

**The Rise of the Eighth-Day Man:  
The Advent of Modern Panentheism and Its Impact on the Doctrine of Biblical Sufficiency**

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ABSTRACT

The foundations of a worldview depend primarily on the source to which one looks to provide a framework for truth and reality. In the same fashion, where God is sought is a prime factor in determining the God one finds. The rise of modern panentheism has led to the advent of a man of the eighth day who seeks to discover the nature and character of God in the mechanics of an emergent universe rather than in words of Divine revelation. The following study will explore the idea that to take one step back from Scripture is to take one step too far.

A. THE ADVENT OF MODERN PANENTHEISM

In her book *When God is Silent*, Barbara Brown Taylor tells of a pastor she met at a preaching conference. This pastor admitted having a nagging difficulty in finding words to preach to a nursing home congregation. The reason given was a recurring nightmare.

I had it again last night. In the dream, I die and find myself standing before the house of God. When I knock, the door blows open and it is clear no one has lived there for a very long time. The place is vacant. There are dust balls everywhere. All I want is to hear God call me by name. I would give anything just to hear God say my name.<sup>1</sup>

Taylor says that the group listened sympathetically but didn't really know how to respond. Eventually, a therapist was recommended.

For some, the experience of the struggling pastor in the above story would serve to illustrate a persistent dilemma in theological understanding. This dilemma centers on the struggle to locate and define the nature of God's activity in the world. According to theologian Kevin Vanhoozer,

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *When God is Silent* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1998), 25-26.

the decision one makes as to how to conceive the relationship of God to creation is one of the single most important factors in shaping one's theology.<sup>2</sup> Classical theism has long held that God is transcendent in His essential separation from His creation, but that He is also immanent in it primarily through the incarnation and redemptive work of Christ. Modern theologians, however, have been sounding out a challenge to the theistic conception of God's transcendence.

Though the voices of contemporary theology are diverse, an influential segment of it is unified in its assertion that the transcendent God of theism has abdicated His throne, if in fact He was ever there in the first place. The idea of a God Who reigns above and exerts His sovereign influence from a position outside this physical world is challenged as being inconsistent with reality, and it also leads to despair on the part of those such as the pastor referenced above who have a desire to include Him as a meaningful part of this life. Modern panentheists believe they have properly located God and the nature of His activity in the cosmos.

**Modern panentheism is a powerful progeny of the process theology movement.**

Although clearly related to modern theological trends, modern panentheism has philosophical roots that can be traced as far back as neo-Platonism.<sup>3</sup> Today's panentheistic philosophy takes the heart of process theology's assumption that God is to be found within the outworking of natural processes and expands it to new horizons. Panentheism believes that the God of process thought accounts for the orderliness of the advance of the cosmos itself and for the emergence of novelty in the world. This philosophy casts God's transcendence in a new light. It asserts that God knows all that is possible, provides the initial aim of any occasion to allow for novelty,

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<sup>2</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture, and Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 96.

<sup>3</sup> John W. Cooper, *Panentheism, The Other God of the Philosophers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 19, 39. Cooper essentially traces the philosophical succession of neo-Platonic thought beginning with Plotinus and continuing throughout the centuries to demonstrate the common link between today's panentheistic concepts and the roots that generated them.

directs the process toward harmony rather than chaos, and receives into Himself all the good accomplished in creation.<sup>4</sup> In essence, God's sovereignty is displayed in the natural order of things from the inside out instead of from the outside in. The cosmos is understood to be developing within the scope of natural and evolutionary processes, and this arena provides the target search area for God's activity in the world.

**Panentheism may be defined but not easily identified.** Arthur Peacocke is a leading panentheist voice, and his definition of panentheism provides a solid understanding of the new way God's activity in the world is being conceived and communicated. In his own words he says that panentheism is "the belief that the being of God includes and penetrates the whole universe, so that every part of it exists in Him, but that His Being is more than, and is not exhausted by, the universe."<sup>5</sup> This expression serves two very important purposes. It reveals first an attempt to retain the concept of God as an independent entity to combat charges that a God Who is radically immanent becomes dissolved into that in which He immerses Himself (contra process theology). Second, it places God within the actual physical processes and nature of the universe so that His actions are considered to take place within those processes and not from outside them (contra classical theism).

Peacocke's definition of panentheism is helpful but limited in the sense that it only refers to the immanent yet distinct element of God's relation to the cosmos. Modern panentheism is also centered on the nature of God's actions within what He has made, and it relates this activity to the fundamental essence of His Being. The following description of modern panentheism summarizes the core of its perspective.

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<sup>4</sup> Floyd S. Elmore, "An Evangelical Analysis of Process Pneumatology," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145 (January-March 1988): 20.

<sup>5</sup> Arthur Peacocke, "Articulating God's Presence in and to the World Unveiled by the Sciences," in *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being – Panentheistic Reflections on God's Presence in a Scientific World*, ed. Philip Clayton and Arthur Peacocke (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 145.

Modern panentheism may be understood as a belief in a sovereign God Who has a dimension to His nature that freely expresses itself in the form of a created and evolving cosmos in which He is an intimate part but from which He is also essentially distinct. While it is difficult to ascribe a well-defined grid of identification for panentheists, there are two common characteristics which mark most who hold this philosophical/theological mindset. The first mark of a modern panentheist is an unreserved acceptance of the science of emergent evolution.<sup>6</sup> The cosmos is understood to have the qualities of evolutionary development and the inherent ability to transcend its own current state of being. The second mark is an overwhelming emphasis on the immanence of God in what He has made. God's primary activity is immersed within the natural processes of the cosmos. From the standpoint of textually-based theology, it should be added that modern panentheists construct their view of God from a perspective that places the Scriptures in a secondary place of reference. The increasing pervasiveness of a panentheistic way of thinking has had a clear impact on the doctrine of biblical sufficiency.

#### B. "WE ARE ALL PANENTHEISTS NOW."<sup>7</sup>

Gregory Petersen makes the above claim in light of what he notes as the growing presence of panentheism among the leading theologians of this day. With its dual emphasis on God's immanence and nature's transcendent abilities, panentheism has become a significant force in modern theological thinking. Michael Brierly would not agree with the complete inclusiveness of Petersen's statement, but he does speak of the adoption of panentheism in the past two

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<sup>6</sup> A good representative of this commitment is John Polkinghorne. In *The Faith of a Physicist: Reflections of a Bottom-Up Thinker*, Polkinghorne begins a chapter by offering a brief but captivating summary of evolutionary history. In just three pages, the entire scope of cosmological development is brilliantly stated, and the epochs of time from the big bang to the current status of the heavens are succinctly summarized. He goes on to state, "Such, in outline, is the story that science tells us about the history of the world. There are some speculations (partly in the very early cosmology) and some ignorances (particularly in relation to the origin of life), but there seems to me to be every reason to take seriously the broad sweep of what we are told. Theological discourse on the doctrine of creation must be consonant with that account." (John Polkinghorne, *The Faith of a Physicist: Reflections of a Bottom-Up Thinker* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994,] 71-73).

<sup>7</sup> Gregory Petersen, "Whither Panentheism?" in *Zygon* 36:3 (September 2001): 395.

centuries as a “doctrinal revolution.”<sup>8</sup> He backs up his revolutionary claim by providing an impressive list of sixty-four distinguished scholars of modern times who have clearly identified themselves to some degree within the panentheistic fold.<sup>9</sup>

In light of the significant presence of a view which is currently influencing a good deal of the theological world, it is important to identify the nature of this particular philosophical system, specifically as it relates to its impact on the Scriptures. A good way to accomplish this goal is to investigate the way the Scriptures are employed by those who advance a modern panentheistic mindset. For this study, a brief summary of the writings of Arthur Peacocke which relate to panentheism will provide insights into this worldview, and his employment of Scripture will clearly reveal the impact of panentheistic thinking on the role the Bible has in revealing the character and purpose of God.

### C. ARTHUR PEACOCKE AND THE LOCATION OF GOD’S INVOLVEMENT IN CREATION

Arthur Peacocke is not ambiguous about what takes priority in forming his theological assumptions. According to him, panentheism is the best expression of critical realism which theology can offer in the light of current scientific understanding.<sup>10</sup> Critical realism is that which best approximates reality as observed empirically and actually. Based on this statement, the two sources for understanding the fundamental qualities of existence are empirical science and actual experience. For Peacocke, reality is a matter of discovery and inference, which has been the foundation of rational epistemology since Descartes. The idea that truth is somehow

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<sup>8</sup> Michael W. Brierly, “Naming a Quiet Revolution: The Panentheistic Turn in Modern Theology,” in *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being – Panentheistic Reflections on God’s Presence in a Scientific World*, ed. Philip Clayton and Arthur Peacocke (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 4.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4. Some key names (including process theists) are Norman Pittenger, Philip Clayton, Sallie McFague, Hugh Montefiore, Peter Berger, Rudolf Bultmann, Martin Buber, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Paul Tillich, Alfred North Whitehead, and Ernst Troeltsch.

<sup>10</sup> Arthur Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age: Being and Becoming – Natural and Divine* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 11.

communicated to man from outside himself is completely out of the picture. The following points summarize the impact of Peacocke's views on the ability of the Bible to be the preeminent reference for understanding the nature and working of God.

**Peacocke believes that the Scriptures are without reliable verification.** In his own words,

“The effects of the Enlightenment are, quite rightly, irreversible, and no sacred writings and no sacred tradition can ever again be self-authenticating in the sense of itself validating its own claims to truth. Some fulcrum, some point of leverage, of assessment from outside the written sacred word or the sacred tradition, is needed to assess the truth of their affirmations and the reality of that to which the adherent of a religion commits him- or herself.”<sup>11</sup>

Peacocke believes that the findings of emergent science have filled the authentication gap.

Interestingly, Peacocke does not address why the Scriptures are said to be without an outside reference for affirmation while science is free to create its own self-validating principles and operate unchallenged within those parameters. The point for Peacocke, however, is to establish a new format within the confines of emergent science and make that scheme a reliable point of verification.

**Peacocke also believes that the Scriptures are not referential in their language.** Peacocke sees himself in the line of those who have successfully utilized the predominant philosophical scheme of their day in order to more accurately and relevantly express the truths of the Christian religion. For instance, he cites the Cappadocian use of Greek philosophy to establish theological categories and Thomas Aquinas' employment of Aristotle. In the same vein as these and other historical theologians, he comprehends his task to be articulating the Christian experience of God in a way that will be believable and usable by a society steeped in scientific analysis and thought.<sup>12</sup> He is in agreement with scholar Hans Frei who believes that language is not

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 7.

important for what it references, but rather it is important for what it does in its shaping of experience and understanding.<sup>13</sup>

Frei's distinction between referent and use is important, because once there is no objective point of reference in regard to ultimate truth, the door is open to use the language of religious expression for any relative purpose. This is what Peacocke has chosen to do in making the language of Christian experience more compatible with panentheism and the discoveries of emergent science. Such a philosophy is devastating to the doctrine of scriptural sufficiency because it places the Bible in a framework where relevance replaces revelation. The concept of Divine communication is removed to make room for communal philosophy where the church employs the biblical text to articulate a faith which is reasonable to its current culture.

**From Peacocke's perspective, God does not act from the outside in.** The referential use of language is exemplified in Peacocke's explanation of how God is understood to be at work today. Though God is not believed to act in a personal fashion on creation from the outside, His immanent presence is powerful in causing creation to continually evolve. He says, "God has again to be imagined as continuously creating, continuously giving existence to what is new. God is creating at every moment of the world's existence through perpetually giving creativity to the very stuff of the world."<sup>14</sup>

A move away from perceiving God as an external and exalted Sovereign is a common theme for a significant segment of modern panentheism. Scholars such as Maurice Wiles critically counter the idea of a God Who is in absolute control of all things. In *God's Action in the World*, he argues that God's activity takes place primarily on the level of immanence rather than from

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<sup>13</sup> Hans W. Frei, *Types of Christian Theology* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 27.

<sup>14</sup> Arthur Peacocke, "Articulating God's Presence in and to the World Unveiled by the Sciences," in *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being – Panentheistic Reflections on God's Presence in a Scientific World*, ed. Philip Clayton and Arthur Peacocke (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004): 144.

the heights of transcendence. In defining God's relationship to creation, he says, "God's relation to the world is not that of a person acting on an external reality as a substance from the outside. The physical processes are the means of God's self-expression."<sup>15</sup> This way of thinking effectively separates God from any overt, identifiable involvement in creation and infuses nature with its own creative enablement. English theologian Austin Farrer had a clear influence on Wiles, and he believed that creation was a matter of God providing creative energy to the cosmos. In Farrer's assessment, God is essentially the cause and source of the elements of creation acting the way they do.<sup>16</sup> Farrer taught that God's immanent presence is expressed in His active involvement to energize the physical world to emerge and develop in its own free way.

It is important for panentheists to restrict God's activity to that of the normal processes of the cosmos, but panentheists disagree as to the clarity of God's actual participation in this scenario. Peacocke would be in the middle of two ends of the spectrum regarding God's identifiable involvement. At one end would be Christopher Knight and his belief that God does act in clearly identifiable ways. Like other panentheists, he believes that God does supervene over His creation without violating any natural laws. However, he does hold to a form of pansacramental naturalism in which God's creative action is "broadened to include providential action."<sup>17</sup> He applies this principle to human religiosity, which he understands to be a combined product of

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<sup>15</sup> Maurice Wiles, *God's Action in the World: The Bampton Lectures for 1986* (London: SCM Press, 1986), 33.

<sup>16</sup> Austin Farrer, *Faith and Speculation* (New York: Adam & Charles Black, 1967), 82. Farrer believed he had effectively dissolved the separation between God's creative action and the actions of that which He created. He specifically argued against energy being considered as the physical ultimate by asserting that God created the elements of the universe to behave the way they do. The actions of the creature equate to the energy which it has been given of God. God acts, and so does His creation.

<sup>17</sup> Christopher C. Knight, *Wrestling with the Divine: Religion, Science, and Revelation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 19.



evolutionary pressures and the Divine will. In his estimation, evolution and the applied influence of God's will are not mutually incompatible realities.<sup>18</sup>

At the other end of the involvement spectrum would be John Polkinghorne. In allowing for direct divine participation in purely natural processes, Polkinghorne stresses the vagueness of such direct participation by God. In his way of thinking, the only evident causal agent in the cosmos is that which is generated by the organized complexity of upward-developing simpler systems. As he says, "The chaos and randomness of evolutionary development result in emergent causalities which act as a whole on the lower physical parts of which it is composed."<sup>19</sup> In other words, the randomness of upward development is eventually controlled and guided by complex and higher forms which such emergent progress produces. As such, evolution allows the universe to eventually become its own god.

Peacocke adopts a perspective that incorporates both ends of the involvement spectrum. His view may be best represented in his discussion of creative immanence as it is illustrated in music. Using Beethoven as an example, Peacocke believes a composer is immanent in the music he writes. By this he means that the composer is transcendent over the music, but he is also present in it as his communication with humanity is entirely subsumed in and represented by the music itself. "So God is actively and personally creating through the processes of the world."<sup>20</sup> What Peacocke has attempted to do in this analogy is identify God clearly in His creative actions but also keep His involvement as being far less than present and direct. For him the Creator is not to be understood as a ruling Sovereign Who should be loved and adored but

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>19</sup> John Polkinghorne, *The Faith of a Physicist: Reflections of a Bottom-Up Thinker* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 26.

<sup>20</sup> Peacocke, "Articulating God's Presence," 144.

rather as an untraceable Power Whose actions are manifested in the wonders of evolutionary advancement.

Peacocke's musical illustration is an excellent example of how some understand religious expression to be a matter of faith trying to perceive and describe reality. Mankind is attempting to understand its place in an emergent cosmos, while at the same time a diligent search is being made to discern God's involvement in what He has made. However, why limit God's immanence to the natural order? Would the Creator depend on mankind's limited scientific perspective in order to make Himself known? Could it be that God has acted immanently in a communicative fashion? Specifically, do not the Old and New Testaments bear the powerful presence of God's active communication? Understanding God's actions in His written revelation is the basis for a helpful new conservative response to the issues raised by panentheism.

For Peacocke, theology is an attempt to interpret reality through the lens of some sense of overall meaning and purpose. The idea that God has somehow communicated an authoritative revelation which must be understood and applied is not part of his thinking. As he states, "Theology is simply an enterprise which attempts to search for intelligibility and an answer that provides some coherent sense of the experimental and experiential data offered by the sciences."<sup>21</sup> This perspective makes the search for truth to be nothing more than an attempt to make sense of what mankind discovers in its quest to understand itself and its universe.

**Key point of impact: the subjection of the Word of God.** The panentheism of Arthur Peacocke conceives the activity of God in the world as being radically immanent in its form. His particular understanding of this activity portrays God's presence as an overall influence that is not to be restricted to any identifiable locus. This means that God is not to be found in any

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<sup>21</sup> Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age*, 87.

specific and definable actions.<sup>22</sup> For Peacocke, a personal, transcendent God does not exist as classical theism has presented Him. As he says, “God is not personal. He is rather a unitive, unifying, centered influence on the world’s activity like the ‘I’ is to individual human actions.”<sup>23</sup> The result of this depersonalization is a way of conceiving the divine which is completely different than one based on revealed truth.

Peacocke’s conclusions about God’s character mean the Bible must be understood in a new and subjective manner. Consider the following statement:

For the worship of both Jews and Christians affords a prominent place for the reading of their scriptures, much of which consists of narrative interpreted as the actions of God in history to which the worshiper is invited to attend as exemplifying the nature and character of the God active in those events and still active today.<sup>24</sup>

In Peacocke’s analogy, the Scriptures relate stories which in some way portray God as active and allow for an assumption that He is still in some measure at work today. The key word in the above statement is the word ‘interpreted.’ The entire matter of the subject of God and His dealings with creation is an issue of personal projection because experience is the center point of focus. Peacocke makes it clear that the actions of God portrayed in the Old and New Testament texts are what the writers believed them to be rather than that of faithful witnesses penning an inspired account. Actual history is the same for all. The difference is that one with faith sees something in an event that another without faith does not see.

The result of Peacocke’s panentheistic assumptions of God’s actions is the complete subjection of the Scriptures. Based on his conception of theology, Peacocke’s insights and estimations of God’s activity are on the same par as the biblical authors. In a very real way, he considers himself to have a higher level of insight into the nature of God due to the superior

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 137.

revelations of modern science. The Bible is nothing more than how people of faith interpreted their world in their time.

Where does Arthur Peacocke look for God? He says He can be found in the collected experiences of the church and in the insights of modern science. At best, the Scriptures are considered a secondary and limited source to try and make sense of the Divine.

**Other panentheists minimize the sufficiency of the Scriptures.** While Arthur Peacocke subjects the witness of the biblical text to what he considers more consistent and reliable sources, other panentheists have had an impact on the assumption that the Bible is a sufficient witness to the character and purpose of God.

*Philip Clayton has attempted to give panentheism a more Trinitarian and scriptural flavor with his Panentheistic Analogy.* This Analogy is built on the assumption that the world which encircles all things evidences sets of emergent properties that might be called “life” and “mind” which exercise a causality of their own. He claims that the cosmos clearly evidences emergent evolution, “that the mental can emerge from the biological or life from physical matter.”<sup>25</sup> Clayton firmly believes that his Panentheistic Analogy maintains a faithful connection with emergent science and also allows what the Bible reveals about God to remain true. He argues that the recent panentheistic turn in Christian theology has served the community of the faithful by providing a better conceptual statement of the Bible’s content than other alternatives.<sup>26</sup> The degree to which Clayton will go in allowing a modern scientific mindset to be the primary grid through which the Scriptures must be interpreted is found in his comments on Acts 17:28.

Acts 17:28 references God as the One in Whom we live and move and have our being. This text is a favorite reference for many panentheists, and Clayton uses Paul’s words to locate the

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<sup>25</sup> Philip D. Clayton, *God and Contemporary Science* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 7-8.

<sup>26</sup> Philip D. Clayton, “The Panentheistic Turn in Christian Theology,” in “A Case for Christian Panentheism?” ed. Ted Peters, *Dialog* 38:4 (Fall 1999): 289. A good example of

“causal joint” of God’s activity in the world.<sup>27</sup> The point of contact between the Creator and His creation is for him the activity of nature itself. As he says, “There is not a qualitative or ontological difference between the regularity of natural law and the intentionality of special divine action.”<sup>28</sup> He applies Acts 17:28 to God being present in each physical interaction and at each point in space, and each interaction is a part of His being in the broadest sense. In essence, Clayton makes Paul’s words a direct commentary on emergent reality, and in doing so he lifts the words completely out of their original context and negates any intent Paul might have had when he penned the words by the Spirit’s prompting. His insight also allows for God’s presence in wicked actions as well as good ones, which is inconsistent with a righteously Divine character.

*Jürgen Moltmann understands panentheism to be the best way of expressing how God is involved in bringing the cosmos to an eschatological goal.* Although his theology is stated in Trinitarian, redemptive, and eschatological terms, Moltmann’s ideas are clearly influenced by contemporary philosophy more than the context of the Scriptures.<sup>29</sup> As an example, Moltmann believes the Bible should be read as a testimony to the history of promise and not as an authoritative witness to the activity of God. In this vein, the cross was an event that opened up a process in which men participate and which forms the foundation of a life of eschatological hope.<sup>30</sup> As a result of this mindset, the books of the New Testament are reduced to being evidence that the biblical writers were simply applying the event of Calvary to their own current circumstances and finding God leading toward a future of glory and consummation. That God is

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<sup>27</sup> The expression *causal joint* is modern philosophy’s best approximation of pinpointing the location of God’s activity. Where exactly does a crystalized willful desire become translated into an external action or effect? Kevin Vanhoozer deals with this specifically when interacting with Clayton’s Panentheistic Analogy and the nature of the mind’s supervenience over the body. (Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology* [Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002], 108-110).

<sup>28</sup> Clayton, *God and Contemporary Science*, 99.

<sup>29</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1974), 277 Panentheism appears in this reference as his basis for understanding the dialectic of the negative element of the suffering of Christ.

<sup>30</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1967), 166.

portrayed in certain passages as transcendent and sovereign is a matter of the early Christians projecting a Caesar-type mentality onto the Jesus event, and it is not a representation of the true nature of God.<sup>31</sup> Clearly, Moltmann's panentheistic mindset dismisses any reasonable acceptance of the testimony of the Bible as being an authoritative witness to God's character and purpose.

#### D. The rise of the eighth-day man

Niels Gregersen builds on a panentheistic interpretation of the initial creation account of Genesis and applies the creative principle of God to man's own activities. He sees human beings as having an assignment to take an active part in the transformation of the ongoing story of creation.<sup>32</sup> Man's creative role supposedly evolves as the narrative progresses. As Gregersen states, man and woman begin their participation in the creative process by breeding nomadic life forms and tilling agricultural life forms. The evolution then continues on from the domain of sexual reproduction into the socio-cultural domain. According to Gregersen's conclusion, the inventions of human culture are not seen as deviations from God's "original" creation but rather as a mode of participation in God's creative act of unfolding and fostering new appearances on the scene of history. Created in the image and likeness of God, the human person is one who has been given the task of developing the systems of nature so they can participate in the overall creative scheme designed by God.<sup>33</sup> In essence, the seven-day creation week is followed by the inauguration of the creative work of man beginning on the eighth day.

Gregersen is not alone in his eighth-day pronouncement for mankind. A similar way of thinking appears in other current writings as well. Ed Marcinak believes the Christian has

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<sup>31</sup> Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 250.

<sup>32</sup> Niels Henrik Gregersen, "The Creation of Creativity and the Flourishing of Creation," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 28 no 3-4 (June-August 2001): 407-408.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 408

recovered his identity as a “man of the eighth day.”<sup>34</sup> He takes from Genesis that God made the world in six days, included the Sabbath for rest and celebration, but He then turned over the eighth day to mankind for fulfillment. To provide textual support for such a claim, Marcinak cites the apocryphal book Sirach 15:14 which reads, “He himself made man in the beginning, and then left him free to make his own decisions.” When Psalm 8 declares that God has made man lord over the work of His hands, Marcinak understands it to mean that mankind is now completely in charge of creation. The end of the eighth-day progression will be the receiving of man’s work by God in very much the same spirit as Gregersen describes when he speaks of creation’s emergence being awaited by God, the Creator of creativity.<sup>35</sup>

Harold Morowitz extends the concept of man’s eighth-day exaltation and likens it to God’s own emergence. He says, “Humanity is the transcendence of the immanent, emergent God.”<sup>36</sup> According to Morowitz, humanity is essentially emergence beyond emergence. This is because the human is self-reflective and capable of controlling destiny above and beyond previous levels of life and consciousness. Morowitz believes that consciousness is the crowning achievement of evolutionary development and a transcendence beyond normal, biological emergence. It is, in effect, God taking form in the human mind. Truly, this is panentheistic immanence taken to its outmost limits and a deification of mankind which echoes the arrogant words of Isaiah 14:14, “...I will be like the Most High.”

From the above authors, it is clear that modern panentheism has a two-fold objective. First and foremost, it desires to express a philosophy that is congruent with a modern understanding of reality. That is, it wishes to state a worldview that is consistent with the cosmos as it is currently

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<sup>34</sup> Ed Marcinak, *Tomorrow’s Christian* (Dayton, Ohio: Pflaum Press, 1969), 165-166.

<sup>35</sup> Gregersen, “The Creation of Creativity and the Flourishing of Creation,” 401.

<sup>36</sup> Harold J. Morowitz, “The ‘Trinitarian’ World of Neo-Pantheism: On Panentheism and Epistemology,” in *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being – Panentheistic Reflections on God’s Presence in a Scientific World*, ed. Philip Clayton and Arthur Peacocke (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 134.

conceived. Second, modern panentheism wishes to remain in the mainstream of a philosophical tradition that abandons a revelational understanding of God's character and replaces it with one that conceives of God as immanently revealed in and through natural processes. The result of such endeavors is a significant impact upon the doctrine of the sufficiency of the Scriptures. The Bible is not seen as a primary source of revelation but rather a record of the testimony of those who strove to discern God from the standpoint of contemporary philosophy.

For those who believe in an inspired and authoritative biblical text, it is important to address the impact of modern panentheistic thought on the Bible's ability to reveal God. The claim to understand God primarily from what His Word reveals about Him finds support from those who have carefully considered the ramifications of what it means to abandon that testimony.

#### E. THE CONTRIBUTION OF SPEECH-ACT THEORY TO THE MODEL OF BIBLICAL SUFFICIENCY

**Conservative scholars have previously addressed some of the issues.** Some of the challenges raised by panentheism have been addressed by conservative scholarship. Vernon Grounds has drawn attention to the move toward relativism that panentheism has fostered.<sup>37</sup> Lonnie Kliever and John Hayes have followed this line of thinking and underscored the relativistic emphasis brought to the forefront by Grounds.<sup>38</sup> Stanley Gundry has traced panentheism's philosophical roots back to its subjective origins.<sup>39</sup> Carl Henry has revealed

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<sup>37</sup> Vernon Grounds, "The Future Of Theology and the Theology of the Future, in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 13:3 (Summer 1970): 152.

<sup>38</sup> Lonnie D. Kliever and John H. Hayes, *Radical Christianity: The New Theologies in Perspective, with Readings from the Radicals* (Anderson, SC: Droke House Pub, 1968). The following quote on pages 30-31 illustrates the impact of a philosophy such as panentheism, "It (relativism) strikes at the roots of fideistic and exclusivistic claims to God's truth and grace. The idea of timeless truths, unchanging values and permanent institutions appears hollow in a world increasingly committed to relativism. Worse yet, claiming *sole* access to the divine nature, will and favor echoes presumption in a world increasingly comfortable with relativism. The day of proclaiming any point of view final much less exclusive is rapidly fading away."

<sup>39</sup> Stanley N. Gundry, and Alan F Johnson, *Tensions in Contemporary Theology* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1976), 175-180.



pantheism's call for the Scriptures to be recast in a new light in order to be properly synthesized with new views of reality.<sup>40</sup> Donald Bloesch has highlighted the comparisons and contrasts between the essential assumptions of pantheistic process theology and that of the Reformed tradition.<sup>41</sup> John Cooper has argued effectively for the philosophical and theological superiority of the Augustinian and Calvinist traditions in contrast to pantheistic claims.<sup>42</sup> There is, however, a root issue to which the above theologians have referred but to which they have not responded. It is the issue of the sufficiency of the Scriptures to reveal God. Bloesch makes a brief point of it when he discusses the fundamental epistemological differences between Process theology and the Reformed tradition. As he correctly points out, Process theology is built from a foundation of psychological and scientific reasoning. Conservative Christianity begins with the authority of divine revelation.<sup>43</sup> John Cooper also states that beliefs about the Bible make up a crucial factor in the pantheistic perspective. Answering questions about the nature of Scripture, its teachings, and how contemporary Christians should be informed by its teaching form the basis of his response to pantheism.<sup>44</sup> Carl Henry goes a step further to emphasize the loss of a revelationally-based understanding of God's character. He says, "The disjunction of the self-revealing God from the word of prophets and apostles as the Word of God leads to the loss of the self-revealing God."<sup>45</sup> The above references about the nature and adequacy of the Scriptures call for careful attention and examination.

**Kevin Vanhoozer's understanding of the Bible as an act of Divine communication provides an effective model for responding to the pantheistic challenge to biblical**

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<sup>40</sup> Carl F.H. Henry, "Where is Modern Theology Going?" in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 11:1 (Winter 1968): 3-12.

<sup>41</sup> Donald G. Bloesch, "Process Theology in Reformed Perspective," in *The Reformed Journal* 29:10 (October 1979): 20-24.

<sup>42</sup> Cooper, *Pantheism, The Other God of the Philosophers*, 220-236

<sup>43</sup> Bloesch, 20.

<sup>44</sup> Cooper, 319.

<sup>45</sup> Henry, 10.

**sufficiency.** The panentheistic challenge raises a question that needs to be addressed by those who believe in the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures. Why cannot the Scriptures be considered a Divine communicative act? If God can place Himself within the very processes of evolutionary development as scholars like Arthur Peacocke and Philip Clayton propose, then why would He not have the ability to act sovereignly to provide a sufficient word of communication?

Conservative scholars such as Kevin Vanhoozer have taken a fresh look at the Scriptures as being an act of communication and have offered helpful insights which provide a good response to the challenges of modern panentheism. An examination of Vanhoozer's communicative model and its implications will advance the defense of God's Word in light of today's particular challenges to its integrity.

*An event's meaning is completely dependent upon its interpretation.* Unlike panentheistic writers who see the Bible as a window to how others have encountered and interpreted God's actions, conservative scholarship holds to the tenet that the Scriptures are a primary and preeminent source witness to the activity and revelation of the Lord of heaven.<sup>46</sup> The necessity of an accurate witness to God's actions is stated well by John Sailhamer. In commenting on the Old Testament text, he says the events depicted in the narratives of Scripture are part of the fabric of the text which has its own specific message to present to the readers.<sup>47</sup> In other words, the text shares an equal priority with the actual event of God's involvement when considering the totality of what God has revealed. The event has no real significance apart from the way it is

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<sup>46</sup> Although not in the panentheistic mainstream, G. Ernest Wright speaks for most panentheists when he says that biblical theology is focused on the acts of God rather than inscripturated revelation. He says, "These acts are themselves interpretations of historical events, or projections from known events to past and future, all described within the conceptual frame of one people in a certain historical continuum." (G. Ernest Wright, *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital* [London: SCM Press, LTD, 1952], 10).

<sup>47</sup> John H. Sailhamer, *Introduction to Old Testament Theology, A Canonical Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 36.

represented and interpreted, and the medium of communication includes the record which is penned. As Sailhamer concludes, “Thus divine revelation may be thought of as lying within the narrative text of Scripture as a function of the meaning of the events in their depiction.”<sup>48</sup> In any historical or scriptural context, then, an event has no meaning apart from its interpretation.

Building on the assumption of textual necessity to communicate revealed truth, Kevin Vanhoozer applies the principles of speech-act theory to an understanding of the biblical text as being God’s sovereign act of communication.

The core of Vanhoozer’s argument centers on the view that an act of speech communication includes three essential ingredients. The first ingredient is locution, which is the utterance of a word or words. It is to say something. The second ingredient is illocution, which is what one does in the locution uttered. A question may be asked. A command may be given.<sup>49</sup> The third ingredient is perlocution, which is the result of the speech-act. The question is answered. The order is obeyed.<sup>50</sup>

Genuine and meaningful communication rests on speech-acts which may be understood and to which there may be a clear response. Applying this concept to Scripture opens a unique and satisfying perspective on what God has done in the giving of His Word.

*God was immanently involved in the inscription of His message to this world.* At the foundation of an epistemological conviction that God has communicated by means of written communication is the nature of biblical inspiration. As Vanhoozer rightly concludes, “The fundamental issue in the doctrine of Scripture concerns the manner of God’s involvement in the

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>49</sup> John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 24.

<sup>50</sup> Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, 173. Vanhoozer specifically emphasizes the perlocutionary aspect of a speech act in a way Searle does not, thus highlighting the propositional aspect of communication.

words of the Bible and thus the manner of God's activity in the world."<sup>51</sup> To accept the biblical testimony of this involvement is to embrace the truth that the Old and New Testaments are the speech-acts of God.<sup>52</sup> The Bible's own testimony asserts a unique claim that it is God's communicated Word. When 2 Timothy 3:16 declares the Scriptures to be θεόπνευστος, it can be taken to mean that the written Word is the very "spiration" or breath of God.<sup>53</sup> What is written is the direct and personal communication from God to man.<sup>54</sup> The intimacy of the connection between the written text and the God Who directed its inscripturation is the very heart of what makes the Word of God the voice of God.

*The Bible is an act of purposeful discourse that carries the full weight of the Author's intent.*

The result of God's personal involvement in the giving of His Word is an effective communication that adequately and sufficiently conveys God's will to those who hear the message. That God has provided illocutionary utterances means that the biblical text should be understood as a vehicle that brings God's thoughts and intentions into clear focus. Based on Searle's language concepts, Vanhoozer sets forth a Trinitarian model of biblical communication.

The Father's activity is locution. This means that God utters words. As Vanhoozer expresses it, God works in and through human intelligence and human imagination to produce a literary account that renders Him a mighty speech agent.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>52</sup> Warfield's statement regarding God's involvement in the giving of His Word is timeless. "It will suffice to remind ourselves that it looks upon the Bible as an oracular book, -- as the Word of God in such a sense that whatever it says God says, -- not a book, then, in which one may, by searching, find some word of God, but a book which may be frankly appealed to at any point with the assurance that whatever it may be found to say, that is the Word of God." (Benjamin Breckenridge Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, ed. Samuel G. Craig [Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1970], 106).

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>54</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries. The Second Epistle of Paul The Apostle to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon*, trans. T.A. Smail (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), 330.

<sup>55</sup> Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, 154.

The Son's activity is illocution. The Logos corresponds to the speaker's act or illocution--that which is accomplished in the communication. "The illocution has content (reference and predication) and a particular intent (a force) that shows how the proposition is to be taken."<sup>56</sup> It is illocutionary force that makes speech count as something: a promise, a command, or a recounting.

In Jesus Christ, the Father's expression of communication took on fleshly form. His will became fully conveyed in the actual Person of His Son. God not only verbally communicated His love for mankind, that love was perfectly and completely manifested in the work of Christ on Calvary's cross (Romans 5:8).

The Spirit is related primarily to the perlocutionary force of the speech act. This includes illumination, conviction and application. Illumination is God-given insight into the meaning of a biblical text (1 Corinthians 2:9-13). Conviction is the assured certainty of what the Scriptures reveal, particularly about Christ (John 16:8-11). Application is the Spirit's enablement to obey biblical directives (John 15:1-8). In other words, "The Spirit makes the biblical words *deliver*."<sup>57</sup>

*Proper hermeneutics will respect and consider the illocutionary dimensions of God's uniquely communicated message.* If language is intended to do more than simply convey a state of affairs or represent a conception or idea, then the action of an author in an act of communication should be a prime factor in interpreting the meaning of that verbal conveyance. For instance, the importance of context is a necessary consideration in attempting to understand the meaning of a text. William Alston uses the following scenario: " 'Can you reach the salt?' sometimes means *please pass the salt*, sometimes *is your reach long enough to enable you to*

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 155.

*touch the salt?*, and sometimes *show me whether you can touch the salt.*”<sup>58</sup> This evaluation of a simple question underscores the need to take in all contextual factors to determine the illocutionary intent of an author. “The fact that a linguistic expression has the meaning it has is a function of what users of the language *do* with that expression.”<sup>59</sup> Applying this principle to the biblical text results in a focus on God’s intention in what He says in the Scriptures.

In summary, receiving the Scriptures as an act of Divine communication allows for an understanding of God that is primarily mediated through textual revelation. Panentheism, in contrast, constructs its understanding of God from scientifically-based observations of an assumed emergent cosmos. The Old and New Testaments are considered to be at least one step removed from any direct communication from God, and thus play at best a secondary role in revealing His character and purpose. The Scriptures, however, declare themselves to be God’s eternal Word, and as such they carry the force of God’s communicative action.

**Psalm 19:7-9 is the Bible’s own witness to its illocutionary nature and force.** A relevant application of speech-act theory to the nature of biblical communication is found in Psalm 19:7-9. This passage is located contextually in the center of a Psalm which emphasizes God’s communication and the righteous and transformative impact it has on the human heart.

*The thematic arrangement of Psalm 19:7-9.* In verses 7-9 of Psalm 19, a particular pattern is followed to elaborate on the verbal communication of God to man. First, the written testimony of Scripture is described in a particular way beginning with its designation as the Law of the Lord. Second, a particular characteristic of God’s law is provided in the form of a predicate adjective. Third, an adverbial phrase is employed to show how that particular function of Scripture impacts lives. In five of the six descriptions a participle is used to describe an action

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<sup>58</sup> William P. Alston, *Philosophy of Language* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964), 37.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

accomplished in the specifically targeted use of God’s communication. The sequence is as follows:

<u>The nature of the text</u>	<u>The text’s ascribed quality</u>	<u>What God’s Word accomplishes by means of this quality</u>
Law of Yahweh	perfect	converting the soul
Testimony of Yahweh	sure	making wise the simple
Statutes of Yahweh	right	rejoicing the heart
Commandment of Yahweh	pure	enlightening the eyes
Fear of Yahweh	clean	enduring forever
Judgments of Yahweh	truth	making righteous altogether <sup>60</sup>

*Psalm 19 and Speech-Act Theory.* As speech-act theory provides, all acts of communication consist of the three components of locution, illocution, and perlocution. In Psalm 19:7-9, each aspect of God’s communication is represented by three attributes. For example, God’s Word is expressed as Law, has the attribute of completeness, and succeeds in turning a life in His direction. The Torah is the locution or that which God has given as His Word. The word תּוֹרָה refers to the Law itself but its root meaning is that of an authoritative, life-directing teaching.<sup>61</sup> The Law, then, is that which places God’s unique claim on a life in order to embrace and direct it. The perfect or complete nature of the Law gives it illocutionary force. As a complete entity, the Law possesses a unique sufficiency to convey what the Lord intends to communicate. The perlocutionary effect of the communication of God’s complete Law is the turning of a soul back to Him. This principle became ultimately true in the Law’s role in preparing the human heart to receive the grace of the Gospel as Galatians 3:24 describes.

<sup>60</sup> This last descriptive statement is the only one that does not contain a participial predicate. However, Gesenius points out that the expression is a substantival predicate and the thematic equivalent to the five other predicative statements in verses 7-9. [See W. Gesenius, *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, trans. A.E. Cowley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1909), 141C.]

<sup>61</sup> R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 910d.

Verse 8 depicts the Word as a pure commandment, where a sin-darkened understanding is penetrated with the kind of light which reveals reality and enables good decisions. A commandment, or **מִצְוָה**, is simply an ordered directive.<sup>62</sup> A pure commandment is one that is honest and sincere, meaning that it radiates from a heart that has the best motives for the instructions that are being given. Mitchell Dahood likens the purity of the commandment of God in verse 8 to a special radiance. Dahood cites a Ugaritic text which says, *km špš dbrt*, “like the sun that is pure.” The root of the predicate *dbrt* is *bārāh*. This same word is used in Song of Solomon 6:10 in the expression **כְּחַמְזָה בְּרָהּ**, pure (radiant) as the sun.<sup>63</sup> The purity of God’s Word is a shining radiance which brings light into the darkest heart and has the impact of enabling good spiritual decisions. The Commandment (locution) has a penetrating and radiant purity in its conveyance (illocution) which brings the light of genuine spiritual understanding (perlocution).

It is evident, then, that God’s illocutions always have potential perlocutionary effects. As stated above, the Law of Yahweh as a complete communication effectively works to accomplish the turning of a soul back to Him. This is the effect of which Vanhoozer speaks in his portrayal of the role of the Spirit in making real the truth of what God has spoken. This same principle of impact holds true for all six statements in Psalm 19:7-9.

How does an individual know that God’s intended communication is a personally applicable address? Augustine wrote in an essay that God was telling him to take and read the Scriptures through a child’s voice crying out *Tolle! Lege! Tolle! Lege!*<sup>64</sup> But is such a directive needed for individuals today to know that the Scriptures have a message for them? The personal certainty

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<sup>62</sup> Harris, et. al., *TWOT*, section 1887.

<sup>63</sup> Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms I, 1-50* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1965), 123.

<sup>64</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *The Confessions of St. Augustine: Books I-IX Selections* (New York: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1961), Book VIII, par. 28.



of possessing a God-given witness rests completely on the nature of the biblical communication and the illuminating work of the Spirit Who inspired its writing. 1 Corinthians 2:13 states that the Holy Spirit uses the Scriptures to reveal the things of God. This illuminating work causes one to see and personally understand the genuine impact of what God has communicated about His purpose and plan. The primary intended result of this impact is to bring about saving faith. Jesus prayed in John 17:20 for those who would believe “through their word.” This is a clear indication that the testimony given by Christ’s immediate disciples as well as those who would follow would remain effective to bring others to belief in the Savior. Romans 10:17 describes the path to personal assurance when it says that faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God. God’s Word is the source of faith in that it provides the message that is believed. The truth embraced is God’s revealed righteousness in the gospel (Romans 1:16-17). One’s assurance that this truth is personally applicable comes directly as a result of the illuminating and convicting ministry of the Holy Spirit. Jesus promised in John 16:8-11 that the Spirit would convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment. Far from being an expired coupon which was only good for a certain time and a certain place, the Bible is a living and enduring proposition for all who will receive Its witness.

#### F. CONCLUSION

Modern panentheism has made an earnest attempt to relate theological truth in a way which emphasizes God’s immanence in the context of a cosmos which is a product of emergent evolution. As a result, its basic premises have had a direct impact on the nature of biblical sufficiency. Most, if not all, panentheistic writers view the Old and New Testaments as a secondary source in forming an understanding of God and the nature of His activity in the world. According to panentheism, God is to be primarily found somewhere within the natural processes

of emergent evolution. The concept that the Scriptures are an effective revelation from God is set aside to make room for a more empirical approach to spiritual discovery.

The Bible, however, remains a powerful illocution from the Lord of heaven. Understanding God's written Word as a speech act does positively contribute to an appreciation of not only the Bible's message but also of the Divinely-intended results of that communication.

Anthony Thiselton offers an excellent summary of the multifaceted nature of the impact of the Scriptures. He states,

By contrast, the biblical texts transcend any single goal: they teach, but they also invite us to celebrate with joy the deeds and reign of God. They make truth-claims about the world and reality; but they also make us uncomfortable recipients of judgment and comfortable recipients of grace. They subvert our idols, but they also address us, heal us, build us, and transform us.<sup>65</sup>

Thiselton correctly observes that the Old and New Testaments employ various forms of illocution to deliver God's message. The result of this effective conveyance of truth is a revelation that does more than just inform. It also transforms. This ability to transform is due to the sufficiency of the communication as an act of God to bring about spiritual change. Because the Bible is the Word of God, it carries Divine communicative force. As an example, the directive in Acts 16:31 to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved is more than just the record of an exchange between Paul and a Philippian prison guard. It is an enduring call to any heart that will by faith lay hold of its wonderful claim.

Perhaps the man of the eighth day will pause long enough to consider that the God of day one is earnestly trying to speak to him through a Word that more than adequately conveys His intentions.

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<sup>65</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Biblical Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Bible Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 131-132.