

The Demise of Foundationalism and the Retention of Truth

What Evangelicals Can Learn from C. S. Peirce

IN A RECENT ESSAY entitled “The Postpositivist Choice: Tracy or Lindbeck?,” Richard Lints suggests that there are basically two methodological options available to contemporary theology: either the postmodern approach that highlights the public or universal character of theological rationality or the postliberal emphasis on intertextuality, narrative, and the cultural-linguistic framework of all knowledge.¹ Although Lints writes from within the evangelical tradition, a movement well known for taking a stand for the truth, he refrains from offering an answer to the question posed in the title, preferring instead to provide a descriptive survey of the two options.² As part of his account, he discusses the two central issues that characterize the present situation, which postmoderns and postliberals deal with in their own ways. The first is the demise of what he calls “epistemic foundationalism”; the second and related issue is the nature of and criteria for truth. The problem is that the death of foundationalism appears to have relativized all truth claims, resulting in a debilitation—if not paralysis—of theological thinking.

1. Lints, “The Postpositivist Choice.”

2. Perhaps Lints was reticent because of the American Academy of Religion audience. He concludes by calling himself an “antimodern” but leaves this suggestion undeveloped. I fail to conceive how one can be “antimodern” (see my review of Lints’s colleague at Gordon-Conwell, David Wells, and his work *No Place for Truth* and *God in the Wasteland*), but to the extent that I understand his protest against modernism, I believe my proposal in this chapter is compatible with his “antimodernist” vision.

Because of their insistence on the importance of truth, some evangelicals have continued to reject the validity of the anti-foundationalist critique. Those who have acknowledged its legitimacy have generally elected in turn what Lints has described as the postliberal option. I do not think that evangelicals can remain intellectually viable if the former strategy of resistance continues, nor do I think that the latter postliberalism *by itself* is an adequate methodological response since it in turn poses new dilemmas. At the same time, I do think that a variety of answers to Lints's question are not only possible but also potentially workable for evangelical thinkers. One clue to a possible solution lies within the scope of Lints's essay and conjoins the two issues he takes to be of central importance. I shall argue that the demise of foundationalism does not entail the rejection of truth. On the contrary, with the help of C. S. Peirce, the founder of American pragmatism, I hope to show that the evangelical insistence on truth in its strongest form can be retained even if knowledge is admitted to be foundationless.

My argument will proceed in three sections. First, I will briefly elaborate the contemporary evangelical theological situation with respect to foundationalism and truth. I will then look at how Peirce's pragmatism allowed him to hold to a fallibilistic epistemology even while maintaining a correspondence or propositional theory of truth. Section three will consist of an attempt to defend Peirce's method as compatible with, or at least not essentially opposed to, evangelical beliefs and sensibilities.

EVANGELICALS, FOUNDATIONALISM, AND TRUTH

Although it is widely agreed upon that foundationalism is dead, it is important to determine exactly what kind of creature it is that so many have laid to rest. In fact, if one is attentive to the various responses to the anti-foundationalist critique, one would have to agree with Timm Triplett that "work on foundationalism is flourishing."³ In terms of the feasible options for evangelicals, however, it is important only that we distinguish between classical and minimal, or weak, foundationalism. The former is that which has been rightfully traced to the Cartesian quest for certainty: all knowledge consists either in immediately justified or self-evident beliefs, or is mediately based on such beliefs. The latter has a variety of formulations, including that proposed more recently by Reformed thinkers such as William Alston and Alvin Plantinga. They have insisted on a different sort of

3. Triplett, "Recent Work on Foundationalism," 93. Triplett's survey identifies no fewer than twenty shades of foundationalism (!), and includes a valuable bibliography of contributions from 1975–1987.

“foundation,” one that is “properly basic” and unjustifiable on evidentialist grounds but which emerges out of doxastic (belief forming) practices and is therefore warranted and not irrational.⁴ While the merits of minimal or weak foundationalism in all its variations are still being debated, classical foundationalism has, even among evangelicals, fallen on hard times.⁵

Evidence of this evangelical reaction against classical foundationalism can be seen in at least two forms. Some are protesting against foundationalism either by aligning their theory of knowledge with that of the Reformed epistemologists, or by providing a clear epistemological critique of respected conservative evangelical thinkers.⁶ Others have realized that an internal critique remains incomplete without a viable option. These protestors have been led to some form of what Lints has called postliberalism. This group embraces an assortment of evangelicals from a broad spectrum, including John Yoder, Stanley Hauerwas, James William McClendon, Nancey Murphy, Clark Pinnock, Stanley Grenz, Gabriel Fackre, Henry Knight III, and others, all of whom have been attracted to the postliberal emphasis on

4. “Minimal Foundationalism” is William Alston’s term, from his *Epistemic Justification*, 39–56, while “Reidian Foundationalism,” following the Scottish philosopher, is Alvin Plantinga’s, in *Warrant and Proper Function*, 183–85. Alston also distinguishes between *iterative* and *simple* foundationalism (*Epistemic Justification*, 19–38), which correspond to Cartesian and his own minimal foundationalism respectively. For Plantinga’s foundationalism, see his “Reason and Belief in God.” For a more detailed elaboration of a “doxastic practice” approach to epistemology, see Alston, *Perceiving God*, 146–83.

5. For an assessment of Plantinga’s foundationalism, see, for example, D. Z. Phillips, *Faith After Foundationalism*, 3–130. Tilley, “Reformed Epistemology and Religious Fundamentalism,” notes that on Alston’s and Plantinga’s premises, the “basic beliefs” of fundamentalists are just as warranted as that of Reformed Protestantism. While the “basic beliefs” may indeed be justified, the question of whether or not the contents of these beliefs are true is quite another matter. I mention the Reformed alternative for two reasons. First, the Reformed epistemologists’ notion of “basic beliefs” finds an analogue in Peirce’s indubitable beliefs, a point I will return to below. Second, it is important to note the departure of this theologically conservative group from classical foundationalism; this creates another option for evangelicals looking to rethink their epistemology. Generally, however, it will be seen that evangelicals have preferred the postliberal option. My proposal looks to draw from both alternatives while further investigating the question of truth.

6. Thus theologians like Carl Henry, Stuart Hackett, Gordon Clark, Ronald Nash, and Kenneth Kantzer have been chided for actually distorting their foundations or working with non-foundationalist tools; see Topping, “The Anti-Foundationalist Challenge to Evangelical Apologetics,” and Clapp, “How Firm a Foundation.” It is clear, for example, that Hackett is a weak foundationalist who acknowledges the arbitrariness of his starting points and indicates his vulnerability to correction (*The Reconstruction of the Christian Revelation Claim*, 25).

the narrative structure of Christian faith.⁷ The essence of postliberalism as articulated by these thinkers is that Christian doctrine and theology has its own internal logic, which is sustained by the biblical textual tradition and which finds its meaning and purposes within the practices of the Christian community. While not all have consciously adopted the label postliberalism as their own, it suffices for the purposes of this chapter that many of these thinkers have in fact been attracted to narrative theology. To the extent that they have, they can be adequately classified according to Lints's definition.

The problem which immediately surfaces is that of truth. Evangelicals have generally been staunch defenders of a propositional view of truth, wherein what is asserted corresponds to an objective reality or state of affairs.⁸ This correspondence theory of truth has ancient roots in Plato and Aristotle, and presupposes that there is an external world apart from the human knower. How, then, can the correspondence of our ideas to the outside world be measured? This was the question that vexed Descartes, among others. He attempted to bridge the dualism between the knower and the known by following a process of methodical doubt in search of that which could be known with certainty. Descartes concluded that his *cogito* was that on which he could erect a viable theory of knowledge: all knowledge is either inherently justified on self-evident or incorrigible beliefs (eminently rational) or else founded on such beliefs (i.e., the *cogito ergo sum*). Later Enlightenment thinkers who built on Descartes's foundation assumed this as a universal rationality. The result of this was the enthronement of Reason. There were others, however, who were not so optimistic about these matters. Skeptics such as Hume questioned the connection between knower

7. All of those named have elaborated and defended their postliberal option in easily accessible sources. Other representatives can be found in Thiel, *Non-foundationalism*, 38–78, along with essays in Phillips and Okholm, eds., *Nature of Confession*, and in Hauerwas, Murphy, and Nation, eds., *Theology Without Foundations*.

It is important to note, however, that narrative theology is not a homogeneous movement and that even postmoderns like Tracy are “narrativists,” albeit, as Gary Comstock puts it, “impure” ones (“Two Types of Narrative Theology”). According to Comstock, “pure” narrativists like Lindbeck take a Wittgensteinian approach to religion and see each tradition as a coherent cultural-linguistic system which is basically immune to outside criticism, while “impure” narrativists like Tracy, Paul Ricoeur, Julian Hartt, and Sally McFague have been inspired by Gadamerian hermeneutics and emphasize the necessity of the ongoing conversation between narrative traditions and others in the quest for correlation. For this reason, and also because Tracy and other “impure” narrativists have never considered themselves fundamentally “narrative” theologians, I think it more useful to follow Lints's distinction between “postmodern” and “postliberal.”

8. This has been defended at length by the doyen of evangelicalism, Carl F. H. Henry, throughout the six volumes of his *God, Revelation and Authority*. See also Netland, *Dissonant Voices*, especially 112–33, and Corduan, *Reasonable Faith*, 39.

and known as well as the notion of the *cogito* itself, and others like Nietzsche objected to the idea of a universal rationality. This thoroughgoing critique of adequate epistemic grounds and universal first principles led in turn to the view of knowledge as subjective, contextual, and relative. In the contemporary scene, the “deconstructive” postmodernism of Derrida and Rorty is the “mature fruit” of this anti-foundationalism. In this framework, it is denied that reality in itself can be objectively and infallibly known; as such, the propositional understanding of truth as correspondence is no longer tenable.

Conservative evangelicals have attempted to ignore the demise of foundationalism in part because of the implications of such for truth. Their concern is that the doors to a complete relativism would be opened if propositional truth were dispensed with.⁹ Other evangelicals, however, have been sufficiently touched by the anti-foundationalist critique to be aware of “the inadequacies of propositionalism.”¹⁰ The human capacity for knowing is not only circumscribed by cultural context, but also limited by sin and the fall. As such, there is neither an Archimedean vantage point of knowledge, nor is there a sturdy foundation underneath. All knowledge is undeniably tradition dependent. This explains, in part, the popularity of postliberal theology. Its emphasis on the narrative character of knowledge has attracted many a thinker across the evangelical spectrum.

The elusiveness of truth within the postliberal framework has not, however, gone unnoticed. The question is that of truth as correspondence versus truth as coherence. In the postliberal view, truth is understood in terms of coherence in that Christian doctrine and theology are meaningful only within their own internal framework. But this raises some difficult questions about the nature and reach of Christian truth claims. What then becomes of its applicability to those lacking the Christian community? Would postliberal theologians be willing to admit that Christian truth thereby becomes no more than a function of or appendage to the Christian narrative? How are postliberals to defend the truth of their claims apart from this story when, according to the Magna Carta of postliberalism, George Lindbeck’s *The Nature of Doctrine*, doctrinal or theological truth is primarily intrasystematic and performative rather than ontological or propositional?¹¹ One of the surprising affinities that the postmodern approach of Tracy and others has with fundamentalism and conservative evangelicalism is that both have a much stronger view of truth as the correspondence (in Tracy’s terminology,

9. This is the concern articulated by Netland in *Dissonant Voices*, 112–96.

10. The title of chapter five of Henry H. Knight III’s *A Future for Truth*, 86.

11. Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 47–52 and 63–72.

correlation) between ideas such as doctrinal and theological propositions to reality. The difference is that in Tracy's case, the external confirmation of truth has to run the gamut of human experience pluralistically considered. In the postliberal view, however, truth as correspondence has for all intents and purposes been vanquished in favor of truth as coherence. The result has been that truth can no longer be universally asserted, but is only meaningfully embedded within particular traditions. More specifically, truth as Christians consider it is relative to the Christian narrative. Conservative evangelicals see this as a step in the direction of the complete relativism of deconstructionism, and have been rightly concerned. But this difficulty has not been overlooked by proponents of evangelical postliberalism either.¹²

It is here that I wish to reintroduce the pragmatism of Peirce. Evangelicals for the most part have not paid serious attention to Peirce. When they have noticed him, they have been misled by identifying him with the form of pragmatism espoused by his more famous contemporary, William James.¹³ While there are undoubtedly other resources from which evangelicals can draw in attempting to maintain their commitment to truth in a postfoundationalist era, Peirce's ideas are situated strategically at the intersection of epistemology and truth. As Guy Debrock and Menno Hulswit, Peirce scholars, inform us, "Indeed, pragmatism, and more specifically, Peirce's own brand of pragmatism, a term which he invented in order to distance himself from other forms of pragmatism [like James's], may well provide the key to an epistemological theory which avoids the pitfalls of both foundationalism and relativism."¹⁴ Peirce's escape from both pitfalls may prove to

12. E.g., the essays by Jeffrey Hensley and David Clark in Phillips and Okholm, eds., *Nature of Confession*, and Nancey Murphy, "Textual Relativism, Philosophy of Language, and Baptist Vision." Yet Murphy's narrativist reconstruction of truth fails if not considered as potentially universal (Yandell, "Modernism, Postmodernism").

13. For example, Peirce receives passing mention in Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1:43–44, where he concludes that "it is difficult to assess the truth and validity of pragmatism, for the writings of Peirce, James, Dewey, and others contain such a variety of viewpoints" (Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1:4). The only extensive evangelical engagement of Peirce I am aware of is Glenn Galloway in his essay "Peirce and Postmodern Evangelical Hermeneutics." In this, a revision of chapter five of his doctoral dissertation, Galloway highlights the difference that Peirce's triadic sign makes for postmodern evangelicals when compared to the dyadic approach of both deconstructive postmodernism and conservative evangelicalism (Galloway's PhD dissertation is "Efficacy of Propositionalism").

14. Debrock and Hulswit, *Living Doubt*, ix. Thomas Olschewsky's essay in this volume, "Realism and Antifoundationalism," is an argument similar to mine against the historicism of Rorty and the relativism of poststructuralism. The work that he and others are doing to distinguish the contributions of Peirce from those who have come after him within the pragmatist tradition (e.g., Mead, Dewey, Lewis, Carnap, Morris, Quine, and Rorty) has been important for the retrieval of the nonrelativistic founding

be a valuable resource for contemporary evangelicals who are attempting to reconstruct a non-foundationalist theology without jettisoning the idea of truth as correspondence. It is therefore necessary, given the objective of this chapter, to summarize aspects of Peirce's technical philosophy. But insofar as evangelicals have not heretofore seriously considered his work, the following can perhaps also serve as a useful introduction to Peirce given the concerns and commitments of evangelical theologians.

PEIRCE AND THE CRITIQUE OF CLASSICAL FOUNDATIONALISM

Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) always considered himself first and foremost a logician, even if he was a proficient scientist, renowned mathematician, original philosopher, and noted semiotician.¹⁵ Peirce's relevance to the "postpositivist" situation characterized by Lints can be better understood when it is realized how Peirce anticipated and was perhaps one of the first American thinkers to launch a wholesale critique of modernity and Enlightenment rationality.¹⁶ Peirce was a key transitional figure between Edwards and Emerson on the one hand, and the "golden age" of American philosophy at Harvard on the other.¹⁷ Gifted with an encyclopedic mind, he was able to contribute not only to the elaborate metaphysics of Royce and the philosophical psychology of James, but to other fields of knowledge and their emergence as academic disciplines as well. Educated in the wake of Darwin's evolutionary theory, Peirce's philosophic interests were shaped by late nineteenth-century developments in the world of the sciences. In this climate, he was inevitably directed to ask questions about the nature of scientific knowledge and its relation to the functions of the mind. This led him even before the age of thirty to an intense study of the history of philosophy and of Kant, who had earlier asked similar questions. Because he never published a systematic treatise integrating his complete vision, he

intuitions of the movement.

15. Biographical details can be found in Brent, *Charles Sanders Peirce*. Note that what follows will be a thematic rather than historical exposition of Peirce's philosophy; the latter is itself a fascinating topic, but my focus in this chapter is to lift up some aspects of Peirce's mature philosophy and bring them into a dialogue with contemporary evangelical theology.

16. Other discussions of Peirce as nonmodernist include Robert Neville's *Highroad around Modernism*, 25–52, and Peter Ochs's lead chapter of *Founders of Constructive Postmodern Philosophy*, 43–88.

17. Cf. Bruce Kuklick's discussion of Peirce's role in inaugurating the "Golden Age at Harvard" in Kuklick's *The Rise of American Philosophy*, 104–26.

was rather neglected until the posthumous appearance of his *Collected Papers*.¹⁸ Since then, however, an enormous body of secondary literature has emerged, as well as a society devoted to the interdisciplinary interpretation of his work. Rather than rehearsing the technical details of Peirce's thought, I want to look at his philosophy in anticipation of the dialogue with contemporary evangelicalism that follows. I will therefore lift up elements of Peirce's fallibilism and theory of truth and discuss them both within the broader framework of his pragmatism.¹⁹

Peirce's fallibilism took shape in the light of his conviction that the Cartesian quest for certainty was a mistaken enterprise. Whereas the Cartesian *cogito* presupposed a dualism between knower and known, Peirce rightly saw a continuity between the two.²⁰ In fact, Peirce rejected the individualism and atomism inherent in Cartesianism and suggested a continuity in the world itself. This is reflected in the fact that our knowledge of the world arises in our continuous experience of it. This experience consists of two aspects. The first aspect Peirce termed the *perceptual judgment*: the uncontrollable operation of grasping, assenting, and acting on sensation. This primary stuff of experience played a similar role in Peirce's epistemology as the notion of the *sense datum* did for the older British empirical philosophers. However, against their atomistic conception of *sense datum*, Peirce anticipated James's theory of mind as a "stream of consciousness" and regarded perceptual judgments as a continuous current of inferences.²¹ Being continuous, they are abstract, vague, and not segregatable, thus making them uncontrollable, uncriticizable, and indubitable in and of themselves.²²

18. Unless otherwise indicated, references to Peirce will be from his *Collected Papers*, and noted within parentheses in the text according to the convention of Peirce scholarship in the form of *v.p.*, denoting volume and paragraph number; all italics within quotations from Peirce are his emphases.

19. This exposition of Peirce is very selective. Those interested in following the details of Peirce's philosophy can consult my references in the notes both to his work and to the secondary literature.

20. Peirce's critique of Cartesianism was most thoroughly explicated in two early essays in the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* (1868): "Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man" and "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities." Briefly, he argued that Descartes's methodological and universal doubt was impossible, that the individualism of *cogito ergo sum* was unreasonable, that thinking proceeded in a spiral rather than in the Cartesian line, and that dualism leaves things ultimately inexplicable (5.264–65). I agree with Susan Haack that Peirce's second critique of Descartes was the most effective ("Descartes, Peirce and the Cognitive Community").

21. That perceptual judgments are inferences is an important point, one which I will return to below.

22. In holding to the existence of indubitables, Peirce approved of this aspect of Reid's philosophy of common sense. Peirce clearly read and admired Reid's work (5.444),

Yet Peirce understood that even while perceptual judgments are not consciously identifiable and dubitable, a fallibilistic epistemology requires that they be open to correction.²³ This led him to identify a second aspect of experience, which he called *perceptual facts*. These are the controlled cognitions or ideas which follow upon perceptual judgments. He described them as “the intellect’s description of the evidence of the senses, made by my endeavor. These perceptual facts are wholly unlike the percept, at best; and they may be downright untrue to the percept” (2.141). This is the case because perceptual facts are not immediate but temporally removed from perceptual judgments, and therefore inferentially dependent upon memory. Memory, however, is fallible, and since perceptual facts in their final form are propositions produced by controlled cognition, thinking can only grasp reality partially and inexactly.²⁴

Peirce’s fallibilism, along with central elements of his epistemology such as perceptual judgments and perceptual facts, have to be understood within the broader framework of his pragmatism. What, however, did Peirce mean by pragmatism? Simply put, pragmatism for Peirce was a method for ascertaining and articulating the meaning of anything. These concepts are clearly explicated in two of Peirce’s most important and widely referenced

and insofar as he also held to the indubitability of perceptual judgments, can be said to have anticipated Plantinga’s retrieval of this aspect of Reid’s thinking as well. In a certain sense, then, Richard Robin is correct to call Peirce a “foundationalist” (Robin, “Peirce on the Foundations of Knowledge”). Where Peirce differed from Reid, the classical foundationalists, and the Reformed epistemologists, however, was in denying immunity to and positively criticizing these “basic beliefs.” He called his own philosophy “Critical-Commonsensism” (5.497–501), by which he meant to distance himself from Kant’s unknowable *Ding an sich* (5.452, 525), and from Reid’s and Dugald Stewart’s Common-Sensism. His quarrel with the latter was that it did not develop a means by which to address the emergence and resolution of doubts that arise from experience: “the Common-Sensism now so widely accepted is not critical of the substantial truth of uncriticizable propositions, but only as to whether a given proposition is of the number” (5.497).

23. Since all knowledge is fallible, Peirce insisted that “there are three things to which we can never hope to attain by reasoning, namely, absolute certainty, absolute exactitude, [and] absolute universality” (1.141; cf. 5.587); and, further, “if exactitude, certitude, and universality are not to be attained by reasoning, there is certainly no other means by which they can be reached” (1.142). Let’s see how this plays out as we proceed.

24. The word “reality” is pervasive throughout the Peircean corpus. I will elaborate on what it means for Peirce as we proceed. Suffice it to say at this juncture that reality is what we encounter and that which our thinking attempts to comprehend. For an exhaustive discussion of the relation of knowledge and reality in Peirce’s philosophy, see Part Two of Hookway, *Peirce*.

papers, published in *Popular Science Monthly* in 1877–78: “Fixation of Belief” (5.358–87) and “How to Make Our Ideas Clear” (5.388–410).

In the first paper, Peirce argued that the path of inquiry is best accomplished methodologically by scientific investigation. He rejected the method of tenacity (which grasps a desired end regardless of outside influences or resulting consequences), the method of authority (which subjects itself sometimes uncritically to the powers that be), and the *a priori* method (which claims to be reasonable when oftentimes it is no more than an expression of intellectual taste). Instead, Peirce advocated a method “by which our beliefs may be determined by nothing human, but by some external permanency—by something upon which our thinking has no effect” (5.384). The objective of pragmatism was to get at the truly real.

Part of fully understanding one’s method and objective, however, involves its adequate articulation. If it is the truth of reality that shapes our beliefs, Peirce then sought to know how it is that we can attain proper beliefs. This is the subject of “How to Make Our Ideas Clear.” Peirce outlined the process by which beliefs are formed. It begins with an initial awareness of something, proceeds to remove doubts regarding the thing, and concludes with the establishment of habits of action relative to the object of belief. This led Peirce to define the meaning of anything as the habits it involved. He put it this way in his famous Pragmatic Maxim: “Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object” (5.402).²⁵ If effects are inconceivable for anything, such a “thing” is probably meaningless and, as such, neither true nor false. To get at the truth of anything is to formulate a hypothesis about its effects. True beliefs are those reached when the effects predicted are borne out in experience. This leads to *full beliefs*, that upon which we are willing to risk ourselves, in contrast to mere *opinions*. Opinions that do not lead even to insignificant actions probably either mean that hypotheses about them have not been properly framed or that there is no truth to them.²⁶

25. Peirce added in a footnote that his Pragmatic Maxim was “only an application of the sole principle of logic which was recommended by Jesus; ‘Ye may know them by their fruits,’ and it is very intimately allied with the ideas of the gospel” (5.402, n.2). Volume V of the *Collected Papers* is titled *Pragmatism and Pragmaticism*. There is a voluminous secondary literature on Peircean pragmatism. A useful and concise survey is Knight, *Charles Peirce*, 45–68.

26. Peirce’s religious example of a meaningless doctrine was transubstantiation (5.401, 541). At the same time, this did not imply his rejection of meaningful religiosity, since Peirce was a fairly traditional theist. As will be discussed below, he held to the reality of thirds or generals, leading him to posit criteria of verification or falsification that was quite unlike the materialism of Comte’s positivism (5.597) and the later

The substance of these two early papers, however, could have been understood as being merely descriptive. Perhaps people use the scientific or pragmatic method of inquiry simply because of intellectual taste. Peirce saw that in order to demonstrate the truth of pragmatism, he had to show that it was normative for the process of thinking. This was a lifelong task that finally emerged in his mature philosophy, most completely expressed in his 1903 *Lectures on Pragmatism* at Harvard.²⁷ Rather than analyzing the psychological aspects of pragmatism, Peirce sought in these lectures to establish its logical basis in order to argue for its truthfulness.²⁸ What motivated his inquiry into the logic of reasoning was the question of how the process of experience enabled the mind to engage the world and understand it truly, or how the signs with which the mind worked mediated reality accurately. In order to answer these questions, however, Peirce recognized that he had to develop a metaphysics. This too was a subject with which he had struggled since his early efforts to reformulate Kant's categories.

Peirce therefore devoted lectures two through four to an elaboration of his categorical scheme. He had come to understand reality in terms of three fundamental categories which he termed *firstness*, *secondness*, and *thirdness*. *Firstness* is pure potentiality, the simple quality of feeling, that which makes a thing what it is in and of itself. *Secondness* is the element of struggle or of brute, resistant fact, that by which a thing is related to others. *Thirdness* is what mediates between firstness and secondness, the universals, laws, generalities, or habits that ensure the continuity of the process of reality.²⁹ Peirce considered these categories to be universally applicable to all phenomena,

stringent analytic philosophy.

27. I greatly benefited from a recent commentary on these lectures edited by Patricia Ann Turrisi in *Pragmatism as Principle*.

28. To distinguish his pragmatism from that of James's, Peirce queried, "what is the *proof* that the possible practical consequences of a concept constitute the sum total of the concept?" (5.27). Peirce's problem with James was not so much the latter's theory of truth—James was an epistemological realist just as Peirce was (see James's *Meaning of Truth*, 217–20)—as it was James's equation of truth with meaning. Peirce wanted to keep both distinct. There were other differences as well, perhaps related to vocation and temperament. James was a metaphysical nominalist, ethical utilitarian, cosmological pluralist, and psychologist-turned-philosopher; in contrast, Peirce was a realist, normativist, synechist, and scientist-logician. As such, he was always after the logic of both thought and action (5.429). Smith's *Purpose and Thought* delineates differences among the early pragmatists.

29. The import of thirdness in Peirce's philosophy should not be underestimated. It signaled his revolt against nominalism—its denial of the reality of laws or generals. It was this error, Peirce insisted, which plagued all of modern philosophy since Ockham (cf. his discussion of nominalism in 1.15–26).

irreducible, able to comprehend all other categorical distinctions, and not only descriptive of reality, but reality itself.³⁰

Peirce's reformulation of the categories yielded some significant insights into the nature of experience and reasoning. Whereas the history of Western thought has generally attempted to comprehend epistemology in dyadic terms resulting in the well-known dualisms of knower and known, subject and object, and the like, Peirce explicated such within a triadic framework that combined experience and cognition. Proceeding from perceptual judgments, human cognition typically involves three types of reasoning, all of which are inferential: *abduction*, *deduction*, and *induction*. *Abduction* is the emergence of a broad inference, a hypothesis, what ensues from the general classification of perceptual judgments. *Deduction* is the prediction of what should follow from the hypothesis. *Induction* is the concrete, piecemeal testing of the deduced predictions to see if the hypothesis holds in reality. What is important here is the basic continuity between perception and abduction. From a phenomenological analysis of perceptual experience, Peirce was led to see that perceptual judgments or sensations are the continuous activity of engaging with brute singulars or secondness by which the mind registers the general or vague features of the world. Our sensation of a table is fundamentally of the laws to which things such as tables conform: hardness, coarseness, color, etc. As such, we can see that perceptual judgments are thirds that connect our sensations with the world.³¹

30. This is an unfortunately brief summary of 1.300–53. Discussions of Peirce's categories can be found from almost all of his commentators. He mentions numerous other examples to support his triadic categories, including: freedom, fact, continuity; feeling, volition, cognition; quality, reaction, representation; presentness, struggle, law; the Kantian categories of unity, plurality, and totality, and possibility, necessity, actuality; and the Hegelian categories of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis—so long, Peirce insisted, as the second was not overwhelmed by the third. Note also the fascinating discussion by Sandra Rosenthal of how Peirce could consider his categories fundamental yet fallible (*Peirce's Pragmatic Pluralism*, ch. 4, esp. 77–88).

31. It is therefore arguable that Peirce's is a naturalistic epistemology, if by this we mean the continuity between mind and reality (see Maffie, "Naturalized Epistemology"; cf. Plantinga's use of "naturalistic epistemology" within an explicitly theistic framework in his *Warrant and Proper Function*, 194–238). The history of science and the advance of knowledge also led Peirce to this conclusion. Since abduction is based on inference and all hypotheses are actually guesses, and since false hypotheses are infinitely far greater numerically than true ones, our remarkable guessing ability can be seen as evidence of the adaptation of the mind to the world (5.591, 6.417, 7.39, 46). While Peirce drew from the terminology of Darwinian evolution in calling this ability Insight or Instinct (5.173, 7.687), he did not succumb to the Spencerian materialistic or mechanistic interpretation of the universe. Rather, this led him to the view that both the world and humanity are signs to be interpreted (5.119, 314), which is in turn suggestive of the theological doctrine of the *imago Dei* (5.588, cf. 6.307); cf. also Miller,

From this discovery, Peirce determined that vagueness, generality, and inference are replete throughout both experience and the process of reasoning. Abduction is thereby connected with perception and occurs continuously with it because of the “interpretativeness of the perceptive judgment” (5.185); in fact, Peirce specifically said that a percept or sensation “fulfills the function of an hypothesis” (5.291). The various hypotheses are refined in perceptual facts, deductively theorized, and then tested in more specific ways. Those that prove themselves reliable guides for the course of experience are solidified into habits of thought and action. The process of thinking, then, is nothing more or less than the drawing of inferences from the generalities of sensations, and the continuous filling in the blanks or making determinate the vague aspects of these perceptual judgments, both by connecting them with previous cognitions and by integrating novel experiences through the ongoing process of reasoning.³² Because generality or thirdness “pours in” upon us continuously in the form of sensation, percepts and perceptual judgments are codified over time as mental signs (interpretations) that grasp the laws and habits of things. This in turn enables us to understand and engage the world. All human experience, from the percepts of feeling to perceptual judgments and on through the entire process of cognition, is therefore wholly semiotic. But, it also follows that since cognition is nothing but inferences from the vague signs of perception, and since there is, at least potentially, an infinite series of interpretations that follow upon the presentation of a sign, all knowledge can only be provisional. This is the case because inductive reasoning can only engage in a finite number of experiments even if extended indefinitely. Reflecting this fallibilism, Peirce thus admonished the investigator to be watchful for exceptions to the rule. Barring the surprises of experience, thinking proceeds in smooth continuity from perception through to action. Peirce summarized the fundamental tenets of his philosophy in the concluding Lecture on Pragmatism in this

“Theological Implications.”

32. Peirce puts it this way: “Perceptual judgments contain general elements, so that universal propositions are deducible from them. . . . The perceptual judgments are to be regarded as an extreme case of abductive inferences, from which they differ in being absolutely beyond criticism. The abductive suggestion comes to us like a flash. It is an act of insight, although of extremely fallible insight. It is true that the different elements of the hypothesis were in our minds before; but it is the idea of putting together what we had never before dreamed of putting together which flashes the new suggestion before our contemplation” (5.180). That perceptual judgments are thoroughly general and put us in touch with the laws and habits that structure reality is, in my opinion, one of the most important of Peirce’s insights. As Robert Corrington comments, “If these beliefs were anything *but* vague, they would make it difficult for the self to function in a variety of situations, each with its own complex variables” (*An Introduction to C. S. Peirce*, 55, emphasis Corrington’s).

way: "The elements of every concept enter into logical thought at the gate of perception and make their exit at the gate of purposive action; and whatever cannot show its passports at both those two gates is to be arrested as unauthorized by reason" (5.212).

The essence of pragmatism therefore follows the logic of abduction. Pragmatism is the process of inquiry that seeks to establish firm beliefs about reality from the inferences of perceptual experience. The pragmatic elucidation of truth asks the question: what can be expected to follow from a true hypothesis? The logic of pragmatism is that the vagueness of perception and perceptual judgment lead us to formulate equally general inferences (abductions), from which more specific predictions are made (deductions), which are in turn finally tested in a variety of ways (induction). If confirmed, inductive experience is shaped into provisional habits that inform our actions. As Peirce put it, "the only method of ascertaining the truth is to repeat this trio of operations: conjecture; deductions of predictions from the conjecture; testing the predictions by experimentation" (7.672). It follows that only the surprises arising from experience jolt us from our habituatedness, trigger doubt, and return us to inquiry.

Both perceptual judgments and perceptual facts are thus synthesized in our minds in such a manner so as to form habits that enable us to engage our world. So long as things are encountered as anticipated, our habits of thought and action are solidified and confirmed. They begin to be consciously criticized, however, when we are surprised by the unexpected. Such surprises raise doubts that inhibit our ability to function in the world.³³ This leads us to a process of inquiry that has as its goal the resolution of doubt and the establishment of a new mode of belief and action. This new *modus operandi*, however, will be satisfactory only if it enables us to engage the world successfully. This requires that we understand our relation to the world truthfully. In this way, that which is experientially indubitable in per-

33. *Surprise* and *doubt* are both important concepts in Peirce's epistemology. The former, Peirce said, "is very efficient in breaking up association of ideas" (5.478; cf. 5.512), and what surprises is precisely our being shocked by an unexpected experience of reality (1.336). The latter Peirce contrasted with *belief*. Whereas belief was understood as a self-satisfied habit, *doubt* was defined as "the privation of a habit" (5.417), or as that which "really interferes with the smooth working of the belief-habit" (5.510). Peirce insisted, however, that genuine doubt exists not in the laboratory of thought but is rather the "uneasy and dissatisfied state from which we struggle to free ourselves [in order to] pass into the state of belief" (5.372). As an example of how the experience of the real duality of secondness caused surprises and raised doubts, Peirce described how the subjective idealist walking down the street and musing about idealism is unable to persist in denying the reality of the external world after being staggered by the flying fist of a drunkard. "What has become of his philosophical reflections now?" Peirce asked (5.539).

ceptual judgments can be and is cognitively dubitable when propositionally asserted as perceptual facts and tested against experience. As Peirce said, “the scientific spirit requires a man to be at all times ready to dump his whole cartload of beliefs, the moment experience is against them” (1.55). Hence Peirce’s fallibilism.³⁴

The preceding discussion has hinted at how Peirce understood all knowledge to be fallible, even while he believed it could be truthful. This connection, however, needs to be elaborated upon. Important for our purposes is that the Peircean corpus provides abundant evidence that he viewed truth propositionally, and that such propositions connect our cognitions with reality.³⁵ This is the case in part because Peirce was convinced that truth is exclusively propositional. Any real proposition, as a semiotic relation, must be categorically triadic. In itself (as a first), a proposition is a sign that stands against an object (a second) and is capable of determining an interpretation (a third). The interpretation either gets at the relation between the sign and the object correctly or it does not. This is what allowed Peirce to say “every proposition is either true or false” (2.327). But because our initial perceptual judgments are vague, they have to be rendered more precise by the many respects or perspectives of interpretation. Propositional

34. Simply put, then, *fallibilism* is “the doctrine that our knowledge is never absolute but always swims, as it were, in a continuum of uncertainty and of indeterminacy” (1.171). It is important to note, in the words of Robert Almeder, that “Peirce’s denial of the existence of absolute individuals provided the logical foundation for his doctrine of the indeterminacy of meaning” (*Philosophy of Charles S. Peirce*, 18).

35. From an unpublished manuscript dating from about 1905, Peirce begins rhetorically: “So what is truth? Kant is sometimes accused of saying that it is correspondence of a predicate with its object. . . . He calls it a nominal definition, that is to say, a suitable explanation to give to a person who has never before seen the word ‘*Wahrheit*’” (from Manuscript 283, 39, in the microfilm edition of Peirce’s unpublished papers located in the Widener Library at Harvard University; quoted in Misak, *Truth and the End of Inquiry*, 128). Yet Peirce did go on to unequivocally endorse the correspondence theory. In the following brief explication of Peirce’s notion of truth, however, we would do well to keep in mind the complexity of his thought. Peirce did discuss theories of truth in general and truth as correspondence specifically in 5.549–73. At the same time, Robert Almeder has documented “Peirce’s Thirteen Theories of Truth.” H. S. Thayer, however, has pointed out the two definitions most widely regarded as “Peirce’s theory” are: “The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate, is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is real. That is the way I would explain reality” (5.407); and, “Truth is that concordance of an abstract statement with the ideal limit towards which endless investigation would tend to bring scientific belief, which concordance the abstract statement may possess by virtue of the confession of its inaccuracy and one-sidedness, and this confession is an essential ingredient of truth” (5.565) (cf. Thayer, “Peirce on Truth,” 124). The import of these definitions will be clear as our discussion continues. For an insightful overview of Peirce’s ruminations on truth in the philosophical context of his time, see Altshuler, “Peirce’s Theory of Truth.”

signs thus function by addressing and creating in our minds other, more developed signs or interpretations, and so on, potentially *ad infinitum*. A true proposition, Peirce explained, meant that

every interpretation of it is true. . . . When we speak of truth and falsity, we refer to the possibility of the proposition being refuted; and this refutation (roughly speaking) takes place in but one way. Namely, an interpretant of the proposition would, if believed, produce the expectation of a certain description of precept on a certain occasion. The occasion arrives: the percept forced upon us is different. This constitutes the falsity of every proposition of which the disappointing prediction was the interpretant (5.569).

This, then, is what allowed Peirce to claim that thought has access to the truth of reality. “Truth is the conformity of a representamen to its object, *its* object, ITS object, mind you” (5.554). For Peirce, far from truth being subjective, all truth is supremely objective in that there is a correspondence relation between propositions and reality. The difference is that Peirce recognized the complex operations of thinking. He understood that the correlation of our assertions with reality takes place not directly, but only by means of a semiotic process of interpretation. This process is a triadic relation between signs, objects, and interpretations, which arise from various experiential perspectives. These respects of interpretation yield successively more determinate aspects of previously less determinate signs.

Two other aspects of Peirce’s theory of truth need to be mentioned. The first is his insistence that the context of inquiry is always a community of inquirers and never an isolated individual. Although Peirce fully acknowledged the provisional nature of all knowledge, he rejected Kant’s idea that reality is an unknowable thing-in-itself. Peirce preferred instead to speak of practical certainty and to rely on the accumulated wisdom of human experience and the consensus of the community of inquirers to establish both truth and reality. As he observed, the real is that which “sooner or later, information and reasoning would finally result in, and which is therefore independent of the vagaries of me or you. Thus, the very origin of the conception of reality shows that this conception essentially involves the notion of a COMMUNITY, without definite limits, and capable of a definite increase in knowledge” (5.311). This is especially the case since the idea of truth entails something being the case regardless of our own particular wishes or desires.

The second aspect of Peirce’s notion of truth that needs to be mentioned is truth as that to which opinion converges in the infinite long run.

While Peirce's use of the word *opinion* is deceiving in that it connotes numerous possible subjective formulations of truth, it should be noted that any particular opinion is always potentially *final*, thus denoting singularity. Even if there is the notion of truth as an ideal limit in Peirce, this does not mean that truth is only an eschatological notion and can never be accessed.³⁶ Because inquiry is the process of settling beliefs, the process of inquiry can terminate whenever particular questions cease to generate doubt, or when satisfactory answers are formulated. In such cases, the community of inquirers has reached a "final opinion": which "truths" are usually conveyed in textbooks (cf. 8.43). The fact that any question may be later reopened by the community of inquirers is evidence that later experience calls into question prior conclusions and that doubt has once again arisen; this is unavoidable given the fallibility of all knowledge.

In sum, getting at the truth involves the logic of reasoning, the continuous fallible activity of a community of inquirers, beginning physiologically with vague perceptual mental signs, proceeding cognitively via abduction, deduction, and induction to render them more completely determinate, and while never getting thought to correspond directly to its object, always increasingly approximating this concordance through the potentially indefinite process of inquiry, which terminates when a certain degree of action is made possible and doubt is minimized. The proof of pragmatism, as Peirce understood it, lies in its following the logic of reasoning. This logic enables the community of inquirers to decipher signs of themselves and the world, interpret experiences, clarify meanings, understand intellectual concepts, be habituated to reality, and apprehend truth.

Before we launch the dialogue between Peirce and contemporary evangelicalism, however, it might be useful to ask where his method of inquiry led with regard to his personal religion.³⁷ The "results" are most clearly seen in his 1908 essay, "A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God" (6.452–93). The "neglected argument," it should be noted, is really a nest of three arguments. These can be distinguished as the Humble Argument, the Neglected Argument proper, and what I will call the Logical Argument. Peirce began with a discussion of "musement," the free-flowing

36. Cf. the excellent discussion of Peirce's notion of truth as "final opinion" and limit ideal by Thayer, "Peirce and Truth."

37. There is an extended discussion of "religion" in the second half of Volume VI of the *Collected Papers*. At the same time, an enormous body of secondary literature has also developed on this topic. Two valuable book-length discussions are Orange's historical account, *Peirce's Conception of God*, and Raposa's thematic *Peirce's Philosophy of Religion*. Other important articles which I found helpful are Potter, "Vaguely Like a Man"; Clarke, "Peirce's Neglected Argument"; Smith, "Peirce's Religious Metaphysics"; and Raposa, "Peirce and Modern Religious Thought."

meditation all human beings periodically engage in. He suggested that prolonged musement on the three universes (the three categories) of quality, brute actuality, and the relation between the two inevitably results in the hypothesis of God's reality as creator of the world.³⁸ This was Peirce's solution to the problem of the one and the many. He admitted that his Humble Argument was very similar to ancient argument from design. That the idea of God is what any reflective muser eventually stumbles upon was, for Peirce, a fact that theologians and theistic apologists throughout the centuries had overlooked. This was therefore a second theistic argument, what Peirce called the Neglected Argument proper. The final Logical Argument is the consideration of the Humble Argument as an exemplification of the process of reasoning. The hypothesis of God's reality which dawns on the muser is usually tested and confirmed both deductively and inductively. As with any other "experiment," the results of these tests will be fallible on the one hand, especially if specified in detail (i.e., as in saying what the divine attributes are), even while on the other hand being open to greater and greater clarification by the community of inquirers. It is important to remember here that Peirce understood the mind to be attuned to reality. This was what enabled the growth of knowledge. Because "the mind works by final causation, and final causation is logical causation" (1.250), it should not be surprising that he hypothesized God to be both the aboriginal creator of the world as well as the telos of its concrete development. It seemed right to Peirce that inquiry, in the infinite long run, would come closer and closer to a correct knowledge of God.

PEIRCE AND EVANGELICAL ORTHODOXY

Much more can and needs to be said about Peirce's semiotic theory—the categories, epistemology, and theism. Yet the question that needs to be addressed after this exposition of Peirce is why evangelicals should pay serious attention to this thinker. Perhaps a prior complex of questions needs to be negotiated before a more concrete dialogue on theological method can be attempted. Can evangelicals learn from someone whose presuppositions and assumptions are altogether different from their own? Is the idea that all knowledge is fallible compatible with evangelical intuitions? Is Peirce's

38. Peirce preferred to speak of God's reality rather than existence since the latter referred to the second universe of matter and actuality. Gary E. Kessler argues that Peirce was mistaken in not taking into account the role of cultural constraints in musement ("A Neglected Argument"). This is an important point which I will briefly allude to later.

revised notion of truth as correspondence—tempered by the infinite long run—close enough to evangelical commitments? How does the link between propositionalism and the thoroughly semiotic nature of interpretation as articulated by Peirce square with evangelical notions of revelation and the hermeneutical process? The problem that many evangelicals would conceivably have with all of these Peircean doctrines is that adherence to them would appear to place one on the slippery slope toward theological liberalism and relativism.

Partly in defense of Peirce and partly in order to not terminate the dialogue before it has even started, let me respond very briefly to these concerns. First, the combination of propositionalism and the process of interpretation in Peirce is suggestively analogous to the evangelical commitment to Word and Spirit, the two forms of divine self-communication. The Word is the concrete revelation of God, most clearly seen in the incarnation and secondarily in the biblical witness. The Spirit is that elusive revelation of God, whose comings and goings are like the wind, and beyond our ability to define with precision (cf. John 3:8). Together, the relationship between Word and Spirit is one of the central tensions in Christian theology. Second, truth as correspondence in its strongest form can be understood literally only in an eschatological sense. It is biblically attested by St. Paul's declaration that "now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully" (1 Cor 13:12). The God who says, "I am who I am" is also the God who will be.³⁹ There is room here for Peirce's notion of truth as that which reveals itself in the infinite long run. Finally, Peirce's fallibilism is not a mere assertion, but rather a rigorously formulated doctrine set within an epistemological, psychological, and metaphysical framework. It is therefore important to distinguish the type of "relativism" entailed by Peirce's fallibilism from that espoused by other "deconstructive" pragmatists such as Rorty. Whereas the latter advocated a form of polite conversation as the only option since truth is relative and finally inaccessible, the former emphasized the fundamental purpose of inquiry as the attainment of truth. Given their more robust doctrines of sin and the fall, evangelicals should be some of the first rather than the last to embrace fallibilism and dispense with epistemological foundationalism. That all knowledge is partial and open to correction should be the hallmark of an evangelical theology articulated in a posture of humility before others and especially before God. Evangelicals can and should acknowledge the fallibilistic nature of knowledge and the relative or contextual form of all

39. "I will be what I will be" is a valid alternate rendition of the Hebrew in Exodus 3:14 (NIV marginal note); cf. Peirce's notion of reality as that which belongs to or appears in the future (8.284).

interpretation, without surrendering to a skeptical or nihilistic relativism with regard to truth.

With these preliminary remarks in hand, I wish to take up in the remainder of this chapter the two issues central to evangelical theology and perhaps most succinctly and formidably expressed in the doctrinal creed of the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS): “The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs. God is a Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each an uncreated person, one in essence, equal in power and glory.” These are the doctrines of Scripture and of the Trinity.⁴⁰ I will deal with the latter first, although with each, I hope to show that Peirce is at least not incompatible with evangelical beliefs.

In the first place, it is important to note that Peirce was clear regarding his belief in God. He also rejected the Unitarianism of his father, Benjamin Peirce, the noted mathematician and astronomer, as is evidenced by his decision to remain a communicant in the Episcopal Church all his life. Yet because he believed that the word *God* was vague even to an extreme, Peirce was leery about the ways in which theologians had attempted to specify the concept and by which they had managed to render a practically understood term theoretically and theologically confusing. I am convinced, however, that there are fruitful insights to be gained in any effort to understand the doctrine of the Trinity if close attention is paid to Peirce’s triadic categories. This is especially the case since Peirce regarded personality in part as the consciousness (thirdness) mediating feelings and qualities of feelings (firstness) with brute matter (secondness). This enabled him to comprehend God as supremely personal.⁴¹ The idea of God as Alpha (first), Omega (second), and the process of evolution in between (third) was also considered by Peirce to be “essentially that of Christian theology, too” (1.362, n.1). A further analogue that comes to mind is Augustine’s doctrine of the Holy Spirit as the bond of love between the first two persons.⁴² Much more thought needs to be given to these matters. I am simply pointing out the potential resources inherent in Peirce’s personalistic theism as an alternative to the

40. I think that these are doctrinally axiomatic to broad evangelicalism even if many within this larger community would take issue with the specific wording of the ETS statement. At the same time, however, any headway made at these points of highest tension will be suggestive of the promise in continuing the dialogue.

41. See the evidence for this gathered by Donna Orange in her *Peirce’s Conception of God*, where she argues that Peirce is far closer to the personalistic God of traditional theism than to the finite God of James (or, for that matter, to the impersonalistic God of contemporary Peirceans like Robert Corrington and Robert Neville).

42. See Yong, *Spirit-Word-Community*, ch. 2, for further explication.

many other Peircean and non-Peircean contemporary reconstructions of the doctrine of the Trinity, based as they are upon impersonal categories that evangelicals would not endorse.

The evangelical adherence to the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture seems at first sight to be problematic. Yet note the qualification of inerrancy to the original autographs; there is already even in this doctrinal statement a recognition of the finitude and hence fallibility of all human endeavors, including that of the transmission of Scripture. More important, however, is the implied dissonance between Peirce's scientific method and evangelical theological method. Whereas the apparent claim of evangelicals that theology must begin from the Bible would appear to conflict with Peirce's relegating the method of authority to second rank at best, I want to show that this discrepancy is much more a surface distinction than an essential one. I will do this by briefly commenting on the doctrine of the Wesleyan quadrilateral—that theology proceeds upon Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience—a model accepted by more and more evangelicals.⁴³ I will take up the elements of the quadrilateral in reverse of their usual order, since I think that the most problematic point is best handled after discussing the other three.⁴⁴

Most evangelicals would agree that theology should not be completely divorced from experience and reason. To be sure, God is not nature or the world, but insofar as evangelicals believe that religious experiences are real encounters with God, these experiences can contribute in shaping and leading us to a deeper and more sure knowledge of God. Further, since many evangelicals are in agreement that the autonomy of reason is a misguided

43. Thorsen, *Wesleyan Quadrilateral*; see also the statement of a theologian respected among evangelicals, Albert Outler: "If we are to accept our responsibility for seeking *intellecta* for our faith, in any other fashion than a 'theological system' or, alternatively, a juridical statement of 'doctrinal standards,' then this method of a conjoint recourse to the fourfold guidelines of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience, may hold more promise for an evangelical and ecumenical future than we have realized as yet" ("Wesleyan Quadrilateral—In John Wesley," 16–17). I find additional support for using Peirce in this way from Michael Raposa, who has himself coined a new term to describe Peirce's method of inquiry: *theosemiotic*. For Raposa, "Peirce's theory of inquiry supplies the rubric for what is, in essence, a complex theological method" (*Peirce's Philosophy of Religion*, 144). Let's see how this method compares with that recognized by evangelicals.

44. The alert reader will notice that whereas I began by proposing a dialogue between Peirce and a more Reformed version of conservative evangelicalism as exemplified by the general orientation of members in the ETS, I am now suggesting that such a dialogue may best be mediated by recourse to a theological method that is growing in prominence in the larger evangelical community. In doing so, however, I am hopeful not only to be sensitive to the plurality within the evangelical camp but also to engage the broader tradition with Peirce's ideas.

experiment in the history of thought, experience and reason are understood as two poles of the same process, in ways similar to that which was articulated by Peirce a century ago. Upon reflection, the value of Peirce's theory of experience and cognition for shedding light on the way we think, both practically and even theologically, cannot be disputed. The religious imagination also begins abductively, formulating hypotheses for reflection and criticism by others. Some of the results are eventually canonized as dogma by the community of theological inquirers, but these are always subject to later revision or even denunciation. This is consistent with the way we as religious individuals in communities actually formulate our theology. We begin with the vagueness of the concept, make it more determinate, and always revise it in light of later experiences.

This constant revision becomes increasingly relevant in assessing theological truth claims. It is especially so for those claims that have references other than strictly theological ones. The claim regarding the historical resurrection of Jesus is a case in point. This is a doctrine strenuously insisted upon by evangelicals. As implausible as the claim may be to the modern mentality, nevertheless, the only possible falsifying evidence is the production of the corpse of Jesus. Apart from this, the claim of the resurrection is the exception that Peirce warned us about, which is sustained by a certain degree of historical evidence and a massive traditional consensus. Meanwhile, the viability of the concept of resurrection has been recently reopened by the Omega Point theory as developed by the Tulane University physicist Frank Tipler. Tipler's Omega Point theory merits attention in this context if for no other reason than that it is an eschatological theory based on the infinite long run. It has been forged in part in dialogue with theologians like Teilhard de Chardin and Wolfhart Pannenberg, the latter being well known for his theory of *prolepsis*: the means by which the future affects the past.⁴⁵ When coupled with Peirce's insistence that "the mind works by final causation, and final causation is logical causation" (1.250), and that "the rational meaning of every proposition lies in the future" (5.427), to deny the possibility of the historical resurrection is to not only commit an unpardonable sin, but also violate Peirce's First Rule of Reason: "Do not block the way of

45. Tipler, *Physics of Immortality*. Tipler's theory has not, of course, gone uncriticized (e.g., Stoeger and Ellis, "Response"); but see also the two symposia in *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science*, 30, nos. 2 and 3 (1995), which feature responses by Frank Birtel, Hans-Dieter Mutschler, Donald York, and Pannenberg himself. I mention Tipler not because I think he is right but because I think the evangelical case can only be strengthened if we enter into earnest discussion and strenuous debate with the larger theological public, one which includes secularists, those in other religious traditions, and even atheists!

inquiry" (1.135).⁴⁶ Evangelicals should not be content with a fideistic stance regarding the resurrection, but should join in the process of inquiry as to its historical credibility by utilizing more than just the historico-grammatical methods of textual interpretation at their disposal.

A point that has not been emphasized so far should be brought out at this time. Peirce did distinguish the arena of science from what he considered to be "vitally important topics." Science, he insisted, was concerned primarily with the truth, and only secondarily with practical instrumentality. In other words, Peirce distinguished between theory and practice. While the former should always be governed by the scientific method, in practice, and especially in matters of life which are of vital importance, "the wise man follows his heart and does not trust his head" (1.653). This is because "common sense, which is the resultant of the traditional experience of mankind, witnesses unequivocally that the heart is more than the head, and is in fact everything in our highest concerns, thus agreeing with my unproved logical theorem" (1.654). In this vein, he also acknowledged the role of human conscience. In the "Additament" to his "Neglected Argument" (1910), he asked bluntly, "Where would such an idea, say as that of God, come from, if not from direct experience? . . . open your eyes—and your heart, which is also a perceptive organ—and you see him" (6.493). Yet, Peirce lamented that books on the philosophy of religion, and by implication, theology, had been distorted by the intellectualist "who in his preface offers you his metaphysics as a guide for the soul, talking as if philosophy were one of our deepest concerns" (1.654). This is not to say, of course, that Peirce disdained speculative philosophical theology. His own theology was a highly speculative one; the characteristics of his theism were left purposefully vague. What is important is that Peirce reserved a place for the conservatism of tradition.⁴⁷ His rationalism and empiricism was thus tempered by his fallibilism, and connected to his theory of the communal aspect of truth. Peirce insisted that "truth is public."⁴⁸ Inquiry leads from individual opinion to communal

46. While Peirce admitted that "miracles are intrinsic elements of a genuine religion" (6.446) as part and parcel of his doctrine of *tychism*—that novelty and chance are elements of the world—he denied that the scientific method could ever prove or disprove miracles (1.90, 6.514). For further discussion, see Ayers, "C. S. Peirce on Miracles."

47. As William Davis puts it, "one of Peirce's most fundamental theses was that human reason is so weak that no individual ought to place overweening confidence in any truth he has discovered unless he can persuade all candid minds to agree with him (a thing most easily done in mathematics and accomplished only with great difficulty in most other fields)" (*Peirce's Epistemology*, 127).

48. Letter to William James, 13 June 1907, briefer version quoted in Perry, *Thought and Character*, 291.

or the more or less intersubjective consensus of all who care to engage in the disputed matter.

Evangelicals should applaud this pietistic, communal, consensual, and conservative element of Peirce's method of inquiry. What is important is that the community of investigators not hold its traditional consensus out as incorrigible like narrative communities potentially do. This is important since the fact that Christians have been bound by their consensus around a lengthy tradition has not prevented a diversity from developing around this unity. As is well known, there are at least three large-scale Christian stories: those of Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and Protestantism. The narrative of evangelical theology is but one within the last category, and is in itself surely not homogeneous. While each story can be fully coherent in itself, the question of theological truth demands that truth claims not just be asserted as such but that they engage universally, both within and without the broad contours of the Christian community—the boundaries of which, we must be reminded, are fluid rather than static—and that counterclaims be taken into consideration. So while the evangelical insistence on contextualizing the gospel message is therefore an important element of the *evangelion*, what is crucial is that truths of the gospel not distort the truths in other narrative traditions, and that both sets of truths—established beliefs about what is real—be rendered comprehensible together. Whereas evangelicals are finding creative means to acculturate the gospel, we are slower to develop means by which to acknowledge and lift up truths found in other traditions. We are slower still in acquiring more comprehensive theological frameworks with which to harmonize these truths.

If, however, evangelicals participate in the larger process of inquiry, one of their primary concerns will be establishing criteria for adjudicating truth claims. Final appeal cannot be made to that which is the product of finite rationality that is corrupted by the fall. Appeal is therefore made to Scripture or divine revelation. Here we come to the crux of the matter.

Peirce did consider the possibility of whether revelation may provide certain knowledge (1.143). While he did not think that it was philosophically possible to dismiss the idea of revelation, still, philosophy that proceeds upon reasoning can never establish certainty. On the other hand, even if revelation were divinely inspired, it is subject to human distortion. Further, the questions that arise as a result of the awareness of other canons and other claims to divine revelation cannot simply be dismissed, no matter what authority is claimed (5.381). For those who fear that the doctrine of fallibilism undermines religion, Peirce responded that "I can only say I am very sorry. The doctrine is true;—without claiming absolute certainty for it, it is *substantially* unassailable" (1.151). While acknowledging that

dogmas such as the prohibition against murder are “practically and substantially infallible” (1.151), he did not think the church had any use either for mathematical or scientific infallibility.⁴⁹ Elsewhere, Peirce suggested that practical infallibility was “the only sense of the word in which *infallible* has any consistent meaning” (1.661). Thus, while Peirce was by no means reliant on the authority of any institution or church, he did grant a place for such within the structures of knowledge.

At the same time, evangelicals cannot, of course, surrender the centrality of Scripture without compromising their *raison d'être*. A more detailed assessment of the compatibility between the evangelical insistence on the priority of Scripture as the word of God and Peirce's method of inquiry would involve an application of the semiotic theory to the doctrinal statement. Questions like “What is the logic of the statement?”; “What are its referents and interpretants?”; and “What are its pragmatic implications?” would need to be investigated. The Bible as symbol must also be analyzed, and specific biblical statements that evangelicals appeal to as textual support for the doctrine of Scriptural priority and which at least on the surface seem to preclude other methods for accessing doctrinal and theological truth should be taken into consideration and subjected to semiotic analysis. Such considerations would be at the heart of a more complete dialogue between Peirce and evangelicals on the role of Scripture in religious knowledge.

Yet it is fair to say that for some (i.e., those raised as Christians), Scripture forms a part of what Plantinga and Alston call “basic beliefs,” which are indubitable to some degree even in the Peircean sense. To pursue this line of thought, however, we would also need to acknowledge that the reading and comprehension of Scripture is a semiotic and interpretative activity,

49. With regard to analytic or mathematical truths, Peirce asked, “*how do you know that a priori truth is certain, exceptionless, and exact? You cannot know it by reasoning. For that would be subject to uncertainty and inexactitude. Then, it must amount to this that you know it a priori; that is, you take a priori judgments at their own valuation, without criticism or credentials. That is barring the gate of inquiry*” (1.144). Peirce did not deny that two plus two equals four, but distinguished between absolute and practical infallibility (4.237). Absolute infallibility “does not belong to the multiplication table” (2.75) due in part to the essence of mathematics as the study of pure hypotheticals (4.232–33, 5.567), but more so to the possibility of human error in calculation (4.478). Further, it does not follow from necessary truths that they are known with absolute certainty since the inconceivability of their denials can never be definitively confirmed (2.29). In another place, he notes that “we hope that in the progress of science its error will indefinitely diminish, just as the error of 3.14159, the value given for π , will indefinitely diminish as the calculation is carried to more and more places of decimals. What we call π is an ideal limit to which no numerical expression can be perfectly true” (5.565). Cf. also Sandra Rosenthal's discussion in *Charles Peirce's Pragmatic Pluralism*, 21–24.

one which is subject to greater and greater understanding and precision. Evangelicals who would insist on the Reformation motto of *sola Scriptura* would need to articulate a theory of experience over and against that of Peirce's that would enable them to say how we can come to a knowledge of Scriptural authority, trustworthiness, and inerrancy apart from what Peirce called the logic of reasoning and without running the gamut of the infinite long run. In other words, they would have to resort to either a fideism or a strong foundationalism of sorts, neither of which is desirable or particularly helpful. The value of Peirce's epistemology, perhaps delineated in far too much detail earlier, should now be evident. Human knowledge is intrinsically fallible given the epistemic process; yet this does not lead to skepticism or relativism, since our knowing aims for an accurate and truthful engagement with the world.⁵⁰

What can be agreed upon at present is that the consideration of Scripture as a starting point for theological reflection does not entail that Scripture be utilized as a proof text, regardless of what the other sources of theology tell us. Evangelicals more than anyone should believe in the essential trustworthiness of Scripture precisely because its truth can only be corroborated and never disconfirmed by reality. Do evangelicals fear that reality and scripture can actually be at odds? The respected evangelical missionary Lesslie Newbigin, in attempting to outline the basis for a Christian conception of the gospel as public truth, suggested that the proper response to skepticism is not an appeal to more foundational beliefs or more ultimate realities, but living and publishing the truth and putting it to public test.⁵¹ This is not far from Peirce's notion of a community of inquirers attempting to make its ideas clear. Christian truth can never be insulated from criticism; rather, its narrative must constantly be reassessed. Its coherence must be tested against that of other narratives, both within and without the Christian community, and whether or not it corresponds with reality must be demonstrated by reason and experience. At the same time, of course, Christian truth is eminently useful, and it is by living it that we can "taste and see

50. Of course, the ultimate test of evangelical fallibilism is our openness to entertaining the hypothesis that the Bible may not be the revealed word of God after all. This is the question that my teacher and Peircean scholar, Robert Neville, posed in response to an earlier draft of the paper which was the foundation for this chapter. My initial reply is that such should theoretically be possible. Yet, I cannot see any chain of circumstances which would cause an upswell of doubt such that further inquiry would not be able to resolve. In this sense, I would follow Peirce in dismissing such a potentiality as a "paper doubt" and set about dealing with the issues that demand our faithful attention such as attending to my children, preaching the Gospel, famines, global warming, and the like.

51. Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 33–35.

that the Lord is good” (Ps 34:8, NIV). Just as theological argumentation, like all other kinds of argumentation, does not proceed upon isolated threads of thought but upon interwoven strands of a complex of arguments, so also an evangelical theology should enable a critical correlation of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience to attain true representations of God and the world.

Insofar as our primary objective has been to see how Peirce can be of assistance in our own task of negotiating the demise of foundationalism even while retaining a strong form of truth, this “dialogue” would finally stall if we did not at least briefly inquire into the ways in which evangelical theology may possibly complement or even correct the Peircean vision. We can, of course, begin by recognizing Peirce for what he was: a child of his age. While he was initially optimistic about the progressive evolution of the world toward concrete reasonableness, later in life he freed himself from the illusion that inquiry would continue endlessly since “the existence of the human race, we may be as good as sure, will come to an end at last” (5.587). From an evangelical perspective, we can also ask if the Peircean notion of the “community of inquirers” would have profited from a consideration of the history of the science of theology, given the perennial theological mode of investigation as that of faith seeking understanding. This would have enabled Peirce to give a more nuanced account of the process of inquiry rather than leaving the impression—which he oftentimes did—of science as driven purely by a disinterested quest for truth. Further, why did Peirce fail to give more serious thought to the idea of divine revelation in spite of the plausibility of such a concept within the overall framework of his philosophical theology and personalistic theism? And finally, although Peirce was correct to note that the human mind must indeed be attuned to reality in order to have stumbled upon so many correct hypotheses throughout the history of thought and of science, he overlooked at the same time the many wrong abductions, some of which produced results detrimental to the human race. Not all musers have come up with a clear notion of God. Some think they have experienced *satori*, or Buddhist enlightenment, while others have arrived at an ultimately radical evil—the Holocaust immediately comes to mind. This shows that there is always the possibility of a demonic element in the process of reasoning that lurks in the corners of the human mind. Our reasoning is undeniably tainted, and such recognition is at the root of the evangelical insistence on the fact of human finitude and on our need for the divine initiative. Many elements of Peirce’s thought have been discarded or revised in the light of later findings, even as I am sure that a sustained engagement of Peirce with evangelical theology would bring other revisions and even dead ends to light. These misgivings aside, however, I see no good

reason why evangelicals cannot learn and profit from Peirce in a mutual dialogue.

The general thesis of this chapter has been structured at least in part in response to the question posed by Richard Lints. I have argued that evangelicals do not have to choose between either the postmodernism of Tracy or the postliberalism of Lindbeck, nor is their only other alternative the antimodernism of Lints himself, whatever that may be; rather, the best of postmodernism and postliberalism should be put to work in the reconstruction and reformation of evangelical theology. I have argued that evangelicals are fully justified in their acceptance of non-foundationalism, and even in their attraction to narrative or community- and tradition-based forms of theology, so long as they do not think that these basic forms are infallible or immune from public criticism. Evangelicals may in this regard learn something from Peirce, whose non-foundationalism served as the basis for a fallibilistic epistemology that did not sacrifice the category of truth or truthfulness. Rather, his theory of experience and cognition allowed for the pursuit of truth within the context of a community of inquirers.⁵² Of course, many aspects of Peirce's philosophy have been and continue to be disputed by those who know it well. But that is as he would have wanted it to be, and it is in the hopes that evangelicals can contribute another voice to this quest for truth that this essay is submitted.⁵³

52. Other evangelicals have reached similar conclusions via different paths, including Kelvin Jones, "Formal Foundation," who argues for the abductive power of Scripture when applied to ontology.

53. This paper is dedicated to the memory of my friend, Stan Spicer (d. July 1999), whose patient reading of this and other articles published in the infancy of my professional career has saved an aspiring theologian from numerous grammatical blunders and conceptual confusions. (Stan, I will miss your friendship, humor, wisdom, intellect, cultural commentary, theological insight, and personal encouragement). Thanks are also due to Eben Yong for reading and commenting on earlier versions of this paper, and to Roger Olson (former editor of *Christian Scholars Review*) and the anonymous reviewers of the journal for their many detailed and helpful criticisms of previous drafts. It goes without saying that any remaining errors of fact or interpretation are mine alone.