

EDITORIAL

As the new editor of *SBET*, I am very grateful to all those who ensured that this issue appeared.

I want to thank my predecessor, Kenneth Roxburgh, for the fine work of his tenure, and for passing on the paper from David Fergusson, much appreciated at the 2002 SETS Conference. David Searle provided me with the article by John Webster, an address David enjoyed at a conference he attended during a sabbatical leave. I commissioned the piece by Iain D. Campbell, having heard a tape of the excellent address he gave on this theme at a weekend study conference in his own congregation. And then David Wright rode to the rescue with a fourth article, based on a paper given recently in Hong Kong. To all the writers, reviewers and editorial staff, I want to express my sincere thanks.

Looking to the future, I trust the *Bulletin* will continue to be of interest to a wide range of theological readers. Ministers tell me they do not want a journal that is directed to a specialist, academic audience. They want it to be scholarly without being elitist. As one said, 'Expand my thinking, but feed my preaching.' On the other hand, research students and lecturers have asked me to narrow the focus towards the academy, and to provide a forum for students to publish chapters of their theses and for lecturers to submit material suitable for research assessment exercises. My inclination is to the former, to continue the broad approach as before, but I await the guidance of the new editorial board when it is formed.

Perhaps I should introduce myself by coming clean on some of my own views, formed initially through studies at Aberdeen University, the Free Church of Scotland College in Edinburgh and Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, none of which will want to be held responsible. That has been followed by twenty years of ministry in Scotland, exercised in three different settings. So, in fairly general terms, what do I look for as I read the various theologians in their complementary disciplines? (Please indulge me, just this once; future editorials will be around a hundred words.)

Let me make five basic points, in a theological wish-list. Some are obviously prerequisites, others will be seen as preferences, and I trust none is a mere prejudice.

Personal

The first requirement for any Christian theology worthy of the name is that it be *personal*.

I mean by that, first, a personal commitment *to Christ*. Our theologians must be Christians, who speak what they know. The perfect objectivity of the detached observer is a modernist myth. Christ must take precedence over this chimera. In every other area of life you can be an expert and a fan. My wife does not doubt Alan Titchmarsh's horticultural expertise because he adores plants. So why doubt the worshipper? I have seen rolling of eyes and shaking of heads from theological academics when a scholar asked to begin his seminar with prayer. The irony was that the early theologian on whom he and they were experts could not have understood theology apart from prayer!

Second, this means a personal commitment *to Church*. The theologian is not a freelance, but is called to fellowship in the community of faith and to full participation in the life of the people of God. Those who theologise from within the church are more likely to theologise for the good of the church. Ideally theologians should be preachers, to try to ensure that their theology is preachable. I recall a visiting professor being asked by a frustrated class, 'How on earth do we preach this?' His reply was, 'That's your problem. I haven't been behind a pulpit in years.' We need to recover the tradition of the preacher-theologian, surely one of the glories of our Scottish heritage.

And third, it means a personal commitment *to vocation*. We ought to have the highest regard for theologians who see their work as a calling, and who do it all as to the Lord. It must sometimes be difficult to maintain this vision, especially in the under-resourced and over-stretched modern university, but theology really is a shoes-from-off-your-feet vocation. This sense of vocation will also ensure that devotion to Christ does not diminish commitment to scholarship, but precisely the opposite. The Christian theologian is always conscious of an ultimate Research Assessment Exercise, the quality assurance of the Day (1 Cor. 3:13). So reverence ensures rigour.

Canonical

The second great requirement for Christian theology is that it be *canonical*. My concerns can be expressed most simply in terms of three dimensions.

First, there is *depth*. Some scholars will give their lives to the exegesis of Scripture, devoting themselves to the most meticulous, in-depth examination of the biblical text, with the wealth of tools and methods available. We need these men and women before anyone else, because

everything depends on properly understanding the canonical Scriptures. The task never ends, because Scripture is inexhaustibly rich, and because 'perfect translation' is an oxymoron. As a preacher, my own favourite form of theological scholarship is the detailed commentary. Through such exegeses the Spirit dazzles us with new insights, and the familiar is constantly made fresh.

Then, there is *breadth*. When we speak about putting a passage in its biblical context, we need to bear in mind that the big context is that of the whole canon. There is unity throughout the diversity, there is one narrative behind the individual narratives, there is one theology embracing the theologies. So we need the scholars who will do the biblical theology, within each testament and then across both testaments, always exploring the bigger picture. If you ignore the story-line of Scripture then, theologically, you have lost the plot. All Christian theology should be canonical, founded on exegetical depth and biblical-theological breadth.

And, further, there is *height*. Scripture is the mountain range which must be allowed to dominate our theology. We speak of towering figures in theology and we acknowledge our incalculable debt to them, but Scripture must be allowed to tower over them all, to dwarf them. We sometimes even use the language of canon to describe key theological figures and texts, but we must privilege the one breathed canon over every other. The greatest theologian is only a subordinate standard, and he is only that as long as he is faithfully representing the supreme one. The words of the fathers must be judged by the Word of the Father.

Evangelical

The third requirement is that our theology be *evangelical*. My plea here is that true theology should always have the evangel at its heart, and that the gospel should inspire our reading, our reflecting and our going, each of the three intimately connected with the others.

In the first place, we should work with *an evangel-led hermeneutic* in our reading of Scripture. If Christian faith sees gospel-grace-in-Christ as the theme of the whole Bible, then the gospel should lead and shape our reading of the whole Bible. Here is reformed reading. If the Reformation was about the rediscovery of the evangel, then reading with gospel eyes is being faithful to our truest distinctive. Some will say this is a shallow and superficial reading, just staying with the basics, but that is to misunderstand completely. There can be nothing more profound than the trinitarian and covenantal gospel. Let's be evangelical readers, who hear the same gospelling God throughout Scripture.

Then, also, we should work at *an evangelical theology*. I mean by that a theology that allows the evangel, the good news, to be pervasive, to fill out the content and shape the contours of the whole system. Systematic theologians are hard at work on their theologies, each with a dominating idea or centre. Why not the gospel as the key to the project? Why not a kerygma-focussed theology for the twenty-first century? It would be a theology with a sense of perspective, as the evangel determined what was primary and what peripheral. It would also be a theology with heart, pumping oxygenated blood through the theological arteries!

And third, we should work out *an evangelistic theology*. That means a further move. This is a theology not simply shaped by the gospel, but shaped very specifically for the gospel, and for its communication today. So this is a missionary theology, which engages with a contemporary mindset and applies theology to a particular context. It will speak freshly into its own age, defending and commending the truth, and translating the unchanging gospel into the language and stories of the culture. Theology and mission are not divorced in Scripture, and so a missionary God calls theology to serve his mission to the world.

Communal

The fourth requirement is that theology be *communal*. It must be as ecumenical as grace, and should be pursued in fellowship within the communion of saints.

First of all, this theological communion is *across the ages*. The Holy Spirit has been active over the centuries, enriching the understanding of his Church. We neglect his work at our peril. So much has been achieved during nearly two millennia, and to ignore tradition betrays ignorance and ingratitude. An awareness of history can prevent us succumbing to the heresies of the past, recognising them even in disguise. And the wisdom of the past provides us with vocabulary, insights and formulations which we should not have to live without. All this great theological heritage is of most help to us when read as a commentary on Scripture.

Then, second, theological communion should be *across the disciplines*. Scholars in theological faculties and colleges will often bemoan how little academic conversation there is among their disciplines, and increasing specialisation threatens to make the situation worse. But there are also encouraging signs, in inter-disciplinary seminars and in various publishing ventures. For example, scholars are at work on a new series, *The Two Horizons Commentary*, which aims to integrate exegesis of the New Testament with contemporary systematic and practical theology. We await further news with interest, and ask for more of the same.

And last, theological communion today must be *across the cultures*. We need the perspectives of other Christians, in a cross-cultural theological enterprise. My first theological teacher, Andrew Walls, never tired of reminding us that the centre of gravity of the Christian world had shifted through the success of the modern missionary movement. Today the majority of the Lord's people live in the non-western world, and their churches continue to grow. I am ashamed of how little contemporary theology I read from outside my own western tradition. If we do not listen to one another, we are condemned to our cultural blinkers and blindspots.

Pastoral

The fifth and final requirement in these desiderata for Christian theology is that it be *pastoral*. That is an appeal for theologians to speak not just to one another, in their own languages, but to speak to those engaged in ministry within the local church, so that we might be given a theology with which to feed the people of God.

This theology will, in the first place, enable us to nourish *Christian spirituality*. The inner life is vital. I do not have a problem with the term 'spirituality', despite its pedigree, as long as it is theologically informed. But spirituality divorced from theology can become sinfully subjective and even self-indulgent. Good theology should be as spiritually edifying as bad theology can be spiritually damaging. We want our preaching so rooted in the right kind of theology that its fruit is seen in lives of theocentric spirituality, with people passionate about devotion and the disciplines.

Such theology will, in addition, enable us to guide *Christian discipleship*. The outward life is equally important. We want piety without pietism. Our teaching and counselling have to face up to the issues with which people wrestle in their complex worlds, and help them think and act Christianly in the dilemmas of contemporary life. So we need the help of biblical scholars and ethical theologians, as we seek to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches. The Bible is a book to be performed, and we have the privilege and responsibility of guiding some in that performance.

And then, finally, this theology will enable us to inspire *Christian hope*. There is a life to come, beyond the horizon of this one. The New Testament has none of the modern church's embarrassment about making too much of that future. Eternal realities put this short life in perspective. The glories to come are the decisive answer to the questions, longings and frustrations of experience here. Thus a futurist eschatology is crucial in theology, and in our preaching and pastoral care. We offer people the earth, a new one. That will be a world suffused with the worship of God, and one where his people will glorify and enjoy him forever.

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The new cosmos is surely the appropriate place for us to end! And the theme of doxology reminds us of where we started, with the theologian engaged in his or her task as a personal worshipper of Jesus Christ the Lord. The worshipping theologian has a vocation in this world that goes on into the next, for there will be no emeritus or emerita there. Exploration must continue forever, because the God whom we worship is inexhaustible. Doxology and theology will never be parted. After all, theology is worship seeking understanding.