

The SBJT Forum: How May Evangelical Theology Transform Culture?

Editor's Note: Readers should be aware of the Forum's format. D. A. Carson, Carl F. H. Henry, C. Ben Mitchell, R. Douglas Geivett and Craig Blaising have been asked specific questions to which they have provided written responses. These writers are not responding to one another. The journal's goal for the Forum is to provide significant thinkers' views on topics of interest without requiring lengthy articles from these heavily-committed individuals. Their answers are presented in an order that hopefully makes the Forum read as much like a unified presentation as possible.

SBJT: Now that *The Gagging of God* has been published, do you have further thoughts as to how it could address theology and culture?

D. A. Carson: I am grateful to Dr. Paul House and his staff for including in this fascicle the opening chapter of my book *The Gagging of God*. What he has asked me to do in this Forum column is reflect a little on what has happened since its publication a little over a year ago. If I were finishing the manuscript today, what would I change?

I confess I would not alter the main line of my argument. But I would probably tweak the emphases here and there, along the following lines:

First, in the intervening two years or so since I sent the manuscript to the press, quite a lot of new literature on postmodernism has been published, and some of it is very important. If I could, doubtless I would interact with some of it. Perhaps two or three examples will prove helpful.

(a) In 1995, Johns Hopkins University Press published *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and Its Quarrels with Science*. The authors, Paul R. Gross and Norman Levitt, are accomplished scientists. They

write out of a modernist epistemology, and they disavow Christian faith. What makes their book important, however, is its damning indictment of postmodern trends in the university world. They write well, they are utterly fearless, and sometimes painfully amusing. Thoughtful Christians will not want to align themselves with the modernist epistemology of Gross and Levitt—informed Christians should opt for neither a modernist nor a postmodernist epistemology, although there are some important things to learn from both—but there are few books more revealing of intellectual trends in our centers of learning.

(b) History is messy. Although Western cultural dynamism is deeply tied to what in *The Gagging of God* I call philosophical pluralism, inevitably there are holdouts, responses, and so forth. Since finishing the manuscript, I have come upon several very recent responses that deserve careful reading. None of these is going to stem the tide: a cultural movement is far too broad and powerful to be reversed by a single book in a couple of years. Nevertheless, thoughtful readers will want to think their way through a book such as *Objec-*

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tivity: *The Obligations of Impersonal Reason*, by Nicholas Rescher (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997). I disagree with some elements of its central thesis (it surely expresses more confidence in unfettered human reason than it ought to), but its argument is important.

(c) In *The Gagging of God*, I suggested that some evangelical scholars are in danger of being seduced by academic prestige, and that what we need is Christian thinkers who conscientiously and openly work at their disciplines out of the matrix of a biblical worldview. Intriguingly, something of the same argument is advanced in essays written by Bruce Kuklich and D. G. Hart (the former of whom is an atheist and the latter a Christian) in a book they jointly edited, *Religious Advocacy and American History* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

Second, although I said quite a bit in *The Gagging of God* about the expression of postmodernism in the declining morals of the West, I think I probably should have devoted more space to that subject than I did. A recent essay in *U.S. News and World Report* demonstrates that the capital turnover in the porn industry exceeds that in cigarettes, booze, and drugs combined. Polls show that 85% of Americans now think that the definition of “sin” should not in any way be tied to God. In his latest book, *Slouching Towards Gomorrah* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), Robert Bork argues that the strange combination of radical egalitarianism and radical individualism, coupled with a court system assuming powers that the Founding Fathers never envisaged, leaves us lurching toward all that coarsens and debases, and suggests that the disciplined and refined thought necessary for the maintenance of democracy is in danger. But I am prepared to stick

with my proposals for the way ahead.

Finally, had I to do it over again, I would probably argue even more strongly and at still greater length that evangelism in postmodern America increasingly entails a worldview clash. We are in Acts 17 in Athens, not in a synagogue in Acts 13. Just as missionaries who evangelize, say, devout Hindus or Buddhists, find it necessary to present much of the Bible’s story-line and theological framework, *as part of their evangelism*, so also must contemporary evangelists, who bear witness to Christ before the current generation of biblical illiterates, start a long way back. This is a considerable change from the pattern of most evangelists in this country a mere twenty years or so ago, when most of our hearers could still interact with the basics of the Judeo-Christian heritage, and “preaching the gospel” meant preaching a small part of the Bible’s plot-line (however central that part is). The implications of this for evangelism are critically important, and are being worked out by a relatively small number of effective evangelists, in local churches and universities, who are fruitfully heralding the gospel to people entirely outside the pale of “churchy” folk. My own efforts at university evangelism offered grist for the mill when I wrote the book, but in retrospect I wish I had culled the experience of many more people in this area, and included the best of it in the pages of *The Gagging of God*.

SBJT: It has now been fifty years since you challenged evangelicals to engage cultural issues in *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*. How does that conscience remain?

Carl F. H. Henry: Right you are: 1997 is the fiftieth anniversary of the appearance of *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*.

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That conscience is uneasy still — presently over contemporary evangelicalism, which has brought upon itself a multitude of detrimental divisions, and plays ping-pong with biblical authority.

Some erstwhile evangelicals would now discard the term evangelical and reanimate the term fundamentalist; others more concessively probe liberal evangelical options; some would network with postliberalism and a few would even mesh with postmodernism. Some evangelical colleges and seminaries are endangered as fund-raising becomes more their burden than does faculty orthodoxy and orthopraxis. Meanwhile compromise of a comprehensively authoritative Bible quietly smolders below public visibility.

Fundamentalist withdrawal from the entrenched culture is no solution except when secular society becomes so lethal spiritually that it is predictably corruptive and ruinous of evangelical integrity. Even so, God's people have a high duty to warn the world about the standards by which the Risen Lord will judge humanity and the nations at His soon return.

The canopy message that needs now to be sounded must ring with New Testament clarity: God wills universally the justice/righteousness exhibited in and by the incarnate Lord Jesus, and He wills also the spiritual forgiveness and new birth of penitent sinners on the ground of the Savior's substitutionary death and resurrection. That God wills universal justice must sound out as insistently as that He wills mankind everywhere to be "born again.

This implies our own eager involvement in evangelism and in socio-political concerns. The consequence of leaving to non-Christians the temper of the entire cultural arena is actually a forfeiture to them of the shaping of the character and

institutions within which believers and their children must struggle for effective spiritual and moral survival.

There is no scriptural necessity, however, for a Christian political party, nor scriptural legitimation of trust in education or legislation as a sure resuscitator of a sick society. Political engagement has its desirable place; evangelicals should be politically active to the limit of their ability and opportunity— which in apostolic times was not great. Yet *Uneasy Conscience* did not encourage an emergence of politically-oriented preachers developing huge multi-purpose mailing lists soliciting funds on the ground of public representation of donors, and who eagerly pursue photo opportunities with official leaders. Left wide open was the question of how best to mediate evangelical conviction into the public realm. This assuredly did little to forge an evangelical view of politics, at which Roman Catholics were more skillful, so that they could often give direction to rudderless evangelical engagement through mutual agreement on isolated issues. Cobelligerency forged areas of agreement on levels somewhat politically significant, but it neglected the larger questions of political philosophy and of revelatory sanctions.

More and more of those determined to become politically engaged pursued public affairs as an alternative to evangelistic engagement. So it came about that evangelicals, who long neglected the political realm in order to focus exclusively on evangelism, gave way to successors now prone to emphasize political involvement to the neglect of evangelism. What theologically-leftist modernists (who had broken with miraculous or incarnational theism) emphasized in their quest for ecumenical socialism as the road

to cultural transformation, now gave way to theological conservatives who looked hopefully for socio-political change pursued through an alternative conservative political agenda. What began as an effort to rectify politico-cultural neglect eventuated in a neglect of personal evangelism and in an emphasis on the ballot box more than on the altar rail.

There can now be no untroubled evangelical conscience until evangelicals recover and shoulder their obligation in both realms.

SBJT: How do you think theological ethics transforms culture and public policy?

C. Ben Mitchell: Even a brief perusal of the daily news sufficiently demonstrates that ethical issues are at the center of our cultural malaise. When we see the skeleton of Western civilization crumbling before us, we are tempted to trust in the arm of flesh to restore the body politic. In the past many Americans looked to mass education, national legislation, and social activism to usher in Utopia. Today we have graduated more students than ever before; we have legal contrivances which rival those of the Pharisees; and social activism is at an all-time high. Yet, according to most cultural observers, we are closer to moral collapse and nearer a new dark ages than we have ever been.

Some in the past retreated to their Christian ghettos where they could be separate from the world. Tempted by a monastic spirit, they deserted the public square in favor of a more pious environment in which to live a life well-pleasing to God. Alas, not only was such pietism unrealistic, but they soon discovered that Christians and their churches were as susceptible to moral failure as the culture around them. Furthermore, they discov-

ered that the culture rubbed off on the church much more quickly and deeply than the church rubbed off on the culture.

Contemporary Christians are caught in this same crossfire. On the one hand, there are many who argue for the necessity of Christian social ethics. Christians, they maintain, must reform the culture. On the other hand, there are those who champion Christian personal ethics. Cultural reform is a bandage. Nothing short of individual spiritual regeneration will suffice. In fact, we need the restoration of both a healthy social ethic and a rigorous personal ethic. The stakes are extraordinarily high and this is not an age for moral sloth and ethical sloppiness.

Inside the body of Christ there is a palpable need for integrity; not the maudlin self-realization prominent in pop-psychology, but a genuine commitment to truth-telling and obligation. "Obedience" is a word a by-gone age used to describe the Christian life. Today we favor less oppressive-sounding terms like "actualization" or "personal fulfillment." Sadly, lying is as popular among Christians as among unbelievers. Not long ago I read about a church that advertised a pizza bash for youth, promising attendees free pizza and entertainment. When the young people showed up, there was neither pizza nor entertainment, but a presentation of the gospel. While the goal of evangelizing the lost is laudable, the means used to reach that end were reprehensible by biblical standards. While this may be an extreme example, it is indicative of the pragmatic spirit that reigns in contemporary evangelicalism. As lovers of truth, Christians are enjoined to be truth-tellers. As St. Augustine pointed out centuries ago, even evangelistic motives do not justify lying.

Fidelity to truth demands obedient dis-

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cipleship. The recovery of “the scripture principle,” carries with it the obligation to interpret correctly the inerrant word and to apply its principles, imitate its virtues, and fulfill its demands in the most practical and personal of ways. To claim the trustworthiness of scripture while ignoring its demand for holiness is a necromancer’s trick.

Christian personal ethics also requires the renewal of the sense of vocation or calling. Obedient discipleship is not something Christians *do* so much as it is who Christians *are*. Christian physicians are not merely physicians who happen to be Christians. They are women and men whose faith shapes the way they practice medicine. The Christian physician sees the doctor-patient relationship as a covenantal relationship, not a contractual one. Christian businesspersons are not professionals who happen to be Christians, they are men and women whose businesses are shaped by their Christian worldview. Promises made to clients are not flippant words uttered to get a contract. Pledging to provide goods and services carries with it the duty to deliver according to one’s promise. Christian teachers are not teachers who happen to attend church on Sundays. Christian teachers are persons whose patience and self-control is reflected not only in their classrooms, but in their interactions with individual students.

Moreover, embracing a biblical personal ethic will mean refusing the sacred/secular dichotomy. For the Christian, every task is a sacred task. There is nothing so mundane as to be desacralized. Whatever one does is to be done as unto the Lord. There is no subject or discipline beyond the pale of the Christian worldview. There is no behavior or lifestyle choice which is without spiritual implications.

We must recover a worldview perspective if we are to regain our integrity.

Similarly, Christian social ethics are worldview-ish in this sense. Once Christians enter the social and legislative arenas there is an enormous temptation to jettison the very principles which should govern a Christian’s personal life. “Honest politician” has become an almost laughable oxymoron. “Public policy” has become a placeholder for the agenda of a special interest group.

Transforming culture demands that Christians enter the public square with their Christian worldview intact. It is very tempting in a pluralistic culture to succumb to a kind of moral Esperanto when addressing ethical issues. When dealing with issues like euthanasia, abortion, homosexuality, etc., Christians sometimes divest their language of biblical terminology and theological motifs in favor of more acceptable secular words. Yet, when we do so, we lose our unique contribution to the public conversation. When we use the language of self-determination, we lose the obligation to obey the sovereign God. When we make use of notions of innate human goodness, we neglect the very problem which makes government necessary. G. K. Chesterton reminds us, in fact, that the only Christian doctrine which is empirically verifiable is the doctrine of original sin. Only sinful human beings need law and government to sustain moral order. Instead of capitulating to the language of secular policymaking, we have an opportunity to help translate biblical-theological truths for those unfamiliar with Christianity. More importantly, since all truth is God’s truth, we provide others with a means of interpreting the world around them. Therefore, when we talk about cloning technology,

for instance, Christians must explain that human beings are made uniquely in the image of God. When we discuss legislation on assisted suicide and euthanasia, we must deal with the biblical prohibition against unjust killing. When we talk about divorce, we must talk not only about the negative impact on children, but about God's ideal for marriage as a one-man-one-woman-one-flesh relationship for life.

It is becoming increasingly difficult to reach consensus on matters of public policy. But the answer to that dilemma is not for Christians to adopt the same tepid talk as those around them. Ethicist Jeffrey Stout has observed that "secular intellectuals have largely stopped paying attention. They don't need to be told, by theologians, that Genesis is mythical, that nobody knows much about the historical Jesus, that it's morally imperative to side with the oppressed, or that birth control is morally permissible. The explanation for the eclipse of religious ethics in recent secular moral philosophy may therefore be rather more straightforward than I have suggested so far. It may be that academic theologians have increasingly given the impression of saying nothing atheists don't already know" (*Ethics After Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1988, p. 164).

If Christian ethics, or, more appropriately, ethical Christians have anything to offer our culture, it is not the pabulum of secularism. That is not to say that public policy must cite scriptural chapters and verses, but it is to affirm that God's design for human society may not be ignored without grave peril. Being salt and light in a darkened and putrefying world requires that Christians not hide their candles but let the light of God's word shine brightly in every crevice of our culture.

How can Christian ethics transform culture? First, we transform culture one by one, from the inside out. That is, by proclaiming the gospel of the risen Christ and living out his claims in our lives. Second, we transform culture by engaging the culture with the principles and virtues which God has designed for human happiness.

SBJT: Please describe current popular American culture and the theological truths that can transform it.

R. Douglas Geivett: Anyone aware of social reality in this country knows that religion is currently a very popular force. We can imagine the Apostle Paul paying a visit to the twentieth century, ascending the American Areopagus of the television and radio talk show circuit, and saying with complete candor: "I observe that you are very religious in all respects" (cf. Ac 17:22).

The American Enterprise magazine (July/August 1997, p. 7) recently reported a 300 *per cent* increase in sales of religious and spiritual books through one of the nation's largest distributors from 1993-1995. Thus, there seems to be a quickening of the American religious pulse. People who used to talk glibly about "getting religion" now speak more respectfully of "becoming more spiritual." A Hollywood starlet is apt to be heard saying to Jay Leno, "I'm a much more spiritual person now." The television series "Touched by an Angel," despite its many pointed references to God and its commendation of spiritual solutions to contemporary human problems, is a chart-topper in the Nielsen ratings. Americans today are an apparently religious people.

Of course, not everyone has climbed aboard the spirituality bandwagon with unmitigated exuberance. Sanguine members of society are more cautious in their theological self-revelations. Compelled to

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answer questions for a survey of national religious opinion, some will respond: "God? Someone high in the scheme of things, I suppose, but it's got nothing to do with me." This attitude may be fairly common among people who say they believe that God exists. I lectured recently on the topic "Life After God" to a group of several hundred students at a conservative state university in the Midwest. Many of those students had indicated that they believe in the existence of God but doubt that God has any significance for their own lives. They reflect the attitude expressed in the lyrics of a popular "Smashing Pumpkins" song: "...And God is empty, just like me."

How is the American evangelical Christian to think about the current religious scene? We might conclude that the collective religiosity that prevails in our time is overgrown with naiveté. Religious activity today manifests an inordinate preoccupation with experiential novelty and practically no interest in a stable tradition of knowledge.

Strangely, the predominant religious attitude is not stifled by the familiar declaration that religious *knowledge* is not possible. Why? Not because people believe that religious knowledge *is* possible, but because they believe that *knowledge does not matter in religion*. Let me illustrate. When asked whether one's choice of religion matters, popular radio personality Dr. Laura Schlesinger—herself Jewish and overtly religious on her program—incautiously suggests that it only matters whether one's choice of religion enriches one's life. The *truth* of one's religious beliefs, however, seems to be totally inconsequential. The oddity of this perspective is intensified with the realization that Dr. Laura is a no-nonsense counselor commit-

ted to the absolute and objective character of (sometimes unpopular) moral truths. She appears to be a morally serious person, who unapologetically associates moral seriousness with religious sensitivity. Yet she is remarkably pluralistic in her support of religion, even when the religions she countenances are clearly incompatible theologically or doctrinally.

Whatever her remarks on the air say about Dr. Laura's personal religious perspective, however, I believe that her demonstrable popularity among radio listeners attests to the popularity of religion in our culture generally and to the readiness of people to contemplate explicitly spiritual solutions to their problems. It also says something about the specific character of popular religion and about the conditions people set on the acceptability of religious solutions to human difficulties.

Three features of American popular religion are especially telling about the acceptable boundaries of popular religion. First, popular religion in this country promotes a fundamentally tolerant and inclusive religious outlook that emphatically denies the unique correctness of any single religious tradition. Second, popular religion smugly replaces the old-fashioned and sometimes laborious quest for religious truth with the more convenient attitude that personal opinion, feeling, and sincerity are sufficient for religious purposes. Third, popular religion fosters a preoccupation with finding meaning and purpose in this present life without regard for an afterlife, about which we can know precious little in any case.

These features of popular religion stand out in unmistakable contrast to the words of one religious figure of some historical stature: "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to God the Father

except through me" (Jn 14:6). Jesus Christ laid this astonishing claim before a bewildered group of notably religious individuals. No one can fail to notice the claim to unparalleled religious authority embedded in Jesus' words, and this is something that twentieth century enthusiasts for religion simply are not prepared to deal with.

If we peer closely at the strange announcement Jesus makes, we find that what he offers is religious reality—truths that bring those who believe into the path of genuine spiritual liberation, but truths that can only be known and appreciated through intimate acquaintance with Jesus himself. But notice, Jesus' claim to have unique religious authority is also accompanied by a method for testing the reliability of that very claim. When he says, "I am the life," his words have both a backward-looking and a forward-looking aspect. First, his words recall the way Jesus had miraculously restored life to the dead body of Lazarus just a short time before (Jn 11). Second, his words forecast Jesus' own resurrection, which was yet to take place. Jesus confirmed that he is the life—meaning that members of the human community obtain permanent spiritual life through relationship to Jesus—by invigorating dead bodies, including his own, with new life.

This method of announcing news that is too good to be true supported by evidence that is too powerful to ignore follows a pattern that was reflected time and again in Jesus' teaching: he would first set some striking truth about himself before those most in need of it, and then back it up with appropriate evidence (e.g., Mk 2:1-12). This, indeed, is part of God's compassionate way with people, and the method is itself an earmark of authenticity. In effect, when God prepares a rem-

edy for the human spiritual condition, he also arranges for desperate human persons, aware of their plight, to confirm the divine authority of the remedy on offer.

Appropriately enough, God attests to his own sponsorship of religious truth—climactically expressed in the person and word of Jesus Christ—by producing along with delivery of that truth an event that is so beyond human imitation and impossible of naturalistic explanation that the divine origin of both the event and the message must be acknowledged. I recently had the privilege of assembling a team of scholars to write chapters for *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case of God's Action in History* (InterVarsity Press, 1997; co-edited with Gary R. Habermas). An important theme of that volume is that the miracle of the resurrection shatters the convenient illusion that God has left us to our own devices to solve perplexing human problems and explodes the myth that religious knowledge is impossible.

This is a thoroughly timely religious insight, I believe. People today are right to get plugged-in spiritually. But they need not despair of the possibility of religious knowledge nor should they blithely ignore the evidence that such knowledge is available. God himself has produced a revelation that specially addresses the human condition, diagnoses it with precision, and spells out a remedy whose high cost was paid on our behalf and which can be applied through faith in Jesus Christ. Until this is understood, popular religion will languish in a form of godliness that is bereft of transforming power (1 Ti 3:5, in context).

SBJT: What role does culture play in theology?

Craig Blaising: Of course, we have to clarify what we mean by culture (I ask the readers'

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indulgence, coming as this response does at the end of an entire issue devoted to the question of culture). If we mean, as Richard Niebuhr did in his classic work *Christ and Culture*, the total linguistic-social-technological environment which human beings sustain and in which they live their lives, then culture is a necessary and inherent part of the work of theology.

Why? The language which we use, the ideas with which we think are for the most part shared with other human beings who make up the broader public in which our educational and social formation takes place and in which the concourse of our daily lives transpires. These shared characteristics are not merely external to our personal identity but actually define who we are in the living of our daily lives — the way in which we think, talk, and behave; our values, our attitudes, and actions towards persons individually, towards society in general, and towards material things. Culture extends its influence to the vocabulary we use to think and speak, our habits of phrasing words together, and the metaphors and illustrations by which we conceptualize our ideas and communicate with others.

Now theology is the practice of speaking about God, although we usually stress a certain mode of such “speaking” — one that is systematic and somewhat formal. However formal it may be, it is, as I understand it, an interpretation of divine revelation. For an evangelical theologian, the extant verbal form of revelation (and consequently the primary form for the task of verbalizing about God) is Scripture. So, in theology, we primarily have to do with interpreting Scripture.

Culture enters into the task in this way: We come to Scripture with ideas, values and attitudes already shaped by culture.

They function as a “pre-understanding,” that is, an initial understanding of God, human beings and the world, in light of which we attempt to understand what we read in God’s word. It is not possible here to address various views on the historical distance between Scripture and contemporary culture. The fact is that we do begin to understand God’s word as we read and study it, and we do this from the initial perspective of our own cultural context. But the nature of interpretation is such that the initial understanding is reformed and reshaped in the process of learning the Scripture. In this way our theology takes shape with words and ideas from Scripture. But also, cultural words, ideas, and attitudes, more or less reshaped by the process of interpretation, will continue to serve as instruments by which we understand, live, and communicate the teaching of God’s word.

In all of this, culture does not usually become a *conscious* aspect of the work of theology until our perceived interpretation of Scripture actually *conflicts* with our cultural pre-understanding or until our interpretations of Scripture which seem *natural* and *proper* to us are challenged by some other interpreter who claims that Scripture promotes or condones teachings and practices which make us *uncomfortable*.

When this happens, what is a theologian to do?

There are some who speak of the *conscious use* of culture in doing theology. Usually those who have spoken in this way belong to the tradition of theological liberalism or one of its many offspring. Culture, or more precisely *modern* culture, is used to alter the meaning of traditional Christian belief at significant points where that culture conflicts with Scripture. From classical liberalism to the various

liberationist, ethnic, and cultural theologies of our day, theologians have been at work repackaging cultural ideologies in traditional Christian terminology.

Evangelical theology, however, affirms Scripture as inerrant divine revelation and acknowledges its supreme authority in the work of theology. Consequently, cultural ideas and values must in principle submit to the instruction of Scripture. This is no less than what Christian *discipleship* demands.

But for this to happen, for Scripture to truly function with its proper authority, culture must become a conscious element in evangelical theology as well — not a conscious ideology used to reshape biblical ideas and values but a conscious instrument in the service of biblical teaching whose fitness as a carrier and transmitter of biblical Christianity is always subject to evaluation. Acknowledging the cultural conditioning of our own ideas and expressions is itself an act of faithfulness to Scripture because it raises again the interpretive question, What does Scripture say? We may very well come away believing, such as the council of Nicea did after evaluating the term *homoousios* [in the teaching that the Son is *homoousios*, of one essence, with the Father], that even though the language is not from Scripture, the language is appropriate and even necessary in our context to communicate the teaching of Scripture. Recognizing the distinction between Scripture itself and our own theological expressions is vital to the conscious submission of the latter to the former, helping insure that our commitment to the authority of God's revealed word is uncompromised.