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ON NOT BEING ASHAMED OF THE GOSPEL:
PARTICULARITY, PLURALISM, AND VALIDATION

John Howard Yoder

A standard account of the problem of validation considers intelligibility and identity as incompatible alternatives in a zero-sum context. The more the identity of a community or a set of ideas is specifiably or particularly Christian, the less capable, it is held, is that community or that set of ideas of communication to others. If on the other hand ideas are so formulated as to be communicable to others, they have less to say that the hearers do not already know. This paper argues that said disjunction is refuted by the concept and by the track record of Gospel; it is a genre of communication which is at once particular and communicable, by virtue of the communicators' unco-erced and noncoercive submission to the host culture.

From prehistoric tribal cultures to the age of the early classic philosophers, our modern notion of transtribal "validation" would not have been pertinent. The truth which any presocratic sage exposited was that of his own community. Argument, proverbs, epic, drama celebrated the values underlying one's own language, one's own mores and social structures. There was no other place to stand.

When travel and social change challenged the self-evident quality of a given community's norms, there were a few logically possible recourses. Classical thinkers tried them. One recourse is to analyze language. We define "justice" by disengaging socratically what we mean by calling a man "just". That opens up a set of possible paths, of which one is Plato's vision of pure ideas. The "validity" of the "ideas" is invulnerable, behind the mental distillation process which separates them from only relative "appearances."

The other end of the scale of "linguistic" answers shades from the sophists to the cynics. These scoffers show Plato and Aristotle how arbitrary are the definitions they claim to find deep in the language. They play with the malleability of language. They demonstrate the various prices to be paid for the diminishing reliability of our claim that our concepts can be unpacked by simply analyzing our usage, so as to provide adequate instruments of shared discernment and accountability.

Both ends of the scale from Platonism to cynicism are still unself-critically language-dependent and community-dependent. Plato's distillation process took off from a monolingual culture. Every "idea" disengaged by socratic questioning is borne by a word, assumed to be univocal, so that its meaning can meaningfully

be pursued, in particular language. The socratic questioner assumes that under proper prodding the word will yield an univocal definition. The socratic investigation of "what we mean by calling a man 'just'" has to presuppose, without being self-conscious about it, a particular language located in a particular culture. Even the cynics go on living and debating within the linguistic culture whose transcendent pretensions they have undercut. Once the culture's monolithic self-confidence is undermined, none of those arguments work.[1]

If the simplest way to describe the conditions for an univocal language is to describe the monolingual village, then the shape of the challenge to self-evident univocality is most adequately modeled by the young person's leaving home for the distant city. It is in terms of personal cultural development that one can best seek to interpret the embarrassment of particularity, which drives people to seek validation beyond themselves.[2] The child moving from the family to the public school, the student discovering the classics, any person first learning a foreign language makes the same discovery. The fundamentalist discovering that the Bible can be read as one reads any other literature, or as history, does it in another way. The counselee experiencing the psychiatrist's capacity to find threatening garbage in his or her own subconscious will in yet another way surrender to the sovereignty of the wider world. The syndrome is regular, even though that wider world is each time just one more subculture. Some of the "wider worlds," in fact, though they overpower the person entering them, are narrower in terms of the agenda they handle, or smaller in terms of the number of people they speak for, than was the provincial culture from which a person came.

The youth discovering a wider world tends to assume that since that particular world had not been there in that particular shape thirty or 100 years before, therefore the foundation-shaking, liberating encounter with a new set of doubts and certainties, which he/she has just gone through, is an unprecedented experience. It matters that we be reminded that in its shape, though not in its substance, the experience is perennial. There is always a wider world claiming that its truths are self-evident. As we shall see, that was the case in the first century. It is not a new contribution of "modernity".

The search for foundations, the urge to find some argument, some mental move, some court of appeal beyond appeal, is thus a learned personal psychic defense against the constantly repeated experience of being overpowered by a wider world. It is psychologically natural, but by the nature of things it is insatiable and logically unrealistic.

The psychological and sociological momentum which makes the respectively "wider world" more convincing is not derived from rational demonstrations (where would one stand to deliver them?) but from the social experience of growth or migration from the world of one's past toward the wider, or more accepting, or more complex, or more tolerant, or more decisive, or wealthier

world into which one has moved. Narrowness is associated with parental authority; breadth with the teacher who has liberated one therefrom.

Behind all of these maneuvers there is the fear of vulnerability, a cringing before the danger that we may be told by an audience in that wider world that they do not believe us. We want what we say not only to be understandable, credible, meaningful. . . . We want people to *have* to believe us. We hanker for patterns of argument which will not be subject to reasonable doubt. We are impressed by the power to convince which we see exercised by demonstrations in mathematics and logic, in the natural sciences, and in documented history . . . and we want our claims about God or morality to be similarly coercive. We think that truth must somehow be made irresistible, because that is the way in which the small world in which we grew up taught us what the rules are, and that is how the larger world we since moved into imposed itself on us. We become "apologetic," ready to decrease the vigor of our claims, if that will decrease their vulnerability to rejection.

To say it another way, the hunger for validation is a hunger for power. We want people to have to believe what we say. We therefore seek to learn from them what the warrants would be to which they would yield. Yet if in so doing we ratify the truth criteria they already hold, what have we then to tell them? Or if we articulate our claims in the language of a world they do not inhabit, why should they listen? The more honestly we face up to the fact of diversity between cultures, the more frankly we acknowledge change and conflict within our own, the deeper becomes the embarrassment of particularity, and the farther out range the searches for "foundations".

It would be demanding but perhaps fruitful exercise to seek to itemize all the possible "apologetic" modes of approximation to transtribal "validation" there might be. Here I shall limit myself, after this amateur preface, to elucidating one specific alternative stance, whose shape seems to me to be different from the others at one point. To do so I propose to walk through a thin sampling of the recent inhouse conversation, among persons doing historical an moral theology in a Christian setting,[3] as that conversation bears upon the notion of validating particular meanings, and sets the scene for the alternative I propose.

George Lindbeck's work *The Nature of Doctrine*[4] has been recognized as a strong statement of one possible answer. He tells us that "doctrine" articulates, from within a community's acceptance of is own identity, the coherence with which that community assumes and continues its own history. "Doctrine" thus understood has more to say than what Lindbeck calls "expressivism"; it makes verifiable statements based on more than "attitude." But it renounces claims to describe "the way things really are" in a way that would transcend community-dependency, or that could negate *a priori* the contradictory readings of observers in some quite different society. This acceptance of one's own limits may be read as not facing the challenge of universality.

James Gustafson does read it that way. He attacks the matter directly in a recent paper.[5] He criticizes a number of contemporary writers, of whom Lindbeck is guilty of being the most clear. Gustafson describes theological knowledge as a null-sum game in which we must choose between authenticity and intelligibility, and Lindbeck has made the wrong choice. So have the "narrative theologians".

To these particularists, whom he calls "sectarian," Gustafson ascribes sociological, philosophical, and theological shortcomings. He does not (in this paper) elucidate these reproaches in depth on the basis of any documented analysis of what these authors have all written. He rather deduces the reproaches *a priori* from the above-stated null-sum disjunction, even though at the end of his paper he grants that the disjunction is "too simple."

Gustafson had made almost the same point four years earlier, quoting approvingly an old statement of Alasdair MacIntyre: "Either [moral theology] will remain within the theological closed circle: in which case it will have no access to the public and shared moral criteria of our society. Or it will accept those criteria: in which case it may well have important things to say, but these will not be distinctively Christian."[6]

Gustafson does not elaborate on what might in his view count as solid criteria to verify or falsify "intelligibility". We must gather from his silence that he assumes they are self-evidently abroad in the university and in popular lay culture.[7]

There are good reasons to take as representative this statement of our issue. Gustafson has stated the argument simply and starkly, in prominent places. He has done it in the realm of ethics, and (once, although only glancingly[8]) he has named me as representing it for him. That does not mean that either Gustafson or I would consider him to have invented the problem. He assumes that it is a classical difficulty.

Gustafson thereby joins the line of academic apologetes since Schleiermacher, who believe that there is in the world around us just one "public" and commonly accessible meaning system, and that it will be of service, both to the Christian tradition and to contemporary doubters, that we restate the former in such a way as to make sense to the latter.

In so doing he has implemented, without recognizing that it might need to be argued,[9] the standard epistemological context of establishment[10]:

1) There is assumed to be "out there" a singly publicly accessible system for validating statements of fact as being (at least) meaningful and (perhaps, ideally) as "true".

2) It is further assumed that that system can also validate statements about value or morality. Accepting the demands of that system is a prerequisite for what McIntyre (1963) had called, with Gustafson's approval, having "important things to say."

3) It is further assumed that in any given setting it is possible to ascertain by empirical readings, whether scientific or impressionistic, what that normative public meaning framework is. For the Gustafson of *ETP* it is a cosmology dominated by the natural sciences and a culture just now coming to be concerned about the ecological crisis. He appears to believe that in this *magnum opus* he has resolved the challenge of particularity in an original way, one which especially befits our present cultural challenge. To critique that claim or that book is not my theme here.[11]

4) By definition the notion of "public and shared criteria" is a true platitude, self-validated if trusted by everyone, and self-defeating if questioned by anyone. Thereby it partakes of the same self-confident ambivalence which regularly marks appeals to "nature," "self-evidence," and "consensus."

The above sampling should suffice to characterize the dominant debate about the ability to communicate to or be validated by "the wider world," and to illustrate the limits of the debate. I suggest that the standard polar account is not merely caricatured, and exaggerated, but illogical. In ordinary rationality, intelligibility and authenticity condition each other mutually. They are not alternatives which one could choose between. More important for my present concern, that statement of the issue omits one important, quite different option. The suggestion I propose to elucidate here is that the notion of "Evangel" or "Good News" represents a specific perspective on the problem of particularity, one to which the standard surveys of methodological spectra have not attended. I propose to call that other option "evangelical," but with the recognition that my use of that widely-abused adjective will need to be specified.

I should note one prefatory claim on the formal level, common knowledge to philosophers yet still needing to be said in the milieu where this review began. It is that the search to avoid particularity by some mental move of definition or some kind of empirical data-gathering is by the nature of things a wasted effort. It cannot be done, whether we analyze the challenges with psychological, sociological, or linguistic tools. There is no non-particular place to stand. Any claim to have access to a kind of truth which is by definition the same for everyone is epistemologically pre-modern.[12] The theory of truth exemplified by and assumed ever since Lessing, which can claim to put the "particularity" of others in a box only because it thinks that its own "necessary truths of reason" are universal, is in fact no less in a box itself.

This does not mean that the games people engage in, in the course of the effort to correct for bias or to make sense to others, are pointless. Constructs like "viewing from nowhere" or "ideal observers" can be of some use for some internal self-critical purposes, as long as their fictional status is kept in mind. What they cannot do is guarantee that someone else in particular ought to believe me.

Yet the desire for some kind of transtribal validation cannot be wrong. It

testifies to respect for those to whom one wishes to communicate. It testifies to the strength of anyone's conviction that what one believes (even though all such belief has been arrived at historically, in one's own setting and language) is not only true only for oneself.

We need therefore to reconstruct the nature of particularity as a truth challenge. We must abandon the chimerical vision of a set of semantic or definitional moves which would transcend the limits of one's own identity, rationally coercing assent, without taking account of a particular interlocutor or a specific dialogical setting. We must relinquish the dream of a set of social moves which would find or construct a "world" so big as to enclose everyone else.[13]

Yet we must not abandon the claim that the validity of what we believe is founded on grounds more solid than whim, flipping a coin, accident, or provincial bias. Instead of seeking to escape particular identity, what we need, then, is a better way to restate the meaning of a truth claim from within particular identity.

The word with which the early Christians did that was Evangel, "Good News." To unfold the implications of this term[14] will demonstrate the inadequacy of the polar formulation of the problem with which we began.[15]

The word "news" refers to a kind of information which originates in a particular setting. It is without embarrassment contingent, historical. (It is often narrative, too, but to make much of that as a special additional issue in our contemporary discussion would be a red herring.) Others need to know about it, but they will know about it only if told by persons who themselves were witnesses to the event, or who had learned about it before by being told. The only information which is not thus received from a witness is the utterly particular new insight which an individual comes up with, however that might happen (dream? vision? audition? hallucination? intuition?), and that too is news when the next person hears it.

Next, "news" refers to information which is communicable. It does in fact get communicated to someone else. There is no more public act than to announce good news. By the nature of the case news is not esoteric or exotic. It can be communicated in the language of any addressee. It is here that Gustafson's pejorative descriptions, according to which any theology which avows its particularity "becomes incorrigible," "marginalized," or "sectarian," or his use of the nouns "fideism," "confessionalism," and "ghetto," are farthest from the truth.

Not as a detour but as an apt illustration, it may help to look more closely at one example from among those inapt characterizations. The "ghetto" in European experience was not a place into which Jews chose to retreat, in order to be safe or to be kosher, or because Gentiles could not understand them. The ghetto-dwellers did have a language of their own—two of them,

in fact, one to read their scriptures and one for family life—but they also spoke the italian, the german, or the polish of the city around them. They spoke it well enough to do business and to represent a cultural challenge. By the third generation in a new host setting they spoke the gentiles' language well enough to serve the host culture as scribes, doctors, and traders, even though they still lived in the ghetto.

It was the gentile establishment, not Jewry, who walled off the ghetto, to defend itself against the cultural threat of the Jews' dissonant, often more energetic and more creative life style. We may take that as a sort of unintended parable of our problem. Something similar is true, mostly though not always, of the Christian minorities called "sectarian" by establishment theologians.[16] The centuries-long exclusion of minority Christians from civil involvement and from the university has been the result not of the free churches' seeking isolation, or of their running away from ambiguity, but of their being excluded, by custom and law, at the insistence and in the interest of the dominant churches. That lasted until Roger Williams and William Penn demonstrated another possibility, namely that despite (or in fact thanks to) their "minority" status and their dissident, non-coercive ethic, they could provide decisive social and even political leadership.

We can set aside, therefore, as counterfactual, efforts to characterize from outside someone else's view as being *a priori* incapable of communication. We should rather ask what in principle are the logical and linguistic conditions of the communicability of "news," which is always community-conditioned, to a given receptor culture, which is always outside of that community conditioning.

This question cannot be asked about the world as a whole; there is no "world as a whole." There is not even a single "modern secular culture" to speak to. This is therefore an empirical question, needing to be asked and answered each time locally. It cannot be answered by a merely mental move of redefinition, dilution, distillation, or translation, made outside the concrete encounter between message-bearers and receptors.

That news should be accredited as "good" by a receptor culture requires first that it be present there, in forms which make sense there. The first words of one of the apostolic documents called "Gospel" said it most formally: "the Logos became flesh and camped among us." Evangel has to submit—wants to submit—vulnerably to the conditions of meaning of the receptor culture. We believe "news" when we hear it because those who tell it know whereof they tell. They are accredited by their status as witnesses, not because we run their report through our *a priori* grid.

The Logos dwelt in a tent, not in a castle, nor in a self-contained motor home fabricated elsewhere. If the Logos had not chosen this *kenosis*, there would have been no message received. In so doing the Logos does not become

less authentically itself; for to impart meaning is the nature of Logos. Again there is no null-sum choice between identity and communication.

What accredits news as "good" is that it enables or even commands a wholeness or fullness, a validation or a flourishing, not actualized in its absence. It cannot be imposed by authority, or coercively. It is rendered null when assent is imposed. Nor can it be esoteric, reserved for specially inducted hearers.

The reasons which count to move hearers to accept the "news" as "good" cannot already be provided by "public and shared criteria" already present in every culture, for then no news would be needed, or possible. Nor can they be stipulated from outside the setting by the bearer of the message. The "reasons which count" are present in the intrasubjective communication setting, by virtue of the fact that the newsbearers have entered the scene, submitting to the language of the host culture, articulating and incarnating their values in the neighbors' terms. That vulnerability to the host community's criteria is the courage of the witness.

I have not bypassed the problem of validation, nor made it simpler, by this description. I have shown that it is multidimensional, but this complexity is more true, and my phrasing of the meaning of validity more adequate, than Gustafson's simpler picture.

In the setting as thus described, we must then put a threefold question about valid communication:

> —is the content of what is "said" in the new setting faithful to its origin? This is like a fuller form of asking whether a proposition is "true";
>
> —is the transition into the "flesh" of the receptor culture accurate? This is like checking the accuracy of translation from one language to another. No two sentences in two languages can be absolutely identical, but a translation can be adequate[17];
>
> —is the "enfleshment" in the host setting authentic, non-imperial, uncoerced?

The Fourth "Good News" author fixed the parameters of this validation in terms of the host setting, by saying of the Logos "he came into his own" or "he came to his own people." The bearers of good news do not concede that the new setting they enter is alien. They do not let gnosticism in the first century or Gustofson in ours stipulate that in addressing their neighbors they are out of their league. They claim even worlds yet unreached as part of the Logos' creation. That claim encompasses even the rebellious powers—to mix metaphors and apostles—under whose dominion humankind currently suffers.

The "news" is not public only in a formal sense: its substance as well is of the ordinary world, not mysterious. Jesus announces in God's name that new ways of handling money, power, status, and enemies—all public, political agenda—will henceforth be possible and will be demanded because God's

rule is now real. This is not privileged information about the inner workings of the Godhead, not about essences or emanations, nor insider secrets about the soul. The news is about a man leading a social movement, out in the open, which so threatens the authorities that he is killed—a response no gnostic secret could have had—yet his movement goes on. It culminated a people-building story as old as Abraham, in whose name all the nations are to be blessed.

Yet what Jesus said and represented in that common language was counterintuitive, subversive, and costly. He demanded of his hearers a response of *metanoia* and a new start in another direction. Yet it was neither esoteric nor hard to understand.

The Word's "coming to his own" cannot be triumphal. "His own did not receive him," the same author went on to write. The creatures are free to rebel. The workers in the vineyard are free to kill the heir. Jesus makes on his hearers' assent no claims but by the truth inherent in his words and his being there at their mercy. Rejection, according to the "news" brought by Jesus and his witnesses, is part of validation. This is where the foundationalists cannot follow. They want to tailor their message for a "world out there" which they trust will be willing to and will in fact have to listen, reasonably, as long as our tongue is not alien or odd. The Good News of the Logos, on the other hand, accepts as the price of its communicability that it must suffer at the hands of the addresses. Readiness to bear their hostility is part of the message.[18]

One way to understand the hankering for a way around particularity with which we began is the cultural memory of the privileged status of establishment. Since Augustine called on Caesar to bring the Donatists back into the fold, the ability to impose assent was assumed to be a mark of the truth. Only grudgingly have the leaders of Christendom yielded their ability to coerce. The constructive theologians of our academic establishment would be horrified by the notion of assent's being imposed *by the state*; yet their definitional moves still project the assumption that they want to be able so to restate the claims for belief that every reasonable reader will have no choice but to agree. The backing of the civil arm, which was not working anyway, has been renounced; yet one still wants one's affirmations not be vulnerable to dissent.

Any such announcement is subject to diversities of appropriation within history. When the early Christians gave currency to the label "good news" as designating a genre of literature, many such texts were circulating. Numerous were judged edifying; finally four were canonized. Particularity and pluralism are thus from the outset not an embarrassment but part of being historical. There is no way some one set of neutral public criteria could bypass this, or should want to.

Evangel *must* then include a component of diversity, critique and conflict,

not by accident or inadvertence or error, or bad manners, but by the nature of things. It will unmask idols. It will demythify the claim of any community of meaning to speak for the whole of humanity. Every "wider world" we can find is smaller than the globe, smaller than it claims to be. Every self-styled speaker for a new age is elitist, every self-styled liberator is oppressive, every one of the Powers is rebellious. The idea that "theology should resist the clamor . . . for what is currently fashionable and immediately intelligible," which Gustafson cites with such repugnance from George Lindbeck, is the dictate of simple honesty. It is also what Gustafson does when some "current fashion" does not convince him.

My above description of formal criteria for "news" has bypassed the simplest descriptive answer. What it means for "news" to be accredited as "good" is first, functionally, defined by the fact that when some witness speaks it someone else hears it, and assents to it, joining the community which bears it.

"Those who received him he empowered to become God's children." Without leaving their own world, the addressees enter the community of the witnesses who first had crossed the border in the other direction. Each world expands to encompass part of the other. The empowerment for this new community comes neither from those receivers' having fled their own world nor from the witnesses' having annexed it. Nor is it derived from the witnesses' having obtained correct information about how to modify their message in order to approach the receptor world. What "they who received Him" (in the next sentence John slips from the third person to the first) have received is not an epistle, nor a line of argument. It is the simple historical presence of *Logos* himself enfleshed in their (our) midst, so that they could let their story be incorporated in his.

Once come into the world, once enfleshed, the "true light that enlightens everyone" was utterly and irrevocably particular. The Prologue to the Fourth Gospel blends without transition from the entire cosmos into something as incorrigibly local, particular as the baptism of John. Yet it is wrong to ask how it was or is or should be "distinctive," as did Gustafson's quote from MacIntyre above. To make "distinctiveness" a value criterion is to measure the truth value of meaning system A in terms of the other systems (whether B or C or N or X) that happen to be around, from which is supposed to differ. That is a method mistake. Some of the neighboring systems may be very much like it. Some of them may be historically derived from it, which is true of most of the post-Christian value systems in the West. To ask that Christian thought be *unique* is nonsense. What we should ask of Christian statements is that they be *specifically* or *specifiably* Christian, i.e., true to kind, authentically representing their species. Whether a specifiably Christian statement is "distinctive" depends on the other guy. That cannot be made a criterion of authenticity.

"God is not a Christian God for Christians only," Gustafson concluded his "anti-sectarian" paper, as if that were an argument on his side. That is what the first Evangelists were saying: the Logos that has become particular (*sarx*) in Jesus is the light that illuminates everyone. I have been saying that Evangel, by presenting an answer *sui generis* to the challenge of validation, refutes the disjunction between integrity and intelligibility; each is the other's prerequisite. Now I must proceed to deny as well the related disjuction between the particular and universal. Evangel is by definition, not by coincidence or fluke, the alternative to the epistemology of establishment, which seeks to adjust one's "own" knowledge to the conditions of validity already dominating the "wider world." Evangel refutes, not by methodological manipulation or sleight of hand but by its irreducible presence and its historical track record, the notion that a thinner message would carry farther, or that concern for intelligibility would be best served by an *a priori* readiness to have less to say.

The ground for the transcultural intelligibility of the meaning of Jesus is not an *a priori* semantic move made by methodologically preoccupied intellectuals (or apologetically concerned missionaries, for that matter). It is a set of first century events, which some of its interpreters call Incarnation. "Incarnation" is not first a concept in communication theory; it is the code word for the uniquely theocentric palestinian jewish man Jesus, communicating God to us.

The above exposition should suffice to make my argument clear. If the argument is valid, it opens up two other important derivative questions, which I here note as a sort of afterword. To name them, though I shall not pursue them, may clarify my point.

On one hand, so to speak "behind" us, there is the ontological problem. Does an epistemology of Evangel presuppose some specific (remember that it need not be distinctive) understanding of what Kind of God can thus reveal himself? Of course it must, somehow. For some systems of thought God is ineffable, and for others He (or She, or It) is self-evident. In the former case no evangel would be possible and in the latter none would be needed. This question would lead us to review the classical trinitarian debates and the high scholastic discussions of communicable versus incommunicable attributes. Historical loyalty to the old narrators and prophets who call God JHWH, and to Jesus who told his followers to call him ABBA, might very well create problems for some of the depersonalizing and departicularizing moves being proposed today in the name of "construction" or "progress."[19]

Yet that is not a new or an alien challenge. To meet that kind of challenge is intrinsic to the evangelical claim, and the apostolic witnesses met it repeatedly from the very start. The canonical NT contains at least five extensive passages testifying to how they handled it, already in the first two generations;

John 1:1-14: Jesus and the Logos cosmology;

Hebrews 1:1-2:18: Jesus and the angels;

Colossians 1:15-2:23: Jesus and religious cosmology;

Rev 4:1-5:4: Jesus and the scroll of destiny;

Phil 2:1-13: Jesus and the pride of Adam/Prometheus.

Five authors, in five languages, five settings, addressing five host cultures, took on the challenge of a new world and proclaimed Jesus' sovereignty. They did not flee the encounter with their contemporary world's version of process ontology; not did they grant that it represented a "wider world" whose standards they had to kowtow to. They rather faced its challenge, assumed its language, and swallowed it up, transcended it.[20]

The evangelical strategy does not accept being walled into a ghetto by the outside world. Not only does it accept the language of the environs: it seizes it, expropriates it, and uses it to say things that could previously not have been said in its prior language; nor could they have been said by anyone else using the wider world's language. It proclaims the God of Abraham as no less the God of the philosophers; it does so not by filtering abrahamic language through philosophical funnels, but by pre-empting the philosophers' language in order to say with it things they had thought could not be said. It refuses to be submitted for validation to the canons of intelligibility or credibility that were in force before it happened.

On the other hand, "before" us so to speak, there lies the apologetic problem. What it is that makes people believe, once the witness is enfleshed in their midst? What counts as a warrant to convince them of whatever it is that they come to believe? Or for that matter, what is it that people need to come to believe? Is there one indispensable propositional content? One indispensable existential or emotional experience?

My above description of the phenomenon of evangel was intentionally formal, social. I have discussed neither how much creedal substance, how many information bits about God and the world need to be transmitted, nor what it is that moves people to say "yes" to that. These questions matter, but they are not the place to start.

It will be no surprise that to these questions too my short answer must be that the responses will and must be empirical and particular. There is no reason that for all possible addressees the reasons for joining the Jesus movement should have been (in fact) or should need (in principle) to be the same.[21] This is not the place to itemize the varieties of social and psychological motivations which were in fact effective in moving people to membership in the early messianic synagogues. All that should be needed for present purposes is to clarify two observations.

One is that the model of "validation" we are most used to thinking about, that of intellectuals coming to be convinced of the truth of propositions in God language, on the basis of rational appeal to generalizable warrants, was not dominant most of the time in the first centuries of the apostolic enterprise, nor has it been since then.[22] People joined the movement for all kinds of reasons, and they explained it in numerous ways.

The other observation is that that was all right. There is nothing embarrassing for the bearer of evangel—as there is for scholastics—about the pluralism of styles, modes, and grounds of either proclamation or conversion. It is part of the nature of Evangel not only to speak many languages but to enter history and the soul through more than one door.[23] What needs to be tested is the congruence between the shape of believing, and of believing speech and believing behavior, in new times and places, and what it had meant before. To test that congruence is a task for the multiple roles of leaders and servants in the discerning community.[24]

There are wrong reasons for joining the movement, and there are truly false ideas, "heresy," by these must be denounced and evaluated holistically, in a congregational/conversational process, from within the meaning of the witness, not extrinsically in terms of some autonomously apologetic logic. The procedures of evaluation come after, not before, assent. They operate within the community's story, not from Athens or "from nowhere."

Neither of these still open questions, neither the "ontological" one "behind" the bearing of good news, nor the "rhetorical" one "ahead" of the witnesses, is intrinsically intractable. Neither needs as far as I can see to be resolved before my argument can stand. The argument is simply that the dominant post-enlightenment disjunction between intelligibility and validity is belied by the undeniable historical reality of good news being borne from one world to another. If the post-enlightenment epistemological grid should continue to refuse to admit this category, that calls into question not the historical reality but the grid.

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NOTES

1. For a strong contemporary statement of the puzzle, cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, "Why is the Search for the Foundations of Ethics So Frustrating?" *Hastings Center Report*, August 1979, pp. 16-22. MacIntyre reviews, in the light of his own deep historical knowledge, without needing to enumerate cases, the intrinsically self-defeating character of efforts to validate one's own starting point through increasingly profound attention to one's own linguistic bootstraps.

2. In my *The Priestly Kingdom* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1984), pp. 48f, I described six possible "adaptive strategies" with which a person naturally responds to the discovery of the greater psychic power of the "wider world."

3. The presentation of this material, at Bangor Theological Seminary in February 1988, and to the Society of Christian Philosophers, at Lexington, Virginia 22 April 1989, could not assume an awareness of the dialogue on related questions soon to be presented in an exemplary way in *Theology Today*, April 1989, pp. 55-73. Accordingly, no effort is made here to crossreference to that conversation, at the numerous places where that might be done.

4. George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine; Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984).

5. J. Gustafson, "The Sectarian Temptation: Reflections on Theology, the Church and the University," *Catholic Theological Society of America Proceedings*, vol. 40 (1985), pp. 83-94. I am grateful to Gustafson for the authentic way in which he represents the mainstream assumptions I here must challenge. My taking his strong statement as occasion to orient my exposition of an alternative testifies to my respect for his unique contribution to the work of our guild.

6. *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective* (henceforth *ETP*) volume I, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 74, citing MacIntyre, "God and the Theologians," *Encounter* (September 1963); reprinted in *Against the Self Images of the Age* (London: Duckworth, 1971; Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1978), p. 23. Although Gustafson testifies to awareness of nuance, his critique of the "sectarian" option still rests on the disjunctive assumptions I am here challenging.

7. In *ETP* his understanding of "shared criteria" has come increasingly to mean a world view centered in the natural sciences, whose dominion in our culture is more assumed than argued. In Harlan R. Beckley and Charles M. Swezey, eds., *James M. Gustafson's Theocentric Ethics: Interpretations and Assessments*, (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1988), p. 72, I collected some of his most trusting allusions to "science." He accuses Lindbeck of reducing truth questions to the inner consistency of a particular community; yet he replaces that with the same criterion writ larger, namely the world view of an unspecified set of our cultured contemporaries. His argument in favor of his university colleagues as preferred public is that "that location is an important one in our culture and formative for many who pass through it," (Beckley/Swezey *op. cit.*, p. 221). That is certainly true of the university; it would be true too of the country club or the Ku Klux Klan. My setting is also a university. Its being "important and formative" hardly suffices to justify how one particular setting properly should function to validate "public" theological reformulations.

8. *Loc. cit,* I say "glancing"; although Gustafson names me, as if my views represented the problem to which MacIntyre's quote pointed, his continuing exposition does not converse further with my views. Gustafson characterizes my view as denominational, although my *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), which is all he cites, is a synthesis of the work of mainline scripture scholars, and although he cites a catholic scholar saying about the same thing. He says "All theology needs to be defined . . . in relation to this radical option," yet we know by reading on that he does not intend to do that. Nothing in *The Politics of Jesus* was addressed to the dilemma of particularity. I have

no special case against the ethical substance of Gustafson's *magnum opus*, which is not dependent upon his argument against particularity.

9. Not recognizing that a given point needs to be argued is of course the prima facie formal mark of claims appealing to "nature" or "reason."

10. Perhaps instead of the term "establishment," from the American political experience, I should say "Christendom." "Christendom" identifies an epoch, an arrangement, as well as a territory, when/where the adjustment between the political and the ecclesiastical elites of the Mediterranean and European world was such that no other world view was permitted. The task of theologians was to unpack the coherence of all known truth within a world which was in principle under control. The heritage of pagan antiquity had been baptized and found its place in the system. The fundamental imperative for the theologian is to make sense to everyone; not to permit anyone to refuse to listen on the grounds of some loyalty, perspective, or identity not shared by everyone.

11. I offered one fragment of such a critique in Beckley/Swezey, p. 86. It is disconcerting how little attention Gustafson gives to the possibility that his new construction of a particular version of theocentrism beyond historic Christian God language might need to be sustained by argument.

12. This is the valid point of the MacIntyre text cited note 1 above.

13. This is the pertinence of my introductory reference to the socio-psychic origins of the appetite for a "wider warrant."

14. My use of the term Evangel in its original, etymological meaning does not mean to enter the muddy modern debate in sociology and journalism about what "evangelicalism" means.

15. Gustafson attributes the intelligibility/validity disjunction to Douglas Ottati; the attribution is however inaccurate. In his *Meaning and Method in H. Richard Niebuhr's Theology* (Washington University Press, 1982), Ottati begins by stating that intelligibility and integrity are both imperative, and sets out to demonstrate that H. Richard Niebuhr successfully held them together.

16. Ernst Troeltsch sought in his history of *The Social Teachings of the Churches* (1912; definitive edition, Tübingen, Mohr, 1923, ET London and New York: Allen and Unwin and Macmillan, 1931) to make the noun "sect," as well as the adjective, descriptive, purely formal, rather than pejorative. Gustafson returns to the pejorative mode.

17. In view of our contemporaries' overt preoccupation with how to communicate into other cultures, it is striking how little attention is paid, anywhere in this discussion, to the linguistic/cultural experience of the Christian world mission. Other faith communities are alluded to at the outset but not treated in Gustafson's 1985 text. Much could be learned from the writings of the missionary linguist Eugene Nida about communication between communities with different language systems; notably his *Message and Mission* (New York: Harper, 1960); *Religion Across Cultures* (New York: Harper, 1968); *Toward a Science of Translating* (Leiden: Brill, 1964); *Language Structure and Translation* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1975); and *Meaning Across Cultures* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1981).

18. I noted in Beckley/Swezey (note 8 above), 81f, how thin Gustafson's attention is to the classical Reformed conception of sin as an epistemological factor. Cf. Merold

Westphal's paper, "Taking Paul Seriously: Sin as an Epistemological Category," in Thomas Flint (ed.) *Christian Philosophy* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1990), pp. 200-26. The noetic effect of sin must mean *at least* the readiness to deal with audience hostility as a mark of truth.

19. When Gustafson says "God is not a Christian God" it seems clear that he considers the statement to be important, and to be directed against someone. What is not clear is whether he means that statement to count as a true substantive proposition about a reality once properly addressed as ABBA/JHWH, or as an analytical (i.e., tautologous) rule about how to use the word "God" as a cipher, or as an *a priori* commitment to some concretely available "broader-than-Christian" value community, or as something else. In the absence of specification, such confident rhetorical use of the name of God is as substantively empty as it is formally pretentious. The notion of Evangel says by definition that its convictions are not only for Christians, that its God is for everybody.

20. Cf. my *The Priestly Kingdom*, pp. 49-54. Historians of dogma will note that it is precisely in these texts that we find the seeds of Nicea, i.e., the first intimations of what later came to be called a "high Christology," namely the very kinds of archaic, ontological definition-spinning which the modern mind has trouble with. That is not what these texts meant then. They do teach us, however, that the message gets "thicker," not thinner, by entering new worlds. As Eugene Nida long ago discerned, (*op. cit.*, 1975, pp. 199, 251), a good translation says more than the original.

21. Nor is there any reason either that for all followers the propositional description of their new loyalties should have been or should need to be the same.

22. This does not mean that it would be wrong for that to happen sometimes, as it began to be done a century later by the so-called apologetes. Yet if the apologetic mode takes over as the only mode of evangelizing, it replaces proclaiming with brokering. It consecrates the host culture instead of challenging it.

23. Gustafson points repeatedly (e.g., *ETP* I: pp. 152, 245 339; II: p. 34) to the plurality of strands within scripture, and the plurality of modes of reading scriptures, as if that fact were somehow to refute the notion of historic canonical accountability. Only against the scholastic fundamentalist would that argument have any cogency. To posit univocality as a condition of coherence is an anti-historical hermeneutic.

24. I describe those ministerial roles in *The Priestly Kingdom*, pp. 28-34.