
Text and World, Unity or Division?

Questioning Lindbeck's Postliberal Biblical Interpretation

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It is true that we live in an age of transition, of expanded horizons, and of vastly accelerated change in which theology is properly pluralized by the need to relate the faith to new situations and non-western cultures... The pluralistic cacophony is in part the product of theology itself rather than the non-theological situation, and its influence on the sense of the faithful, insofar as it has any influence at all, cannot help but be disintegrating.¹

George Lindbeck, a proponent of postliberal theology and dedicated ecumenist, saw that theologians were imperiling the biblically informed and communally unitive *sensus fidelium*. He unhesitatingly advocated a return to the classic biblical interpretation amid the currents of liberalism.² Regarding his proposal, opinions are mixed: those who are imbued with postmodern sensibilities think Lindbeck's approach to biblical interpretation continues to espouse the meta-narrative. This tenet of modernism has turned off many to the subject. Supporters of modernist thinking, contrarily, consider that Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic approach weakly surrenders truth to postmodern relativism.

This article first examines Lindbeck's position on premodern biblical interpretation. Recognize how his cultural-linguistic model sheds light on the church's self-concept. Recognize also that its underlying notion juxtaposing the transmission of faith raises concerns in the postmodern era. How we conceptualize anew the text-world relations in pluralistic contexts becomes an ever more relevant topic for discussion. I will conclude by evaluating the applicability of Lindbeck's postliberal program in the twenty-first century.

Biblical interpretation in crisis: The death of classic hermeneutics

George A. Lindbeck (1923–) was born in Luoyang, North Central China. His parents were Lutheran missionaries of Swedish-American heritage. At the age of 17, Lindbeck left China to seek higher education in North America and Europe. Lindbeck was indebted to Wittgenstein, T. S. Kuhn, Peter Berger, and Clifford Geertz who greatly influenced his writings in the 1960s. Lindbeck

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appraises: "Whatever their differences, they are not bewitched by modern uniqueness: they hold that the basic processes of the linguistic, social, and cognitive construction of reality and, experience are much the same in all times and places, however varied the outcomes."³

Lindbeck describes the crisis of biblical interpretation as one that "is related to the loss of the once universal classic hermeneutical framework."⁴ The occurrence of liberal relativism threatened the sense of the faithful. When Lindbeck talks about relativism and pluralism, he mainly refers to Enlightenment thinking and its pervasive influence in Western culture. For instance, the liberative motif did more harm than good. Liberation in post-Enlightenment times might have produced positive changes for society, such as religious freedom, social equality, economic justice, and democracy. However, that overarching theme "also liberated evil forces, especially in the last century: nationalism, fascism, Nazism, and Leninist and Stalinist Marxism."⁵ The ambiguity of liberation is seemingly paying a high cost to the society and human history.

In addition, Lindbeck is concerned with the kind of historical criticism that severely undermines the unitive whole of the biblical narrative.⁶ For over 200 years, scriptures were read to scrutinize all events that were told, thus to prove the correctness of historical facts. The text became "a source of data" to reconstruct history, including "the originating events, personalities, or situations" and that was how the "historical Jesus" came into existence.⁷

3. George Lindbeck, "Confession and Community: An Israel-like View of the Church," in *The Christian Century*, (May 9, 1990): 493.

4. Lindbeck, *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, 202–203.

5. "Performing the Faith: An Interview with George Lindbeck" in *The Christian Century*, 24 (Nov 28, 2006): 35.

6. Lindbeck, *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, 202.

7. *Ibid.*, 209.

1. George A. Lindbeck, *The Church in a Postliberal Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 213.

2. *Ibid.*, 202.

Scripture was reduced to a tool for accumulating knowledge for the betterment of human society. Thus, Lindbeck laments: "Until our own lifetimes, however, virtually no one on either the right or the left gave much attention to biblical narrative as a genre in its own right. The classic hermeneutics became effectively dead."⁸ Its loss created "the normless voids" that intensified the strength of unchecked freedom and desire.⁹ The resulting promotion of self-interests breaks up "communal cohesive-ness" which further deteriorates the community of faith, and accelerates the disunity of the church.¹⁰

What is more distressing for Lindbeck is that too many modern theologians are using extrabiblical sources (for instance, Marxist ideas), to conceptualize theologies and interpret biblical texts. Lindbeck regards this re-birth of the old liberal strategy inherited from the Enlightenment as the "unmediated *aggiornamento*."¹¹ Updating faith in a wrong direction only hastens the process of de-Christianization of the West. Lindbeck is convinced that cultural Christianity with a focus on liberation and humanist logic should give way to diasporic Christianity, which is built upon scripture, the foundation for community development.¹²

Ending the crisis: Recovering premodern biblical interpretation

Together with other thinkers at Yale University in the 1980s, most notably Brevard Childs and Hans Frei, Lindbeck initiated an intellectual movement in opposition to liberal Protestantism. In 1984 Lindbeck published an influential book titled *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*. In this book the term postliberal/postliberalism was first introduced to the public. According to C. C. Pecknold: "(T)he postliberal tendency was to remove obstacles to faithfulness, to repair broken practices and empower the church's witness to the world and her service to both God and neighbor by enabling communities better to speak and practice the language of the scriptures."¹³ Postliberalism is understood as 'a return to scripture' to counter the force of liberal relativism.¹⁴ For Lindbeck, the hermeneutical direction is closely related to the organizational and ecclesiological aspects, and a combination of these three components will effectively promote Christian unity.¹⁵ The renewal of the church will help restructure and reaffirm the church's identity in a fast-changing world.

Christological mediation of history

The authority of scripture does not rest on liberal rationalism according to Lindbeck. The good news *per se* as opposed to modernist thinking has laid the best foundation for producing

faithful and responsible interpretations. The conviction that Jesus Christ as the self-revelation of God has long been the core of theological orientation and confession of the fathers, medievals, and Reformers. The Christian identity that centers on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is shared within the community of people. When Christians review and retell the story of Jesus, they are practicing a "distinctive method of reading" that demonstrates what has "consensus-and-community-forming potential."¹⁶ Lindbeck asserts: "When joined to him, even Gentiles became members of the enlarged people of God, citizens of the commonwealth of Israel (Eph 2:12). Its history became their history, and its Bible their Bible."¹⁷ Everything is interpreted in light of the gospel; no one should add anything to the text to reach consensus on the text. This interpretive method not only helps the community better understand the scriptures, but also binds them together and guides their social behavior.

As the rule of faith becomes unambiguous and the canon of the Bible a distinctive form, Lindbeck gives emphasis to the element of intratextuality. According to Lindbeck, there are two levels of intratextuality: "first, Scripture is interpreted in the light of Scripture, and the biblical canon is read as a single interglossing whole; and second, all reality is interpreted in this same scriptural light—the biblical world absorbs all other worlds."¹⁸ All realities will be consumed in Jesus the Christ. The statement presumes that people acquire the needed language, understand the gospel message, and acknowledge the lordship of Jesus Christ.¹⁹ Therefore, it is not surprising to see why Lindbeck connects the use of scripture with the construction of reality. Lindbeck maintains, "Scripture is the embedded guide for the social construction of reality...Christians use the Bible's stories, images, categories and concepts to interpret all that is."²⁰

In keeping with Lindbeck's logic of how the biblical world absorbs all other worlds, churches and Christians of later generations are to follow what the Israelites experienced as a people of God and do what God has commanded of them. The Israel-like expression represents a bottom up approach to reconstitute church and cultivate unity. Note that being Israel-like has nothing to do with supersessionism and assuming Christianity will replace Israel as the New Israel. Lindbeck writes that the "consensus-and-community-forming potential" of premodern biblical interpretation will materialize the vision of the one church.²¹ Lindbeck has coined this one church the Israel-like church, which transcends time and space. It also presents a symbol of God's salvation for all people across cultures and languages. But how, technically, can

8. Ibid.
 9. Lindbeck, *Performing the Faith*, 35.
 10. Ibid.
 11. Lindbeck, *Confession and Community*, 494.
 12. Ibid., 492.
 13. C. C. Pecknold, *Transforming Postliberal Theology: George Lindbeck, Pragmatism and Scripture* (New York: T & T Clark, 2005), 5.
 14. Ibid., 2.
 15. Lindbeck, *Confession and Community*, 495.

16. Lindbeck, *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, 204.
 17. Ibid.
 18. George A. Lindbeck, "Atonement & The Hermeneutics of Intratextual Social Embodiment," in Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, eds., *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals & Postliberals in Conversation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 226–227.
 19. Lindbeck, *Performing the Faith*, 29.
 20. Lindbeck, "Atonement & The Hermeneutics of Intratextual Social Embodiment," 226–227.
 21. Lindbeck, *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, 202.

scripture help us locate ourselves in the Israel-like church? How can the story of Israel become our story, despite difference in time and space? It is to these questions that we now turn.

The cultural-linguistic framework: Speak and act in the language of faith²²

To understand how the universal classic hermeneutics works and/or how religion (in general) works, Lindbeck points to a common identity—including but not limited to “a common language” and “a common mind.” Lindbeck claims that “religions are seen as comprehensive interpretive schemes, usually embodied in myths or narratives and heavily ritualized, which structure human experience and understanding of self and world.”²³ He explains that the linguistic tradition “comprises a vocabulary of discursive and nondiscursive symbols together with a distinctive logic or grammar in terms of which this vocabulary can be meaningfully deployed.”²⁴ Language is not simply an expression of ideas, but a medium that shapes the entirety of life, such as thoughts and behaviors. Lindbeck insists that the cultural-linguistic medium “is a communal phenomenon that shapes the subjectivities of individuals.”²⁵ Thus Lindbeck speaks against the cognitive-propositionalist and the experiential-expressivist models. The former claims doctrines as propositional truths that will finally lead to the validity of plural realities; whereas the latter emphasizes common religious experience that fails to distinguish respective religious identities. Christianity does not fit into any of the previous two methodologies; it has to be placed in the cultural-linguistic framework.

If one does not achieve the skills in a given linguistic tradition, one basically cannot understand the language and symbols used for another religion. Thus, Lindbeck argues: “To become a Christian involves learning the story of Israel and of Jesus well enough to interpret and experience oneself and one’s world in its terms.”²⁶ Christians far and wide are included, grafted onto the one church, the Israel-like church, because of the common story. More significantly, the story is mediated by Jesus who “fulfills and transforms the overall biblical narratives of creation, election, and redemption, and thereby specifies the meanings of such concepts and images as Messiahship, Suffering Servanthood, Logos, and Divine Sonship.”²⁷

The story articulated in its vocabulary of symbols and syntax serves as the medium for Christians to connect the text and the world.²⁸ And the story can only be told by the people who are acting and being acted upon within the tradition. The authority of scripture, as the heart of communal experience, will strengthen the

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cohesiveness of the people and the church. Because he was greatly influenced by Hans Frei’s *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, Lindbeck believes the narrative meaning of the stories about Jesus would bridge the gap that has formed between historical criticism and modern theology.²⁹

The twenty-first century “applicability”³⁰ of Lindbeck’s proposal: Debating the orthodoxy of hermeneutical positions

Lindbeck has explained how the transmission of faith has become the key to resist the currents of relativism, falsification, and syncretism. Transmission of faith is juxtaposed with a quest for premodern biblical interpretation. Any hermeneutical lenses that fall outside the classic framework have to be seriously scrutinized and possibly rejected. Classic hermeneutics becomes normative for faithful and responsible biblical interpretation.

However, the criterion for deeming what is orthodox and what is not principally depends on the observance of the rule of faith. While tradition is valuable, the absoluteness embedded in the rule of faith and its practice remains contestable. We recall the numerous times when the church fathers gathered and debated over the identity of Jesus during ecumenical councils, and we have a better sense of how complex the relations between Christ and the world can be. Reaching consensus on christological formulation is never a simple assignment. It is complicated when Greek philosophy represents the entire teaching of Christianity. While refraining from an analysis about which christological model is more plausible, I want to point out the danger of easy categorization. A dissident voice that does not build on the so-called orthodox tradition can be of value.

Truth is not about some fixed and rigid principles. Wilfred Cantwell Smith reminds us that all conceptualizations of things are done through human words.³¹ The voice of the other may conflict with what has been agreed upon. Yet it enriches our understanding of God’s love and mercy for the world. In Robert Warrior’s essay, “Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians,” he unveils two opposing perspectives narrated by two conflicting communities

22. Lindbeck, *Performing the Faith*, 29.

23. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 18.

24. *Ibid.*, 19.

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*, 20.

27. George A. Lindbeck, “The Story-shaped Church: Critical Exegesis and Theological Interpretation,” in Stephen E. Fowl, *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 41.

28. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 21.

29. *Ibid.*, 41–42.

30. For Lindbeck, the applicability of premodern biblical interpretation is essential to the future of the church, in particular, its unity.

31. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 193.

who name themselves the people of God.³² One is the narrative of conquest and the other the narrative of the Canaanites. Warrior unwaveringly points out that Native American Christians read themselves into the experience of the Canaanites. Because of the years of oppression that Native American Christians suffered in their land, it is necessary to call Lindbeck's postliberal biblical interpretation into question. On the one hand, we are told that Jesus fulfilled the history of Israel; on the other hand, Lindbeck was silent to the Israelites' violence against the Canaanites. As the summation of Israel's history, is Jesus to be associated with the oppressor? Regarding Israel's story as singular runs the risk of depreciating the multiplicity of voices. The notion of a singular and unified biblical narrative does not treat each community of God fairly and hence do justice to the oppressed. Whose voice is to be preserved? Who has to be cast out? Interpretation matters. How will the wider Christian community work together and give priority to the other in the task of faithful and responsible biblical interpretation?

Compromising individual identities in the name of unity

One primary purpose of Lindbeck's proposal is to serve the church. Learning the grammar of scripture is something that holds things together. At the core is the unity of the church. When applying the linguistic functions of the world to the semiotic universe of the biblical world, Lindbeck demonstrates how signs and symbols of the religious system function within a community and, at the same time, shape the communal experience in their own right.

There are setbacks in Lindbeck's biblical interpretation, however. While re-appropriating classic hermeneutics, the neutrality of Lindbeck's proposal cannot hold. The introduction of the cultural-linguistic framework means highlighting the subjective feelings and lived experiences of the people. The signified meaning of a specific word within the signification process can be arbitrary. Given such arbitrariness, language is not objective. I believe Lindbeck is well aware of that. But what happens when two different linguistic systems collide? Is one linguistic system better than the other? To resolve the deadlock, Lindbeck resorts to the "common" language that is being used, spoken, expressed, and transmitted within classic hermeneutics, in order to objectify the subjective. Unfortunately, the issue of forced identity shifts ensues. While no two cultural-linguistic traditions are perfectly identical with each other, those who come from a linguistic system different from the Christian one are perceived as less intelligent or inferior: their language does not correspond to the truth spelt out in the Christian tradition.

The pursuit of the cultural-linguistic model also affects those who speak the Christian language. When holding divergent views on biblical interpretation, these Christians will inevitably be

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deemed deviant and their subjectivity subjugated in the name of unity. In her analysis of the multiplicity of individuals and their relation to society, Pamela Cooper-White argues: "Our subjectivity is not monolithic. In this sense, none of us at any given point in time is a unitive 'Self' or 'Being.'"³³ Her observation accurately describes what happens in a community setting. The subjectivity of an individual varies from person to person, even though they are members of the same community. When these individual selves are unable to speak about their own feelings and experiences for the sake of preserving "unity," the sense of commonality in Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic framework compromises thoughts and beliefs. To avoid conforming people to certain sets of values, we should be careful of the homogenizing tendency mistakenly endorsed by a common language. In short, it is not about the common language, but a language that facilitates meaningful interactions between selves and others.

Implications for interreligious relations

Since Lindbeck's approach centers on the meta-narrative of Jesus' salvation for all humanity, any discussion of his program should not be limited to Christian circles but should also consider those outside of it. The cultural-linguistic model implies that all religions develop their truth claims in accordance with their language and respective traditional values. While that may be the case, the ultimate truth and truth-claims are not exactly the same. Lindbeck declares that not all cosmic stories convey and lead to the penultimate truth.³⁴ The assertion that Lindbeck supports religious pluralism is an illusion.

Lindbeck identifies three types of truth: categorial, intrasystematic, and ontological. The first refers to "grammar," or "rules of the game." These elements are constitutive of meaningful statements, but those statements are not necessarily and propositionally true. Second, intrasystematic truth is "the truth of coherence."³⁵ This coherence cannot be measured by external

32. Robert Allen Warrior, "Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians," in James Treat, ed., *Native and Christian: Indigenous Voices on Religious Identity in the United States and Canada* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 93–104.

33. Pamela Cooper-White, *Braided Selves: Collected Essays on Multiplicity, God, and Persons* (Eugene: Cascade, 2011), 106–107.

34. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 18.

35. *Ibid.*, 50.

standards, but internally. Self-referencing is an indispensable step for distinguishing ultimate truth from other truth claims. Finally, ontological truth means “that truth of correspondence to reality, which, according to epistemological realists, is attributable to first-order propositions.”³⁶ Consistency becomes an important theme running through the argument. This explains why Lindbeck keeps repeating that all realities are examined in light of the universal salvation of Jesus Christ. Lindbeck affirms: “A statement, in other words, cannot be ontologically true unless it is intrasystematically true, but intrasystematic truth is quite possible without ontological truth.”³⁷ Unsurprisingly, Lindbeck believes that Christianity is true categorially, intrasystematically, and ontologically. Moreover, Christianity alone has the truth to tell.

When Lindbeck says that “the biblical world absorbs other worlds,” does he intend to say that the biblical world occupies other worlds? If that is the case, the absorption language unavoidably presupposes an imposition of values, attitudes, and beliefs. It becomes obvious that Lindbeck holds tightly to the conviction of “no salvation outside the church.” While his presumption entails a common goal of salvation for all world religions, it necessitates conversion of the religious other and their conformity to the Israel-like church. People of other religious convictions are required to pick up the Christian language and acknowledge the lordship of Jesus Christ in order to attain salvation, even though they do not understand salvation the same way as the Christians do. In other words, they are asked to abandon the language that represents them.

Is it possible for one to unlearn one's language before acquiring the Christian language, if the old language has shaped the entire life of that person? Lindbeck contradicts himself, for he has ascertained that religious languages are untranslatable. Furthermore, David Brockman criticizes: “If religions truly are mutually untranslatable and incommensurable, then the terms and experiences of one religion are excluded from, and incomprehensible within, another religion. Thus, from within a given religion, all other religions are truly void.”³⁸ My concern is that Christians are living in a self-enclosed world; they are talking among themselves and communicating a language that makes sense exclusively to them. As Brockman rightly observes, Lindbeck's approach to biblical interpretation largely reinforces the already known “knowledge” within the insiders' religion.³⁹ When the Christian community becomes more inward-looking, this negatively affects the church's missiological orientation and praxis.

Does Lindbeck's postliberal biblical interpretation promote unity or division? The point is not to take sides in a binary, deciding whether to accept Lindbeck's proposal or reject it. What is more significant is to unveil a complex web of power and violence in biblical interpretation, when misuse of scripture persists in

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justifying damaging acts to the other. Re-positioning the church in a fast-changing world requires us to engage the text, the other, and the world with honesty and sincerity. As Walter Kasper observes, when the church becomes too concerned with its identity, it loses its relevance in the world.⁴⁰ The text-world relationships are multifaceted. When communal experience is truly valued, it opens new avenues to understanding. The voice of the other is a voice that matters equally.

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid.

38. David R. Brockman, *No Longer the Same: Religious Others and the Liberation of Christian Theology* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 88.

39. Ibid., 87–88.

40. Quoted in Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1994), 12.