

Learning Not to Know

A Practice of Postmodern Pauline Interpretation

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Someone who presumes to introduce postmodern interpretation (in a single chapter!) begins from the embarrassing predicament that the more simple and lucid one makes the topic, the less adequately one has represented it. Since no single thing can be decisively isolated and identified as the official, undisputedly postmodern approach to postmodern biblical interpretation, a single introductory essay can only begin to hint at the intricacies of this polytropic mode of exegesis (some manifestations of which emerge in other essays in this volume). Nonetheless, one must begin somewhere, and perhaps an introduction that denies itself the pretense of adequacy may successfully point onward toward the more complex whole of which it constitutes only an attenuated part.¹

By way of introduction, then, I propose that a postmodern approach to biblical interpretation will show some characteristics from a broad (but mutually-related) repertoire. Postmodern readers suggest interpretations that *reject totalizing* explanations of the text they study (indeed, they often concentrate their attention upon texts that render totalizing interpretations problematic). Postmodern interpreters likewise avoid justifying their work with appeals to unshakeable axioms about the nature of reality, of history, of communication, or other such absolutes; they are *antifoundational*, operating more in the realm of persuasion than of proof, of "making a case" more than "discovering the facts." Postmodern interpretations typically involve *demystifying* the hidden presuppositions and power relations that buttress other approaches to the text. So at a very general level, postmodern interpretations adopt an *anti-totalizing, antifoundational, demystifying* rhetoric.

More specifically, postmodern readers may adopt one of many finer-grained interpretive tactics. The best-known mode of postmodern interpretation is deconstruction, the persistent attention to a discourse's details, a painstaking examination that undoes the appearance that

1. More expansive introductions to the relation of postmodern thought to biblical interpretation include my small book, *What Is Postmodern Biblical Interpretation?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), its larger successor *A Handbook for Postmodern Biblical Interpretation* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), *The Postmodern Bible* by the Bible and Culture Collective (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), and Jean-François Lyotard, *Le Postmoderne Expliqué aux Enfants* (Paris: Galilée, 1986). The bibliographies in these books will also point toward further reading in the primary sources of postmodern thought.

a discourse attains finality, coherence, closure. Or a reader may concentrate on the ways that political considerations cross and counter-cross at the meeting-place of text and readers. A postmodern political reading aims not only to spell out the attitudes that an author expounds, but also (or often "instead") to situate the political claims that the reader associates with the text in a panorama of shifting political scenes of interpretation. Some other postmodern readers take up the phenomenon of *intertextuality* -- the extent to which all discourses constitute themselves with textual bits and pieces drawn from other discourses -- not simply as basis for analyzing "influences" and "effects," but as an opportunity to envision afresh the constellations by which we associate (and dissociate) texts. Other postmodern discourses address modern culture's anxiety over identity. Modern discourses tend to rely on identity as a principle of standardization (as in the assembly-line where interchangeable workers put together interchangeable parts) more than the actuality and precision by which an identity renders itself distinct, unique, and truly itself. Modern discourses require identity, but they require an odd, inside-out sort of identity: identities serve modern purposes by affirming the markers by which institutional powers minimize confusion and maximize efficiency -- but modern identities must not be so very individual as to defy categorizations, to disrupt market profiles. The modern individual marks a site where specifiable samenesses intersect, but does not decenter the productivity of modern projects.

These postmodern gestures do not cohere in a single methodical program. Sometimes they complement one another; sometimes they conflict. Never is a postmodern interpreter obligated by a transcendent Law of Postmodernity to adhere to one or all of these. Indeed, one may often recognize postmodern sensibilities at work precisely to the extent that the interpreter betrays no fealty to repeating the required steps of an extrinsically-determined method. More often than not, postmodern interpreters operate without the constraints and consolations of pre-determined methods, and thus they produce interpretations that defy simple categorization (or reproduction). In the manipulation of this kind of hermeneutical freedom, postmodern interpreters justify their readings not by appealing to familiar indubitable premises, ironclad reasoning, or certified systems of distilling meanings from words -- but by the truthfulness, the beauty, the subtlety, the brilliance, or the resonance of the gesture itself.

One way to get acquainted with the ways of postmodern interpretation involves exploring a particular text in relation to characteristically postmodern premises. The selection of a text to explore offers the opportunity to demonstrate a postmodern sensibility from the beginning. One may, for instance, hold up for examination an expression that readers have hitherto treated as a simple digression, parenthesis, an aside. Or one may point to a familiar

and thoroughly-analyzed text in order to demonstrate interpretations that diverge markedly from what conventional wisdom has long taught.²

Counterintuitive readings of canonical texts frequently encounter scornful responses from hostile critics, as such interpretations defy "common sense." Yet "common sense" isn't a self-evident, unchanging criterion of plausibility; that which counts as "common sense" changes from period to period, from culture to culture, even from neighborhood to neighborhood. When critics appeal to "common sense," they enlist readers into the club of readers to whom they, the critics, belong, which rejects certain (postmodern) allegedly-nonsensical readings. Observe, though, that this gesture proves nothing relative to the text or its interpretation; it simply effects a partisan division between "us," who read sensibly, and "them," who don't abide by the canons of interpretive etiquette that "we" take for granted.

Common-sensical readings will never be able to exclude, to fend off aberrant approaches, because "meaning" doesn't subsist in texts in a way that limits interpretation. Limits to interpretation derive always only from the *conventions* by which communities of interpreters order their interactions. Once upon a time, the style of reading that we now identify as "historical criticism" was derided and vilified, its practitioners expelled from teaching positions and excommunicated from their churches (indeed, this is still the case in some places and denominations); now, historical criticism constitutes the common-sense hegemony in most European and North American faculties of biblical studies. Has common sense itself changed? By no means -- but the culture of interpretation has changed, its constituents engaged in different social practices, different scientific presuppositions, different theological (or atheological) axioms. Postmodern interpreters defy the conventions of dominant approaches to reading not just out of a gratuitous impulse to tweak the noses of stuffy forebears, but because interpreters' imaginations can always extend beyond the boundaries of convention. Today's outré interpretations of well-known texts will either fall by the wayside of misguided false starts, or will be assimilated into the common sense of another generation of interpreters.³

But in this chapter, I'll adopt the alternative of drawing a less-prominent passage into an analysis that conventional scholarship has relegated to parenthetical insignificance. In 1

2. The outstanding example of emphasizing a marginal reading would be Derrida's *Éperons: Les Styles de Nietzsche* (Paris: Flammarion, 1978), and Foucault's "What Is An Author?" in *Language, Counter-Memory, and Practice* (Ithaca, N.Y. : Cornell University Press, 1977).

3. Such critics as Stanley Fish and Frank Kermode have contributed powerful essays on the importance of communities in interpretation; see Fish, *Is There a Text In This Class?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982) and Kermode, *The Art of Telling* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985) for beginning examples.

Corinthians, as Paul the Apostle warms to the topic that will occupy his rambling paranesis and exhortations, he drops an innocent, human expression with far-reaching consequences. Paul advances his case against factionalism by scolding the congregation for (apparently) identifying with their theological heroes: "I belong to Apollos," "I belong to Cephas" (v 12). "I thank God that I baptized none of you," he says (v 14), lest they have that reason to commit their allegiance to him as their savior, neglecting the nonpareil importance of Christ in forming the identities of the Corinthian believers. Except, as it turns out, Paul admits that he *did* baptize two of them: Crispus and Gaius. Then, after a moment's theological exposition, Paul recalls that his firm asseveration that Christ did not send him to baptize (v 17) overlooks yet another set of converts, the household of Stephanas. "Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else" (v 16).

Scholars and translators treat this passage with a certain degree of embarrassment. Translations commonly punctuate verse 16 as a genuine parenthesis; scholars acknowledge that the torrent of Pauline rhetoric carries him faster than his power of recollection, so that in verse 16 he simply continues the list of exclusions he stipulates in verse 14 (and issues a rhetorical insurance policy against having forgotten any other members of the congregation whom he might have baptized). Common sense dictates that we simply accept this disclaimer from Paul, perhaps with an indulgent smile, and proceed to the weightier theological topics about which he is obviously more concerned.

If we decline, for a moment, to cooperate with this common sense, we encounter a distinct discursive peculiarity in this passage, a peculiarity that disrupts modern interpretive assumptions. On one hand, certain modern interpreters adhere to the premise that the meaning of biblical texts must be inerrant, that each word is inspired by God so as to render the discourse infallible in matters of fact. This interpretive premise, which some readers will associate with a retrograde conservative fundamentalism, in fact accepts fundamentally modern notions about meaning, history, factuality, and interpretation: meaning, on this account, inheres in a text, has a single "real" definition per unit of communication, and corresponds unambiguously with events and personalities in an externally identifiable reality.⁴ On the other hand, a different school of interpreters depend on Paul to have provided in his letters sufficient information for subsequent readers to arrive at sound conclusions concerning Paul's interests and intentions. In order for their interpretations to claim any purchase on the historical "reality" of Paul's discursive world, they need a basis for

4. On the persistent fallacious assumption that "meaning" inheres in texts, see Stephen Fowl's "Texts Don't Have Ideologies," *Biblical Interpretation* 3 (1995): 1-34, and *Engaging Scripture* (Oxford: Blackwell's, 1998).

advancing reasoned conclusions grounded in stable warrants; if the evidence for "what Paul meant" rests on too precarious a body of evidence, the historical critics' pretense to interpretive authority would ring hollow. Paul's standing as an inerrant spokesman for the Holy Spirit and his prominence as an exemplary author from the early Christian movement both rely on implicit assumptions about his capacity to serve as a fount of data, where 1 Cor 1:16 indicates that any data from Paul might be taken back, corrected, perhaps even repudiated in the next breath. Both of these tacitly modern approaches to Pauline interpretation suppress the subversive memory that the supposedly-immovable foundations on which they rest have always been shifting. On one hand, one can easily find development and disputation among scholars who earnestly affirm the inerrancy of Paul's letters; on the other, the "history" that grounds academic interpretation changes perceptibly with each generation of persuasive scholarship. Even within the foundationalist discourses of biblical inerrancy and biblical historical criticism, the "foundations" never stop shifting, mutating, re-orienting the fundamental premises of the discourse.

The major parties to contemporary hermeneutical disputes share a reliance on distinctly modern premises (premises that Paul's parenthetical disclaimer undermines). Each party adopts a different mode of generating an interpretive totality (hence, "totalizing") out of the bits and pieces of information Paul provides. In the first case, that totality rests on the premise that Scripture cannot err in matters of fact, still less contradict itself; where evidence is lacking or ambiguous, the guiding principle supplies what is lacking in the evidence. In the second case, that totality rests on the premise that diligent investigation provides a basis for sufficiently-grounded evaluation of the most probable course of actual events and intentions. Each approach can allow the hypothetical possibility that their totalizing axiom might not hold true -- but practitioners of each approach turn out to find ample justification for maintaining their position in every situation they encounter.

If divine inspiration insulates the Scriptures from any possibility of factual error, then what shall we say about Paul's claim in verse 14 that he baptized none of the Corinthians? Even if we grant his immediate reservation -- "except for Crispus and Gaius" -- one must exercise some hermeneutical gymnastics to reconcile the parenthetical correction in verse 16 with Paul's initial position. Paul does not only admit that he baptized *several* of the Corinthians he of whom he initially claimed to have baptized *none*, he further acknowledges that he doesn't know whether he baptized even more. Which of these claims is inerrant? This line of interrogation may seem impertinent; Paul presumably deserves the respect that allows him the final, corrected version of his argument (something such as, "It doesn't matter how many of you I baptized, since the point is that I was called not to baptized but to

preach the gospel"). At this point, however, those who posit the axiomatic inerrancy of the biblical text run into a stumbling-block: while readers can with little difficulty follow the apparent thrust of Paul's rhetoric, their apprehension of Paul's claims derives not from the explicit words recorded in the letter, which are nakedly self-contradictory, but from an implicit communicative sympathy that offers Paul the benefit of the interpretive doubt.

If on the other hand the authoritative scholarship that adjudicates historical probabilities were to take quite seriously Paul's admission that he doesn't know how many Corinthians he baptized, on what Pauline propositions could one rely? Paul is not, after all, introducing a matter of no consequence in these verses; the factionalism that he decries seems to bear some important relation to the Corinthians' allegiance to the various leaders who baptized them. By denying (erroneously) that he baptized any of them, he gains the rhetorical high ground of claiming to be disinterested. When he then admits that not only did he actually baptize a small crowd of Corinthians, but he may have baptized even more, he calls into question his own reliability as a reporter. He may be an inspired preacher and theologian, but he makes an unsatisfactory witness to history. Since his is the only testimony available to most of the events he narrates, however, the historian must either advance a façade of confidence incommensurate with Paul's capacity to remember basic elements of his career, or admit that one can say little about what Paul actually did, since any of his recollections may be as faulty as was his memory of this pivotal aspect of his Corinthian ministry.⁵

All this, from taking seriously a short aside in one letter! Yet the text of 1 Corinthians doesn't distinguish "the important verses" from the unimportant. Even if it did, one would have to rank verse 16 as a particularly important verse, since that verse protects Paul from falsifying his relation to the Corinthians. The logic of totalizing discourses requires that Paul espouse a coherent, non-contradictory account of his activity in Corinth, so that they understandably tend to divert attention from verse 16 to the more theologically dense parts of Paul's argument. Specifically modern interpreters, however, hold no power to force readers to accede to the imperative to generate a totality from fragmentary expressions. Indeed, between the poles of inerrantist orthodoxy and historical skepticism lies a vast ocean of readers who perhaps sense that their most obvious interpretive options have been defined for them by hermeneutical extremes to which they do not adhere. Their interpretive practice stands to benefit from all parties encountering and reckoning with the problems that inhabit

5. For further, more specifically postmodern reflections on the relation of discourse to history, see D. Attridge, G. Bennington, and R. Young, eds. *Poststructuralism and the Question of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) and J. Chandler, A. Davidson, and H. Harootunian, *Questions of Evidence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

any identifiable repertoire of interpretive gestures; postmodern interpretations do not deliver readers from problems, but do serve the salutary purpose of keeping problems toward the foreground (rather than burying the evidence that might tell against an ideologically-determined exposition). A postmodern reluctance to leap from the particular things Paul wrote, to the over-arching firmament of his theology or to the actual historical realities to which he presumably refers, thus serves the cause of interpretive clarity precisely by focusing attention on the untidy ambiguities with which Paul (and all communicators) venture to evoke understanding.

A postmodern attention to verse 16 provides an antidote to inerrantist and historicist readings of Paul by way of calling into questions the foundations on which these totalizing discourses raise their interpretive edifices. Scholars who operate within the sphere of modern assumptions bolster their arguments by claiming to base their conclusions on unassailable rhetorical bedrock: historical facts, or the nature of reality, or incontrovertible logic, or undeniable theological affirmations. They imagine that in so doing, they render their arguments more persuasive, but this is hardly ever the case. If in analyzing Paul's Corinthian correspondence one aimed at grounding one's interpretation in the true facts of history, what would connect those alleged facts with Paul's letters (and the critic's interpretation)? The only way from facts to interpretation leads by way of Paul, who has already stipulated that neither he nor we can rely on his memory. Because we have no other access to the actual events in Corinth, we must either confront the contingency of our assessments (which contingency dispels the rhetorical advantage of appealing to the bedrock foundation of absolute factuality), or ignore Paul's own uncertainty about what actually happened.

By the same token, scholars who attempt to ground their interpretations in the self-authenticating, infallible trustworthiness of the Bible run into a parallel problem. The verses in view include Paul's initial claim not to have baptized anyone, a subsequent revision of that claim (Crispus and Gaius), a later further revision of the claim (the household of Stephanas), and a contradictory assertion that he does not know how many people he baptized (why didn't the Holy Spirit inspire Paul the first time through, so that he would not have had to correct himself?). One of these may provide the unassailable apologetic foundation that affiliates Paul's point with the facts in question -- but sadly, Paul neglects to indicate which is the connection-to-truth claim, and what should be the status of the less foundational claims. Even if he did, we would have to take that indication provisionally, granted Paul's uncertainty about his own words and deeds.

Indeed, any interpretive discourse should find Paul's words too sandy a foundation. He

asserts his forgetfulness and ignorance not only in these verses, but also at various points throughout his letters. To the Philippians, he does not know whether he would rather die or live (1:22); to the Romans, he does not know what he's doing (7:15); to the Corinthians, he distinguishes the authority of his own perspective on ethics from Christ's authority (1 Cor 7:25) and he upholds to the Philippians his practice of forgetting what lies behind, but pressing on toward what lies ahead (3:13). Paul professes uncertainty over whether the ecstatic experience he describes in 2 Cor 12:2 and 3 was corporeal or spiritual; many scholars reckon that the one who was "caught up into heaven" was Paul himself, in which case his uncertainty is understandable -- but it also constitutes a problem for making a foundation of Paul's teaching. In these ways, Paul undermines the modern constitution of identity as a self-identical, consistent, unity; the Paul who baptized a number of the Corinthians was no longer accessible to the Paul who wrote to them against factionalism; the Paul who was caught up to the third heaven was no longer available to the Paul who cited that heavenly voyage in defense of his apostleship. However convenient it would be for interpreters to invoke an apostle whose self-identity certified the accuracy of his every word, such an identity is more the requirement of and product of modern discourses than a characteristic of general human experience. The Paul who represents himself as an uncertain, unreliable witness makes a tenuous candidate for an epistemologically certain, reliable foundation for modern discourse.

We need not conclude from all this that Paul was feeble-minded or deceptive, that if his letters are not perfect, they are worthless. Paul evidently felt comfortable acknowledging his shortcomings in part because he did not think of himself as a privileged mediator of reality and factuality, but rather as a trustworthy (rather than infallible) spokesperson for the gospel. If in any regard his words strayed from a perfect expression of God's message, he could be confident that God would make the message clear in some other way. Paul's emphasis on faith, on persuasion, comports well with a non-foundational, non-totalizing account of the gospel; Paul can thereby reserve for God the power actually to make the divine truth manifest, while the apostle's writings remain the corrigible products of an earthen vessel. A postmodern reader who foregrounds the incongruity of supplying the forgetful apostle with the façade of inerrancy thus does Paul no dishonor. The grandiose vestures of a totalizing, foundational argument don't fit Paul; in this passage at least, an anti-totalizing, anti-foundational reading of Pauline rhetoric shows Paul the greater respect of taking his words seriously even when they reflect a discomfiting light on him.

The importance of giving a complete account of Paul's actions and meaning derives not from Paul's own letters, but from the magisterial modernists' sense of their obligation to

provide Paul with a globally consistent theology, which rests on unassailable foundations (or to deride him for lacking these). Modern critics' insistence on determinate criteria reflect an anxiety about the limits of legitimate interpretation, an anxiety that may extend as far back as the Reformation. Before the Reformation, a catholic (in the sense of "comprehensive") church could rest comfortably with diversity in biblical interpretation, manifest in figurative or "spiritual" interpretation; the criterion of an interpretation's truth was the catholicity of its reception. Once the very identity of the *true* church depended on which party promulgated the more correct interpretation of the Bible, *no* interpretation could be unproblematically "catholic," and *every* interpretation marked a site of theological, political contestation. Under these circumstances, an interpreter had to appeal not simply to the authority of the church itself, but to some criterion with more persuasive authority. Over time -- as specifically modern discourses displaced the modes of argument prevalent in antiquity and the middle ages -- this authority devolved upon the discourse of "history," understood as a *wissenschaftlich* (scientific, scholarly) investigation of the actual course of events in the past. One constituency of interpreters developed an array of rigorous rationalizations for the literal archaeological, historical precision of biblical narratives; another constituency tended to grant legitimacy only to those biblical texts that bore the imprimatur of independently-attested Reason.⁶

Ironically, the genealogical roots of both the inerrantist and the historical critic go back to the same historiographical developments. Both, however, manifest an urgent necessity to limit legitimate interpretations that derives not so much from "the nature of interpretation" (which teaches us that divergent interpretations have *always* provided adequate justification to satisfy receptive audiences) nor from the actual facts of history (which have yet to speak apart from the interpretive ventriloquism with which partisans offer to give them voice), but from the vital importance of establishing one party's discursive dominance.

Since modern interpreters of both factions operate under the sign of a mystified imperative to claim exclusive legitimacy, neither interpretive conservatives nor liberals can rest comfortably with a postmodern, demystified discourse that allows a proliferation of legitimate interpretations -- nor (paradoxically) with Paul's own assertion that he himself cannot recall the number of Corinthians whom he may have baptized. They repudiate the ambiguity within which postmodern interpreters operate, demonstrating an aversion more related to hysteria or panic than to reasoned objection. An increasing number of scholarly

6. I endeavor to sketch some of these characteristics and developments in *New Testament Theology and the Problem of Modernity* (Macon, Ga. : Mercer University Press, 1995).

readers acknowledge the influence of postmodern thought, but Western civilization has not ground to a shabby end, nor has the discipline of academic biblical interpretation lost its bearings. Likewise, were scholarly interpreters of Paul to attend to his imperfect recollection, instead of averting their gaze in favor of more reassuringly important points, they would not have to jettison every consistent version of Pauline theology, nor ignore his every assertion of his (historical) experience.

To this extent, then, verse 16 provides a key to demystifying Pauline theology. Whereas professional Paulinists have a vested interest in putting an imposing face on Paul's discourse, this disclaimer should release Paul from exaggerated claims made on his behalf. Paul understands that he is at best a favored servant of the gospel, but that the power of the gospel comes from its source rather than its herald. Some of the mysteries that had been kept hidden for long ages have been revealed to him, and he feels no hesitation to proclaim them; his gospel was not taught him by human agency, he does not plan by human terms, nor does he walk a human walk -- but he recognizes his own folly, he boasts, he admits his faulty recollection, he carefully distinguishes his own counsel from the Lord's command. Paul's advocates and detractors, however, hold him to a superhuman standard of rigor and historical veracity, because their theological and historical discourses require that he fulfill a discursive role which precludes absent-mindedness and imperfect consistency. Inerrancy and historical precision are not attributes of human discourse -- not even of divinely-inspired human discourse, according to Paul's own words -- as even a cursory survey of the history of interpretation ought to show. Where human discourses depend for their authority on attaining divine infallibility or asymptotically approximating academic certainty, interpreters will trade off precision and perspective for the ideological advantage of laying claim to the decisive criterion of valid interpretation. Readers overstate their claims about the degree of certainty one can ascribe to interpretive approaches in order to support the ideological structures with which modern authorities define Paul. Yet although Paul's poor memory and his uncertainty shake the foundations of the most prominent, most rigid uses of the Pauline persona, they do not affect a historiography or a theology that permits Paul his genuine forgetful, imprecise humanity.

Postmodern interpreters may therefore opt out of modern imperatives that mandate comprehensive explanations of multifaceted letters, that fuse interpretive claims to (supposedly) invulnerable foundations, that mystify these inflationary gestures by representing them as natural, as necessary, as simply *given* features of any interpretation. Insofar as they eschew these modern maneuvers, they position themselves -- ironically -- to take up the Paul's admonition to "become imitators of me," echoed elsewhere in the New

Testament (1 Cor 4:16, 11:1; Eph 5:1; Phil 3:17; 1 Thes 1:6, 2:14; 2 Thes 3:7, 9; Heb 6:12, 13:7, 3 Jn 11). Their imitation of Paul departs from the modern anxiety over identity -- they do not *become Paul*, but they follow (differently) the example they have in him. His willingness occasionally to disclaim comprehensive knowledge contrasts with a critical rhetoric of decisive proof, of conclusive demonstration, of final revelation. Postmodern interpreters more closely resemble the disciples, of whom Jesus constantly asks "Do you not yet understand?" than they resemble the modern interpreters who claim to know something (whom Paul might remind that they do not yet have the necessary knowledge).⁷

In the end, then, postmodern biblical critics can pursue interpretations without knowing in advance the method or rules by which they operate. They recognize the various hermeneutical rules taught in modern academic settings as mystified loyalty-oaths: "Read this way, and we will accord you support and respect; read otherwise, and we have no part in your interpretations." Rule-based hermeneutics guarantee a limited, familiar array of interpretive options; postmodern hermeneutics open onto horizons whose contours are not already determined, whose paths may lead to unforeseen stations.

That does not imply that all postmodern interpretations are equal, or that no one can evaluate them. Where modern interpretations authenticate their legitimacy by the extent to which they apply authorized methods, a postmodern reader may produce an interpretation without a definable method, whose authority derives from the interpretive performance itself. Interpretive performance surely includes the familiar expository essay, sermon, and commentary -- but the range of postmodern interpretive performance extends beyond the predictable genres to include instances that diverge markedly from precedents, in medium, style, direction, or sense. Postmodern interpretations can actualize their warrants *retrospectively*. Rather than replicating the authorized steps of an interpretive method, performative postmodern interpreters can learn to free their imaginations from the strictures imposed by the institutions that guard biblical sobriety. (Postmodern interpreters will -- for instance -- be particularly likely to take advantage of the accelerating availability of high-quality tools for digital composition of video, audio, and interactive interpretations; non-verbal visual or auditory interpretations of biblical texts are not less "interpretations," but more obviously escape the judicatory regimes of modern interpreters.)

Some of the interpretations produced thusly will certainly amount to little more than

7. For two perspectives on the imitation motif in Pauline literature, see Elizabeth Castelli, *Imitating Paul: A Discourse of Power* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991) and my essay, "Walk This Way: Difference, Repetition, and the Imitation of Christ," *Interpretation* 55 (2001): 19-33.

self-indulgent nonsense (at least, they will seem so when evaluated by the standards of conventional interpretive wisdom); even modern interpretive discourses have produced much forgettable speculation. For those who have ears to hear, however, the very interpretive liberty that unconvincing, trivial, failed postmodern readings announce will provide an impetus for essaying stronger, richer, truer postmodern interpretations. Then as imagination-stretching practices of interpretation gain currency, the likelihood that some will attain brilliance likewise increases.

Where such postmodern interpreters bring acute attention and fecund imagination to the opportunity to pass along the Word of God, living and active, there the efforts of modern scribes to quench the verve that the postmoderns bring to bear will reveal themselves as the forced conformity of a superannuated hermeneutical bureaucracy. Without totalizing, without foundations, without the protection of mystified claims to power over interpretive alternatives; with exuberant delight in the intertextual relations of scriptural and secular writings, with vigilance toward the political costs and effects of specific interpretations, with intense attention to the ambiguities and self-contradictions that modern interpretations suppress, with diverse expressions of diverse identities, postmodern critics espouse their freedom from hermeneutical slavery to *any* particular constellation of cultural determinations. Indeed, just these modes of postmodern appropriation of the Bible well capture the audacious spirit with which outstanding interpreters of Scripture have, through the ages, announced their freedom from the strictures that constrained their teachers. Of such hermeneutical resuscitations, Paul himself might well have said that "the letter kills, but the Spirit makes alive" -- if he remembered.⁸

8. I did not forget, but simply found no convenient place to insert, references to a variety of pivotally important works in postmodern thought. For instance, the contributions of Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, Michel Foucault, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Michel de Certeau, Fredric Jameson, Paul de Man, and Judith Butler could never be catalogued in an essay of short compass. The chef of biblical postmodernism is Stephen Moore, whose *Literary Criticism and the Gospels: The Theoretical Challenge* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), *Mark and Luke in Poststructuralist Perspectives: Jesus Begins to Write* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), *Poststructuralism and the New Testament: Derrida and Foucault at the Foot of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), *God's Gym: Divine Male Bodies of the Bible* (Routledge: New York and London, 1996), and *God's Beauty Parlor: And Other Queer Spaces in and around the Bible* (Contraversions: Jews and Other Differences Series; Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001) stand out as exercises of postmodern imagination in biblical studies.