

Saved by Word and Spirit: The Shape of Soteriology in Donald Bloesch's *Christian Foundations*



FRED SANDERS

Associate Professor of Theology
Torrey Honors Institute,
Biola University
La Mirada, CA 90639
fred.sanders@biola.edu

The late Donald Bloesch did not allocate one of the seven volumes of his *Christian Foundations* series to soteriology, so there is no single book to turn to in order to examine his doctrine of salvation. Earlier in his career, he did write entire books on the subject: in fact, close attention to the experience of piety and the Christian life was the main motif his first publications, and significantly dictated the formal and material decisions of his influential two volume *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*. Nor is Bloesch's soteriology distributed evenly across all seven volumes of *Foundations*: it is focused in two volumes. Those two volumes are the books on *Jesus Christ: Savior and Lord* (1997) and *The Holy Spirit: Works and Gifts* (2000). In particular, the character of Bloesch's soteriology is best seen by giving attention to two chapters, found near the end of these two respective volumes: "Salvation in Evangelical Protestantism" in the Jesus volume, and "The Highway of Holiness" in the Spirit volume. This in itself is highly significant: in order to study Donald Bloesch's soteriology, you have to spend time in both his Christology and his pneumatology, because salvation, for Bloesch, is equally located in Word and Spirit. That salutary dispersion of the doctrine across two more fundamental loci pretty much says it all about Bloesch's soteriology, but I will try to unpack the material content

of that formal decision. Along the way, I would like to survey the main features of Bloesch's soteriology and explore the fit between this doctrine and his overall project, as well as put him into dialogue with some enlightening conversation partners from Schleiermacher to Barth.

Every fully-elaborated Christian theology finds its coherence and the key to its articulation in a vision of salvation. That vision of salvation is the secret center to which the theologian recurs and refers in locus after locus of the entire range of doctrine. When you become a good student of a theological writer, you begin to develop a sense of what he's about, how he makes decisions, and how he can be expected to proceed into the territory ahead. There's no better indicator of the particular contours of a theological project than the soteriology expressed in it and presupposed throughout it. In literature, a good character has been described as a personality so well portrayed that you have ideas in advance of how that person will behave in new circumstances. This need not be deterministically predictive, except in bad novels. But it does provide insight into the character, the kind of insight that gives the reader confidence that he is coming to know the character's personality. The personality of a theological character shows through most clearly in his soteriology.

Donald Bloesch's soteriology is definitely to be characterized as salvation by Word and Spirit. "Word and Spirit" are the organizing grid of his whole project, and indicate throughout the project two poles of a complex reality. Bloesch repeatedly correlates Word and Spirit with objective and subjective, though he does not simply identify them. He also broadly correlates Word and Spirit with the second and third persons of the Trinity, but again not by simple identification, rather by way of what classical trinitarian theology calls "appropriation." No doubt Bloesch hit on this evocative combination as a result of grappling with the problems of describing revelation in a way that got traction with contemporary categories. However, from the opening pages of the first volume of *Foundations*, Bloesch announced that he was using this polarity in order to describe the critical role the experience of salvation plays in determining the character of theological articulation: To speak of Word and spirit is

to reintroduce in theology the critical role of the experience of faith, which is qualitatively different, however, from ordinary human or even religious experience. ... To affirm a theology of Word and Spirit is to affirm that the experience of faith is correlative with God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ. Since faith is a work of the Spirit in the interiority of our being, the

truth of the gospel is not only announced from without but also confirmed from within. In the theology presented here both revelation and salvation have to be understood as objective-subjective rather than fundamentally objective (as in evangelical rationalism) or predominantly subjective (as in existentialism and mysticism).¹

Here Bloesch is staking out his basic methodological commitment and declaring how it will play itself out especially in the way theology walks into the knowledge of God. But notice that he does so by defining the character of soteriology: it is “*salvation*” which must “be understood as objective-subjective.” Salvation, in other words, has to be described in a way that rejects false dichotomies, and does so even at the cost of resorting to the language of paradox: it is simultaneously objective and subjective, or, as Bloesch often prefers, one single complex hyphenated reality: objective-subjective.

Bloesch’s writing is full of paradox: his standard mode of operating is to survey a situation, identify the crippling and unnecessary dichotomies that bedevil the topic, and then to demand that those extremes be reconciled by being held together. If necessary, these extremes can be held together by sheer fiat and force of will, but more often he pushes through to achieve a conceptual demonstration of the underlying unity that in fact holds them together. As we stroll through Bloesch’s *Foundations*, we see this apparent paradox motif in almost every part of the landscape. I think, however, that we are not seeing merely a formal similarity that is traceable to a habit of thought: a tendency to identify and overcome dichotomies everywhere, and identify erroneous positions to the left and the right. Instead, I believe that throughout his project, Bloesch is tracking down the one central paradox of Christian soteriology, the single reality which we encounter in a polarity as objective-subjective salvation, salvation by Word and Spirit. This soteriological paradox is fruitful, and brings forth the other paradoxes.

In the opening pages of his *Christology* volume, Bloesch recapitulates the methodological commitments of his project, using identical terminology and then applying it more directly to the Christian life:

¹ Donald Bloesch, *A Theology of Word and Spirit: Authority and Method in Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 14-15.

The aim of my *Christian Foundations* series is to set forth a theology of Word and Spirit, which seeks to do justice to both the objective and subjective poles of revelation and salvation. A theology of Word and Spirit will be at the same time a theology of the Christian life, since the truth revealed in the Bible must be appropriated through the power of the Spirit in a life of obedience and piety. While I affirm the pivotal role of the Christian life I am calling not for a new form of the imitation of Christ but instead for a deepening recognition that the risen Christ lives within us, empowering us to realize our divinely given vocation under the cross. The Christian life is not simply the fruit and consequence of a past salvation accomplished in the cross and resurrection of Christ but the arena in which Christ's salvation is carried forward to fulfillment by his Spirit. The Pauline and Reformation doctrine of salvation by free grace must be united with the call to holiness and discipleship, a theme found in Catholic mysticism and Protestant Pietism."²

Salvation is a complex unified reality that pulls in two directions at once: the theologian wants to say that it is a finished work then and there, but also that it is a present reality here and now. Salvation "then and there" means objectively for us in Christ; but salvation "here and now" means subjectively in us by the Spirit. Both must be true, and true in a way that doesn't allow one to surreptitiously conjure away the reality of the other. From that position, Bloesch is able to affirm the way that various traditions have given especially clear witness to one side or another of the polarity: Reformation teaching on justification by free grace brings out the then and there accomplishment of salvation, but mystic and Pietist emphasis on holiness and discipleship keep the here and now of salvation before our eyes.

The question of what is held "before our eyes," or kept at the center of our theological attention, may be the key to understanding soteriology in Bloesch's project. Bloesch is committed to theology as disciplined reflection on a given, a datum, a concrete complex reality which God has set before us, has set us down in the middle of, and fidelity to which is the sole determinant of whether we have a chance of saying the right thing as theologians. Abstracting away from that reality may be a necessary exercise for conceptual clarification in particular thought projects, but the theologian must always return from

² Bloesch, *Jesus Christ: Savior and Lord* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 11.

these carefully delimited exercises in abstraction to the thing itself in its situation in actuality. Keeping the actual thing before the eyes of our contemplation is the main thing. This commitment shows up repeatedly in the topics that make up soteriology. For example, in the doctrine of sin, or “the plight of humanity,” Bloesch avoids describing or defining humanity’s plight in advance, instead demanding that “the knowledge of sin is included in the knowledge of faith. We do not have any reliable knowledge of our sin apart from God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ.”³ Bloesch is aware that many, especially many Lutherans, disagree, but he sees his theological task as starting from the actual knowledge of sin, which comes to us bundled together with knowledge of grace, and only by an act of abstraction can be considered in itself.

Similarly, Bloesch weighs the merits and challenges of Christological approaches from above and from below, and opts for what he calls tellingly “Christology from the center.”⁴ The whole problem of the other approaches is that it makes no sense to start with the human Jesus and work your way up, or to start with the divine person and work your way down. Bloesch has a high Christology, affirms Chalcedon, and defends the pre-existence of Christ, but he does not consider this as giving him a license to start his reflection with the unincarnate Word and then consider its enfleshment as a problem to be solved. He counsels that christology is not reflection on the “abstract concept of God or Christ removed from history nor ... the historical man Jesus. Instead my point of departure is the paradox of God himself entering world history at a particular place and time, in a particular historical figure –Jesus of Nazareth. I wish to begin with the Word made flesh rather than with the preexistent Logos or with the historical Jesus.”⁵

Again, turning from the doctrine of the person of Christ to the work of Christ, Bloesch wants to keep the actual atonement, the one Christians have experienced their salvation through, in its objective-subjective polarity, at the center of theological reflection. That the atonement is objective is obvious and uncontroversial for anybody operating with a remotely traditional theology of the atonement: the sacrificial death of Christ on the cross is obviously a “then and there” event in the history of Jesus Christ. Using a variety of formulations, Bloesch tries to indicate how the atonement itself also has a subjective side: it echoes in the experience of the faithful. In Bloesch’s words: “The

³ Bloesch, *Jesus Christ*, 47.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 70.

atonement is an objective sacrifice that reverberates throughout history in the lives of those who trust in this sacrifice for their redemption. It includes both God's atoning work for us in the life history of Jesus Christ and the faith of the human subject in this work."⁶ However, this is not simply the traditional Reformed approach of "redemption accomplished and applied." It is not atonement then and there, reception of it here and now. Rather, Bloesch expands the parameters marked out by the term "atonement" so that it includes both the objective sacrifice and its reverberation in later lives: the two together are atonement. This must be the case, for what good would be an atonement that saved nobody? And the historical objective sacrifice divorced from its later reverberations would not be salvation for anyone you have ever met, not even the theologian attempting to render an account of salvation.

As Bloesch circles around this reality of atonement, he tries to describe its nature as something that is in itself both accomplished and experienced, and the tension of doing justice to its then-and-there character and simultaneously its here-and-now character becomes heightened. Finally he has to posit that there are two subjective poles of the atonement: Jesus Christ and the Christian life. He distinguishes the senses, however:

In one sense Jesus Christ himself is the subjective side. Jesus as our representative appropriates the salvation of God on our behalf. Yet salvation remains incomplete until we ourselves participate in Christ's appropriation. The experience of faith constitutes the subjective side of salvation. The Christian life can also be said to comprise the subjective pole of the atonement. Jesus' life and obedience are the ground of our salvation, but our lives and obedience are the fruit and culmination of Christ's work of salvation.⁷

In other words, the objective sacrifice on the cross becomes ours in two ways: first of all, it is always already ours in the sense that it was for us and our salvation that Christ as our representative went to the cross. "Jesus...appropriates salvation of God on our behalf." Second, it becomes ours when we participate, not in the sacrifice, but in Christ's appropriation of that sacrifice for us. In this formulation, we do not make the death and resurrection of Christ our own; Jesus the

⁶ Ibid., 162.

⁷ Bloesch, *Jesus Christ*, 163.

representative makes them our own and we participate in the own-making.

Ever alert to the danger of a misplaced emphasis, Bloesch is self-critical and worries later that he has himself run the risk of a false emphasis:

The Christian life is not simply a byproduct but a concrete sign and witness of Christ's passion and victory in his struggle against the powers of darkness. But it is more than that: it is the arena in which the implications of our salvation are unfolded as we strive to appropriate the fruits of Christ's cross and resurrection victory. In my early writings I sometimes gave the impression that the Christian life is a contributory agent in the effecting of our salvation. I would now contend that our works of obedience mirror and proclaim Christ's work of obedience unto death, but they do not render his death and resurrection efficacious.⁸

Expanding the very definition of atonement to include also its effects is a dangerous move. The chief danger is that the effects of the atonement, my salvation and Christian life, might now count toward constituting the work of salvation. This conclusion Bloesch denies, understandably: this whole objective-subjective whirligig is a long way to travel if the goal you arrive at turns out to be just salvation by works of righteousness. Bloesch insists on an order, a structured sequence within the manifold reality. The atonement and its effects must be held together, but the effects (salvation and the Christian life) are downstream from the objective event: they answer, or echo, or reflect, or witness to, or proclaim the cross and resurrection.

It seems that Bloesch would be comfortable with the traditional "redemption accomplished and redemption applied" schema of Reformed theology, and he repeatedly uses similar terminology. He often quotes and has clearly reflected deeply on Calvin's classic transition to the third book of the *Institutes*:

First, we must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains

⁸"Donald Bloesch Responds," in *Evangelical Theology in Transition: Theologians in Dialogue with Donald Bloesch*, ed. Elmer M. Colyer (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 200.

useless and of no value for us. Therefore, to share with us what he has received from the Father, he had to become ours and to dwell within us.⁹

The objective-subjective soteriology of *Christian Foundations* is a variation on this theme. The fact that Bloesch is concerned about the specter of an atonement that has no effect also puts him in the lineage of the Reformed tradition, the tradition that asks and answers difficult questions about the scope of the atonement. If the atonement is intrinsically effective and necessarily saves all for whom it is intended, then we must affirm either a limited atonement or universalism. Bloesch asks and answers this question as well, which marks him as comfortable in the Reformed tradition, though his answer is not calculated to make his Westminster cousins happy at the family reunion. Because of his commitment to keeping the unabstracted reality of experienced salvation at the center of his reflection, he continually fiddles with the accomplished-applied schema, finding objective-subjective polarities within each side of the accomplishment and application of atonement.

It may not always be clear to the reader which element Bloesch intends to emphasize, because often his whole point is to secure the complex reality of objective-subjective accomplished-applied salvation by Word and Spirit without emphasis or distortion. But when confronted by a tendency toward imbalance, Bloesch immediately goes to the armory and brings out weapons. He sees pietistic subjectivism as a major threat, and “it is dangerously misguided,” he warns,

to contend that the real salvation is only what happens in us. The real salvation happened in Jesus Christ for us and happens in us through faith. Our salvation is effected not only through the death of Christ on the cross but also through the application of the benefits of his death by the Spirit of the risen Christ. The descent of God to humanity and humanity’s ascent to God through faith and the life of obedience must be held together in paradoxical tension.¹⁰

Bloesch sees the subjectivist temptation as taking several forms: mystical-pietist subjectivism, existentialist subjectivism, and ethical-humanist subjectivism, all of which give total priority to Christ in me

⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes*, Book III, chapter 1.

¹⁰ Bloesch, *Jesus Christ*, 163.

over Christ for me. The objectivist temptation, on the other hand, appears in the forms of sacramentalist objectivism and predestinarian objectivism. It also appears in a kind of Barthian christological objectivism, which has always been Bloesch's major complaint against Barth's soteriology. In 1976, when the standard evangelical misunderstanding of Barth was that his doctrine of the word left him mired in existentialist subjectivism,¹¹ Bloesch published a book arguing that Barth, at least in soteriology, was too objectivistic to do justice to biblical salvation.¹² In Bloesch's judgment, "Where Barth's soteriology stands in most obvious tension with that of historical evangelical orthodoxy is in its objectivism,"¹³ and "The paradox of salvation is ever again sundered in his emphasis on the objective to the detriment of the subjective."¹⁴ Barth's "objectivistic slant" made him sound to Bloesch like the famous reformed Pastor Kohlbrügge, who testified that his own conversion took place at Golgotha. While deploring Barth's objectivist distortion, Bloesch admitted that

Barth's stress on the finished work of salvation is perhaps a needed corrective to the view rampant in American folk religion that salvation is primarily and essentially an experience of the power of God in the here and now. Such a notion robs the historical atonement of its significance and efficacy, since the work of Christ on the cross is reduced to a mere preparation for the real salvific event, which takes place in man's present religious experience. An unbiblical subjectivism is very much in evidence in current revivalism... It is my contention that biblical faith is neither objectivistic nor subjectivistic but

¹¹ The clearest instance of an author who shares Bloesch's concern about Barth but views it from the opposite side is found in Robert Reymond's booklet, *Barth's Soteriology* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1967), 3: "Of course, it is true that Barth's *Römerbrief* (1919) had refused to ground Christian faith in objective history and objective knowledge, this refusal rendering his dialectic theology wholly compatible with existential emphases and in broad early agreement with Bultman..." "But there are sound reasons for feeling that this much-discussed 'development' has been greatly exaggerated and that Barth is still controlled today in his methodology by the presuppositions which bound his thinking in the second edition (1921) of his *Römerbrief*."

¹² Bloesch: *Jesus is Victor! Karl Barth's Doctrine of Salvation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon 1976).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 110.

paradoxical in that the divine Word and human subject must be seen together in paradoxical or dialectical tension.¹⁵

When Bloesch sounds those warnings against the equal and opposite errors of objectivism and subjectivism, and struggles to define the place of integrity that falls into neither error, I believe he is working on the issue which is his greatest contribution to contemporary theology, and especially to evangelical theology. We have already said that every fully-elaborated Christian theology finds its coherence and the key to its articulation in a vision of salvation. That vision of salvation is the secret center to which the theologian recurs and refers in locus after locus of the entire range of doctrine.

The personality of a theological character shows through most clearly in his soteriology. Every topic he takes up will be colored by the basic tone of the experience of salvation, and one of the best ways to sort theologians is according to their soteriologies, because that's where family resemblances—sometimes embarrassing family resemblances—are most undeniable. The family resemblance that becomes undeniable in Bloesch's soteriological method is his position in the theological tradition of Protestant Pietism. Pietism resonates with evangelicalism in countless ways, and since its classic expression in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it has exerted a positive pressure on Christian theology and life: it curbs rationalistic tendencies, insists on application to life, and it centralizes and integrates the otherwise disparate set of truths that make up a theology, connecting them all in a vital way with the experience of communion with God. Take as one example of early Pietism the Puritan William Ames, who in his *Marrow of Theology* defined theology as "the doctrine or teaching of living to God."¹⁶ He explained what he meant by "living to God:" People "live to God when they live in accord with the will of God, to the glory of God, and with God working in them."¹⁷ According to Ames, *theologia* really ought to be called *theozaia*, living to God.¹⁸ Thus Ames derived the science of theology from an analysis of "the spiritual life, which is the proper concern of theology."¹⁹ This is a noble tradition, and one in which Bloesch partially—though only partially—views himself as working.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 132.

¹⁶ *The Marrow of Theology*, translated and with an introduction by Eusden, I.i.1.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, I.i.6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, I.i.13.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, I.ii.2.

Between us and the classic Pietists, however, stands the Enlightenment, and in particular that first titanic modern theologian, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834). Schleiermacher had a Pietist upbringing (among the Herrnhut brethren), and his theological project can be considered a modern twist on the Pietist project. In Schleiermacher's hands, the Pietist impulse entered modern theology as *Bewußtseinstheologie*, the theology of consciousness. If Christian salvation is something we definitely experience, we can then reflect on that experience, and set forth a coherent, systematic, scientific Christian theology as reflection on the distinctively Christian consciousness. The primal content of that Christian consciousness is *Gefühl*, feeling, which operates in the moment prior to the divergence of what we would normally call thought and emotion, prior even to the epistemic distinction between subject and object, in a moment so fleeting and primal that "you always experience and yet never experience" it. It is the pre-conscious pious awareness that you are a portion of the whole world, that you are acted on by God through the universe, that "you lie directly on the bosom of the infinite world."²⁰ By defining the essence of religion as *Gefühl*, Schleiermacher was securing for it an independent region alongside metaphysics and ethics, a maneuver made necessary by the Enlightenment tendency to reduce religion to either a way of thinking (metaphysics) or a way of behaving (ethics). Schleiermacher was manifestly Kantian in that he did not believe that metaphysics was able to deal adequately with the things of religion, but he was decidedly anti-Kantian in the sense that he would not tolerate the reduction of God to "a postulate of practical reason." *Gefühl* could not be reduced to either pure or practical reason; it demanded recognition as an independent realm of experience, or as Schleiermacher said, "Piety cannot be an instinct craving for a mess of metaphysical and ethical crumbs."²¹ Schleiermacher had to assert the absolute independence of piety over against ethics as well as metaphysics, and he made this connection explicit at the point of *Gefühl*, in the Christian consciousness and its experienced knowledge of the reality of salvation. Schleiermacher's argument came from deep convictions rooted in his Pietist faith, but his strategy was largely apologetic. He was recommending Christianity to its cultured despisers, and winning a place for theology in the modern University.

²⁰ Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches To Its Cultured Despisers*, translated by John Oman (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1958), 43.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

The way of *Bewusstseinstheologie* is the way of 19th century liberal theology.

The full title of Schleiermacher's *Glaubenslehre* is *The Christian Faith Systematically Presented According to the Basic Tenets of the Evangelical Church*. In his lectures on the theology of Schleiermacher, Karl Barth analyzed this title according to its three main components: Faith, System, and Tenets. The Christian Faith, Barth points out, means for Schleiermacher "the faith of Christians," or the pious consciousness as expressed in the church. "Systematically presented" means that every element of the presentation is explicitly related to *Gefühl*, to the God-consciousness of believers. Finally, "according to the basic tenets of the evangelical church" introduces the idea of an external, even confessional, source for the form and content of the dogmas. Barth is right to indicate that the combination of these three elements in one theological work indicates a tension at the heart of the undertaking: the universal God-consciousness present in *Gefühl* can be seen struggling to express itself through the historically-conditioned forms of a particular church's confession. The awkwardness of this situation is apparent when Schleiermacher discusses the different kinds of dogmatics, and at the borderline between a "Scientific Dogmatic" and a "Symbolical Dogmatic" refers to the requirement that the principal points of the system should be "none other than the fundamental facts of the religious self-consciousness *conceived in a Protestant spirit*." If the theologian is attending to pious consciousness, what inherent connection can that have to a set of doctrines enshrined in confessional statements? Perhaps the theologian's own pious consciousness has been schooled in the confession? But if that is the case, how is reflecting on the Christian consciousness better than simply reflecting on the confessional documents which teach it the things it knows? Are we reading a book or a mind? Or if both, how are they related, and what if they aren't? Schleiermacher seems to have left this tension unresolved.

I have taken a few moments to sketch Pietism's heritage before and after the enlightenment, because I believe this is the nut Bloesch is trying to crack. He is essentially operating within the Pietist paradigm, but with an insistence that there is such a thing as an objective word from God which finds us from outside, communicates to us in a way that produces concepts, knowledge, content, knowable truth. Bloesch is not merely trying to re-pristiniate Pietism or get back to the way it was before Schleiermacher turned it into that modern beast, the theology of consciousness. He is well aware that the dangers which bore fruit in Schleiermacher's romantic faith-subjectivism were latent in the Pietist

approach from the beginning; in fact, this is the main reason he will not associate himself unreservedly with Pietism. In a dialogue with Clark Pinnock, Bloesch observes:

Pinnock rightly perceives my roots in evangelical Pietism, but he needs also to take into account my reticence to define my position as pietistic. While learning from Pietism I also recognize with Karl Barth how easily Pietism slides into liberalism and modernism. When the source of theological authority is reduced to the experience of faith, it opens the possibility of allowing reason to interpret this experience. The University of Halle founded by Pietists in the eighteenth century became within two generations a bastion of rationalism.²²

Notice that in Bloesch's estimation, the slide into liberalism is bad, but the real final danger of pietism is that it can suddenly convert into rationalism, by taking experience as the subject matter of theology and therefore making theology directly available for rational analysis. Fear of rationalism is a pretty pietistic reason to reject Pietism. But it is telling, and entirely consistent that Bloesch would identify the main danger as a reduction of the subject matter of theology to something directly available for human mastery, rational analysis, and personal manipulation.

As he takes a stand between the experience of salvation and the revealed word of God, Bloesch warns that taking Schleiermacher's approach

tend[s] to make religious experience rather than the gospel itself the source and norm of theology. The right order is not from experience to reflection but from divine revelation to human appropriation in experience, life and thought. Experience is not the regulatory norm or enduring basis of theology, but it is a vital and necessary element in theology. The transcendent source of a biblical, evangelical theology is the living Word of God who breaks into our experience from the

²² "Donald Bloesch Responds," in *Evangelical Theology in Transition: Theologians in Dialogue with Donald Bloesch*, ed. Elmer M. Colyer (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 197.

beyond and remolds and transforms our experience and understanding.²³

Theologians must experience salvation, hear God's word, and reflect on it: "Unless it has a perduring experiential ingredient, theoretical theology becomes unnervingly abstract and speculative...the theological task can be carried out only by believers and that the only right theology is a theology done by regenerate persons (*theologia regenitorum*)"²⁴ But it is not their own experience or their Christian consciousness that they reflect on. Adamantly, Bloesch insists that it is the transcendent word of God, above our experience and producing our experience, which is the subject of theology.

In 1968 Bloesch published a set of essays called *The Crisis of Piety*. The book was republished 20 years later, and in the "Author's Note" to this 1988 republication of the 1968 original, Bloesch reflected:

If there has been a shift in my perspective, I believe more strongly than before that a theology of Christian commitment must be united with a theology of the Word of God if it is not to lapse into subjectivism and anthropocentrism. The focus on personal piety must never supplant the more basic focus on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The bane of classical Pietism was that it sought to cultivate the Christian life without a corresponding emphasis on the decision of God for humanity in Jesus Christ. Morality and Christian character became more important than the incarnation and substitutionary atonement of Christ in biblical history. Pietism invariably fades into latitudinarianism and liberalism unless it is informed by the wisdom of orthodoxy. Orthodoxy, on the other hand, becomes barren and deadening unless it is nurtured by an abiding seriousness concerning personal salvation and the life of discipleship. What is called for is a live orthodoxy, which is none other than a biblically grounded and theologically robust Pietism.²⁵

A "biblically grounded and theologically robust Pietism" is not the same thing as Schleiermacher's "fundamental facts of the religious

²³ Ibid., 201.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Bloesch, *The Crisis of Piety: Essays Toward a Theology of the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs, CO : Helmers & Howard, 1988), xi-xii.

self-consciousness *conceived in a Protestant spirit,*” and need not suffer from the pitfalls of that project. This is what I take to be Bloesch’s great contribution to evangelical theology: he has tried to combine the subjective, lived reality of experienced salvation with the objective, revealed, mind-informing, concept-generating self-revelation of God. He has been at work on a project that bedeviled the Pietists, Schleiermacher the archetypal modern liberal theologian, and Barth. His recommended way forward is to focus our attention on the gospel itself rather than on our experience of salvation, to start with the almighty living Word of God rather than the collection of texts that bear witness to him.

Can the articulation of an entire theology be deducible from a vision of salvation? I believe it both can and should be. But there are right ways and wrong ways to proceed here. Bloesch is an advocate for the right way, taking up a basically Pietist concern to center our knowledge about God on that knowledge of God which is our salvation. There is a very ancient tradition of framing theological arguments according to soteriological vision: even classical conciliar Christology was hammered out with the tools of soteriology. Athanasius knew that Christians had been saved with a salvation only God could have accomplished, and concluded that the savior Jesus Christ must therefore be of one essence with the Father who sent him. This soteriological insight led the Nicene theologians through the Scriptures and gave them advance notice of what testimony to expect from the Scriptures. A generation later, Gregory of Nazianzus argued that however God might have considered saving us, what he actually did was to assume human nature into hypostatic union with the Son of God, healing what he took on. Therefore what is not assumed is not healed, therefore everything essential to human nature was assumed, therefore Jesus Christ is fully human. This must be true, or it would follow that God has not saved us, and he has. These classic theological arguments are soteriological visions which generate theological conclusions, and examples could be multiplied. Schleiermacher represents a paradigmatic modern misuse of the classic method. Bloesch, for his part, intends to stand not in that modern line but in the classic one. The difference between classic soteriological theologizing and the kind of faith-subjectivism generated by 19th century *Bewusstseins-theologie* is the extent to which a vision of salvation is normed and formed by the actual content of God’s work in Christ. The difference between a bad Pietist and a good Pietist is that good Pietists take their religion to heart, recognizing that salvation is something deeper and greater than new ideas, new codes of conduct, or new feelings. Bad Pietists are locked up inside their own consciousness

and cannot hear a word from the Lord. Bloesch has staked his system on the paradox of Christian salvation, of evangelical Protestantism's proclamation of free grace that puts us on the highway to holiness. And he has done so with a keen eye on the danger of lapsing into subjectivism, non-cognitive approaches to truth, or denigration of the Scriptures into a dead letter. Under the banner of salvation by Word and Spirit, Bloesch has been fighting all these years to expound the experience of the Gospel, rather than the gospel of experience, which is not good news at all.