

**Evaluations of Paper Proposals for the 1999 WTS Meeting
Southern Nazarene University, March 5-6**

Proposal submitted by: Henry Spaulding, professor of theology and philosophy, Trevecca Nazarene University

Topic: "Good Conscience or Good Confidence: Re-Thinking Holiness Ethics in a Postmodern World"

Comments by the evaluator:

_____ This proposal should not be accepted for use in the 1999 program.

_____ This proposal should be discussed during the conference call.

Evaluator's name _____

**Good Conscience or Good Confidence:
Re-Thinking Holiness Ethics in a Postmodern World**

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The suggestion that Christian Holiness and Morality are fundamentally the same thing seems obvious to many within holiness circles. Yet, the philosophical and theological ferment surrounding postmodernism tends to question such a conclusion. This situation provides Wesleyan scholars with the opportunity to re-think the adequacy of their paradigmatic commitments. No doubt such an exercise will have wide ranging significance for the entire field of theological reflection within Wesleyan/Holiness circles. This paper will attempt to assess the creative possibilities of re-thinking holiness ethics from a post-liberal perspective. I intend to argue that postmodernism, especially in its post-liberal form, opens the door to a more productive, faithful, and authentic engagement with the ethical issues which confront us.

The first project of the paper will be to define the advantages of the post-liberal school of postmodernism over what Tilley calls “postmodernisms of completion” (Habermas and Tracy) and “postmodernisms of dissolution” (Derrida and Taylor). The paper will attempt to show that the “post-liberal” perspective is the most congenial to a Wesleyan/Holiness point of view. It will also argue that it opens many creative possibilities for ethical reflection. I will look at the tendency to divide Wesleyan ethical reflection along two lines. First, there are those who interpret Wesleyan ethics in terms

of deontological themes. This point of view tends toward ideals, principles, absolutes, and so on. Second, there are those who interpret Wesleyan ethics in terms of a situational teleology. This point of view tends toward defining dilemmas, the examination of the inadequacy of all absolutes, and the importance of moral vigilance. These are the predominate options in the minds of most who attempt to chart an adequate course for Wesleyan ethical reflection. The first section of the paper will characterize these approaches and point to their similarities. I also intend to suggest both are dependent upon a wedding of the modern paradigm and Wesleyan theological/ethical reflection. I will argue that it is the very similarity of these two perspectives, which creates an impasse. In other words, both perspectives are framed by the same assumptions. I will suggest that a post-liberal approach can get beyond this impasse.

The second section of the paper will characterize the ethics of postliberalism. The work of Stanley Hauerwas, Alasdair MacIntyre, James McClendon, Jr, and John Milbank will be important to the analysis offered in this section. For example, we will look at MacIntyre's observation that modern ethics tends toward an ahistorical perspective. I will also look at Hauerwas' and MacIntyre's observations that a decisionistic orientation diminishes the capacity to live truthfully, thus virtuously. Finally, I will look at Milbank's observation that the tendency of much theology to co-op secular reason belies the most fundamental elements of the Christian faith. Therefore, the point of the second section will be that post-liberalism manages to point to some real problems with both deontological and situationalist orientations in ethical reflection. This suggests the appropriateness of defining not just the post-liberal critique of modern ethics, but the

need to re-think the shape of ethical reflection for Wesleyan theology to “go on” (Wittgenstein).

The final section of the paper is the most crucial part of the paper. This section will offer a constructive proposal, which avoids the pitfalls of linking Wesleyan ethics with a modern paradigm. It will emphasize the importance of character over principles, social formation as opposed to resolution of conflict of duty, and the significance of liturgical practice. I will argue that the most important element of this option is the priority of the narratives and practices, which form character truthfully. Emphasis will be placed upon the gestures, which illuminate the practice of truth. I will argue that this approach is far more adequate for approaching the pluralism, which defines postmodern culture.

The title of this paper is dependent upon a chapter in John Milbank’s book entitled, The Word Made Strange. He begins the chapter entitled, “Can Morality Be Christian?” with a simple answer – No!. While this response will be confusing to some, it goes the heart of a postmodern re-construction of ethics. The underlying conviction of this paper will be that Milbank is right and that a proper understanding of Wesley and holiness of heart and life calls into question the appropriateness of the identification of holiness with morality. Further, I will suggest that this should be the occasion for those of us who are committed to Wesleyan holiness to re-think our ethics.