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Edward Schillebeeckx and Hans Frei: a Conversation on Method and Christology

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In Parts Two through Seven Preus “interprets and applies the Gospel to virtually all of life’s contexts” (book jacket). He identifies twenty-four separate and particular gospel metaphors and places them under the general headings of creation, commerce, legal, personal, sacrificial and deliverance metaphors. Each chapter follows a prescribed format. They begin with a short illustrative life situation that serves to put flesh on the metaphor. A short exegetical study of pertinent scripture passages follows, along with a careful endeavour to separate the gospel metaphor from its law counterpart. This format gives these chapters a decidedly sermonic, if somewhat repetitive, tone.

Part Eight exhorts the reader to share these remarkable metaphors with others, for this is the peculiar and essential mission of all believers. As Preus declares, “the words with which Christians go out into all the world are not just words ... because they are the very words of Christ, the Word of the Gospel The words themselves are powerful, rich, and evocative, not just words. They are words that make us just” (221).

In sum, *Just Words* is an enjoyable and beneficial primer on the gospel for Christians of all stripes.

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**Edward Schillebeeckx and Hans Frei:
A Conversation on Method and Christology**

Marguerite Abdul-Masih
Waterloo ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2001
193 pages, \$ 45.45 Softcover

Marguerite Abdul-Masih has written a book that is important for at least two reasons. First, she introduces readers to the work of Hans Frei and Edward Schillebeeckx in a concise, fair and manageable manner. She carefully articulates their most important themes against the backdrop of broader theological movements, notes the genesis of

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their thought and considers the significance of their theological contributions for contemporary theology. The book is also significant because it represents a learned and careful reflection on the theme of experience in modern theology, using Schillebeeckx and Frei as test cases. "Experience" could well be in the title of the book insofar as it is her intention to query how theological method and the category of experience relate.

In sum, her book aims to demonstrate that theological method is influenced by the theological reasoning, which, in turn, affects theological method. She uses experience as the test case in order to demonstrate that one's understanding of revelation affects one's hermeneutic, which in turn advances theological understanding in particular ways. How one uses "experience" reflects the presuppositions evident in this hermeneutical circle. The book advances the thesis by first considering the work of Frei, and then Schillebeeckx, before finally providing an extended comparison of their work in the third part. Each of the sections first considers the doctrine of revelation, before outlining the hermeneutical theory and finally each theologian's assessment of the importance of experience in light of their Christology.

Abdul-Masih examines Frei's work in the first section of the book. As a representative of the Yale School, Frei draws heavily upon the work of Barth in explicating that revelation is communicated exclusively in the meaning of Scripture. Revelation is understood as "objective, christocentric, immediate, and rooted in the freedom of God" (17). The meaning of Scripture is given via a literal-like reading of Scripture which attends to the narrative character of the text. In Frei's estimation, meaning is not hidden behind the story but given in the story. The task of Christology admits two possible approaches: one can query how Jesus is present to us and then turn to the question of his identity or one can begin with his identity as presented in the biblical narrative and then concern oneself with how Christ relates to us. This latter method characterizes Frei's approach (40). Consequently, the place of experience in theology is restricted to *applicatio*, which follows *explicatio* and *meditatio* (49). In short, experience does not serve as a source for theological reflection, although it is an important category for practical theology. Frei is insistent on underscoring the communal character of experience.

Schillebeeckx, whose work resonates more with the so-called Chicago School, considers the place of experience in theology to be more foundational. In the second section of the book, Abdul-Masih examines his work, beginning with his treatment of revelation. History as a whole is considered the locus of revelation (66). Experience is considered a crucial category insofar as God is revealed in and through experience – although not exhaustively.

Abdul-Masih does a fine job of articulating Schillebeeckx' understanding of the structure of history, a key component in explicating his hermeneutic. Historical change can be likened to concentric circles moving around an axis. The outermost circle is considered the most rapidly moving. The axis of the circle represents that point where change is slowest and historical structures are most abiding (73, 74). The outer circle constitutes that ephemeral history which encapsulates the events of the everyday. In between the two is what Schillebeeckx identifies as conjunctural history. This explanation of history is critical for Schillebeeckx insofar as he uses it to relate continuity and discontinuity, an important factor in our experience. Experience functions as the unification of four constitutive realities of existence: our encounter with the world, thought, language and history (79). History as the locus of revelation does not preclude theological criteria.

Yet this criterion is understood in a rather different way than is the case in Frei. Schillebeeckx proposes what he calls the "proportionate norm." (92) In using such a norm, the task is to see how Jesus' message related to the particular context in which he lived and to use that relationship as the norm for our relationship to our own context. The presupposition is that revelation continues to occur in contemporary experiences (94). Experience serves as a source for theological reflection and as such has two poles; tradition and the contemporary situation (98). As one would imagine, the task of Christology for Schillebeeckx is markedly different. He underscores the centrality of the historical Jesus, who is characterized as the eschatological prophet in all New Testament Christologies (116).

In the third section, Abdul-Masih compares and contrasts Schillebeeckx and Frei. She notes that Frei's method is confessional insofar as he focuses on that which is unique in Christianity to the virtual elimination of general anthropological considerations. Schillebeeckx, by contrast, begins with what is universal and

consequently advocates an experientially based method grounded in anthropological reflections. Frei locates meaning in the text, while Schillebeeckx asserts that meaning is found behind, in and in front of the text (148).

Although both theologians have markedly different Christologies, Abdul-Masih considers both of their Christologies to be “low.” Schillebeeckx’ is considered low because he begins with the experience of the disciples and Jesus while Frei’s is considered low because his point of entry is the narrative subject of the text rather than the Christ of later dogma (161). In conclusion, Abdul-Masih uses the typology of the late Prof. George P. Schnier (of Regis College, Toronto) to compare their appeal to experience. In so doing, she notes that both thinkers, while having obvious points of divergence, also converge in their affirmation that the life of faith has to do with engagement as well as concepts, and experience is best construed communally in relationship to the life of the church (168). Moreover, she considers a multivalent appeal to experience to be the most helpful.

Abdul-Masih successfully demonstrates her thesis. It is clear that one’s understanding of the task of theology has a direct bearing upon how theological method directs it, which, in turn, affects the task of theology. Perhaps one weakness in the study is that relatively little can be said of Frei’s engagement of experience, which is given much more attention in Schillebeeckx’ work. This results in the study seeming somewhat uneven. Nonetheless, she has clearly outlined two important and different approaches to the use of experience in theology. Clearly, there is more to say in this regard, but she has provided a fine assessment of the *status questionis* and has initiated an important conversation.

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