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**SCOTTISH  
BULLETIN  
OF  
EVANGELICAL  
THEOLOGY**

**Volume 12 Number 2      Autumn 1994**

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## EDITORIAL: REMEMBERING WILLIAM TYNDALE (1494-1536)

This *Bulletin*, as many of our readers will be aware, is the organ jointly of Rutherford House, Edinburgh, and the Scottish Evangelical Theology Society. The editor's column should before now have welcomed to the Wardenship of the House (and therewith to membership of the *Bulletin's* Editorial Board), in succession to Dr Nigel Cameron, the Revd David Searle, who comes from singularly fruitful pastoral teaching ministries in Aberdeen, Larbert and Bangor, Northern Ireland. We now make amends for our oversight, and wish the new Warden every encouragement in the Spirit as he develops the multi-faceted activity of the House under the banner 'Encouraging Effective Ministry'.

From the next issue we will also welcome to the ranks of our Associate Editors Dr David Bebbington, Reader in History, Stirling University, Professor Donald Macleod of the chair of Systematic Theology, in the Free Church College, Edinburgh, Dr Donald Meek, Professor of Celtic Studies in Aberdeen University and Dr Kevin Vanhoozer, Lecturer in Theology and Religious Studies, New College, University of Edinburgh. In addition, Dr Campbell Campbell-Jack of Munloch, Ross-shire, will join the Editorial Board. As editor, I gladly take this opportunity to thank all who share the editorial burden, and particularly Professor Stephen Williams, who leaves our lists as he assumes the chair of Systematic Theology in Union Theological College, Belfast.

Since the Scottish Evangelical Theology Society evolved, by maturation and a change of name, out of the Scottish Tyndale Fellowship, it is only appropriate for *SBET* to note the jubilee of the Tyndale Fellowship and Tyndale House, Cambridge. They were both founded in 1944 by a visionary band that included Dr Douglas Johnson, the (first) General Secretary of the Inter-Varsity Fellowship (now U.C.C.F.), Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones, F.F. Bruce, John W. Wenham, Alan M. Stibbs, W.J. Martin (of Liverpool University and later Regent College, Vancouver – perhaps the single most influential initiator), and Professor Donald Maclean of the Free Church of Scotland College. Others involved were those two very different translators of Karl Barth, G.T. Thomson and Geoffrey Bromiley. So the Scottish contribution was weighty.

This is not the place to rehearse the role that the Tyndale Fellowship and House have played in the post-World War II resurgence of evangelical biblical and theological scholarship in Britain. A brief history by Tom Noble will shortly tell the essence of the story, and there are other measures of their accomplishments, such as the *Tyndale Bulletin* and numerous monographs and co-operative publications. A fine representation of Tyndale scholarship is to be found in the volume of essays edited by Joel B. Green and Max Turner, *Jesus of Nazareth: Lord and Christ. Essays on the Historical Jesus and New Testament Christology* (Paternoster Press, Exeter, 1994; 536pp., £29.99; ISBN 0 85364 560 4). The collection honours Professor Howard Marshall of Aberdeen University, who is the President of the Scottish Evangelical Theology Society. The *Bulletin* is delighted to add its own word of congratulations.

The fiftieth anniversary of the Tyndale Fellowship was marked by a conference at Swanwick under the title, 'A Pathway into the Holy Scripture', taken from a small treatise by William Tyndale – in reality, an enlarged version of the prologue to his first attempt at publishing his New Testament. By a happy conjunction, the quincentenary of Tyndale's birth also falls in 1994. He was the first English translator of the Bible to work direct from Hebrew and Greek, and his was the first New Testament to be printed in English. Since sixteenth-century Scotland produced no counterpart to Tyndale, it was his New Testament (first published 1526) that kindled and fanned reforming fires in Scotland from as early as 1527. He appears often in the *Gude and Godlie Ballatis* of the mid-1540s ('My New Testament thay wald keip downe, / Quhilk suld be preicheit fra towne to towne'), and earlier in David Lindsay's *Ane Pleasant Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis*. The Pardoner, *i.e.* the indulgence-pedlar, laments that

Of all credence, now I am quyte,  
For, ilk man halds me at dispyte,  
That reids the New Test'ment...

I give to the Devill, with gude intent,  
This unsell wickit New Testament,  
With thame that it translaitit.

So the Scottish churches must join in thanksgiving for William Tyndale, who eventually paid with his life for his commitment to the open Bible for all to read.

Tyndale was also concerned about the interpretation of the Scriptures. As a tribute to his pioneering contribution to the tradition of biblical learning in which all the institutions and associations mentioned in this editorial stand, we reproduce here a couple of paragraphs from the section on the senses of Scripture in his largest work, *The Obedience of the Christian Man* (1528).

Thou shalt understand, therefore, that the scripture hath but one sense, which is the literal sense. And that literal sense is the root and ground of all, and the anchor that never faileth, whereunto if thou cleave, thou canst never err or go out of the way. And if thou leave the literal sense, thou canst not but go out of the way. Neverthelater, the scripture useth proverbs, similitudes, riddles, or allegories, as all other speeches do; but that which the proverb, similitude, riddle or allegory signifieth, is ever the literal sense, which thou must seek out diligently: as in the English we borrow words and sentences of one thing, and apply them unto another, and give them new significations....

God is a Spirit, and all his words are spiritual. His literal sense is spiritual, and all his words are spiritual. When thou readest (Matt.i.), "She shall bear a son, and thou shalt call his name Jesus; for he shall save his people from their sins:" this literal sense is spiritual, and ever-lasting life unto as many as believe it. And the literal sense of these words, (Matt.v.) "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall have mercy," are spiritual and life; whereby they that are merciful may of right, by the truth and promise of God, challenge mercy. And like is it of these words, Matt. vi. "If you forgive other men their sins, your heavenly Father shall forgive you yours." And so is it of all the promises of God. Finally, all God's words are spiritual, if thou have eyes of God to see the right meaning of the text, and whereunto the scripture pertaineth, and the final end and cause thereof.

# NO MORE THAN A SPOONFUL OF SUGAR? EVANGELICALS AND SOCIAL INVOLVEMENT

GORDON R. PALMER,  
SLATEFORD-LONGSTONE CHURCH, EDINBURGH

## Earlier Neglect

The story has been told, a good number of times over, of how the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were a time when evangelical social involvement tailed off at a significant rate. David Moberg's *The Great Reversal*<sup>1</sup> was, if not the best known work at a popular level, at least among the most significant of early works charting the decline of evangelical social involvement in that period. In particular the title of his book summed up recent evangelical awareness that the neglect of social concern was not part of the essence of Evangelicalism, but in fact was contrary to its basis and heritage.

In explaining the decline, a handful of factors are generally mentioned as behind the move away from social engagement: a reaction against theological liberalism producing a kind of backs-to-the-wall mentality; an avoidance of social issues, as that was the ground taken by the social gospel movement; the rise in popularity of pre-millennialism which portrayed the decline in the social order as an indication of the nearness of Christ's return (and hence, in a perverse way, almost something desirable); the growth of Evangelicalism among the middle classes who were distant and distanced from the most acute social needs. To these we might add, for the UK at least, the fact that at least some of the agreed areas of involvement of the church became part of the functions of government. The great efforts of Thomas Chalmers (amongst others) to provide for the poor of the parish declined after the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1845 took responsibility out of the church's hands.

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<sup>1</sup> D. Moberg, *The Great Reversal* (London, 1973).

### Recent Re-emergence

I referred to Moberg's book as 'early' as it came out at a time when Evangelicals were only slowly emerging from the assumed and/or cultivated position of non-involvement in worldly matters such as politics, social care, arts, sport, etc. In fact Carl Henry had produced his influential *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*<sup>2</sup> twenty-five years earlier, and things had been changing gradually. There had been significant shifts in the mid-1960s – such as at the World Congress on Evangelism at Berlin in 1966, and the Congress on the Church's Worldwide Mission held at Wheaton the same year, and the National Evangelical Congress at Keele in 1967. However, a more significant turning point was the International Congress on World Evangelisation at Lausanne in 1974, a gathering of 2,700 participants from over 150 countries. Here a statement was produced, 'The Lausanne Covenant', which had 'Christian Social Responsibility' as its fifth section – after the Purpose of God, the Authority of the Bible, the Uniqueness of Christ and the Nature of Evangelism.

It was not that these conferences created the interest in social action so much as that they gave confidence to those already involved; they were part of a growing movement. For other Evangelicals, it was not conferences but the rise of evangelical organisations such as TEAR Fund (British launch in 1968) which drew attention to social issues, so creating more interest and concern. Magazines began to appear such as that which became *Sojourners*. Many people on the ground, at grass roots level, were longing for an alternative to the narrow versions of Christian faith they were experiencing in their churches, but they did not know one another.... People from many places saw the flag, and met one another around the flagpole.<sup>3</sup>

There was not only change and development within American and western European Evangelicalism. Other international influences were at work, and as Evangelicalism became more heavily affected by these, e.g. the weighty contributions of Rene Padilla and Samuel Escobar at

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2 C.F.H. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids, 1947).

3 J. Wallis, *The New Radical* (Tring, 1983), p. 72.



Lausanne, the massive international significance of poverty, racism, cultural imperialism and so on became more highlighted and therefore bigger issues. It is also the case that Evangelicals were being influenced and affected by a general trend in society at large towards greater awareness of international needs and shared responsibility – for instance, how we in the rich north through trade were continuing to exploit the poorer countries in the southern hemisphere. A more recent example of this is the increased attention to environmental issues.

The increase in attention to social concern took deeper root in the 1970s and 1980s and spread to different wings of the evangelical church. Through events such as Spring Harvest and Festival of Light, social involvement issues have been given wider prominence in the church. Specially convened conferences have been arranged to bring together people in the charismatic movement with others involved in social action.

### **Biblical Basis**

One of the things to have clearly emerged from the by now large number of books, conferences, magazines and study packs from different organisations, is that the Bible has a good deal to say about social concern. God is concerned with all of life. He cares deeply about all areas and aspects of life. Theological principles have been expounded such as those in the early chapters of John Stott's *Issues Facing Christians Today* calling for a fuller understanding of the biblical teaching: Stott calls for a fuller doctrine of God (as God of nature as well as religion, of creation as well as covenant, of justice as well as justification); a fuller doctrine of man (surely only a matter of time before he uses less exclusive language); a fuller doctrine of Christ (who entered others' worlds, and served); a fuller doctrine of salvation (which cannot be separated from the kingdom of God, which includes Jesus as Saviour and Lord, which does not separate faith from love); and a fuller doctrine of the church (involved in and seeking to reform the world).<sup>4</sup>

The Scriptures give us a wealth of material and references on social involvement. God is celebrated as the Creator and

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<sup>4</sup> J.R.W. Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today* (Basingstoke, 1984), pp. 13-25.

defender of the oppressed. God destroyed first Israel and then Judah because of their oppression of the poor. Repeatedly the prophets warn that God hates religious ritual that is separated from concern for justice. A tender compassion for the poor and marginalised was a central concern for Jesus and evidence that he was the Messiah. Jesus said bluntly that if we fail to feed the hungry and clothe the naked we are condemned.

Because there is by now plenty of material on the biblical basis for social involvement and because there are fine outlines available, I am not going to offer a biblical basis overall or in depth. Rather I want to point to a main area of contention in the evangelical debate, and to come to what I think is still the main reaction of many Evangelicals, that social action has its place, is important, is biblical... but.... However, before moving on to the first of these, I want to spend a few moments on another point.

### **Cause of Neglect: Decline of Reformed Theology**

One reason generally not cited in the list of contributory factors to the 'great reversal', which I deliberately omitted from above in order to raise it here, is the decline in popularity of Reformed theology. Prior to the Reformation the medieval world-view was one of acceptance of the social order as something divinely ordained: God was in his heaven, the bishop in his chair, the lord in his castle; this was to medieval man and woman part of the very nature of things.

To the Reformers and Puritans the social structure was not something natural and something static. It was the result of human decision and therefore was infected with sin and so could be in need of reforming. Furthermore this was part of one's Christian duty. Knowledge of God was in acknowledging him, in serving him, in applying his Lordship to all areas of life: the emergence of original Calvinism represented a fundamental alternation in Christian sensibility, from the vision and practice of turning away from the social world in order to seek closer union with God – to the vision and practice of working to reform the social world in obedience to God.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids, 1983), p. 11.

So Calvinism was marked by a systematic endeavour to mould the life of society as a whole... it lays down the principle that the church ought to be interested in all sides of life, and it neither isolates the religious element over against the other elements, like Lutheranism, nor does it permit this sense of collective responsibility to express itself merely in particular institutions and occasional interventions in affairs, as in Catholicism.<sup>6</sup>

One of the most revolutionary insights of the Reformation was its teaching that 'vocation' is not the preserve of the elite few, but the privilege of every Christian. 'Worldly' occupations are blessed by God and form the sphere in which God may be glorified. This empowerment of ordinary people took effect not only at the personal and individual level, but also in institutional and social life. Although Lutheranism spoke of being called by God to all sorts of occupations, what someone did in their occupation was thought of not so much as a matter of obedience so much as a matter of social necessity.

Therefore the whole occupational structure was a given, God-ordained, rather than something created by us and to be rearranged if need be. But in the Reformed view obedience was not about remaining in one's given role, but about what one did in that role. And if it did not serve the common good, as it ought to, then something must be done to change things.

The Reformed tradition, then, was a liberating, prophetic theology that provided a basis for social involvement. Many attempts were made to follow this through into practice and in a number of ways it was clearly shown that social involvement was an integral part of the Christian calling. For instance, in the Church of Scotland's *Second Book of Discipline*, 'distribution' was one of the marks of the church. This was to say that ministry to the poor was of the very essence of the church – and by 'ministry' was meant financial support. It was part and parcel of the life of the church, and not an optional extra activity, that there should be some kind of social witness, some kind of transformation of the social order. If a church lacked it, it was no church at all, no matter how sound its constitution.

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<sup>6</sup> E. Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (New York, 1931), vol. II, p. 602.

I mention the Reformed tradition here because it seems to me that it was with the relative strengthening of a more pietist approach within Evangelicalism, that a further factor emerged to contribute to 'the great reversal'. This is not to say that we could easily solve our problems in this field today by a re-reading of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Calvinism has its flaws in social involvement: its all-embracing approach was taken by some and subsumed into a secularised version of the kingdom of God. Also it remained stuck in a Christendom model, and so contributed to the legitimation of colonial conquest. It was also, not always unfairly, accused of an intolerant approach: the Westminster Confession says that the civil magistrate is to use his powers to proceed against those whose opinions or practices are 'destructive to the external peace and order which Christ hath established in his church'.<sup>7</sup>

A case is made that the policy of some Calvinists of trying to enforce their opinions and beliefs on others has backfired. In his study of the roots of American secularism, Gary Smith says

Calvinists believed that alternative ideologies to Christianity had no right to exist in the public arena; thus they sought to prevent proponents of non-Christian world-views from participating in public questions of politics, education, and morality. They wished to force those who disagreed with their Christian values nevertheless to live under these values as citizens of the state, especially in the education of their children and observing the Christian Sabbath.... If Calvinists and other Protestants had not tried to force their values on society during the late nineteenth century and instead had supported the concept of cultural pluralism, the contours of contemporary American culture might be quite different.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, though there are flaws and blemishes in Calvinists' record of social involvement, Calvinism does give a strong theological undergirding for such involvement. One question which bothers me about my own denomination is how it has come about that this church within the Reformed

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<sup>7</sup> Westminster Confession 20.

<sup>8</sup> G.S. Smith, *The Seeds of Secularisation* (Grand Rapids, 1985), pp. 6-7.

tradition has still such a small fraction (relatively speaking) of its Evangelicals committed to the importance and relevance of social involvement. How is it that this sizable grouping of Church of Scotland Evangelicals, so openly enthusiastic about Calvinism, is yet so hesitant about social and political involvement by the church? Is it no more than a knee-jerk reaction against what is perceived to be the over-politicisation of the gospel by other wings of the church? If so, is that any reason to maintain what is clearly a view at odds with our professed Reformed heritage?

### **Area of Contention: Kingdom v. Creation**

Calvinists, like other Evangelicals, have not found it easy to enter the public and political arena and work out their Christian faith. It is not an easy task, perhaps especially today in a secularist and pluralist context. How then do we take Christian values and Christian principles into the public arena? If we are not to do nothing – and thereby let society get worse, let darkness reign as we hide our light under the bushel, or let the meat go bad as we keep our preservative (salt) in the jar – and not to impose our views on others, then we must seek to persuade: but on what basis?

Here we find a major debate among Evangelicals on social involvement. Some seek to base their arguments on creation, and others use the kingdom as their basis. This is a more recent debate, for it is not all that long a time since the theme of the kingdom was almost unheard of amongst Evangelicals.

George Eldon Ladd, in his *Jesus and the Kingdom*,<sup>9</sup> stressed that the kingdom of God is the rule or reign of God over all of life and that it is present as well as future. That the kingdom is central to the message of Jesus was a revelation to many Evangelicals brought up on a theology which focussed on the individual's relationship with God brought about through justification by faith in Christ. The kingdom was not a theme that was much discussed or emphasised by Evangelicals. When two major missionary conferences were held within six weeks of each other in 1980, it was not difficult to guess which of the two – the Evangelicals of the Lausanne movement or the WCC's Conference on Mission

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<sup>9</sup> G.E. Ladd, *Jesus and the Kingdom* (New York, 1964).

and Evangelism – was to have its Bible readings from the Gospels and which from Romans.

John Howard Yoder's book *The Politics of Jesus*<sup>10</sup> was very influential. Some have described it as 'seminal' and as a 'landmark in biblical social ethics'.<sup>11</sup> Yoder, who is a Mennonite, argues that we have read the New Testament assuming 'that Jesus is simply not relevant in any immediate sense to the question of social ethics'.<sup>12</sup> Instead we have largely based our ethics upon natural theology and the natural order of things. In contrast Yoder argues that our understanding of the example and teaching of Jesus should be our basis.

On the other hand, Oliver Barclay, writing as A.N. Triton, *Whose World?*<sup>13</sup>, based involvement on our understanding not of redemption, but of creation. This was the predominant line: indeed Michael Green had to put in a plea for the other at Lausanne:

How much have we heard here about the kingdom of God? Not much. It is not our language. But it was Jesus' prime concern. He came to show that God's kingly rule had broken into our world: it no longer lay entirely in the future, but was partly realised in him and those who followed him. The Good News of the kingdom was both preached by Jesus and embodied by him.... So it must be with us.<sup>14</sup>

The Lausanne Covenant tried to cover both aspects in its final draft:

We affirm that God is both the Creator and the Judge of all men. We therefore should share his concern for justice and reconciliation throughout human society and for the liberation of men from every kind of oppression. Because mankind is made in the image of God, every person, regardless of race, religion, colour, culture, class, sex, or age, has an intrinsic dignity because of which he should be respected and served, not exploited.... When people receive Christ they are born again into his kingdom and must seek

10 J.H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, 1972).

11 Chester, *Awakening to a World of Need* (Leicester, 1993), p. 55.

12 Yoder, *Politics*, p. 15.

13 *Whose World?* (Leicester, 1970).

14 M. Green, in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, ed. J.D. Douglas (Minneapolis, 1975), p. 176.

not only to exhibit but also to spread its righteousness in the midst of an unrighteous world.<sup>15</sup>

This was not enough to satisfy some who were calling for a more radical response.

Because this group made the kingdom of God central to social action they were more inclined to advocate radical change (in line with the radical nature of the kingdom) than those who made the doctrine of creation central and who thereby tended to be more politically conservative (inclined to preserve the created order).<sup>16</sup>

Those who take the kingdom line, as well as inevitably calling for more radical change, are also more inclined to make the social aspect part of the gospel itself,<sup>17</sup> whereas those using creation as a basis see it as something more general, not part of the redemption message *per se*, though obviously connected with it. Indeed it is one of the main criticisms of the 'kingdom-ethics' school that the 'creation-ethics' school leaves Christ and the gospel out of social action.

Therefore the two groups have differing emphases in terms of the changes sought, and they divide on the content of the gospel. The two also differ over the issue of structural or social sin. The kingdom school are in a number of ways trying to move away from the individualistic approach that has dominated (and weakened) evangelical thought and teaching, and this has included their insisting that sin is not just an individual matter, but can be talked of as social and structural. The creation-ethics school point out that repentance is only ever called for from individuals in Scripture: 'The gospel is addressed to the individual. Society collectively cannot be redeemed. It can, however, be reformed according to the law of God.'<sup>18</sup>

There is, then, this difficult question of the applicability of the Christian position in a non-Christian or pluralist society. The creation approach implies that God's commands for

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15 Lausanne Covenant 5.

16 Chester *op. cit.*, p. 81.

17 See C. Sugden, *Social Gospel or No Gospel* (Nottingham, 1975).

18 F. Catherwood, *The Christian in Industrial Society*, quoted in O.R. Barclay, 'The Theology of Social Ethics: A Survey of Current Positions', *Evangelical Quarterly* 62 (1990), pp. 63-86 at p. 71.

society are the very best for all humanity, as we are all part of creation. If something as general as the creation can be established as the basis, then we avoid saying that the Christian ethic is for the church only, or that it is an arbitrary will of God.

However, those who hold to the kingdom model, as I said above, think that this removes Jesus and his work and words from our appeal, and believe that the creation model is not nearly radical enough. The need is not so much to nurture as to confront, and it is argued that it is the kingdom model that better provides a basis for conflict – with demons, structures and so on. Furthermore it is unrealistic to expect the upside-down values of God's kingdom to be understood and welcomed by people in general, through arguments based on general principles. What they need is to see God's way lived out and demonstrated. The kingdom is something to be lived; when enacted by Christ's followers, it will draw others in.

Another area of tension between the two approaches to mention here has to do with the activity of God. Does there need to be an open and acknowledged confession of Jesus, or can God's kingdom be built even by those who do not know Christ?

The Kingdom centres on Jesus' Lordship and his activity through his people, but it is a fact, dependent not on people's acknowledgement of Jesus. Otherwise if no one acknowledged Jesus, the Kingdom would cease to exist.... When non-Christians express values approximating to Christian values these must be related to the revealed will of God. This preserves the unity of God's action; his activity inside the church is not separable from his activity outside.<sup>19</sup>

In an earlier debate on this, published in a Grove booklet, Ron Sider and John Stott disagreed over the extent of the kingdom prior to the return of Christ. Sider said that 'The kingdom comes wherever Jesus overcomes the power of evil. That happens most visibly in the church. But it also happens in society at large because Jesus is Lord of the world as well as the church.' In response Stott insisted that the kingdom of God in the New Testament is always centred on Christ; 'it

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<sup>19</sup> Sugden, *Kingdom and Creation in Social Ethics* (Nottingham, 1990), p. 14.



may be said to exist only where Jesus Christ is consciously acknowledged as Lord.'<sup>20</sup>

This is the position that Ron Sider himself takes in his more recent work:

Does that mean that we should speak of salvation when the environmental movement creates greater ecological wholeness or when democracy or economic justice grow in China, Russia, or the United States? Not at all. Nowhere does the New Testament use salvation language for what happens before Christ's return except where persons consciously confess Jesus Christ.'<sup>21</sup>

Nowhere does the New Testament speak of the presence of the kingdom proclaimed by Jesus except where Jesus himself is physically present or where people consciously confess him as Messiah, Saviour and Lord.'<sup>22</sup>

There are then difficulties and differences when it comes to explaining and applying biblical principles in a pluralistic world. Nevertheless those who are most keenly debating the kingdom-ethics versus creation-ethics issues are united on a number of points. Not least do they agree that there is a strong biblical case for social involvement, that it is not an optional extra, that the world desperately needs involved Christian disciples and the church needs its disciples to be involved. Some are confident that a middle way can be found.<sup>23</sup> Oliver O'Donovan has argued that we need not be forced to choose between a creation approach and a kingdom approach. Creation and kingdom are not independent of one another:

A Kingdom ethic which was set up in opposition to creation could not possibly be interested in the same eschatological kingdom as that which the New Testament proclaims. At its root there would have to be a hidden dualism which interpreted the progress of history to its completion, not as a fulfilment, but as a denial of its beginning. A creation ethic

20 Sider and Stott, *Evangelism, Salvation and Social Justice* (Nottingham, 1979), p. 23.

21 R. Sider, *Evangelism and Social Action* (London, 1993), p. 93.

22 Sider, *Evangelism*, p. 211.

23 E.g., M. Schluter and R. Clements, 'Jubilee Institutional Norms: A Middle Way Between Creation Ethics and Kingdom Ethics', *Evangelical Quarterly* 62 (1990), pp. 37-62.

on the other hand, which was set up in opposition to the kingdom, could not possibly be evangelical ethics.<sup>24</sup>

### **The Contemporary Situation: Widespread Acceptance, with Suspicion**

The debate over the basis for social involvement, while producing large areas of agreement and influencing the overall fell and thrust of much Evangelicalism, has still left widespread uncertainty. Is it or is it not part of the gospel? Is it or is it not secondary to evangelism? Is it something related to but distinct from evangelism?

Some within Evangelicalism seem to think the matter is largely settled: 'It would be true to say that Manila settled once and for all that social concern was part of the gospel – and it had not pleased everybody.'<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, while the Lausanne movement has tried to find some kind of balance that pleases everyone, it is clear that, to some, too much ground has been given to social action; in their concern for a strategy for world evangelisation, they have been beginning to lose patience with the Lausanne movement. Arthur Johnstone in *The Battle for World Evangelism*<sup>26</sup> argues that too much emphasis on social action inevitably leads to an abandonment of evangelism. Outright opposition to social action is rare: more commonly we are warned that social action (good as it is) will only deflect us from our one key task – that of proclaiming the gospel. John Woodhouse, an evangelical Anglican from Sydney, who through connections with the Proclamation Trust has a growing influence in Britain, has written:

It is right that we should be called again and again to care, but when that obligation is given the theological undergirding that belongs properly to the task of evangelism, when the evangelistic task is no longer seen as unique in importance, when evangelistic responsibility is taken for granted, and our neglect of social action causes deeper remorse than our neglect of evangelism, then the cart has got before the horse, and is trying to grow legs.... Our

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24 O. O'Donovan, *Resurrection and the Moral Order* (Leicester, 1986), p. 6.

25 Tom Houston, quoted in Chester, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

26 A. Johnstone, *The Battle for World Evangelism* (Wheaton, 1978).

discussions of social responsibility would be far more clear if we spoke simply in terms of our duty to love our neighbour, rather than in terms of 'the mission of the church'.<sup>27</sup>

This, to my mind leaves us with a rather unhappy half-way house position. Social involvement is on the agenda, but... Lip service (and it is that) is paid to its importance, but when it comes to the bit, it is only an optional extra.

One effect of this is that we grant that social action is important, but when it comes to specifics we say that since it is not part of the substance of the faith we can have liberty of opinion. Therefore our influence is not coordinated, and we often find ourselves working against one another. In making social matters secondary we make it easy or convenient to disagree, and we take some pleasure in how, in Christian fellowship, we can cope with these differences on secondary matters. This removes, so we kid ourselves, a responsibility to do any very serious thinking or heart-searching. Simply put, it is a convenient cop-out when faced with some tough issues. Agreeing to differ is usually a way of saying we agree to do nothing about this.

A second effect is that although we agree that social involvement is important, because it is not our primary task we never really get round to it. Consequently,

Although in general terms it is now securely established in the evangelical mind and conscience that we have an inescapable social responsibility, we have not yet attained the really influential unity of mind and action which the size of our constituency could command.<sup>28</sup>

Here, it is not that there is settled opposition to a lot of evangelical social involvement so much as a passing by on the other side of the road, because we are busy and have an important rally to attend or leaflets to distribute. To many Evangelicals it is not that we think that the Bible is silent on the subject of social involvement, it is that there are more important, eternal issues at stake, and so it is vital not to get distracted by other important, but secondary, matters.

Thirdly, while it is seen as separate from social action, evangelism will continue to be perceived as its rival. When

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<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Chester, *op. cit.* pp. 166-7.

<sup>28</sup> Stott, in Chester, p. 7.

much of our evangelism is ineffective this is compounded: people call for the church to turn from 'secondary' things in order to focus on what is most important, *i.e.* evangelism. But the New Testament has little to say on how and when we should evangelize. Instead it has much to say on how Christians should live and particularly how they should live in the light of Christ's coming. The talk of evangelism as primary necessarily demotes other areas of Christian life, and undermines the call to build a rounded biblical lifestyle.

Talk of priorities means that pressure is unfairly put on what are seen as non-priority issues if we think that things are tough. All we have time and resources for is concentration on that which is essential. Social involvement is sometimes dropped or avoided because it is not important enough or 'successful' enough. But how many evangelistic efforts, such as leafletting, street meetings, *etc.* are rather barren efforts, but nevertheless get concentrated upon, because evangelism is seen to be our primary work? That a particular criterion is sometimes applied to social action (how well are the pews filled as a consequence of it) which is not applied in the same way to our evangelism (or indeed used to help us re-think about, *e.g.*, how boring our worship appears), is a selective picking on social involvement. Why does that happen? Why is social involvement called upon to justify itself in terms of results in a way that other aspects of church life are not? Because it is not the real work of the church?

### **Merely a Spoonful of Sugar?**

In all of this we betray, I think, the view that social involvement is the spoonful of sugar that helps the medicine go down. It is the gloss on our activities to help us 'win' people who otherwise would not come near us. This is not only an offence against the integrity of our compassion and service, but also an offence against the gospel – to assume that it only wins people if we can first dress it up in attractive social clothes.

The polarizing of social action and evangelism also means that we have pushed aside an important area of biblical teaching, giving it a reduced place in our lives. Our claims of being biblical or orthodox have a hollow ring at this point.

Earlier I argued that the supernatural incarnation is incredible to modern men and women. But is not costly

discipleship incredible to many conservatives? The language of losing one's life for Christ's sake may be as symbolic and mythical to conservatives as the Virgin Birth and substitutionary atonement are to liberals.<sup>29</sup> Unfortunately this charge sticks: why are so few Evangelicals involved? Is it really because we have not read the relevant Bible passages? I do not think so (and that is why I did not go over any of them in this paper).

Is it not rather that these things are not so important to us? We recognise that social action is valuable, but not for us who have so many prayer meetings to go to or sermons to prepare (or listen to). Perhaps in many evangelical churches it would be a profitable mid-week meeting if, from time to time, the usual sermon was scrapped and everyone wrote letters on behalf of those who are imprisoned without trial! Do we really need another sermon on Hebrews 13:3, more than we need to do something in response to it? Why are so few of us involved – in Amnesty International, in Shared Interest, in the World Development Movement, in Friends of the Earth, in Greenpeace? If part of our defence is that these groups have been taken over and dominated by people with rather cranky ways or beliefs, or by others with non-biblical influences and motivations, is that not at least partly because we have stood back and left the way clear?

Now of course the kingdom of God will not be present in all its fullness the day that Britain ceases to link its Aid and Trade Provision with major arms sales – but has the Bible really nothing to say about 'charity' that is given so that the giver benefits? Has Scripture really nothing to say about helping in order that we are helped in return? And has it really nothing to say about valuable resources being used up in ridiculous projects (like the Pergau dam), while plenty of needs go unmet, so that the rich can get further reward? Is the Word of God silent on deceit – and is it not deceitful to offer 'aid' so that we can do a bit of business in return?

'The great reversal' has at least been noticed and there are now many excellent instances of a proper biblical concern being shown in social as well as private and spiritual matters. But most of us are still suspicious, are we not? We are saying, 'Yes, but...'. As long as we talk of priorities between

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<sup>29</sup> D. Webster, in Sider, *Evangelism and Social Action*, p. 107.

evangelism and social involvement and as long as they are seen as rivals or alternatives, this will continue. It is damaging. It is damaging because we are saying one thing (social involvement is important) but doing something else (never getting round to it or leaving it to someone else). This damages our credibility and also confuses ourselves. It is not about whether or not we should care or evangelize. It is about how we witness. More fundamentally, it is about how we live as disciples. If we believe, as I assume that we do, that our lives as a whole are to be based on God's Word and lived in response to the free grace of God, we need to give social involvement more of a place than as the spoonful of sugar that makes the medicine go down. It is more than a fringe activity, and more than lip service is called for.

# FROM CANON TO CONCEPT: 'SAME' AND 'OTHER' IN THE RELATION BETWEEN BIBLICAL AND SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

If a Protestant be allowed to have a Holy Grail, mine would be the answer to the question, 'What does it mean to be biblical?' I hope to repay the honour of your invitation to deliver this year's Finlayson lecture by pursuing this worthy question a bit further. You have heard in recent years about metaphors and about biblical authority; my theme tonight – from canon to concept – follows on from both these topics by contending that biblical authority is best served by attending to the literary forms of Scripture. I will argue that the gulf currently separating biblical from systematic theology can be bridged by better appreciating the contribution of the diverse biblical genres, and that a focus on literary genre could do much to relieve the ills currently plaguing both their houses.

Almost everyone agrees that the relation of biblical and systematic theology is a vital one. The number of compelling treatments of this subject, however, is in inverse proportion to its significance. I would like to stand on the shoulders of giants, but there are not many. Calvin did not explicitly address the question of the relation of biblical to systematic theology, but his *Institutes* provide an exemplary model of the *practice* which I will try theoretically to describe. By keeping such examples in mind I hope, if not to stand on, at least to peer over, the shoulders of giants.

My aim is to sketch, and it can only be a sketch, a method for relating biblical to systematic theology which might also respond to Bernard Ramm's call to Evangelicals to develop a

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<sup>1</sup> The Finlayson Memorial Lecture delivered at the annual conference of the Scottish Evangelical Theology Society on Wednesday 13 April, 1994 at the Faith Mission Bible College, Edinburgh.

new paradigm for doing theology.<sup>2</sup> I therefore offer my remarks in the humble spirit of one who desires to continue, to cite the title of Professor Finlayson's last work, 'the story of theology'.

## I. From Canon to Concept: The Problem

### 1. Canon and Concept

What is involved in the passage from biblical language and literature to theological concepts and doctrines? What governs the move from biblical to systematic theology? The question is more easily asked than answered. It is widely acknowledged that the Bible is the indispensable resource for Christian theology. But here the consensus ends. With some exceptions, biblical studies and theology have grown further and further apart since the Enlightenment. Although many authors believe that biblical theology is an essential bridge between exegesis and theology, there is a great degree of confusion over how biblical theology ought to be done and over its relation to systematic theology.

#### i. The Crisis in Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology

*The crisis in modernity.* Both biblical and systematic theology are today in crisis, as is modernity itself. 'Postmodernity' has provoked a crisis in biblical criticism just as the rise of the modern world had earlier precipitated a crisis in traditional biblical interpretation. So-called 'postmodern' thinkers have lost their faith in rationality. Reason, rather than giving us access to objective truth, has instead fallen prey to a hermeneutics of suspicion which disputes its claim to neutrality. Postmodernists regard reason as a form of rhetoric that masks the self-interest of those who use it. Worse, reason is a form of violence which suppresses the 'other'. The very etymology of the word 'concept' – 'to take to oneself' (Latin, *concipere*) – indicates the totalitarian nature of rational theories.

What is the alternative to reason? Postmodernists want all voices, especially those which have been marginalized, to tell their own stories rather than subsuming them in a

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<sup>2</sup> See Bernard Ramm, *After Fundamentalism: The Future of Evangelical Theology* (San Francisco, 1983).



'metanarrative' – a grand story that purports to explain everything else. In the postmodern world, every voice shall be lifted up. Incidentally, this sentiment lies behind the furore over required reading lists – canons – in the national curriculum. The very idea of a canon means that some voices will *not* be heard. There is little room for authoritative canons in a world that celebrates particularity and pluralism.

***The crisis in biblical theology.*** Biblical theology is in crisis too.<sup>3</sup> The attempt to study the theology of the Bible historically and descriptively has led not to the development of biblical theology but to its demise. Biblical theology, by the end of the nineteenth century, had degenerated into mere histories of the 'religion' of Israel and the early church. The growing stress on the diversity between the varying strands of the biblical tradition led to scepticism about the possibility of producing a unified theology. Moreover, biblical theology failed to agree on what method should be used or on the focus of its task. Werner Jeanrond has recently expressed his worry about the lack of integration of biblical and theological studies in most faculties of theology. He asks: 'what is the discipline of biblical studies good for these days?'<sup>4</sup> and calls for a reform of the theological curriculum in order to facilitate greater integration. Brevard Childs agrees: 'Clearly if there is to be any future for biblical theology, the pressing need for the next generation is to build strong links between the disciplines of Bible and theology.'<sup>5</sup>

***The crisis in systematic theology.*** Finally, contemporary theology is in crisis, or better, methodological disarray. In place of a unifying perspective, theology today is characterized by multiple points of view, each representing

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3 See Brevard Childs' *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia, 1970).

4 Werner G. Jeanrond, 'After Hermeneutics: The Relationship between Theology and Biblical Studies', in F. Watson (ed.), *The Open Text: New Directions for Biblical Studies* (London, 1993), p. 85.

5 Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflections on the Christian Bible* (London, 1992), p. xvi.

some particularity (e.g., feminist, gay, liberation, process – divisions cut not of denominational but of ideological cloth), each following its own agenda. The postmodern theologian is allergic to systems, which are identified with closed, oppressive and totalitarian forms of thought.

To the extent that biblical studies is a historical and critical discipline independent of doctrinal theology, it has become harder for theologians to be ‘biblical’. Biblical studies no longer ‘belongs’ to theology.<sup>6</sup> And theology, insofar as it has cut its ties with Scripture, has been effectively deregulated. It is a matter of great concern that, in trying to determine what we can say about and do in the name of God, contemporary theologians all too often have recourse only to makeshift criteria.

## ii. The Canon in Biblical Theology

How can biblical theology help? J.P. Gabler’s 1787 lecture marks the beginning of a separate career for biblical theology.<sup>7</sup> According to Gabler, biblical theology is a descriptive discipline. Minimally, it describes the thought of an author or a book or a particular theme in the context of its historical development. Maximally, biblical theology describes the relation of the belief system of Israel to that of the early church. ‘Biblical Theology occupies a position between Exegesis and Systematic Theology in the encyclopaedia of theological disciplines. It differs from Systematic Theology not in being more Biblical ... but in that its principle of organizing the Biblical material is historical rather than logical.’<sup>8</sup> Its descriptions are given in the authors’ own terms and categories. To use Krister Stendahl’s now classic distinction, biblical theology describes ‘what it meant’ and systematic theology prescribes ‘what it means’. But this way of putting the relationship between biblical theology and systematic theology only poses the problem: how does one

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6 So James Barr, ‘Does Biblical Study Still Belong to Theology?’, in *Explorations in Theology* 7 (London, 1980), pp. 18-29.

7 See John Sandys-Wunsch and Laurence Eldredge, ‘J. P. Gabler and the Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 33 (1980), pp. 133-58.

8 Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids, 1948), p. 5.

move from 'what it meant' to 'what it means'? Is 'what it means' the same, other or similar to 'what it meant'?

With the rise of modern biblical scholarship, historical research revealed more sharply the 'otherness' of the biblical writers, that is, the differences between the various voices and the distance between biblical and dogmatic theology. The use of doctrinal categories to analyze and organize the texts temporarily provided bridges between the biblical canon and theological concepts, but 'by the end of the century these bridges were becoming insecure at both ends'.<sup>9</sup> Liberal theologians came to believe that the dogmatic categories were inadequate descriptions of Christian faith; biblical critics judged these categories inadequate descriptions of biblical religion. Biblical theology took on a new meaning: not 'the theology which accords with the Scriptures' but rather 'the theology contained in the Scriptures'. *Sacra doctrina* and *sacra pagina* were prised apart.

Brevard Childs has called for a new approach which would reinstate biblical theology as a bridge discipline between biblical studies and systematic theology by focussing on the Bible as canon. Ideally, biblical theology should be the integral element in a hermeneutical process which would relate the descriptive to the dogmatic in a 'fusion of horizons'. I agree with Childs that the proper object of biblical theology is the canon. The church did not canonize J, E, D or P but rather the final form of the biblical traditions. But I disagree with Childs about the significance of the canonical form. For most of church history, canon has been seen as a principle of authority rather than of meaning. The function of canon, that is, is to list the books that the believing community has recognized as authoritative, not to serve as a context of meaning.

### iii. Concept and Systematic Theology

For Thomas Aquinas, systematic theology is the rational exposition of divine revelation given in Scripture. He refers to *sacra doctrina* and *sacra pagina* interchangeably. But how large is a page, and what is on it? Is theology a science of the

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Morgan, 'Biblical Theology', in R. J. Coggins and J. L. Houlden (eds), *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation* (London, 1990), p. 88.

sentence or of the text? The practice of making key sentences into proof texts not only leads to bad exegesis but also betrays an inadequate view of the nature of language. Aquinas is well aware of the difficulty in moving from canon to concept: 'the truth of faith is contained in Holy Writ diffusely, under various modes of expression, and sometimes obscurely, so that, in order to gather the truth of faith from Holy Writ, one needs long study and practice'.<sup>10</sup>

Systematic theology has not taken sufficient account of the Scripture's 'modes of expression' and the role they play in communicating content. Just as philosophers long considered metaphors and other figures of speech mere decorative packaging, so theologians have often underestimated the cognitive significance of larger literary forms. For many, the literary modes of expression are just so much wrapping paper to be torn off in one's haste to get the proposition inside the package. There are better ways to move from canon to concept.

Systematic theology is an inquiry into the basic concepts of the Christian faith. Paul Ricoeur has some (uncharacteristically) harsh things to say about theologians who proceed to concepts too quickly. They dilute the rich language and literature of the Bible to a diluted set of arid propositions, exchanging their birthright for a mess of pottage. Ricoeur is only echoing Gregory of Nyssa: 'Concepts create idols. Only wonder understands.'<sup>11</sup> Must we be so hard on concepts?

According to the 'names model' of language, every word names a thing and concepts mirror the essence of things or the relations between things. Since Wittgenstein, however, we have learned that not every word refers to a thing and not every sentence is used to mirror the world. Language can be used to do many things besides refer to the world. So can literature. And so can concepts. Some philosophers view concepts not as mental representations but as mental skills or capacities. One way to acquire these skills, I shall argue, is to let oneself be instructed on the way language is used in various language games or literary genres. I shall argue that the canon contains a number of such 'games' wherein we

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae i..9. ad. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, cited in Jürgen Moltmann in *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (London, 1977), p. 73 n. 29.

learn to use concepts such as 'God', 'sin', and 'salvation' correctly.

#### iv. Form and Content

'From canon to concept'. This is about the relationship between form and content in our thinking about God. My thesis is straightforward: before we systematize what the Bible says about God we must first attend to how the content of the Bible is given in and through its literary forms.

In modern thought, until rather recently, linguistic and literary form was thought to be of little consequence. Reason was thought to have only one form – the theoretical, an autonomous sphere of discourse inhabited by a set of rationally founded abstract propositions. Myths and metaphors were thought to be of aesthetic, though not cognitive interest. Modernity, by and large, has accorded normative status to scientific thinking (*e.g.*, thinking in concepts) rather than to mythopoetic (*e.g.*, thinking in myths and images).

This tendency towards abstraction reached its culmination in Hegel's distinction between *Begriff* (concept) and *Vorstellung* (representation). For Hegel, the Christian narratives fall short of the clarity and certainty that philosophy requires. They have to be *aufgehoben* ('elevated') into more adequate conceptual forms. In principle, the concept retains the truth of the representation: 'Hegel's intent is to be loyal to the *content* of Christianity.'<sup>12</sup> In practice, the various representations of the Christ event are swallowed up into Hegel's omnivorous dialectic of Being, non-Being and Becoming.

#### 2. 'Same' and 'Other'

Among the most important conceptual skills is knowing how to draw distinctions and to make connections. In large part, we acquire these skills when we learn the meaning of 'same' and 'other'.

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<sup>12</sup> Colin Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement: A Study of Metaphor, Rationality and the Christian Tradition* (Edinburgh, 1988), p. 22.

### i. Orthodoxy and Heresy

Edward Farley and Peter Hodgson argue that the Bible only became 'canon' because of pressure from 'heretical' opponents.<sup>13</sup> The 'heterodox' – the other to reason, the other to 'us' – is a threat. The 'Scripture principle', that is, the belief that the Bible is the final arbiter of theological statements, developed to cope with the increasing diversity in the Church. Doctrine responds to threats to Christian identity or sameness and functions as a means of 'social demarcation'.<sup>14</sup> Doctrine is an attempt to consolidate the 'Same' over against the 'Other'. Walter Bauer argued that what is now called 'heresy' in the New Testament was originally considered orthodox but was subsequently defeated by adherents to the Pauline tradition of Christianity.<sup>15</sup> James D. G. Dunn concurs: in early Christianity there was no such thing as orthodoxy – 'same' or 'right' opinion – but only 'different forms of Christianity competing for the loyalty of believers'.<sup>16</sup>

### ii. Unity and Diversity

*Biblical theology v. systematic theology.* The problem of how to relate unity and diversity is as ugly a ditch as was Lessing's ditch between history and faith. Indeed, the ditch between unity and diversity is doubly difficult. On the one hand, it refers to the diversity within the canon itself. Finding the unity behind the diversity of the Scriptures is one of biblical theology's most challenging tasks. On the other hand, it refers to the methodological ditch, the divide between different organizing principles (historical, logical) for the two disciplines.

For many theologians, however, the ditch is not very deep. The representatives of Protestant Orthodoxy did not let the

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13 'Scripture and Tradition', in Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King (eds, 2nd ed.), *Christian Theology: An Introduction to its Traditions and Tasks* (Philadelphia, 1985), pp. 67-70.

14 Alister McGrath, *Genesis of Doctrine* (Oxford, 1990).

15 Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia, 1971).

16 James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity* (London, 1977), p. 3.

Aristotelian form of their theologies deter them from claiming to be 'biblical'. Unfortunately, much systematic theology that passes as 'biblical' enjoys only a casual acquaintance with the biblical texts. The method of proving doctrines by adducing multiple proof-texts leaves much to be desired. One typically begins with a doctrinal confession and then sets off trawling through the Scriptures. One's exegetical 'catch' is then dumped indiscriminately into parentheses irrespective of where the parts were found. Biblical theology is hardly possible in such an atmosphere.

*Postmodernism v. systematic theology.* Walter Brueggemann speaks for many postmodern biblical scholars when he urges that the proper subject of biblical studies 'is the specific text, without any necessary relation to other texts or any coherent pattern read out of or into the text'.<sup>17</sup> This approach is congenial to postmoderns because it focuses on 'little' stories rather than the 'great story', or what I earlier called 'metanarrative'. Brueggemann says that we too often read the Bible with some systematic interpretive framework that causes us to judge one text by another and often to eliminate the 'lesser' text.

David Tracy thinks that modernity has become overly dependent on a single form of thought – the propositional – which it then forgot was a form. Nietzsche excelled in exposing and exploding alleged truths as fictions which thought too highly of themselves. The same urge lies behind deconstructionist philosophers who accuse systematic forms of thinking of violently repressing difference. On this view, the drive towards sameness – orthodoxy – is always fascist.

The doctrine of original sin, at once central and controversial, well illustrates the problem. Biblical scholars note that Genesis 3 has been assigned a disproportionate role in classical theology which the Old Testament does not reflect. Moreover, it pertains to a mystery which stretches conceptual understanding to the limit, namely, the origin of evil. Ricoeur complains in his article "'Original Sin": A Study in Meaning' (1960) that the doctrine suppresses essential dimensions of biblical language (especially biblical symbols and metaphors)

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<sup>17</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Bible and Postmodern Imagination: Texts under Negotiation* (London, 1993), p. 58.

in a pseudo-rationality. Theology makes an interpretive error in moving from canonical images like 'fall' and 'error' to the concept of original sin. And to complicate matters further, the concept was born under the impulse of external threats: the 'others' of Gnosticism on the one hand and Pelagianism on the other.

'Captivity was an image, a parable; hereditary sin tries to be a concept.'<sup>18</sup> Ricoeur is quite clear that the concept of original sin is not a biblical one. Indeed, he accuses the concept of being 'false knowledge' which 'compresses into an inconsistent notion a juridical category of debt and a biological category of inheritance'.<sup>19</sup> Augustine's formulation is an inconsistent mix, like oil and water, of two universes of discourse, those of law and that of biology. What Ricoeur finds objectionable in the doctrine is its pretence to replace the need for interpretation. Concepts, unlike symbols and metaphors, do not create new meaning but wring the life out of language.<sup>20</sup>

Another French philosopher, Emmanuel Lévinas, calls the history of Western thought 'Greek', and characterizes it as a style of language that is conceptual rather than metaphorical and a style of thinking which attempts to reduce the other to the same. Such a reading of 2,000 years of intellectual history is doubtless perfunctory, but Lévinas's charge is a sobering one. Does reason ultimately reduce all knowledge of others to knowledge of oneself? Are we only able to know what is already in 'our system'?

Must all interpretation be repressive? Must even translation be violent? Must otherness always be violated when one searches for a deeper sameness? The diversity with which I am here concerned is literary in nature. Is it possible to get

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18 Paul Ricoeur, *Conflict of Interpretations* (Evanston, IL, 1974), p. 269.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 270.

20 Ricoeur prefers to see the Fall as a 'rational symbol'. The distinction is cut rather finely, but Ricoeur means to say by it 'that concepts do not have their own consistency but refer back to expressions which are *analogous*, not because of a lack of rigor but because of an excess of meaning' (*Conflict of Interpretations*, p. 281). In other words, a rational symbol captures rather than resolves the tension which inheres in the canon.



theological sameness out of canonical otherness? We may well ask why there are so many different forms of biblical literature in the Bible in the first place. One of Ricoeur's remarks has caught my imagination: 'Not just any theology is associated with the narrative form.' For better or for worse, the Word and reality of God come mediated to us in a variety of literary forms. These differences need not imply disunity for, as Aristotle commented, Being may be said in many ways. There are, then, two errors to avoid in the attempt to build bridges between biblical and systematic theology: reductionism (the loss of 'otherness', of diverse forms) and relativism (the loss of 'sameness', the unifying substance).

### **3. Bridging Biblical and Systematic Theology: a Brief Typology of Approaches**

Some bridges ought to be avoided. It is possible to exaggerate either sameness or otherness. Traditional approaches tend to reduce poetic forms (e.g., metaphors, narratives) to concept. Contemporary approaches tend to revel in poetic forms and refuse to let them settle down in concept. It may be helpful, at this stage of our inquiry, to give a brief typology of the ways in which biblical and systematic theology may be related.

#### **i. 'Same'**

Under the heading of the 'Same', we may mention approaches that seek to 'translate' the Bible into theology. Some focus on sameness of biblical content, others on sameness of form.

*Content-oriented approaches.* I want first to consider two very different content-oriented approaches, represented by Charles Hodge and Rudolf Bultmann. Hodge represents what George Lindbeck calls 'propositional theology'. Lindbeck charges this view with being literalistic, insofar as it assumes that the truth of God can be read off of Scripture and restated definitively in propositional form. Lindbeck's charge of 'literalism' is inappropriate: such naive realism is neither a necessary consequence nor a condition of cognitive approaches to doctrine. The medieval Scholastics knew about analogical God-talk. And Calvin made good use of rhetorical analysis. As we have seen, non-literal forms of discourse such as metaphor have cognitive content too.

Nevertheless, Lindbeck has a point. The proof-texting method does tend to give authoritative status to the propositional form. Ramm states that 'The goal of Reformed theology was to systematize the revelation of God as one unitary corpus of revelation. It considered that there was one system of doctrine under the literary diversity and historical records.'<sup>21</sup> Hodge compares the Bible to a storehouse of data and theology to scientific induction. The basic problem with this method is that Hodge tends to treat all portions of Scripture as if they were cut from the same logical cloth. In treating all verses as though they were the same kind of fact, Hodge betrays a tendency to reduce the diverse parts of the canon to the same genre: didactic literature. Hodge, by failing to appreciate the different uses to which biblical language and literature are put, ultimately succumbs to a certain naiveté about what it means to be biblical in systematic theology. In the last resort, a false picture of language holds him captive.

Bultmann represents a second content-oriented approach to Scripture. He attends to the religious experience that lies behind the text and is expressed through it. Bultmann demythologizes the text in order to recover this experiential core. Demythologizing is really a procedure which literally 'de-forms' the text. The literary form is merely an irritating distraction that Bultmann must discard in order to obtain the existential core. Interestingly, Robert Morgan believes that Bultmann's New Testament theology 'has proved the century's clearest attempt to combine the two related meanings of biblical theology [theology that accords with the Bible and theology contained in the Bible]'.<sup>22</sup>

These first two approaches represent conservative and liberal theology respectively. However, they share something important in common. Bultmann recast the New Testament kerygma in the conceptual framework of existentialist, rather than Scottish common-sense philosophy, as did Hodge. With Charles Hodge, what counts is the propositional content. With Bultmann, what counts is the existential self-understanding. But in the final analysis, each considers the canonical material to be only a means to an end.

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21 Bernard Ramm, 'Unity of Doctrine' in his *A Handbook of Contemporary Theology* (Grand Rapids, 1966), p. 133.

22 Morgan, 'Biblical Theology', p. 89.

**Form-oriented approaches.** Today the situation is reversed. Form is the new darling of the intelligentsia; the medium is the message. Metaphor has become a kind of pop-star in theological circles. In large part this has been a protest movement against propositional theology. Sallie McFague argues that the problem with concepts is that they 'literalize' the metaphorical and thus 'idolize' one image or concept of God.<sup>23</sup> She encourages theologians to develop new metaphors which will do for our day what the biblical metaphors did for theirs, namely, image God's loving relationship to the world. According to McFague, the better way of speaking about God today would be to say that God is the 'lover' or 'friend' of the world.<sup>24</sup> She is well aware, however, that while these changes preserve the form of theological discourse, they represent, with regard to the content of theology, no less than a change from theism to pantheism.

A number of contemporary theologies claim to be 'narrative'. What David Tracy has described as the 'second coming' of Barth in theology is the result of the rediscovery of the centrality of narrative in his thought. Hans Frei argues persuasively that, while Barth begins the *Church Dogmatics* with the form of doctrine, it is the narrative form that takes over – so much so that in volume IV the first two parts are structured according to the parable of the Prodigal Son, the going of the Son in the far country and then the homecoming of the Son. Barth's preoccupation with narrative means that his primary question will be about God's identity, not God's nature. While one welcomes the renewed interest of theologians in the Bible, there is a danger that exclusive attention to metaphor or narrative in particular results in a 'canon within the canon' and thus to a theological method that is less than fully biblical.

Brevard Childs deserves special mention in this brief review of attempts to preserve sameness of form, not least because in his latest work he makes heroic efforts to relate biblical

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23 Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology* (Philadelphia, 1982), pp. 2, 38.

24 See the critique by David J. Bromwell, 'Sallie McFague's "Metaphorical Theology"' in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 61 (1993), pp. 485-503.

theology and systematic theology. For Childs, the process of canonization is essentially the process by which the traditions of Israel and the early church were made fit for future theological service. The whole point of canonization according to Childs was to enable the Scriptures to function as theological, and not merely historical witnesses.<sup>25</sup>

Childs contends, rightly in my opinion, that the basic problem of biblical theology – the relation of the two Testaments – ‘can only be resolved by theological reflection which moves from the description of the biblical witnesses to the object toward which these witnesses point, that is, to their subject matter, substance, or *res*’.<sup>26</sup> For Childs, the goal of biblical theology is ‘to understand the various voices within the whole Christian Bible, New and Old Testament alike, as a witness to the one Lord Jesus Christ, the selfsame divine reality’.<sup>27</sup> To remain on the textual level, he says, is to miss the key which unites dissident voices into a harmonious whole. Of course, the contentious question is how we penetrate to the subject matter, to the thing itself. But when it comes to addressing explicitly the relation between biblical and systematic theology, Childs unfortunately offers little light: ‘at this juncture probably little more precision in theory is required other than to urge biblical scholars to be more systematic, and systematic theologians to be more biblical, and to get on with the task’.<sup>28</sup> But this advice, though sincerely meant, only throws us back to the beginning: what does it *mean* to be biblical?

## ii. ‘Other’

Of course, many theologians consider the attempt to say the ‘same’ thing as the Bible to be totally misguided. Deconstructionists argue that translation is always transmutation. Even verbatim quotations of Scripture fail to preserve the content because the new context in which it is

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25 ‘The material was shaped in order to provide means for its continuing appropriation by its subsequent hearers.... This shaping activity functioned much like a *regula fidei*’ (Childs, *Biblical Theology*, p. 71).

26 Childs, *Biblical Theology*, p. 80.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 85.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 89.

uttered alters the original meaning. On this view, all interpretation is 'allegorizing', in the original sense of the term: 'speaking one thing and signifying something *other*'.<sup>29</sup>

Both of the above approaches overlook crucial hermeneutical issues. Theologians who believe that they can achieve sameness with the Bible risk hermeneutic pride. They err in thinking that interpretation is an *insignificant* problem. Language and literature are treated merely as something to be got through as quickly as possible. Theologians who believe the message of theology will always be other than Scripture, on the other hand, manifest hermeneutic sloth. They err in thinking that interpretation is an *insuperable* problem. On the contrary, interpretation – like theology – is rather a matter of work and prayer which approximates the text.

## II. From Canon to Concept: The Proposal

### 1. Biblical Theology and Poetic Rationality

I turn now to constructive suggestions, beginning with biblical theology.

#### i. Beyond Metaphor and Narrative

Metaphors are cognitive instruments for discovering the real.<sup>30</sup> They are imaginative creations – models – which allow us to perceive certain aspects of reality that would otherwise go unnoticed. Metaphors, and the models they engender, are thus 'reality-depicting'. The same is also true of narrative. Both metaphors and narratives have come to be appreciated for their irreducible cognitive functions.<sup>31</sup>

Attention to these forms of creative language has yielded important gains, *and* important losses. We have come to see,

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<sup>29</sup> So Heraclitus in the fifth century B.C. See Andrew Louth, 'Allegorical Interpretation', *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, p. 12.

<sup>30</sup> See, for instance, Max Black, *Models and Metaphors* (Ithaca, NY, 1962); Ian G. Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms* (London, 1974); Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford, 1985).

<sup>31</sup> For an excellent compilation of recent work on narrative and its significance for theology, see Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones (eds), *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology* (Grand Rapids, 1989).

for example, that narratives are able to 'tell time' in ways that other discourses cannot. They can relate the identity of persons as well as create a sense of communal identity. Never again will we say 'It's just a story'. But in the wake of the rehabilitation of narrative has come a loss: narrative has become for many a virtual canon within the canon. What is missing from metaphorical and narrative theology is an appreciation of *all* the literary forms in the canon.

## ii. Biblical Theology as Genre Analysis

The basic unit of meaning is an utterance or speech act. I am here interested in describing only how speech acts larger than the sentence cohere and communicate, in the diverse literary 'genres' or forms of discourse which constitute the canon.<sup>32</sup> 'Discourse' refers to language at the level of the communicative act. And I do want to say that in Scripture there are many different kinds of communicative acts: assertions, warnings, promises, questions, songs, proverbs, commands, and so forth. Remembering this will provide the needed correction to propositional and metaphorical theology alike: the Bible does not merely give us atomistic propositions about God, or free-floating metaphors, but ways of processing and organizing propositions and metaphors into meaningful wholes. The forms of biblical literature are the bridge between canon and concept we seek.<sup>33</sup>

Genre is much more than a way of classifying forms of literature. They are rather ways of viewing the world. A genre is a form of thinking embodied in a form of literature. Each

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32 See my 'The Semantics of Biblical Literature', in D. A. Carson and John Woodbridge (eds), *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon* (Grand Rapids, 1986), pp. 53-104.

33 A similar proposal to mine on the role of biblical theology has recently been made by Mary Gerhart: 'With generic analysis, biblical theologians will understand themselves to mediate between genres' ('Generic Competence in Biblical Hermeneutics', *Semeia* 43 (1988), p. 60). Bernard Ramm also notes the importance of literary forms for a treatment of biblical revelation, but does not explore the matter at any great length: 'We can only speak suggestively and representatively here, for this subject requires nothing short of an independent treatise to do it justice' (*Special Revelation and the Word of God* [Grand Rapids, 1961], pp. 66-67).

genre represents a 'mode of cognition' and offers a distinct perspective for conceiving God, humanity and the world. In other words, every biblical genre has epistemological significance. Biblical theology should be the study of the rules and procedures that govern a particular biblical form. Unless we understand the form of the whole, we are doomed to misread, misunderstand and misuse the parts. Music provides a good analogy. Appreciating music is much more than being able to abstract the melody. Likewise, interpretation is much more than extracting the message.

What biblical theology should describe is the way in which biblical literary forms communicate content. This is similar to what literary critics term 'poetics': the study of the ways in which different kinds of literature make sense and represent reality. Poetics is the study of the rules and conventions 'embodied' in different kinds of discourse. Now in the one Bible we have many kinds of books. On my view biblical theology becomes a 'poetics' of revelation. To some extent, we engage in poetics already. We have to. Verbal meaning is always 'genre-bound'.<sup>34</sup> 'Every piece of writing is a kind of something.'<sup>35</sup> Reading is always *reading as*. One cannot simply read the Bible; one reads the Bible as history, as gospel, as apocalyptic, *etc.* What I am calling for is a systematic study of the poetics of biblical literature. This would be more than an exercise in classification.

How does one identify a genre? It is not enough to examine the formal structure only. Two buildings might both present a neo-classical facade, but one could be a hospital and the other a church. One needs to go inside to find out which. So it is with genre: one needs to examine both the shape and the substance. To use Aristotle's categories, we might say that genre is 'formed matter' or 'material [in this case verbal] form'. The point is that we never have unformed or immediate access to the matter.

We must therefore be on our guard against the 'substitution theory' of genre. It is a mistake to think that one could entirely replace a literary form with an equivalent descriptive

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<sup>34</sup> So E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, 1967), p. 76.

<sup>35</sup> John Gabel and Charles Wheeler, *The Bible as Literature* (Oxford, 1986), p. 16.

proposition. The most for which we can hope is a *similar* statement. Our interpretations will never supplant the original text. To think that they could be is to commit what literary critics term the 'heresy of paraphrase'.

In suggesting that biblical theology and systematic theology should attend more than they have to the Bible's literary genres, I am not advocating a merely literary approach to Scripture. Genres, like metaphors, can be reality-depicting. I am trying rather to avoid two extremes: 'Biblicism may fail to see the literary character of Scripture and treat Scripture like a code book of theological ordinances. Criticism may be so preoccupied with the literary aspects of Scripture that it fails to see the substance of which literature happens to be the vehicle.'<sup>36</sup> God's Word comes to us embedded in a variety of literary genres.

To repeat, genres are ways of seeing the world, verbalized habits of vision. For example, Hebrew narrative marks the beginning of historiography and of a concept of linear rather than cyclical time. Apocalyptic pertains to the end of history; wisdom literature sees the natural and social world as ordered, thus permitting organized knowledge of it. And Gospel narrates 'eucatastrophe' – historical events with cataclysmic beneficial effects.

The Bible continues to be the theologian's spectacles, but these spectacles are multi-focal, not bi-focal; we must pay attention not only to the two Testaments, but to the multiplicity of literary forms. The intelligibility of New Testament concepts, for example, depends not only on their being rooted in a particular form of life, as Wittgenstein maintains, but in a particular form of literature. Anthony Thiselton's study of biblical uses of the word 'true' is instructive in this regard. He finds that 'true' is used in various language games and not only in the language game of history that refers to past events.<sup>37</sup> In the Psalms, for example, 'true' means 'trustworthy' ('all the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth', Ps. 25:10). He thus cautions against speaking about 'the' biblical concept of truth. The task for biblical theology, then,

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<sup>36</sup> Ramm, *Special Revelation*, p. 68.

<sup>37</sup> Anthony Thiselton, 'Truth (*Aletheia*)' in C. Brown (ed.), *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology III* (Exeter, 1978), pp. 874-902.



is to describe the rules for the various language games found in Scripture.

Let us examine the apocalyptic 'game' in more detail. According to one definition, apocalyptic is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation, mediated by an other-worldly being to a human recipient, discloses by means of symbolism a transcendent reality which works eschatological salvation. Its particular function is to interpret present reality in the light of the future and thus to influence the behaviour and understanding of the reader today. Must we not say that apocalyptic literature makes an indispensable cognitive contribution to theology? Recall Ricoeur's adage that not just any theology can be wedded to the narrative form. The same may be said of apocalyptic. Indeed, without apocalyptic literature, the Christian faith would not be the same. Without apocalyptic, what could we hope? It is, of course, possible either to neglect this genre or to exaggerate it. Church history provides us with examples of both. Nineteenth-century liberals virtually lost apocalyptic altogether in their preoccupation with ethics; present-day dispensationalists, at the other extreme, make it a virtual canon within the canon, interpreting all other genres in light of apocalyptic. Wolfhart Pannenberg may be cited as a more balanced example of one who has taken the Apocalyptic Principle to the very heart of his systematics. His trademark emphasis on the resurrection as anticipating the end of universal history is the structuring principle of his conceptual framework, and it is inspired by biblical apocalyptic.<sup>38</sup>

## 2. Systematic Theology as Conceptual Mimesis

Biblical theology, to summarize, seeks to interpret the canonical forms on their own generic terms. Systematic theology is the attempt to catch up and preserve the meaning of the various canonical discourses in a conceptual framework that will be intelligible for people today. As such, systematic theology is a kind of conceptual 'mimesis'. 'Mimesis' is a literary critical term which means 'creative interpretation'. In his *Poetics* Aristotle defines poetry as a 'creative imitation' of

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<sup>38</sup> See Philip D. Clayton, 'Anticipation and Theological Method', in Carl Braaten and Philip D. Clayton (eds), *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg* (Minneapolis, 1988), pp. 129-36.

human actions. The poem represents reality in a new medium. But this is precisely the task of systematic theology as well: to 're-present' the various kinds of sense and reference found in the canonical genres in a coherent conceptual framework.

*Mimesis* is a *creative* imitation of reality. 'Imitation' is not mere copying. Words do not simply mirror nature. Our interpretations must be creative because this is the only alternative to what McGrath calls 'a theology of repetition' which merely parrots what the Bible says. Merely to repeat the words of the Bible is an abdication of the theologian's responsibility, namely, to say what it means for today. The only serious alternative to a theology of repetition 'lay in transposing the scriptural narrative conceptually, generating new images and idioms by an attempt to recast this narrative in a different (yet not totally unrelated) mode of discourse'.<sup>39</sup> It is the positivist who believes that one can go directly from observation to truth, from biblical verse to doctrine, by ignoring interpretation and the critical use of models. The worry, of course, is that interpretation imports and imposes foreign concepts upon the Bible. But this is precisely why I have suggested that we attend first and foremost to the Bible's own literary genres as themselves providing the resources, and hints, of further conceptual development.

As creative interpretation, systematic theology neither translates nor transmutes the biblical message. Rather, systematic theology 'transmits' the biblical message by 'transferring' it to another register of discourse: the conceptual. Theology is creative – there is a transfer of meaning, a metaphorical moment; and it is 'imitative' – the aim and intent is to communicate the same, though we only have it under the 'similar'. We may therefore say of systematic theology what George Steiner says of good reading: it is to be a 'creative echo' of the text.

Calvin's *Institutes* are exemplary in this regard. Calvin saw theology as a means of entering into a profitable reading of Scripture. According to John Leith, 'Calvinist theology reduces itself (almost!) to a hermeneutic.'<sup>40</sup> Childs concurs: 'the purpose of his *Institutes* was not to offer a propositional

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39 McGrath, *Genesis of Doctrine*, p. 64.

40 John Leith, 'John Calvin – Theologian of the Bible', *Interpretation* 25 (1971), p. 332.

summary of the Christian faith, but to instruct in the nature of scripture's proper scope precisely in order to be able to discern the true subject matter of scripture among its full range of notes'.<sup>41</sup>

### i. Interpretation the work of concepts

If the goal of systematic theology is conceptual mimesis, the means is textual interpretation. In Ricoeur's celebrated phrase, 'The symbol gives rise to thought.' But not only symbol: metaphor, narrative, indeed *every* biblical genre, gives rise to thought. Each genre refers and predicates. This opens up the possibility for conceptual thought to identify what is being referred to and to clarify its ontological status, that is, to say what kind of being it is or has. Insofar as we want not merely to know where images come from but what they *mean*, we must have recourse to concepts. Concepts clarify what is being signified (*i.e.*, referred to, predicated of) in discourse.<sup>42</sup>

My quest – to be biblical – has become a semantic safari, something like a lion hunt, or at least like the children's game of that name. As the hunters march, they encounter different obstacles, but the refrain is always the same: 'can't go round it, can't go over it, have to go *through* it'. Indeed, we are tied to these texts. The various genres are like different kinds of terrain. There are the rocky mountain heights of lyric poetry, the sloughs of existential wisdom, the great plains of narrative history, the thickets of Pauline argumentation, and so forth. Biblical theology is a kind of cartography; it draws up the detailed ordinance surveys. Systematic theology puts the various regional plans together in order to obtain a map of everything. The aim in both disciplines is to help the reader to negotiate the text and navigate the world.

Ricoeur's image of the role of concepts in interpretation is that of a universe of discourse in which the different forms are kept in motion in relation to each other by 'an interplay of

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<sup>41</sup> Childs, *Biblical Theology*, pp. 725-6.

<sup>42</sup> Ricoeur insists on the distinction between poetic and philosophical discourse: 'the speculative fulfils the semantic exigencies put to it by the metaphorical only when it establishes a break marking the irreducible difference between the two modes of discourse' (*The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language* [London, 1978], p. 296).

attractions and repulsions that ceaselessly promote the interaction and intersection of domains whose organizing nuclei are off-centred in relation to one another'.<sup>43</sup> There are various kinds of forces, weak and strong, as there are at the sub-atomic level in physics. Each genre exerts a centrifugal force, refusing to be pinned down in a closed and frozen system.

Conceptual discourse pulls biblical language towards clarity and univocity; biblical discourse pulls conceptual language towards complexity and plurivocity. Neither discourse should destroy the other. The task of systematic theology is to 'knit together' the various genres of the Bible into a tensile unity that would hold the genres together in a dynamic equilibrium. Interpretation is a mode of discourse 'that functions at the intersection of two domains, metaphorical and speculative'.<sup>44</sup> Speculative discourse acts as a 'vigilant watchman overseeing the ordered extensions of meaning'.<sup>45</sup> The project of a unified field theory of biblical literature, however, is still beyond us.

## ii. The Discourse of Theology: Canonical and Conceptual

Interpretation is midwife to textual understanding. The implicit understanding 'in' the text needs to be delivered to the reader. Interpretation is a question of transmitting, by means of conceptual elaboration, a richness of meaning that is already there in the text. Biblical theology focuses on the diverse kinds of imaginative presentation of Ideas (narrative, apocalyptic, lyric, *etc.*). Systematic theology uses concepts which attempt to catch the meaning generated by the dialogue between biblical forms. The narrative of the Fall and subsequent decline of humanity in Genesis 4-11, for example, must be read in light of the penitential Psalms of David, the prophetic prosecutors of the covenant and the explicit teaching of Paul about the universality of sin. When thought together, these literary forms generate the deep grammatical concept of original sin.

It is important to treat the biblical texts in a way that does justice to their genre, but it need not follow that systematic

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43 Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, p. 302.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 303.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 261.

theology must use the same forms as it goes about its business of conceptual inquiry. Concepts are useful for asking questions both about the meaning of what is happening within one literary form and about the connection between literary forms. Concepts are our tools for drawing distinctions and for making connections. With regard to the narrative form, McGrath states that 'the narrative is assimilated to concepts, and the concepts are accommodated to narrative'.<sup>46</sup> He also notes that one does not 'deduce' from narrative, though one may 'infer'. Calvin's testimony on this point is unsurpassed. He argues that the church has used 'foreign' concepts like 'Trinity' in order to unmask false teaching. 'Thus men of old stirred up by various struggles over depraved dogmas, were compelled to set forth with consummate clarity what they felt, lest they leave any devious shift to the impious, who cloaked their errors in layers of verbiage.'<sup>47</sup> We should not therefore be squeamish about using concepts if they serve to clarify the subject.

When theologians work with concepts, the same rules which govern rational thinking in other disciplines apply (e.g., clarity, consistency, coherence, comprehensiveness, correlation with truth found elsewhere). The challenge is to balance the sameness and otherness of Scripture. No one genre should be allowed to preclude the others. The 'conversation' between the various forms should not be unduly stifled by elevating one form above another. Rather, systematic theology shows how the differing views of the world projected by the different parts of the canon fit together. Here theology is no longer queen, controlling the ranks and dominating the other pieces in the game of theological studies. To stay with the metaphor of the chessboard: theology is, on my view, more like the bishop who cuts diagonally and thinks laterally across the disciplinary and generic ranks.

### iii. The 'Similar'

If Being can be said in many ways, why not Christ? Is this not an implication of the 'four-part harmony' of the Gospels? As Childs puts it: 'The oneness of scripture's scope is not a rival to the multiple voices within the canon, but a constant

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<sup>46</sup> McGrath, *Genesis of Doctrine*, p. 61.

<sup>47</sup> *Institutes* I:13:4.

pointed, much like a ship's compass, fixing on a single goal.<sup>48</sup> The task is to see the same in and through and within the different. But this is, as Aristotle knew well, to see the similar.<sup>49</sup> Systematic theology strives for this kind of sameness, the sameness of the 'similar', by making the rationality inherent in forms of literature (first approximated by biblical theology) more explicit. The relation between biblical theology and systematic theology is thus analogous to Calvin's conception of the relation between Old and New Testaments, in which the latter renders the former more explicit – and for that reason, more 'glorious'.

Theology never totally escapes from the tension between canon and concept. But this tension can be healthy and productive. Being finite and temporal is constitutive of the human condition; we know only in part. Interpretation is our common human lot: our privilege, and our responsibility. Theologians must resist eating fruit from the tree of absolute knowledge. We must avoid the lust of the mind. Absolute knowledge is forbidden us, at least at present. And it is just as well: if we knew absolutely, we would become proud and complacent. Between absolute knowledge and relativism, however, there lies the alternative of poetic and interpretive rationality. There is in Scripture a determinate and dynamic structure of meaning that both gives and calls for thought.

How then should we understand the relation of biblical theology and systematic theology? I have rejected the substitution-theory of literary genre, where concepts simply take the place of canon, as inadequate and unbiblical. When theological concepts are abstracted from the canonical context which generated them, they tend to lose their meaning. I have suggested that we view biblical theology as a poetics of biblical revelation whose task is to articulate the way in which each biblical genre makes sense and reference. Its speciality lies in understanding the respective rationalities of the various biblical genres. Biblical theology describes the respective 'grammars' of biblical literature. Systematic theology is a

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48 Childs, *Biblical Theology*, p. 725.

49 'If the *imaginatio* is the kingdom of "the similar", the *intellectio* is that of "the same". In the horizon opened up by the speculative, "same" grounds "similar" and not the inverse' (Ricoeur, *Rule of Metaphor*, p. 301).

'second-level' form of discourse, a 'depth grammar' which relates the canonical language games with one another on a deeper, conceptual, level. Systematic theology is logical discourse about the logics of biblical discourse. But that does not mean that it is only talk about talk. No, its goal is to clarify the sense and reference of the various parts of the canon, to coordinate these different perspectives on reality with one another and to bring them to bear on ourselves and our world.

Systematic theology and biblical theology must be allowed to put questions and respond to each other. The two kinds of discourse should not be confused, for each has its individual integrity and role. But they are more likely to talk to rather than past each other if they attend to the role which the literary forms of the Bible play in mediating the content. Biblical theology seeks the particular communicative rationality of a genre, that is, the rules which govern its language game and the kind of validity claims it makes. Systematic theology relates the various rationalities to one another in their quest to render the same reality. There are many ways of viewing God and the world imbedded in the forms of canonical literature; theology's task is to make them and their interrelations more explicit.<sup>50</sup> Systematic theology is the discourse that tries to perceive the 'same' in and through the 'other', without ever absorbing the 'other' into the 'same'.

Systematic theology should not become a substitute either for biblical theology or for the Bible itself. I think this was Ricoeur's worry about the doctrine of original sin, that as an explanation rather an expression of human evil, it exhausted the meaning of the text and made it unnecessary to return to the resources of the canon.

This is not the place to formulate a full-orbed doctrine of original sin. But I would like to indicate the way in which attention to literary genres contributes to our understanding of the phenomenon of sin in general. God's law allows us to recognize instances of sin. The narratives, especially the highly condensed account of early human history in Genesis

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50 'Conceptual inquiry is a critical reflection on the conceptual skills we command intuitively, with the purpose of tracing the systematic relations between them' (Vincent Brümmer, *Theology and Philosophical Inquiry: An Introduction* [London, 1981], p. 78).

4-11, show the rapid spread and universality of sin that spoils human relationships. The Psalms give us insight into the psychological dimensions of sin, for instance the sense of shame and the sense of guilt. They also remind us of the vertical dimension of sin: sin is ultimately against God. The prophets show that nations and peoples can be judged by God's Word as well as individuals, and that God is less interested in external conformity to the law than in heartfelt obedience. The wisdom literature shows sin as foolishness, for nothing is more fruitless than trying to deny the very created order which sustains one's being. Apocalyptic literature depicts sin as a supramundane power that will be ultimately defeated only by God. Lastly, the epistles expose sin as a power and corruption that has been defeated by Christ and which no longer has a hold over those who are in Christ. The canonical forms say more together than they do separately, and systematic theology ignores any one of them to its peril.

#### iv. Objections

*Is this not simply a 'literary' approach?* It would be if it ignored the question of extra-biblical reference and reality, but it does not. I have argued that genres are large-scale works of the imagination which are virtual world-views. And I emphasize *world*. Language can refer to reality in ways other than that of historical correspondence. Being may be said in *many* ways.

The books in the Bible may be more than works of literature, but they are certainly not less. My main emphasis, however, has not been on the Bible as literature so much as the Bible as made up of different genres, different forms of structured discourse. Many of the genres in the Bible are not 'literary' per se but rather represent the ordinary forms of discourse of their day (e.g., proverbs, epistles). Moreover, the concept of truth itself is a skill that pertains to how we render the world in words. To speak truly is to render some aspect of reality in some way. Truth is a matter of 'rendering' reality in thought, word and deed (see below).



*If each canonical genre is a separate language game with its own kind of rationality, and if no one language game is superior, how can systematic theology avoid (epistemological) relativism?* Systematic theology must avoid both a relativism that fails to coordinate the biblical discourses and a reductionism that fails to preserve the forms of biblical discourses. One must neither eliminate nor exaggerate the significance of the literary form. Systematic theology must preserve a certain degree of sameness and otherness if it is to be biblical. It does so by initiating a dialogue between the various canonical forms and between canonical forms and contemporary forms of thought. The theologian must coordinate the various biblical genres and show how they intersect and interrelate, while resisting the temptation to ignore their generic differences and make them identical, as happened in the old proof-texting method.

George Steiner likens reading a text to meeting a stranger. The stranger is a guest to whom we owe hospitality and courtesy. And yet, even when we become intimate our knowledge will remain partial; and this is as it should be. For if we could fully assimilate the text, it would have nothing more to say to us. Our understanding will always only be approximate. And it is precisely this distance between canon and concept that guarantees the freedom, this 'otherness' of the text, and thus its ability to call us and our theology into question. There would be no need to keep reforming if we were fully informed!

*Is theology a science on this view?* The data with which theology works is not isolated proof texts. It is not simply a matter of inducting more of the same kind of facts. Theology guards the diverse forms of rationality inherent in the Bible's forms of speech and literary genres. Theology is a 'reconstructive science' whose aim is to render theoretically explicit the intuitive, pre-theoretical know-how underlying the diverse literary and linguistic competencies of Scripture.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> I am here following Jürgen Habermas's understanding of a 'reconstructive science', as found in his essay 'Philosophy as Stand-in or Interpreter', in Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman and Thomas McCarthy (eds), *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?* (London, 1987), pp. 296-315.

### 3. Conclusion: 'Rendering' God

#### i. From Canon to Community

God's Word may be said in many ways. Our highest calling as theologians is to 'render' God. Our English word 'render' comes from the Latin *reddere* 'to give back'. Rendering – with its connotations of translating, giving back what is due, representing, causing to be – is a wonderfully suggestive metaphor for describing the task of theology. Theology's task is to 'render' conceptually the divine reality to which the biblical texts refer and about which they make predications. This task requires one to pay special attention to the ways in which the canonical forms 'render' reality. Theology too renders reality, namely, the reality of the Word of God, in word, thought and deed. To this point I have referred only to theology's theoretical rendering of the various forms of biblical literature, to 'concept'. But our 'imitation of Christ' has a practical aspect as well: canon gives rise to *community*.

I would be remiss not to mention some implications of the Bible's canonical diversity for practical theology. Scripture's literary genres generate not only ways of seeing but also ways of *being* in the world. Indeed, the way we live is perhaps the most important form of our biblical interpretation. For behaviour, as T. S. Eliot remarked, is also belief.

Not only ideas, but ways of human living are inscribed in the biblical texts. Theology must render these too. Theology is a science concerned with knowledge and a practice concerned with wisdom: both *scientia* and *sapientia*. A literary form generates a way of thought *and* life, a way of envisaging the world and existing in it. Indeed, is not the main purpose of having recourse to concepts to render reality clearer in order that we may fit in the world as we ought? Herein is wisdom: to live in the created order as we ought, and in our flourishing to glorify God. We need therefore to amend Ricoeur's formula: not just any *community* is associated with narrative, not to mention apocalyptic, gospel, law, and so forth. The life and thought of the Christian community is shaped and sustained by just those literary forms which comprise the biblical canon.

**ii. Reforming Theology**

In our continuing attempt to render God, and ourselves before God, we will from time to time need to reform our ways of speaking, thinking and living. My remarks on the task before systematic theology give a new sense to the adjective 'Reformed'. To render is to reform, and this in two ways. First, theoretically, by rendering the content embodied in the canonical forms of biblical literature in the conceptual forms of systematic theology. Second, practically, by rendering these forms of biblical witness in our lives. The Christian community renders the Word in the power of the Spirit. Our thoughts and our lives ought always to be re-formed by the visions generated by the various forms of the biblical witness. In the words of Auguste Lecerf: 'The canonical authority of Scripture is the condition of faith and liberty. A faith which does not based itself upon God is not faith; a liberty which does not find its charter in the Word of God is not more than an illusion of the mind.... 'Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom' (2 Cor. 3:17) and there only.'<sup>52</sup>

The moral is clear: we must attend to the particular literary forms of the canon in order to do theology, and to live, according to the Scriptures. In so doing, we sharpen our concepts and shape our community. This is the way to render reality as revealed by God's Word. This is the way to 'sound' the canon to the glory of God.

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<sup>52</sup> Auguste Lecerf, *An Introduction to Reformed Theology* (London, 1949), p. 369.

# CONFESSING CHRIST IN A MULTI-RELIGION SOCIETY

## LESSLIE NEWBIGIN

The issue before us is witness in a multi-faith society. Obviously we must begin with the gospel itself. It always seems to me that one of the wonderful verses in the New Testament is the last verse of St Luke's gospel which says that after the Ascension the disciples came back to Jerusalem and were continually in the Temple praising God.

### **Mission as Praise**

The first response to the gospel is praise. The first thing in any kind of missiology must be praise. The gospel begins with an immense explosion of praise; if God has done this amazing thing, then everything else, so to speak, is swept away. There is one thing to do and that is to praise. Mission is surely essentially and primarily an overflow of praise. It seems to me one of the terrible signs of our fallen nature that we somehow so constantly convert it into a task or burden – something laid upon us. We constantly misquote the Great Commission, leaving out the essential first part. We repeat 'Go into all the world and make disciples' that looks like a command, an order, a burden laid upon us, but we forget the first part, 'All authority in heaven and on earth is given to me and therefore you can go and tell the world.' It is the fact of what God has done which is the starting point of it all and which must overflow in an outburst of praise – a kind of radio-active cloud which spreads into the whole world out of an immense explosion, but a radioactivity which is not lethal, but life-giving.

A further consequence of our distorted thinking is that we put in the centre the whole question how can I be saved and how can other people be saved. In other words the centre shifts from how shall this glorious God be glorified to the question how shall I be saved or how shall somebody else be saved. And this happens, of course, because we have allowed ourselves to be conned by the assumptions of our culture, which regards Christianity as one among a body of things called religions which are about personal opinions and personal experiences not about public facts.

### The Gospel as Fact

The word 'fact' has come to have a particular meaning in our post-Enlightenment culture.<sup>1</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre says in one of his books that 'fact' has now become a folk concept which has an aristocratic ancestry, the ancestor being Lord Bacon who used the word 'fact' in the sense in which we now use it. But, of course, it is originally simply the Latin *factum*, something which has been done and, having been done, is there and cannot be changed. We may have different ways of understanding and interpreting it but the 'fact' remains, and the heart of all that we are on about in the Christian church is this tremendous 'fact' that God has done this astounding thing – that he has so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that the Word has been made flesh, that this ultimate reality which is beyond all our conceiving and understanding and which no human mind can ever grasp has yet become accessible to us – that which we have seen, that which we have heard, that which we have handled. It is a fact of history which is accessible to us and in which God has so acted to redeem us from our estrangement and bring us into his own.

In our culture, however, the Christian message is not seen as fact, but regarded as a matter of private opinion, whereas a couple of hundred years ago it was taught as a fact in school that 'man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever'. That is not a fact now but a personal opinion, and glorifying God, at least in public worship, is included in the

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was given at a conference on 'Confessing Christ in a Multi-Faith Society', organized by Rutherford House and the Scottish Lausanne Committee, held at Larbert in May 1994. The paper has been transcribed from the spoken address, and is presented virtually as it was orally delivered. After it was given, a member of the audience correctly pointed out to me that my argument about the gospel as 'fact' raised serious epistemological questions which I had not addressed. I realise that these questions need thorough treatment. If I had been addressing a company of people *not* committed to the Christian faith it would have been necessary to engage in a full discussion of the relation of what we call 'facts' to the interpretive framework which gives them this status. I was addressing Christians, and if one has committed oneself to the truth of the gospel, then one cannot coherently give it any other status than the one which we denote in popular speech by the word 'fact'.

abstract of statistics published by Her Majesty's Stationery Office now, if at all, among 'leisure pursuits'. Because of this, the attention centres on the question of the person – my experience and my salvation. Hence the position of my old friend John Hick. His theology has become almost orthodox, namely that religion is not a series of truth claims but a series of alternative ways of personal salvation. It is not to be understood as a series of beliefs about what is the case, about the actual realities, but a series of different answers to the question of personal salvation. And if the centre is put there, then of course we have this wonderful exercise of massaging various biblical texts in order to see if they can be slightly adjusted to open up some hope for other people to be saved. But that surely puts the whole emphasis in the wrong place.

The Christian faith, Christianity, which is an ambivalent, changing, questionable phenomenon (some awful things have been done, and still are done in the name of Christianity, as we all know), is the fallible and often horrible attempt that we make to come to terms with this fact of what God has done in Jesus Christ. Surely all our attention has to be fixed there. If it true that God has done this, then of course it has to be the thing that controls everything else. It cannot be regarded as one of a series of interesting facts which can be slotted away in our encyclopaedias, but has to be that which shapes, determines, evaluates everything. If the fact is what we do celebrate – that God has done this great amazing thing, then the first thing surely that has to be said, the essential thing, is that this overwhelming, amazing generosity of God must be reflected in the life of every congregation. It must be a place where the love of God flows out to everybody and therefore a place where the stranger is loved and embraced and welcomed. God forgive us, for we know that our congregations are very different from that. How introverted they become and how unwilling to embrace the stranger. How often we become a company of people who enjoy one another's company because we are all like each other. Therefore, the first thrust surely is absolutely right – that the very heart of the gospel must lead us to that loving, warm, welcoming embrace to every human being, whatever their race, whatever their creed, whatever their sins, whatever they be. This surely must be the very first priority.

When we state that we are talking about a fact – not about how am I going to be saved but about what is the case, we are of course first of all in a world where other factual claims are made. Islam, for example, flatly contradicts the central affirmation of the gospel. It is not the case that God died for our sins on Calvary. It is blasphemy to say so. For Hinduism, the alleged historical facts about Jesus may be inspiring and interesting, but they belong to a world which does not touch ultimate reality. They belong to this shifting world of maya where you do not find ultimate truth. It may be a good story to tell, illustrating a certain way of understanding ultimate reality, but it is not itself a clue to that ultimate reality. Or we may take the overwhelmingly dominant culture in our society, which is not a Christian culture, but one that derives from the Enlightenment and now participates in the collapse of the Enlightenment vision of eternal, indubitable truths and for which therefore the Christian claim about Jesus can only be a personal opinion. It cannot be public truth. It is in that situation that we have to witness to the gospel. And I would want to suggest several implications of that.

### **Implications**

The first and probably the obvious is this: if it is factually true that God has done this thing which we affirm in the Christian creeds, then it cannot be one among a number of different points of view. It has to be the point from which everything else is assessed. It has to be the point by which everything else is judged and everything else understood. We do not in the end understand anything in its full depth except when we look at it from that standpoint that is given to us in the fact of Jesus Christ.

The second implication, therefore, is that all human beings, wherever they are, are embraced in that love of God. All human beings are made in the image of God. All are illuminated by the light who is Jesus Christ – the light that lightens every person. There is no human being – I am sure that this is absolutely fundamental – there is no human being in whom there is not evidence of the grace of God, of the mercy of God, of the kindness of God. I do not feel very comfortable with the language of ‘common grace’ and ‘saving grace’. I know it has a long history in the Reformed tradition, but I cannot help feeling that it smacks of the old Catholic idea

of grace as a kind of commodity which God may dispense in various strengths. I find that a very unbiblical idea. It seems to me that the witness of the Bible is that God's tender mercies are over all his works and that the grace of God is not, as it were, a commodity. It is the graciousness of God. It is that tender, gracious, loving care of God which surrounds every human being.

Therefore, that means that in our approach to people of other faiths our first concern, our first delight must be to search out, to acknowledge, to rejoice in all signs of the goodness of God that we find in our fellow human beings, be they secularist, humanist, Buddhist, Marxist, Muslim or whatever. You know that form of evangelism which Bonhoeffer harshly criticises when he talks about trying to winkle out the hidden sins in people so that we may then present the gospel. If this person is a Muslim or a Hindu or whatever there must be something wrong. There must be a sin somewhere which we can winkle out and then present the gospel. Bonhoeffer calls that Methodism, which I think is not very fair to our Methodist friends. I think that it is tremendously important that we put this first, that we acknowledge, and welcome, and thank God for, and cherish, and admire, and reverence all the signs of the grace of God which we see so movingly among people of other faiths, including secularists and very devoted atheists and the like. All of them at some point will be heard to say 'God help me'.

The third thing to say is that the coming of Jesus is at the same time the coming of judgement. He was in the world and the world knew him not. He came to his own and his own received him not. The coming of the light which lightens everyone is at the same time the showing up of all that is not the light. And we cannot evade that very, very sharp element of judgement which is present in the New Testament.

### **Love, Judgement and Surprise**

I always find it astonishing that people talk as if the God of the Old Testament was the God of wrath and the God of the New Testament is the God of love. Some of the most moving expressions of the love of God are to be found in, for example, Hosea, and, on the other hand, there is nothing in the Old Testament to match the terrible severity of some of the words that our Lord speaks about the possibility of being lost.



But surely the point to remember about these words is above all that they are primarily addressed to those who think they are saved, who think they are all right. Over and over again, the words of our Lord, these terribly, terribly stern words of our Lord are addressed those who are confident that they are inside. It is not the brambles growing round the vine that are to be pulled up and burned but the branches of the vine which do not bear fruit.

The second point to note is the great emphasis in the teaching of our Lord about the last things is the element of surprise – the first will be last and the last will be first. One cannot escape the fact that almost all the words of Jesus about the last things are about the element of surprise. Some people take the parable of the sheep and goats as the final word on the subject of the last judgement and are confident that their good works will see them through. But it is worth pointing out that those on the right hand were astonished to learn that they had done those things. Once again surprise is at the very heart of that parable of the last things. When someone in the crowd asked Jesus, 'Are there few that be saved?', remember that Jesus said, 'You try to get in by the narrow door, for many go down the broad way that leads to destruction'. It is not a question that we ask about other people but one that we ask about ourselves. There are enormously inclusive passages in the New Testament, as we know, for example in Romans 5, or even more strikingly in the great argument of Romans 9-11 which begins with the unbelief of the Jews to whom everything has been given, but which ends with the vision of the time when the fullness of the gentiles will be gathered in and all Israel will be saved.

We are called upon to live, it seems to me, within this tension between the love of God and the wrath of God. The Christian life is not one in which we have everything sewn up but one in which we live in a tension between a godly confidence and a godly fear. The same Paul who said, 'Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ' could also write, 'I buffet my body and keep it under lest having preached to others I shall be a castaway.' So I think that the concentration on the question 'Can a Muslim or a Hindu be saved?' is a mistaken interpretation of Jesus. It is one of the weaknesses of a great deal of contemporary Christianity that we do not speak of the last judgement and of the possibility of

being finally lost. That is an element of the gospel which we cannot ignore. But I am sure that the central teaching of our Lord would steer us away from anxious debates about who can or cannot under what circumstances be saved. 'Strive to enter in by the narrow door'. The real question – to come back again to the beginning, to the point where missiology has so often been skewed – is not how shall I be saved, but how shall God be glorified? That is the response to the gospel. It is praise and glory, and the mission of the church is the spilling over of that tremendous praise.

### **Friendship and Reverence**

What would be the practical consequences of that way of looking at the gospel? I want to suggest a few. The first is just ordinary human friendship, the ordinary ways in which we reach out in friendship to other people. Why is it that we make such a song and dance about it when it is somebody of another faith? We do not do so when the person is a secular humanist – which is a totally different faith from the Christian faith and in some ways much more remote from the Christian faith than some of the so-called non-Christian religions. But we do not have a great church conference about having a conversation with a secular humanist who lives in the next-door house. To reach out in ordinary friendship is surely the very first and simplest thing to say. That will of course included the sharing of hospitality. One of the things which we learn when we get to know especially our Asian neighbours is the tremendous warmth of their hospitality, which often puts us to shame. To be able to share hospitality with one another and to enjoy the hospitality of one another is surely an enormously, humanly enriching thing and ought to be at the very heart of our normal life when we are living in this kind of multi-cultural and multi-religious community.

A word must be said also about invitations to others' places of worship, to mosques and temples and so forth. I think that if such an invitation is given it is right to accept it. I am sure we cannot, but in the words of that great Scottish missionary, Nicol McNicol, 'We can reverence their reverence.' We can sit there quietly with respect and reverence their reverence even though we cannot ourselves be part of the worship that they offer. That is, of course, made very clear when one goes

to a mosque. Sometimes it is less clear when one is in a Hindu temple or a Sikh gurdwara.

We should also invite people of other religions to come to our places of worship and to be with us when we worship. It seems to me only right that it should be reciprocal. If we are going to do this (this perhaps is a minor point, but an important one), we ought to make sure that we have available the kind of literature that will help them to understand our faith. I would think it would simply be obligatory for any Christian congregation which is in an area where there are many Muslims or Hindus to have a stock of gospel portions in the relevant language. I hope that they are easily available, perhaps from the Bible Society, in all the relevant Asian languages, and also other material that we can put unto the hands of our friends from other religions to help them to understand and enter into and to learn about Jesus.

### **Types of Dialogue**

It is also very important and often very relevant that we join with our neighbours of other faiths in common tasks, civic responsibilities, actions for political or social change and so forth. There is an immense area of work where we can share together in common objectives. It is often one of the best ways of opening up relationships. During my career as a missionary in India I was involved in two kinds of what you might call inter-faith dialogue. (I am very allergic to this word dialogue because it seems to me that we use it when we cannot have an ordinary conversation. When we talk with our neighbour over the fence who may or may not be a Christian we do not talk about a dialogue – we have a conversation. The very use of the word dialogue often indicates that in fact ordinary conversation has broken down or not even started.) I used to spend every Wednesday evening in the premises of the Ramakrishna Mission where we sat cross-legged on the floor and we studied the Upanishads and the Gospels. That kind of dialogue for me was very helpful, and certainly on both sides it did a great deal to help us to understand one another's deepest convictions. Certainly it did so for me and I believe for many Hindu participants. But in that sort of dialogue, we are, so to speak, shooting from prepared positions and it goes only so far.

When I was in Madras, where we were trying to face the colossal problems of a big metropolis growing at a fantastic rate, we had meetings of people of many different faiths, including Marxists and Gandhians and others, to talk about how our faith commitments helped us in illuminating and tackling the common problems that we had as citizens of Madras. That in some ways was a more fruitful exercise because there were no prepared positions. There is nothing in the Bible about some of the problems that Madras was facing. It had to be our living faith. It had to be the faith as it is actually operating now that was at work. This kind of sharing in common tasks which concern the whole community is one of the most fruitful things that we can do.

We must also remember, and this has been referred to, the position of our Christian friends from Asia, many of whom have themselves come from a Hindu or Muslim or Sikh background. In my own experience in Birmingham I have found that many have felt very, very bitter because even Christian congregations have shown so little interest in them and in fact have shown more interest in a Hindu than in an Indian Christian. The testimony that our Christian brothers and sisters who come from a Hindu or Muslim or Sikh background bear is a very important part of all our participation in the mission of the church in Britain.

Let me say one word more about dialogue. Formal inter-faith dialogue is a very valuable exercise. It is a distinct thing. It is not part of evangelism, in my opinion. I know that when I was engaged in those discussions in the Hindu monastery I was not trying to convert those men. They knew that I was constantly preaching in the streets and proclaiming the gospel to the pilgrims coming to the Hindu temple. They knew perfectly well where I stood. But at that moment I was not trying to evangelise, but to achieve mutual understanding as a necessary basis for a true evangelism. So participation in this kind of dialogue has a very limited but a significant place. It needs to be done by people who thoroughly know their own faith. We sell our partners short if we do not present the fullness of the Christian faith in all its integrity – if we try, as it were, to massage it down so that it is a little bit easier to swallow. We are not playing fair.

So we have to recognise that dialogue has only limited possibilities. The Socratic conception of dialogue which

involves the mutual criticism of each other's positions so as to lead on to a fuller truth rests upon the assumption that there are fundamental agreements already on the basis of which both parties can argue. But that is not the case in the matter of inter-faith dialogue, because (and here I come back to my first point) if the gospel is true, if Jesus is the *Logos*, the Word made flesh, then there is no other basis from which we can work except the recognition of Jesus as Lord. So there are strict limits to the possibilities of dialogue.

### **Other Agendas for Society**

The last point that I want to make, and it is a very important one, is to recognise that our other partners (Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus) have also their agenda. It is particularly important to say that because Islam has a very definite agenda. I do not know whether any of you have seen the document which was produced by the Islamic Foundation in Leicester about ten years ago called, 'The Islamic Movement and the West'. It is a very substantial document which lays out a total strategy for converting western Europe into an Islamic society. The strategy involves methods of getting into places of power, particularly in the educational system, and securing the ultimate goal, which a faithful Muslim must follow, that society should be totally Islamic, governed by the Shariah law. Our Muslim friends are perfectly clear about that. They have this agenda and they are working very vigorously to secure it. It is worth mentioning that the extreme militant Hisb-ut-Tahrir which is banned in all Arab countries operates freely in this country and is recruiting vigorously in the universities. So we ought not to be naive, nor should we be paranoiac. But we should know that our friends of other faiths also have their own agenda.

In the background of all our thinking we have to ask the question, 'What kind of society do we want Scotland to be?' Since the collapse of Marxism there is no strong contender against the kind of society that we already have, namely a secular society which marginalises the Christian faith into a leisure activity and which believes that economics govern everything in human life and that the only end worthy of a nation's pursuit is economic growth. That is the ideology which controls our society. Islam has a different vision of human society. In some way we have to be thankful to the

Muslims for challenging us at this point because they see very clearly what our society is. They see also an increasing number of members of this society who are attracted to Islam and become Muslims because of the clear, definite spiritual message that Islam brings.

I do not believe that there is any future for the idea of a secular society. It is breaking down everywhere. It is obvious that in all those parts of the world where the agenda of secularisation has been pursued the result has been the rise of religious fundamentalism, which has now become one of the major factors in international politics. I believe that what we have to work for is a Christian society. By this I mean a society in which a sufficiently large proportion of the population are believing Christians to ensure that the laws and the public policy of the nation are congruous with the Christian faith. Because the cross stands at the very heart of the Christian faith and because, therefore, unlike Islam, we do not believe that the truth of God can be finally identified with any political order – because the death of Jesus, in flat contradiction to the central teaching of Islam, is at the centre of our faith – we can never think of a kind of Christian society in the Christendom model which persecutes, which coerces belief. It has to be a society in which freedom of faith remains sure. But only a Christian society can achieve that. I do not believe that in the long run a secular society can do so. Throughout this area of inter-religious relationships we have to hold steadily in our mind the ultimate question, ‘What kind of society do we hope to have?’

At this point I think I will come back to the point that I started with. I said we have to avoid both naivety and paranoia. It is easy to become, in certain situations, paranoid about the threat of Islam. I know situations where very tough, strong-arm, militant tactics are being used to get Christian governors off the governing bodies of schools and to try to ensure that the schools become entirely Islamic. One has to be realistic about that, but also not be paranoid. We have to come back to the very heart of the matter. I quote again the Great Commission, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.’ Jesus is at the right hand of the Father. Jesus does reign over all things and, therefore, we have no need to be frightened or anxious or paranoid. We can be open, confident, generous, embracing all our fellow citizens

of whatever faith with the same love with which God has embraced us. I want to come to that starting point. I hope that I am not being simplistic or unfair, but I do think that this concentration on the question can a Hindu be saved or a Muslim be saved is totally wrong. That is God's business. We are not supposed to be settling those questions.

If we are overwhelmed, as we must be, by the marvel of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, if it is true that Almighty God has done this for us, then there is a kind of uncalculating generosity at the very heart of God which must be reflected in the life of our churches. Overwhelmingly, it seems to me, with all the sorts of reservations and safeguards and so forth that I have suggested, overwhelmingly the message surely must be that when we give to people of other faiths the impression that they are not welcome we are really contradicting the gospel. Every Christian congregation, and this is of course the place where the real thing happens – the local congregation, which believes the faith, which celebrates it, which rejoices in it, which lives by it, which lives it out in the life of the community, is the place where the Holy Spirit is present to give his own witness and to draw people in his own way – often by very strange and mysterious ways – to faith in Christ. When that is present I think we have the answers to the questions with which we are struggling today.

## REVIEW ARTICLE

### **Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology.**

Organizing editor Nigel M. de S. Cameron; general editors, David F. Wright, David C. Lachman and Donald E. Meek  
Edinburgh: T&T Clark; and Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1993; xx+906pp. £39.95, \$79.99; ISBN 0 567 0960 6, 0 8308 1407 8.

Until now there has been no systematic effort to chart the rich and varied story of Christianity in Scotland with reasonable comprehension between the covers of one book. The new *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* makes such an attempt and succeeds magnificently. The project, sponsored by Rutherford House, an Edinburgh study-centre organized primarily by Evangelicals in the Church of Scotland, has had a long gestation. Despite problems along the way, the lengthy period of preparation was, on balance, a benefit. It made it possible, for example, to receive several articles from F.F. Bruce (1910-90), as well as also to include a summary article on Bruce's life as a Scottish scholar who did more than any other twentieth-century individual to rejuvenate academic study of the Scriptures among Evangelicals. The long wait also had poignant effects. The *Dictionary* contains an article by W.M. Dempster on 'Huts and Canteens' (a Christian service to Scottish troops in World War II), which, because of the delay, could note Dempster's death in 1991 and also comment on his being 'at the heart' of this relief effort.

The wait was worth it. From 'Aberdeen Breviary' to 'Zwinglianism', through each of its 906 pages, the *Dictionary* is a goldmine of both human interest and Christian enlightenment.

Simply as a reference work, it is a model. The organizing and general editors secured just the right authors for the various articles. A total of 382 scholars contributed, ninety-five drawn from outside Scotland, including twenty-six from the United States and seven from Canada. The matching of authors and articles is also superb. Many of the articles are written by individuals who have published substantial research on their assigned themes or persons. Almost always the authors are sympathetic with their subjects. The best examples of this sympathy are the articles on Scottish Roman Catholicism, a subject of great importance for the medieval and early modern times, but also again in the twentieth century since Roman Catholics now make up the largest church-attending denomination in previously Protestant Scotland. Most of the Roman Catholic articles in the *Dictionary* come from Roman Catholic authors. The same procedure was followed for other religious groups like Jews, Unitarians, Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses – 'insiders' with special knowledge and sympathy do the writing.



Two mechanical features are especially commendable. The print, though compact in two columns per page, is very clear. In addition, there is an outstanding system of cross-references which makes it a simple matter to leap rapidly throughout the volume in pursuit of connected themes.

In form so also in content: the *Dictionary* is an absolute treasure of information. The main article on missions by Andrew Walls – which includes the development of the missionary spirit in Scotland as well as accounts of Scottish missionaries around the world – is a full-scale monograph in its own right and should be published separately. It is especially informative on the high place that Scottish missionaries have always given to educating Christian leaders. Several other articles, though not quite as magisterial, are splendidly original pieces of creative research and authoritative summary – for example, Donald Meek on revivals, Ian Campbell on religious themes in Scottish literature, Nicholas Needham on sabbatarianism, and Donald Macleod on systematic theology. When John Dempster writes on religious publishing, he specifies why the church historian finds such riches in the Scottish past: ‘It is impossible to over-estimate the influence of the press on the religious life of Scotland... (Since the Reformation), every development in the history of the Scottish church was both shaped and accompanied by a torrent of print.’

Not all the essays are captivating to the last detail, but nearly all are informative. The coverage of Scottish Christian life is nearly comprehensive, with outstanding pieces on (in only a partial list) architecture, the arts, the atonement, Bibles, Calvinism, the Celtic church, Christology, church and state, theological education, evangelicalism, hymns, libraries, marriage, music, periodicals, preaching, Roman Catholicism, sabbatarianism, the philosophy of Scottish Realism, the Westminster Assembly, witchcraft, women in the Presbyterian churches and as missionaries, and worship. In a special category of interest are highly informative essays on Scottish influences in Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand and Wales.

The volume also provides the guidance that outsiders need to fathom the complicated past of the various Presbyterian bodies that have contended against unbelief, and often against each other, in Scotland’s intense Protestant history – from the Kirk (or established Church of Scotland) through Anti-Burgher, Associated, Burgher, Cameronian, Free Presbyterian, New Light, Old Light, Reformed, Relief, Secession, United, United Free, United Secession, and Wee Free (*i.e.* Free Kirk) variations. It is sobering to think that each one of these designations is the product of deeply held convictions and that each arose from an agonizing schism, a joyous reunion, or sometimes both at the same time. Most of these factions also sent their sons and daughters overseas, where immigrants from almost all these groups have been key players in their new regions’ ecclesiastical history.

The *Dictionary* also helps with Scottish usage: for example 'whigs', originally a term of reproach applied to Covenanters and only later broadened out to political movements in England and the United States; 'stickit minister', for someone who leaves the ministry in favour of another occupation (perhaps originally for getting 'stuck' half-way through a trial sermon); and 'lifters', a short-lived secession church in the late eighteenth century which held that ministers should lift the bread and wine from the communion table before the prayer of consecration.

One of the greatest strengths of the *Dictionary* is the multitude of memorable people treated in its pages. In the words of the introduction, 'it is one of the characteristics of the energetic history of the Scottish church that it has spawned so many figures who were neither major nor insignificant.' Of the book's tremendous number of authoritative biographical sketches, some may perhaps be useful only for genealogical or local purposes. But most reveal a person with a larger historical claim. If they were important in Scotland, or important after leaving Scotland, and they had something to do with Christianity, they are here – in all, 18 Campbells, 15 MacDonalds, 14 Stewarts (plus 6 Stuarts), 12 Gordons, 12 Hamiltons, 11 MacLeods, 11 Forbes, 10 MacKays, 9 Erskines, 8 Frasers, three different George Wisharts, and many, many more.

A number of interesting sketches are also included of figures not usually noticed in church history: literary lights like Sir Walter Scott (who depicted both honourable and dishonourable Scottish ministers in his novels and yet who remained reticent about his own religious position), Robert Burns (by no means an unreligious person, but who skewered the foibles of Scottish Calvinism with rapier wit), and George MacDonald (whose unorthodox Congregational beliefs drove him far from the Scotland of his youth even as he continued to employ themes from his own early life in his books); philosophers like David Hume (a sceptic who remained good friends with numerous Presbyterian clergy) and Thomas Reid (the clerical professor of moral philosophy who was Hume's most trenchant contemporary critic); scientists like William Thomson (Lord Kelvin) and James Clerk Maxwell (whose faith shaped the direction of their path-breaking research); and the industrialist Andrew Carnegie (whose family included Unitarians and Swedenborgians but who seemed himself to worship only the dollar).

There is also solid treatment of those who are usually written up in church histories, sometimes with details, however, that will surprise even experts. These better-known figures include, again only as examples, Andrew Melville and Alexander Henderson, second-generation leaders of the Reformation who possessed not quite the fire, but every bit of John Knox's conviction; Samuel Rutherford, Henry Scougal, and Thomas Boston, seventeenth-century theologians whose works are in print to this day as an inspiration to at least some modern believers (Scougal's *Life of God in the Soul of Man* first showed George Whitefield what he called 'true religion'); Thomas Aikenhead, who as a nineteen-year old became in

1697 the last Scot executed for blasphemy; John Erskine and William Robertson, who led, respectively, Evangelicals and Moderates throughout the eighteenth century and who, whimsically, were thrown together as colleague ministers of the historic Old Greyfriars church in Edinburgh; Robert and James Haldane, brothers who were converted amid the turbulence of the French Revolution and then devoted a considerable family fortune to promoting revival and lay theological education beyond the borders of the established Kirk; James Hogg, whose *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) remains one of the most penetrating religious novels ever written; Edward Irving, who in a short life over the first third of the nineteenth-century innovated boldly as a preacher, but also as promoter of premillennialism, biblical inerrance, and a form of charismatic pentecostalism; Patrick Brewster and James Begg, nineteenth-century orthodox ministers who spoke out as lonely voices for the burgeoning masses of Scottish urban poor; David Livingstone, whose African exploits are well chronicled, but whose connection to America – the Livingstones lost a son in the American Civil War – is not; Alexandra Macphail, who became the first woman physician to work as a missionary under a Scottish church and who was a mainstay to both patients and governments in India; James Orr and James Denney, capable theologians at the start of the twentieth-century whose combination of orthodoxy and sensitivity to the modern situation blazed a trail that too few Evangelicals have since followed; and Eric Liddell, who as a Congregationalist missionary in China seems to have been a person of even more humble integrity than portrayed in *Chariots of Fire* and whose influence pointed another son of Scotland, Peter Marshall, toward the ministry and an eventful career in the United States. On such figures, the *Dictionary* could not be more helpful.

In general, the articles are understated, though not colourless. The authors are certainly free enough to let us know what they think, as, for example, in the article on ‘heresy’ where David Wright speaks of the ‘grotesque disproportion’ of the late twentieth-century where ‘a minister or elder is much more likely to be disciplined for re-baptizing than for denying the divinity of Christ’.

Several authors must be mentioned for contributing unusually illuminating work – John Wolffe on issues involving Catholicism and anti-Catholicism, Andrew Walls on many individual missionaries, Henry Sefton on the major theologians and theological issues of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Derek Murray on Scottish Baptists, Lesley Macdonald on women in Scottish church history, David Lachman on Covenanters and Presbyterian conservatives, Paul Helm on philosophers and philosophical schools, John Dempster on many aspects of periodicals and publishing, Nigel Cameron on issues having to do with Scripture and David Bebbington on general evangelical subjects. Donald Meek’s articles on Gaelic and Highland subjects represent a magisterial distillation of research by hundreds of previous scholars. With great success, Meek

shows both how the Highlands were transformed from the least Christian to the most Christian region of Scotland and how the use (or non-use) of Gaelic played a critical role at every juncture of the Highland's often tragic history. Finally, David Wright and Nicholas Needham were the workhorses whose scores of articles covering the length and breadth of Scottish history not only presented authoritative interpretations but seemed to cover almost all possible holes.

Is the *Dictionary*, then, perfect? Not quite. Experts may find more about which to object, but I discovered only three matters for complaint. One was a typo: the dates provided for James Morison, who championed Charles Finney's theology in Scotland, are 1816-63, but the article has him retiring in 1884. There is also at least one factual error: of James M'Cosh it is said that he was 'almost a lone voice among orthodox Evangelicals' in aligning orthodox faith with evolutionary theory at the end of the nineteenth century. In fact, James Orr, B.B. Warfield, and several contemporary Reformed theologians in the Netherlands made similar adjustments. Finally, I thought the *Dictionary* neglected one topic. Despite perceptive material at several points, especially in articles by William Storrar on Scotland itself and the Church of Scotland's Church and Nation Committee, the question of Scottish nationalism and the churches' part in the intermittent (and now quite insistent) appeal for some form of devolution from Westminster never received full treatment.

As indispensable as the *Dictionary* immediately becomes for the facts of an important sector of church history, it also offers enough general illumination to make many of its pages well worth reading even by those with little interest in Scotland as such.

From the mid-sixteenth century to the early twentieth-century a conservative Protestant church (or set of closely related churches) exerted a most unusual sway over the Scottish corner of the world. That experience constitutes a ready-made laboratory for others who would also bring all of life under the rule of Christ. Surveying that history, one can only conclude that it offers a noble spectacle of solid Christian institutions, dedicated Christian leaders, courageous Christian martyrs, remarkably successful Christian education (in family and society more generally), and a genuinely Christian civilization. What might be called 'Presbyterian Scotland', in other words, presents an enthralling picture of what a religion that tries to keep God at the centre can do to reform lives and shape society.

At the same time, the same history reveals also the limits of even the most dedicated, earnest and courageous Christian efforts. The Scottish Christians who accomplished such heroic deeds were creatures of clay like the rest of us. They were given to theological overkill and never bypassed an opportunity to pursue deviance (real or imagined) through the labyrinthine ways of Presbyterian polity. They exhibited the highest standards of godly thrift and earnest Christian frugality, but were conquered, in the end, by forces from the very industriousness and

mercantile integrity that their religion promoted. T.C. Smout, the greatest living Scottish historian, begins one of his best books, *A Century of the Scottish People 1830-1950* with a damning indictment of the weaknesses of a very strong church: 'The age of great industrial triumph was an age of appalling social deprivation, not, certainly, without amelioration, but with no solution for its terrible problems. I am astounded by the tolerance, in a country boasting of its high moral standard and basking in the spiritual leadership of a Thomas Chalmers, of unspeakable urban squalour, compounded of drink abuse, bad housing, low wages, long hours and sham education.... What was the point of all those triumphs of the great Victorian age of industry, if so many people were so unspeakably oppressed by its operations?'

There is also a final, sobering conclusion to be drawn at the end of the twentieth-century. Despite its glorious history, the church age in Scotland has passed away. The great experiment in Christian civilization-building has, for all its triumphs over such a long period, now nearly collapsed. Triumphs and failures alike, in sum, provide a thought-provoking picture of the potential, but also the perils, in attempting to structure a whole society for God.

On a more personal level, that same history offers countless lessons for edification, some to imitate and some to avoid. It shows, for example, the pathetic character of self-protective pettiness (as when the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1799 effectively barred ministers not of the Church of Scotland from its pulpits in large part because the evangelical Anglican Charles Simeon had been spending his vacation preaching to Church of Scotland congregations). But it also reveals the heroism of principle (as when religious broadcaster Ronald Falconer in 1962 refused a high post with the Scottish BBC because he thought his ordination vows prohibited such service). Sometimes it shows how pettiness and principle can exist together (as when in 1988 the Free Presbyterian Church, a conservative Presbyterian splinter that maintains the doctrines of the Reformation with vigorous integrity, disciplined its most illustrious member, Lord MacKay of Clashfern, the Lord Chancellor, because MacKay attended a requiem mass for a deceased legal colleague). Scotland's Presbyterian history shows how easily Protestants fall into the hagiography for which they criticise Roman Catholics (as when an editor was relieved of his post in the mid-nineteenth century for allowing criticism of Thomas Chalmers to appear in his journal). It also provides luminous incidents of winsome Christian love, as when two of the greatest promoters of the evangelical revivals of the eighteenth century, Lady Glenorchy and Lady Maxwell, maintained a friendship despite serious differences over the age's great leaders and doctrines (Lady Maxwell thought highly of Wesley, Lady Glenorchy did not).

The same history also contains moments of supernal courage, none more moving than at the death of the Covenanter martyr, eighteen-year-old Margaret Wilson, in 1685. When she was sentenced to death by

drowning with an old widow, Margaret Lauchlison, for refusing to swear an oath to the king, the two were tied to posts on the shore. Margaret Wilson was placed closer to land so that as the tide advanced and she saw the waters overcoming Margaret Lauchlison she might (so the authorities hoped), recant and take the oath. But as the sea swept over Lauchlison, Wilson only waited patiently and said, 'What do I see but Christ wrestling there?'

The history of the Scottish church also offers rare glimpses of Christian charity combined with commitment to the truth. When Edward Irving died in 1834, the young Robert Murray M'Cheyne, himself near the end of a short but eventful life, commented from the heights of orthodoxy, but also out of the charity with which some of the orthodox were imbued: 'I look back upon him with awe, as on the saints and martyrs of old. A holy man in spite of all his delusions and errors. He is now with his God and Saviour, whom he wronged so much, yet, I am persuaded, loved so sincerely.'

For these reasons and more, the *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology*, even at £39.95 or \$79.99, is the book bargain of the year.

*Mark Noll, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL.*

## REVIEWS

### **Great Divides: Understanding the Controversies that Come Between Christians**

Ronald H. Nash

Nav Press, Colorado Springs, CO, 1993; 240pp., £6.99; ISBN 0 8910 96965

### **A Marvelous Ministry: How the All-round Ministry of C.H. Spurgeon Speaks to us Today**

Edited by Timothy George

Soli Deo Gloria Publications, Ligonier, PA, 1993; 147pp., £4.50; ISBN 1 877611 59 X

The stated aim of Professor Nash is to help his readers grasp why they think the way they do about 'ten of the most important and yet potentially divisive issues of our day'. These include such as the Pro-Life movement, women leaders in the church, divorce and remarriage, the end times, and Christian involvement in politics. The examination of each subject provides a good general outline of the history of the controversy, the principal arguments, and the leading participants with numerous extracts quoted from their most important writings. The general reader who is keen to be informed on the topics selected will find this a helpful introduction.

British readers will notice the strong North American preoccupation throughout the book. It is recognizable in the topics chosen as the *Great Divides*, as well as in the fact that Nash practically confines his references to the works of American authors. This perspective is also evident in the chapter on eschatology. He is particularly concerned about the popularity of dispensationalist premillennialism, but although G.E. Ladd's *The Blessed Hope* is among titles recommended for further reading, that view is not examined, nor is the more moderate dispensationalism of British writers.

The publishers of the second work have rendered a real service in having these six papers on Spurgeon presented together in one volume. Of the six, three were prepared for the Carey Ministers' Conference in 1992, and one for the Puritan Conference at Westminster Chapel, London, in 1971. As Reformed Baptists, all four authors write from a position of sympathy with their subject. Errol Hulse has contributed 'Spurgeon speaks today' and 'Spurgeon and his Gospel invitations'; Geoff Thomas has supplied the main biographical article; David Kingdon has written 'Spurgeon and his social concern'; and Tim Curnow concludes the study with the chapter 'Spurgeon and his activity in politics'.

This book is hard to lay down. Each author writes with clarity and authority. There are numerous quotations from *Sword and Trowel* and Spurgeon's published *Sermons* which allow the preacher's own voice to be heard. It is difficult to choose a sample that will adequately convey something of the character of this work, but perhaps the ten features of Spurgeon's Gospel invitations will provide a taste of it: no restrictions in persons addressed; the reality of death and hell; flexibility in presentation; evident love for souls; personal application of appeal; urgency; joy; offer of immediate justification; sincere persuasiveness; a sense of the power and presence of God.

If, as the foreword states, a century after his death 'there are more works in print by Spurgeon than by any other English-speaking author', this appetizer is surely a fitting introduction to the preacher himself. There are a few slips and misprints (e.g. his wrong age on p. 24), but our main regret is that there is neither an index nor even a short bibliography for further study. This apart, we commend it to a wide readership and share the hope that 'perhaps today he is having more influence in the world than he was 100 years ago. God will honour the life and ministry of Charles Haddon Spurgeon who loved his Saviour, until that Lord Jesus Christ comes again.'

*Robert Boyd, Fort William*

## **The Strangeness of God: Essays in Contemporary Theology**

Elizabeth Templeton

Arthur James Limited, London, 1993; 173pp., £7.99; ISBN 0 85305 296 4

Templeton describes this book as 'fragments of thinking done over some fifteen years... mostly since I stopped being an "academic"'. This latter phrase, perhaps, explains her description of this material as 'unacademic theology'. Certainly, these articles are likely to prove very difficult reading for those who are not academics! The Bishop of Durham, who would presumably classify himself as an academic, appears to have found this book heavy going. His Foreword urges perseverance in reading this book, especially where the reader does not 'at first, make much sense of it'.

In the Foreword, we read that this book 'lies very much within Christian Faith, taken for granted and pursued'. Some readers may wonder whether this begs the question: can we take it for granted that this book gives us an authentic account of the Christian faith? Later the Foreword describes God as 'far too great a Mystery and a Glory for dogmatisms, moralisms and sectarian certainties'. This statement highlights the



difficulty of speaking about God in a way that does not reduce him to human size.

Templeton is quite clearly a protest against this type of thinking. Perhaps, in her theology, there is a strong element of reaction against 'two years of fervent evangelical acceleration in my early teens'. Throughout this book there is one conspicuous absence: the voice of Scripture, speaking authoritatively as the Word of God. At the risk of being accused of 'claustrophobic anti-world sectarianism', this reviewer must ask the author for more exposition of Scripture.

Templeton's articles raise the question: what is to set the agenda for our theology – the world or the Word? She insists that we must not say 'more than can be said in view of the facts' and that we must not dodge 'the actualities of existence'. The evangelical theologian must also say that Scripture is one of the facts, Scripture as a Word spoken to our existence by God himself. Where the Word is removed from theology's centre-stage, the world will not be slow to fill the gap. Theology will then be too much our speaking and not enough God speaking to us, too much listening to the world and not enough listening to the Word. There needs to be balance here: listening to the world and listening to the Word. I suspect that many readers will question whether Templeton has come close to achieving such a balance.

In her opening chapter, she depicts God as saying, 'I will go to them *incognito*... I must be careful not to dazzle them. I will be mistakable for anybody, or nobody.' While affirming that in Christ we have God 'veiled in flesh', this reviewer must ask: is the glory of God so hidden as to merit this kind of talk – 'mistakable for anybody, or nobody'? Or is there some other reason why Templeton is drawn to this way of thinking? On the next page, she tells us that 'a strange thing happened. In the community of those who had learned to love this man ... the presence of the man who was dead and gone became more alive and potent and convincing than it had been even in his lifetime'. Here we must ask whether this is how Scripture describes for us the 'strange thing' that we call the resurrection of Jesus Christ? Again we must ask why Templeton speaks as she does. She speaks of God in terms of 'love and freedom which is uncoercive'. Do we have here an explanation why she shies away from a clearer statement concerning the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 1:16-18)? Is this the reason why she draws back from an account of Christ's resurrection which refuses to reduce the fact of his resurrection to our faith in him (1 Cor. 15:17, 20)? It seems to me that she draws back from any account of Jesus Christ which is in her view too coercive. Here we have the problem of reading Scripture according to our own preconceived notions. We only allow Scripture to say what we want to hear.

Readers who look for a greater willingness to let Scripture speak more freely will, I expect, feel an element of strangeness in this book. Whether this is 'the strangeness of God' is another question. Perhaps, it is the

strangeness of reading theology which seems so uncommitted to a careful and attentive listening to the voice of Scripture, speaking as the Word of God.

*Charles M. Cameron, St Ninian's Parish Church, Dunfermline*

### **Perspectives on Christology: Essays in Honor of Paul K. Jewett**

Edited by M. Shuster and R.A. Muller

Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 1991; xxvii + 302pp., £16.99; ISBN 0 310 39731 6

One of the most heartening things about the *Festschrift* in the 1990s is that it has come of age. Perhaps the fact has eluded most of us, but in post-modern times, when diversity and disunity are in vogue, such a literary genre makes stimulating reading: it alone offers diversity whilst combating disunity in one volume. *Perspectives on Christology* does just this. Indeed, it is perhaps fitting that a *Festschrift* should honour a systematician, in this case Paul King Jewett of Fuller Theological Seminary, best known to British readers for his 1975 *Man as Male and Female*. The book is itself a reflection of the systematician's discipline: the subject matter, as the title suggests, is the person of Christ: its contents, put simply, an evangelical mini-systematic treatise on the relevance and impact of our understanding of Jesus Christ across a broad spectrum of subjects. The book is divided into four parts, 'Scripture and Christology', 'The Person of Christ: Historical Perspectives', 'The Person of Christ: Contemporary and Literary Views' and 'Ethics and Christology'.

Familiar contributors include the late Robert Guelich, Colin Brown, Geoffrey Bromiley, Robert Kelly, Anthony Yu and Lewis Smedes, all in a most enjoyable book in terms of both content and the provocative points it raises. For instance, Donald Hagner's contribution, 'Paul's Christology and Jewish Monotheism', scratches where the itch currently rages concerning New Testament and systematic debate. What could be more relevant than a competent presentation of an ancient debate in which scripture and tradition are shown to be in agreement, whilst challenging the sloppy thinking that pervades much evangelical talk on the nature of God?

The two middle sections contain, perhaps, the most rewarding reading. The humanity of Christ is presented from several interesting perspectives. One of the most outstanding articles is, surprisingly, a refreshing defence of Schleiermacher's Christology by Richard Muller. His superlative article gets behind controversies in order to present the Schleiermacher so often lost in evangelical reactions against the 'Father of Liberalism'. Muller's co-editor, Marguerite Shuster, offers a very stimulating article on the possibility of Christ being tempted to sin.

The last section, on ethics, will be of interest to any involved in pastoral ministry. For the systematician, doctrine has always found meaning only in its practical application. Perhaps the reason why so few Christian thinkers immediately respond positively to the discipline of systematics is the sometimes abstract theologies that have been produced over the centuries. Not the case here, though. The person and work of Christ are explored from different angles for their practical and personal relevance.

All in all, this is an easily digested book. It offers meaningful and thought-provoking content which should appeal to academic and student, lay and ordained alike. Heartily recommended for the study and the soul!

*Graham McFarlane, London Bible College*

### **The Ordination of Women to the Priesthood Debate. The Verbatim Record**

Church House Publishing, London, 1993; 91pp., £4.50;  
ISBN 0 7151 3751 4

Many readers will remember the media coverage of the historic Synod debate on 11 November 1992 about the ordination of women to the Church of England priesthood. In response to popular demand, the verbatim record of the debate has now been published.

However, as the helpful background notes at the end of this volume make clear, this debate was only one part of a long process which began in 1975, when the motion that 'There are no fundamental objections to the ordination of women to the priesthood' was carried, although a motion to remove 'legal and other barriers' was lost. Furthermore, the synod debate was not the end of the process either. However, for good or ill, it was unquestionably of immense importance.

Presbyterians reading this book may find themselves, like me, feeling how alien our two ecclesiastical systems are culturally as well as theologically. For many of us, a crucial difference is the concept of 'priesthood'. In the Church of England there have been women readers and deacons for some time, but the leap to priesthood is seen as an enormous one, theologically.

Of course many different and fascinating arguments were put forward in this debate, but the ones which must be taken seriously by us as Evangelicals are those which claim to be based on Scripture. Others based either on mere tradition, or on a desire to conform with Roman Catholicism, or even on how the world sees the church may be left safely to one side, though they are an interesting reflection of the struggles of those in our churches who have abandoned the supremacy of scriptural authority to find other authorities, other standards and other bases for argument.

The question is whether it is true that 'while the Scriptures are inconclusive on the question of the ordination of women, they are firm and conclusive on man and woman together being in the image of God', or whether the ordination of women is clearly prohibited by the Bible; there is much in the debate which is probably irrelevant to this question.

This is not a book in the usual sense and is not intended to present any particular theory; it is a transcript of a polite and yet lively debate, and, given its historical significance within the Church of England, will be an important addition to the bookshelves of both those interested in the question of women's ordination (regardless of their own denomination) and those interested in the study of modern church history.

*Anne E. Stewart, Glasgow University*

## **Sermons on Job**

John Calvin

Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1993; 752pp., £35; ISBN 0 85151 6440

So very much could be written in appraisal of this great work, but a short review must be confined only to some of the principal points of significance. What we have here is a facsimile reprint of *Sermons of Master John Calvin upon the Book of Job*, translated from the French by Arthur Golding, first published in London in 1574. Scholars and seasoned students of Calvin will hasten to obtain their own copies; others, even if initially lured by the ever attractive dustcover of a Banner of Truth publication, may feel hesitant after close examination. The work is far from easy to read despite the claim that '10 minutes' reading aloud is generally enough to whet the interest for more', and the encouragement that 'the English has the force and colour of the age of Shakespeare'.

The work contains 159 sermons on the Book of Job, in Elizabethan English, each one consisting of about 6,000 words. They are set out in double columns over five pages or so, and rarely broken down into more than three paragraphs: two (an introduction, referring to the previous day's exposition, and a brief conclusion or final prayer) are very short in comparison with the third, which contains the bulk of the sermon. All are divided into very long sentences, frequently the length of a paragraph of today, and subdivided into clauses. The punctuation corresponds to the preacher's rhetorical pauses rather than to any written style.

One is tempted to ask why the Banner of Truth did not try to produce a much more popular version on a computer (such as those used by the Wycliffe Bible Translators, who might have been willing to undertake the task) programmed to translate material from one dialect to another, in this instance from Elizabethan to modern English. As this idea has apparently not yet been explored, the reader must persevere with the archaic text, but

he will have his reward. Throughout the sermons, Calvin's theology is presented and invoked, but not in the crystallised and systemised manner so familiar in the *Institutes*, nor yet in the apt and polished prose of his commentaries. Here we find a much more relaxed Calvin, whose thought flows through the terrain following the course of the text under review. Here and there it eddies for a while as an issue is dealt with in depth. Occasionally it will take up much of the time allotted to the entire sermon, if Calvin feels it is significant enough.

In the sermons Calvin the orator is always Calvin the pastor, concerned with the needs of the common folk and their eternal well-being. Thus the imagery he uses is not that of the intellectual but that of the local countryside – of animals, especially horses, of fairground and circus. Yet those who follow him, whether yesterday's hearer or today's reader, albeit grappling with the forbidding Elizabethan script, will find themselves led into heavenly places in Christ, which is what Calvin always intends. The sermons were preached at 6 or 7 a.m., according to season, on weekdays between February 1554 and March 1555, in alternate weeks, according to Calvin's custom of preaching through the Old Testament.

*Peter Cook, St Andrew's, Cheadle Hulme*

**Lion PC Handbook of the Bible**  
Lion Publishing / Lynx Communications  
Computer Software £51

Could this be the answer to your prayers? At least to prayers regarding the make-up of your sermons? Could a computerised Bible along with the Lion aids to Bible study compete with that well-worn and carefully compiled library upon which you faithfully rely to produce ever better sermons?

Perhaps that scenario would be to misunderstand the nature of computers and their use. However if you are the owner of a PC XT with 640K memory or greater, then you might find the above mentioned combined pieces of software at least an aide in the compilation of those sermons and studies. What the above offers is a system that could allow increased flexibility and speed in your method of working. Perhaps the most helpful aspect is the NIV version of the Bible accessed in all kinds of clever ways by the purpose-designed interface. It is immensely useful to be able to access quickly, in search mode, verses of scripture containing multiple words in which you are interested. Single word access is provided too, but it is the combination search and display modes that are the most powerful and beneficial.

Besides finding verses for your study, it is possible to look up any relevant notes that might be found in the compilation of Lion books, specially adapted for this computer set-up. A list of relevant subjects can be displayed and quick access made to them. This information is now able

to be imported into your own notes in a separate editor. By using this system you are able to work up a comprehensive study of any subject, adding your own notes, of course, from 'books', as required.

Does it sound like a dream? Unfortunately it is not. Unfortunately, because the system of commands through which you access all this 'spirituality', although fast, is very clumsy and not at all intuitive. You would be hard put to find your way round the system by experimentation. The design could be much friendlier, given that the golden rule is 'if in doubt read the manual last'. The learning curve, for getting around and extracting the available information into a usable form, is steep in the extreme. A few years ago people would put up with an interface of this nature, but techniques have come a long way. The arrival of 'Windows' has influenced even humble DOS type programmes in command structures. Greater ease of use is possible. In conclusion: the material is proven, and the idea sound, in this package and ones like it. However in this instance the presentation and access are a hindrance to true productivity, especially for those new to computing.

*Bob Akers, Glasgow Bible College*

## **Grace in the End: A Study in Deuteronomical Theology**

J. Gordon McConville

Paternoster Press, Carlisle, 1993; 176pp., £6.99; ISBN 0 85364 588 4

As McConville rightly points out, Deuteronomy and the related Deuteronomical literature in Joshua – II Kings has very considerable influence on the background thought of the New Testament. He emphasises that this is seen not only in the fact that the actual Book of Deuteronomy is so frequently quoted in the gospels, but that the theological thought of Deuteronomy lies behind the approaches of the New Testament. As a result we are seeing a growing list of studies on the Deuteronomical literature and Deuteronomy itself, so it is particularly apt and helpful to have this scholarly but readable book available. Students will find it a helpful guide through the maze of critical thought and I am thankful to be able to recommend it to my students.

After an initial chapter which sets the scene nicely McConville gives us a good chapter with an overview of the literary and historical understanding of Deuteronomy. Already this chapter begins to demonstrate one of his main theses, that our view of the historical setting will determine our theological interpretation. He shows quite convincingly that 'the literary criticism is far too often subjective and fragile'. This leads naturally to a shorter but significant chapter on the dating of Deuteronomy and Deuteronomical literature. He rejects the commonly held view that they date from the 7th century B.C. and the

times of Josiah. By the end of the book it becomes clear that McConville favours a more traditional dating which is early.

Chapter 4 works through the Deuteronomic idea in the books of Joshua, Judges, I and II Samuel and I and II Kings. As one might expect from his other writings, McConville is particularly strong on I and II Kings, but his overview of the other literature is also most helpful. This section starts with a critique of some modern Deuteronomic scholars – Cross, Provan, Smend, Hoffman and Hobbs.

Chapter 5 outlines what McConville sees as the key elements of Deuteronomic theology in the glorification of the God of Israel as distinct from the worship of Canaanite or other deities. He underlines that this God is made known through his spoken words and through his actions in history. McConville proceeds to a discussion of covenant and election as central themes and closes with the climax of ‘grace in the end’. Here he sees no necessary contradiction between a message of grace and one of law. While Wellhausen saw Deuteronomy as a book of law, Von Rad as a book of gospel and grace and Nicholson as one of treaty and covenant, McConville shows that the one author can continue these varying themes together. He stresses that God’s gracious promises are matched by Israel’s persistent sin; but the author of Deuteronomy already teaches that God alone can work to change the perverse nature of his people and bring the fulness of salvation – and that introduces its fulfilment in the New Testament where God works in Jesus Christ to bring ‘grace in the end’.

But McConville notes a variety of other vital themes. He shows that God alone is central – there is no sacrosanct authority or position for any other system, whether it be Jerusalem as the place for God’s name or the kingship as an institution. And yet at the same time Deuteronomy does look for an organisation of society with equitable distribution of wealth, brotherhood of all people and the joy of religious celebration. What a pattern for today! And what a pointer to its fulfilment in the New Testament! So the book concludes with two chapters on Deuteronomic theology and its fulfilment in the New Testament.

This book is a masterly introduction at a student level to the Deuteronomic literature. It will be a real help to many students of theology at university or in Bible and theological colleges.

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