

**“Review Symposium on Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as  
Narrated Promise” by Ronald F. Thiemann**

**Robert W. Bertram**

[September, 1986. Later published in *dialog* 26, No. 1 (Winter, 1987): 69-71.  
Reprinted with permission.]

In an earlier review of this otherwise exquisite book, I suggested it was too short-reaching, only “bite-size.” But that complaint implies also an affirmative converse, a compliment to the cook. For all its “spareness,” the book is already so savory that it *schmeckt nach mehr*. Ironically, the “more” of which it is a foretaste lies not in Thiemann’s revelational theme – a kind of Luther-Barth fugue: knowing God’s grace is itself grace (“faith’s knowledge of God is a gift of God”) – but rather in the trouble this theme gets Thiemann into. Happily so, for the resulting challenge, as I think Thiemann senses, calls for something far newer in God than just being “revealed” or “identified” and for a God whose newest and best “prevenience” is exactly its scandalous contrary, divine dependence or contingency.

In the course of resolving one “incoherence,” Thiemann opens himself, more than he may appreciate, to another incoherence of the worst kind, that is, the kind which necessitates Christ and so is theologically most opportune. The first incoherence to which the book ostensibly limits itself is the one afflicting modern theological foundationalism, from which Thiemann rescues the Christian concept of revelation by means of its biblical, internally coherent metaphor, promise. But the new, more formidable incoherence which I think this rescue effort (to its credit) forbodes is an incoherence within the very God thus revealed: a promiser whose “unconditional” grace needs to be trusted in order to come true and whose very “prevenience” must share some onus for aiding and abetting the creatures’ widespread distrust. An incoherence of such daunting proportions, *de Deo*, requires a far more ambitious theological resolution – not to mention a theology of “coherence” or rationality – than has been offered by the revelationists, to whom Thiemann himself might still seem to belong were his book to be taken too closely at face value and without sufficient regard for its further, self-surpassing implications. These lurking premonitions of an incoherence insoluble except perhaps through Christ, but through Christ as more by far than God’s revealer, are the book’s implicit, foretasted “more,” its wineskin-bursting wine which – like Foucault’s “insurrection of subjugated knowledges” – arouses the reader’s appetite and extends what Jaus calls the “expectation horizon” beyond the book’s modestly stated, largely “descriptive” aims.

Although Thiemann finds modern foundationalism incoherent, epistemologically so, in its founding our knowledge of God’s priority in some common intuitive experience of ours, he too acknowledges that the “human response,” when it occurs – “faith,” not divine prevenience in isolation – is important for God’s revelation to “succeed.” It is this concession to human faith, guarded though it is, which combines with Thiemann’s dominant emphasis upon divine prevenience to form a binary, highly combustible tension, volatile enough to explode the book’s own apparent revelationism. True,

Thiemann's allowances for faith often sound like grudging yes-but's. While God's promise admittedly requires human reception, what Austin calls the promise's "uptake," Thiemann is at least as eager to say what that reception is not: "it is not an implicit work which I must perform in order to make the promise effective," it "does not in any sense constitute the promise" (p. 110). Indeed not. But then why in the Christian promise does faith count for so much? Only because faith, too, is God's doing? Is not that much equally true of love, patience, discipleship, none of which is singled out by the Gospel as "saving" or "justifying" or "liberating" the way faith is?

Similarly, Thiemann follows "Luther's insistence that 'promise and faith necessarily go together,'" but how far will Thiemann follow? How coherently? To the point where, with Luther, if instead of faith there is unfaith, the promise becomes judgment? Though faith may not "constitute the promise," may not unfaith constitute its negation, ontically? When even Erasmus' religious "endeavorers" cannot be certain that their efforts please God, then is it not "certain," as Luther reasoned, that they are right, "they do not please God?" (A Christian truth claim appealing for confirmation to non-Christian *experientia!*) But that, as Luther dared to admit, surely implies incoherence not only within the divine grace but within divine justice, all the more if this all-Creator is as preveniently active as Luther and Thiemann maintain. (So do I.) Thiemann grants that "the biblical text functions as God's promising address . . . only when the recipient responds with the appropriate correlative action." And if not? In that case there has not been "successful interlocutionary" communication. Then does not the promise refer to all? Thiemann admits there is "ambiguity" in the promise's "reference." And, though he is not here taking "a position on freedom in relation to divine election," he knows that "that question is obviously not unrelated to the issue of the prevenience of grace" – and, I would add, to its incoherence, inescapable but usable incoherence.

Thiemann's passing reference to Luther's *Bondage of the Will* we might seize upon for an alternative to modern moribund revelationism, drastic though Luther's alternative is in its stress on coherence. Drastic, because in the *De Servo Arbitrio*, the "hidden God" does not mean, as Thiemann underestimates, "the unknown and unknowable God beyond his revelation." On the contrary, "God hidden" is all too knowable and precisely for that reason unbearable, who though knowable should not be *made* known, "preached," as only "God revealed" in the Gospel should be. Yet, it is the Gospel itself, what Thiemann might call the Christian narrative's own "logic of promise," not just scattered grim Scripture quotations, which entails this gruesome *Deus absconditus* as the Gospel's negative converse. For, if grace is had only by faith (a very internally related, non-privatistic view of divine love), and if faith itself is sheer gift, then why are the most and the best of us so preveniently reinforced in the opposite, unbelief, never, of course, against our wills but then exactly with only that much "freedom," namely, to be ourselves – the ultimate "bondage"? Must that not implicate God as well as ourselves – the oh so prevenient God? Such a contradiction in God's justice, Luther conceded, not even the Gospel can resolve – yet. Meanwhile, the only thing worse than taking that destructive though valid *Deus absconditus* out of hiding and proclaiming it is the sort of revelationism which, by theological fiat, defines it out of existence as untrue. To be sure,

that way the whole God-problem is obviated in advance, modern Christianity is spared its most scandalous cross – and, alas, its closest theological affinity with unbelievers.

Thiemann, commendably, values that affinity, and I think I know why. His christology, especially in some “proclamatory” moments in his book, shows more divine affinity with sinners than revelationism usually dares. Revelationism as I understand it (Thiemann means something else by the word) has been the exorbitant price we have paid for universalism and may soon be its bankruptcy. We Christian universalists may not much longer be able to support our habit if revelationism – if! – is the cost it exacts. At the going street value, what has revelationism cost? Answer: the depth of God’s affinity with the unpleasing. In the “narrated promise” at its best, God’s Christ so identifies with unbelievers that he not only assails their illusions about God but agreeably confirms their own worst fears. It truly is God, regardless of whatever else, from whom they need to be saved, and saved by being replaced – also in their noblest parts, their “rationality” – by a whole new, plausible identity. Mercifully, this occurs as Godself in Christ acquires a new unprecedented identity of his own, not just as “prevenient” or even “gracious” but now, for the first time and forever after, as one of them, relieving them of that onus and reidentifying them as junior deities with a “prevenience” of their own, faith, to which God in turn is now the pleased respondent.

It is their faith in this promise of Jesus which renders them plausible – I mean, literally, pleasing – yet only if this new, self-reidentifying God, to the very core of the Trinity, has, in historical fact, become true. What the promise reveals, then, is not a God who, all along, would have been savingly gracious anyway, with or without Christ, believe it or not, and who needed Christ only to be publicly identified as such. There is a bolder alternative for making the promise all-inclusive, a hope which, for Christians at least, is non-negotiable: not by relieving the Promiser’s dependence on faith but by using the promise as Thiemann would, as a “speech-act,” which, in proclamation (including dialogue and listening), accomplishes what it describes. Granted, doing that flies in the face of an enormous incoherence, *Deus absconditus*, and can be excruciating.

Robert W. Bertram