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EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY VOLUME 43, NO 1, January 2019

# Evangelical Review of Theology

A Global Forum



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# Evangelical Review of Theology

## A Global Forum

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# Introduction: New Ideas

After nearly forty years of Christian experience, I sometimes struggle with lack of motivation for daily devotionals. I get the feeling that I've read the Bible so many times that there is nothing new to discover in another reading.

My response to that devilish impulse is to look for new ideas. Instead of just opening the Bible, I grab a devotional book or listen to a pastor online. In that way, I learn insights from another believer who may have seen something in Scripture that I never noticed.

This issue of *ERT* features articles that should stimulate readers with new ideas, even though some of them are derived from relatively old sources.

Brent Neely grabs hold of theologian Kevin Vanhoozer's creative concept of 'improvisation' and applies it to the apostles' actions at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. His approach sheds light on our ongoing task of applying a timeless message to changing cultures, as well as on the early church's use of the Old Testament.

Steven Boyer points out that Vaishnavism (the branch of Hinduism that venerates Vishnu) understands the concept of 'incarnation' in a manner that somewhat resembles Christianity. His exposition of Vaishnavism is enlightening in itself, but it also yields important observations about the significance of the Christian incarnation.

Hans-Georg Wuench, in a colourful article reprinted from *Verbum et Ecclesia*, demonstrates that African Christians do their theological work quite differently from traditional Western approaches, even when writ-

ing Bible commentaries. He finds their deeply personal interaction with the text and their emphasis on contemporary relevance quite refreshing.

The ideas featured in Thomas Schirrmacher's essay are not new, but are somewhat overlooked. He focuses on the contributions of German New Testament scholar Wilhelm Lütgert, whose ground-breaking analysis of the identity of the apostles' opponents, especially those lurking as the unnamed targets in many passages of Paul's letters, greatly affected how these issues are viewed today, more than eighty years after Lütgert's death.

Along with new ideas, we also need to be re-inspired by clear presentations of classic, timeless truths. In that vein, Thomas Johnson provides an updated version of his masterful synthesis (and mainly reconciliation) of Luther and Calvin's views on the relationship between law and gospel, first published in *ERT* about a decade ago.

Editors don't normally publish their own work, but I had space for one more article and my book chapter on an innovative Anglican seminary and its unanticipated global impact seemed to fit nicely. I don't expect any leftover space for at least the next four issues, as the WEA's Peirong Lin has structured an exciting set of topics coordinated with the WEA Theological Commission's agenda. See the call for papers on the next page.

Happy reading!—Bruce Barron

# Call for Papers

*The Evangelical Review of Theology* (ERT) is the WEA Theological Commission's journal. Beginning in 2019, we are seeking to more fully synthesize the content of ERT with the work of the Theological Commission by highlighting, in each issue, a theme related to topics that the Theological Commission is addressing. Accordingly, we are presenting a call for papers on four themes as listed below. Note the submission deadlines.

We invite articles based on these themes, although submissions on any other topics are still welcome. Submit them to editor Bruce Barron at [bruce.barron0@gmail.com](mailto:bruce.barron0@gmail.com). Questions may be directed to Peirong Lin, research coordinator for the WEA's Department of Theological Concerns, at [peironglin@worldidea.org](mailto:peironglin@worldidea.org).

## **Engagement and Dialogue with the Other** (April 2019 issue)

The Theological Commission is working on clarifying its terms of engagement within the broader Christian family, as well as with other world religions. We invite articles that explore the theme of theological engagement. This could include theological reflection on the understanding of engagement, dialogue and/or the other, case studies from particular cultural or national contexts, or historical accounts of engagement and dialogue. *Due date was 1 January 2019, but submissions in January will be considered if space remains.*

## **Theological Anthropology** (July 2019 issue)

The Theological Commission is working on clarifying its understanding of human sexuality. A holistic understanding of human sexuality is rooted in one's understanding of theological anthropology. We invite articles that dig deeply into issues of anthropology and human sexuality. How are human relationships characterized? How does sexuality influence relationships? How does culture influence understandings of anthropology and sexuality? *Due date 1 April 2019.*

## **Engagement in the Public Space** (October 2019 issue)

At the WEA, we seek to work with other international institutions like the UN as well as in many different government contexts. One important global trend today is the rise in nationalism in politics. Our faith impacts how we interact with the broader public. What does this mean for our theology? What kind of theological reflection is required in pluralistic, postmodern societies? Does one's theology change in the face of a nationalistic or closed government context? How should Christians live out their theologies in the public space? *Due date 1 July 2019.*

## **Theological Education** (January 2020 issue)

As evangelicals, we pride ourselves on taking the Bible seriously. At the same time, we live in a time that is different from biblical times. The world today is globalized and digitalized. How should these considerations influence our theological education? What is the role of higher criticism in theology? What is the place for contextual or systematic theology? *Due date 1 October 2019.*

# Kevin Vanhoozer's Theodramatic Improvisation and the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15

Brent Neely

In a well-known article, Andrew Walls asks the reader to imagine an extremely long-lived Martian anthropologist studying the 'earthly' phenomenon of Christianity over centuries and across the globe.<sup>1</sup> Walls's imaginative 'on the ground' descriptions of the extra-terrestrial social scientist's visits indicate a breathtaking extent of liturgical, theological, cultural and linguistic diversity among Christian faith communities, almost to the point of obscuring their shared Christian identity.

Indeed, the cultural, political, economic and even theological gaps among Christian groups around the world are stark—not only over time, but also in various locations in our own time. This variation testifies to the fact that, in terms of its lived expression, the Christian faith has undergone multiple rounds of change, variation and innovation since it emerged in Jerusalem two millennia

ago as a radical movement of Jews committed to Jesus as their risen Messiah. The undeniable diversity in Christian expression raises crucial questions about how to pursue authentic contextualization of the faith once delivered to all.

From its inception, the Gospel has continually traversed cultural and linguistic boundaries. Especially in the modern period, this has resulted in diverse developments across the spectrum of global churches as Christianity has become rooted in an ever-increasing array of local cultures. A diverse ecclesiastical panorama has emerged from the fraught and intricate dance between message and context as the gospel wends its way through history. Missteps are possible, but so too is a beautiful pattern that is both variegated and integrated, dynamic yet faithful to God's story.

Whence comes all this dynamism and creativity? Is there a stable identity? Where is the continuity among the churches? How do this vast newness and change in the Church interrelate with the inalterable truth from which its existence derives? And where might we look for guidance as

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew F. Walls, 'The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture', in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 3–15.

we seek to achieve faithful contextualization of the message amongst the world's countries and people groups?

## I. Acts 15, the Global Church, and Improvised Drama

One point of entry into these questions appears in Acts 15, which recounts decisions adopted by the so-called Jerusalem Council that unleashed seismic transformation in early Christianity.<sup>2</sup> As we consider those world-forming moves in ancient Judea, we turn to the insights of a contemporary theologian to help us frame and guide our quest.

'Theodrama' is the guiding paradigm that Kevin Vanhoozer applies to biblical interpretation, theological production, and the life and mission of the church. He affirms 'a canonic and hence christological principle, namely, that the Spirit speaking in Scripture about what God was/is doing in the history of Israel and climactically in Jesus Christ is the supreme rule for Christian faith, life, and understanding.'<sup>3</sup> Further, he 'views

the gospel as essentially dramatic, the Bible as a script, doctrine as theatrical direction, and the church as part of the ongoing performance of salvation.'<sup>4</sup>

In this essay, I apply elements of Vanhoozer's notion of theodrama to the narrative action of Acts 15, giving special attention to his use of the concept of *improvisation*. In this precise theological sense, improvisation does not mean unbounded innovation. Rather, it represents the creative but faithful contextualization or application of canonical truth to shifting cultural contexts. Vanhoozer explains that such improvisation is fully consonant with a stable orthodox identity.<sup>5</sup>

Vanhoozer uses the classic debate between Athanasius and Arius over the nature of Jesus as an illustration, pointing out that mere repetition of prior verbal formulations guarantees neither theological integrity nor relevance. 'The Arians could affirm Jesus' statement "The Father and I are one" (John 10:30)', Vanhoozer states, 'but it fell to Athanasius to explain what the words meant. *Homoousios* was Athanasius's "improved" response.'<sup>6</sup>

Vanhoozer's understanding of 'theodramatic improvisation' correlates in striking ways with the 'drama' of the Jerusalem Council. Acts 15 has featured frequently in discussions of global theologizing, contextualization, and the translation of the gospel across cultural, religious, or ethnic boundaries.<sup>7</sup> For Richard Longeneck-

<sup>2</sup> I assume the broadly reliable historicity of Luke's work. For a defense of this contested position, see Craig S. Keener, *Acts, An Exegetical Commentary*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), chapters 3–9, including the final section of chapter 6, 'Approaching Acts as a Historical Source'.

<sup>3</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "'One Rule to Rule Them All?' Theological Method in an Era of World Christianity', in Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland (eds.), *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 108. Vanhoozer's full statement on doctrine as 'theodrama' is found in *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster

John Knox Press, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Vanhoozer, 'One Rule', 109.

<sup>5</sup> Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 128.

<sup>6</sup> Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 128.

<sup>7</sup> Cynthia A. and David K. Strong, 'The Globalizing Hermeneutic of the Jerusalem Coun-



er, at the Jerusalem Council, 'James, it appears, voiced one of the greatest of all theological judgments, which at this point in God's dealing with humanity was one of the great turning points of redemptive history.'<sup>8</sup> Notwithstanding its unique role in the drama of salvation, Acts 15 is an exemplary, even foundational, case of the improvisation and contextualization that has been underway as theology has 'gone global' from the start.

For Vanhoozer, theology is oriented towards 'practical' wisdom (*sapientia* and *phronesis*) in the life of disciples. Given its relationship to lived experience in all its nuance, diversity, and tension, the rationale of the divine drama 'is as imaginative-intuitive as it is analytic-conceptual and ... theology's primary aim is to help disciples discern how best to "stage" the gospel of the kingdom of God in concrete situations'.<sup>9</sup> Scripture provides 'the script' which is to be lived out as the church 'performs' the Gospel on the world stage.<sup>10</sup>

In this sense, the narrative action

in Acts 15 is virtually a tailor-made exemplification of dramatic improvisation.<sup>11</sup> 'Improvisation is ... [the term] for the process of judging how to speak and act in new situations in a way that is both canonically and contextually fitting.'<sup>12</sup> For Vanhoozer, 'The best improviser is the one whose speech and action appear neither preplanned nor ad-libbed but rather fitting. Christian theologians improvise whenever their doctrinal directions appear fitting or obvious to one who fears God, to one whose reflex is to follow the Word in the Spirit of freedom.'<sup>13</sup> 'Improvising well requires both training (formation) and discernment (imagination).'<sup>14</sup>

For those committed to the authority of Scripture, the assumed overtones of the term 'improvisation' may well be alarming. But, as Vanhoozer points out, the problem here lies with the popular (mis)understanding of the concept and the failure to realize how improvisation, rightly understood, has been inherent in *all* theology, mission and translation, at least since the closing of the canon.

In the contextual adaptation of im-

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cial', in Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland (eds.), *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 127–39; Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think about and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 202–5. I will not address the complex and contested exegetical issues of the passage in complete detail.

<sup>8</sup> Richard N. Longenecker, 'Acts', in Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (eds.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 10, revised edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), Kindle Locations 27449–50.

<sup>9</sup> Vanhoozer, 'One Rule', 109.

<sup>10</sup> See Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 30–33.

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<sup>11</sup> This essay primarily engages with Vanhoozer's 'One Rule', along with *The Drama of Doctrine*. Vanhoozer does not provide a detailed overlay of the improvisation scheme onto Acts 15 in either work. Cf. *Drama of Doctrine*, 339, 440. From a different angle, in *Biblical Authority after Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016), Vanhoozer presents the Jerusalem Council as 'a paradigmatic case of what it means to practice *sola scriptura*' (p. 130; cf. 130–32).

<sup>12</sup> Vanhoozer, 'One Rule', 113; cf. *Drama of Doctrine*, 335–54.

<sup>13</sup> Vanhoozer, 'One Rule', 114.

<sup>14</sup> Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 337.

provisation, there is no question of abandoning truth. But for those who view theology as exclusively propositional and abstract, the intuition, discernment and oblique insight inherent to improvisation may be unsettling. Precisely these elements, however, are central to Luke's story.

In drama theory, improvisation begins with an 'offer', an initiative presented by some character in a shared scene. The offer is built on a preliminary assumption; offers are then either 'accepted' or 'blocked'. 'In accepting an offer, the actor says yes to the basic assumption. A block, by contrast, is "anything that prevents the action from developing".<sup>15</sup> The theodrama of the canon is the Church's operative assumption. Vanhoozer further states:

The most important offers that structure the ensuing play—'Let there be light'; 'Behold the Lamb of God'; 'For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works' (Eph. 2:10)—have already been made. The New Testament is replete with examples of people accepting offers—improvising—in ways that develop the action. The Jerusalem Council, for example, accepted the 'offer' that the covenant of Grace included the Gentiles.<sup>16</sup>

While improvising, good actors fruitfully go beyond merely accepting an offer; they may *overaccept* it. That is, they incorporate offers 'into a

larger story'. They are faithful to the big picture, maintain their own identity, and 'keep in mind the overall coherence of the developing theodrama' even as they respond to 'what is happening immediately around them'.<sup>17</sup>

Sometimes the word [of God in the biblical drama] is accepted, usually it is blocked; the divine improvisation continues regardless. God overaccepts even human blocking by incorporating it into the broader covenantal comedy. Even Israel's unbelief is overaccepted into the story, with the result—spontaneous but not discontinuous—that the Gentiles become part of the action too (Rom 9–11). The greatest divine improvisation is, of course, the incarnation, when the word of the Lord comes in a way that is different yet at the same time continuous with previous words.<sup>18</sup>

Another relevant concept here is 'reincorporation', one of the most important narrative skills in improvisation. Reincorporation involves reintegrating previously revealed material in a scene during its development or towards its closure. Reincorporation is not an exercise in autonomous free association or radical and random redirection; rather, the improviser engaging in this action is thoroughly 'committed to the play, to the other

<sup>15</sup> Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 339. Vanhoozer quotes from Keith Johnstone's work *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 1981), 97. On the process described in this paragraph, see *Drama of Doctrine*, 338–39.

<sup>16</sup> Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 339.

<sup>17</sup> Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 340.

<sup>18</sup> Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 341. 1 Sam 8, in which God grants a king to Israel, is another example of overaccepting—an improvised response that goes beyond the narrow confines of the initial offer ('Israel wants a king like the other nations'), incorporating the entire episode into a much greater narrative and purpose (God's designs for a Davidic redeemer).

players', and to the wholeness and unity of the drama.<sup>19</sup> As we will see, offers, acceptances, overaccepting and reincorporating are all prominent in the Jerusalem Council story.

In describing theologians as improvisers, we must stress that they are not freestyle, independent improvisers. Rather, they follow the lead of God the Author, Thespian and Improviser himself; he makes the offer. For Vanhoozer, in the canonical sweep of the salvation story, the lead offer is God's cosmic promise to Abraham (Gen 12; Rom 4:13).<sup>20</sup> 'The history of salvation is largely the history of divine improvisation on this covenantal theme.'<sup>21</sup> In Acts 15, we clearly perceive an initiating offer and an improvised response. In the unprecedented flow of Greek pagans into the Antioch congregation *without becoming Jewish proselytes*, God (and his missionaries) had radically interjected the 'new'; an offer was on the table (cf. Acts 11:19–26; 14:27; 15:3). The apostles and elders struggled, listened and responded; that is, they improvised.<sup>22</sup> Recognizing the Antioch mission to the Gentiles as the 'restoration of David's fallen tent'—now extending its sovereignty over the nations—was a grand move to overaccept and propel God's drama forward (Acts 15:16–18).

## II. Memory, Catholicity and Canon at the Jerusalem Improv

The disciple-theologian-actors are not called to a wilful, autonomous construction, even as they are called to improvise. Whatever the 'new' is in improvisation, it is not a heedless disavowal of what preceded. As Vanhoozer puts it:

Memory is actually more foundational for improvisation than originality. An improviser seeks not to innovate but to respond to the past ... for the future is formed out of the past. ... The difference between acting from a script and improvising is that the improviser is more dependent on what the other actors are saying and doing. This is especially the case when the action carried forward derives from the economy of the Triune God.<sup>23</sup>

This is precisely the story of Acts, a narrative propelled across the Roman world stage with unexpected twists and turns. The apostles display bold obedience, but on many occasions they are simply scrambling to keep up with the Actor's offers. Consider, for example, the apostles' somewhat fuzzy expectations until the Spirit appears at Pentecost; the sometimes negative nudges that the Spirit gives Paul's band in guiding their journey (e.g. Acts 16:6–7); or especially the engagement between Peter and Cornelius.

In Luke's earlier book, the paradoxical victory of the cross had been confirmed as the resurrection shredded the shroud of the old cosmos, ushering in the new creation. And

<sup>19</sup> Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 340 (cf. 339–40).

<sup>20</sup> Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 347.

<sup>21</sup> Vanhoozer, 'One Rule', 114.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 339.

<sup>23</sup> Vanhoozer, 'One Rule', 114.

then, in the immediate sequel, the would-be ambassadors of the new-creation gospel are told to wait (Acts 1:4)! God must move first; his people will improvise in response.

Although improvisation implies the emergence of something new, the *prior* activity of God sets the trajectory, even when that prior action has long been misunderstood. Throughout Acts, the Spirit leads in line with the covenantal promise granted to Abraham in eons past (cf. 3:24–26). Memory is vital in Antioch, in Jerusalem and in the mission to the nations. Thus the debate in Jerusalem invokes the memory of the Spirit's recent actions in Syria and Asia Minor (15:3–4, 12); of Peter's encounter with Cornelius years earlier (15:7–11); and, ultimately, of the divine deposit in the Scriptures and history of Israel (15:13–18).

A theodramatic expression of the Gospel in new scenarios entails surprise, contextual development, or even apophatic mystery. But it certainly does not mean a random abdication of authority to every new agenda or context. Vanhoozer's construal of the theodrama entails the Spirit, through Scripture, leading the assembled community. Therefore, improvisation in the theodramatic mission of the Church must be both canonical and catholic (universal). Perhaps today more than ever, vernacular theologies from across the world must contribute to this process, as catholic community is global community.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Vanhoozer, 'One Rule', 117–18. In personal communication, Vanhoozer advocated for further clarity (here and in theology generally) on the role of catholicity and also for correlating the universal with the local church in concrete rather than abstract ways.

In Syria and Asia Minor, God and the Antiochene community had been improvising on such a scale that an 'ecumenical' conference was necessary. This new expansion of the people of God—an incorporation into Messiah of Gentiles who had not taken on the 'yoke of Torah'—was shifting the ground beneath the feet of a church that understood itself as the renewed Israel of the latter days. God's bold offer led to considerable shaking and to 'no small dissension and debate' (Acts 15:2 NRSV). But a centrifugal fragmentation had to be resisted. Importantly, the shape of the theodrama is unified and catholic, so representatives of the whole spectrum (from those reaching out to Gentiles to the Hebraic old guard) convened at Jerusalem (15:2).

The tenor of theology forged in new contexts is improvisational. For the first-century church of Judea and Syria, the context that could not be ignored was the increasing number of non-Jews entering the fold of Israel's Messiah. The tectonic plates were sliding. Crucial to the deliberations were the remembered contexts of the ministries of Paul, Barnabas and Peter<sup>25</sup> wherein God had instigated new realities in physical, tangible, miraculous ways. But James then turned the

<sup>25</sup> Note Peter's impassioned speech in Acts 15:7–11. In effect he says: 'God gave these outsiders his own Spirit freely and directly. Who are we to quibble?' Indeed, Peter is rather provocative and totalizing as Luke presents him: God makes 'no distinction between us and them'; Jews and Gentiles are saved by Messiah's grace on the same terms; and resisters are 'testing God', and hypocritically at that (as they themselves have been less than comprehensive in bearing the yoke of Torah!)

assembly's focus to the holy writings. Again, the theodrama is *canonical*; it always requires the turn to Scripture. But in light of the new reality, improvisational hermeneutics would also be required.

### III. Improvisational

#### Hermeneutics at the Council

In globalizing theology, as faith crosses boundaries, fresh understandings of the canon emerge. The fact of a diverse world church, gathered around a shared canon, raises the question of interpretation. (For simplicity, I set aside the relatively minor differences between Christian traditions regarding the canon.) What is the form of a canonical, yet dynamic, hermeneutic? How is the word to be understood in unprecedented scenarios? What methods should be employed?

With regard to James's invoking of Scripture in Acts 15:15–18, David and Cynthia Strong point out that his method in appropriating Amos 9 (and other passages) contrasts substantially with the conventional historical-grammatical exegesis taught in American evangelical seminaries. They treat James's more 'rabbinic' technique as an example of a valid, though non-Western, hermeneutic—a hermeneutic still anchored in Scripture.<sup>26</sup>

Strong and Strong raise a valuable point, but there is more to be said. Whatever Hebraic contextual exegesis James may be engaged in (such as stringing together diverse biblical texts based on lexical triggers), beyond his method there is also a

meta-principle, a guardrail of sorts. This guardrail is the canon itself. To be more precise, exegetical method in Acts 15, and throughout the New Testament, is shaped by the drama of revelation contained in the canon of the Hebrew Scriptures and understood to have recently climaxed in the Christ-event.

The apostolic interpretation of the Prophets was certainly improvisational, but it did *not* consist of purely arbitrary lexical games or random method. In this regard, the larger context of Amos 9 may also be relevant to James's expanded interpretive horizon. For example, in Amos 9:7, the prophet's sharp rhetoric shockingly places Israel in the same basket with other nations of the world, near and far.<sup>27</sup> The early believers improvised their Bible reading in line with the arc of salvation-history, in light of the divine drama of the Gospel—the Christ-event that had broken in upon Israel now, at the end of the ages (cf. 1 Cor 10:11).

Given these extraordinary events that had been accomplished in the midst of the first-generation church (cf. Lk 1:1), for James to understand the Gentiles' embrace of the risen Jesus as the 'restoration of David's fallen tent' (Acts 15:16; Amos 9:11–12) was anything but a stretch; indeed, it was virtually inevitable.

The famous story of Akhnai's oven from the Babylonian Talmud (*Bava Metzia* 59b)<sup>28</sup> provides an illustrative

<sup>26</sup> Strong and Strong, 'Globalizing Hermeneutic', 131–32.

<sup>27</sup> See Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Bletchley, UK and Grand Rapids: Paternoster and Baker Academic, 2003), 67.

<sup>28</sup> *The Babylonian Talmud* (original text and English translation) is available at <https://www.sefaria.org/texts/Talmud>.

counterpoint to the scriptural hermeneutics of Acts 15. In Luke's account, Scripture is authoritative and context (i.e. the influx of Gentiles) must be evaluated in light of it; nevertheless, the context—the divine action in the world—pushes the believers towards an appropriation of God's word that is both *new and canonically faithful*. Together, by the Spirit, they come to a fresh understanding of God's previously unexpected action in the world and of how that action is consonant with, or even required by, his ancient, revealed truth. In the Talmudic story, on the other hand, not even miracles or heavenly voices can overcome an interpretation backed by traditional consensus; so settled is this point that God is in effect outdone by the rabbis. The interpreters trump the Author.

Of course, Acts and the Talmudic narrative are not comparable genres, and we must allow that the Talmud is speaking 'tongue-in-cheek'. But with regard to the dynamics of canon, community, and hermeneutical authority, the structural contretemps between the two stories is noteworthy.

The Hebrew Scriptures remained the unassailable authority for the Jerusalem messianic community. But that canon was understood as a coherent story line that had reached its climactic, surprising fulfilment in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus from Nazareth. The drama that explains the past, situates our present and directs the future is centred on the gospel about Jesus. Recall that reincorporation (or recapitulation) is essential to right improvising.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, 'one might say that the whole

New Testament is an improvisation upon the Old', entailing 'the recapitulation of all that has gone before in Jesus Christ' (cf. Lk 24:27; 2 Cor 1:20).<sup>30</sup>

This sense of improvisation between the testaments is not identical to, but is compatible with, Augustine's famous aphorism about the 'new concealed in the old; the old revealed in the new'.<sup>31</sup> Augustine, writing *Against Adimantus*, says that 'there is such strong prediction and preannouncement of the New Testament [in the Old Testament] that nothing is found in the teaching of the Evangelists and the apostles, however exalted and divine the precepts and promises, that is lacking in those ancient books'.<sup>32</sup>

In *On the Profit of Believing*, Augustine speaks of the underlying congruity between the Old and New Testaments, stating that the apparent disjunction lies only in the obscuring epistemological veil that obfuscates the reading of the Old Testament until that veil is removed in Christ (cf. 2 Cor 3:6–18).<sup>33</sup> In the wake of a dramatic improvisation in the Bible's 'Great Story', one's retrospective gaze may well lead to a sense that a veil has been lifted.<sup>34</sup> At the Jerusalem Coun-

<sup>30</sup> Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 341.

<sup>31</sup> I am grateful to Dr Tite Tiénou for reminding me of this Augustinian notion. The phrase is said to come from *Questions in the Heptateuch* 2.73 (which I have not been able to access).

<sup>32</sup> Iain Provan, *The Reformation and the Right Reading of Scripture* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017), Kindle Locations 1039–41, citing *Against Adimantus* 3.4.

<sup>33</sup> Augustine, *On the Profit of Believing/De Utilitate Credendi*, [www.newadvent.org/fathers/1306.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1306.htm) (paragraph 9 on the 'veiling' issue).

<sup>34</sup> Iain Provan sometimes refers to (a sum-

<sup>29</sup> Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 339–40, 388–89.

cil, the dynamic and redemptive intervention of Jesus in his world (well beyond Jewish boundaries) drove the disciples back upon Scripture, in dependence on the living Spirit, in such a way that they saw with new eyes. The path forward would be discovered not by syllogistic deduction but by wise discernment as a faithful community improvised within the drama.

#### IV. Canon and Context

Acts 15 exemplifies mission in fresh cultural context and provides a sort of live video clip of *canonical* theodramatic interpretation.

Scripture governs theology not by providing the field from which we harvest abstract universals, but *by embodying truths of transcultural significance in particular contexts*. ... What ought to govern the play of theology in other times and places [is] the cultural-linguistic patterns of Scripture itself, *not* because those ancient cultures are authoritative but because the judgments that come to specific cultural-linguistic expression in them are. ... [The canon authoritatively] constrains but does not exhaustively determine how we participate in the theo-drama today. We are still in the realm of *phronesis*.<sup>35</sup>

Faithful improvisation entails not *contextualism* ('the view that everything we say is determined by and relative to a particular context') but

a *contextualizing* 'that recognizes the cultural clothing of our speech and action but does not necessarily deny their transcontextual significance'.<sup>36</sup> David Bosch critiques a sort of hyper-ideological contextual theology that, in a sense, sets the context *above* the text: 'It isn't the facts of history that reveal where God is at work, but the facts illuminated by the gospel. According to *Gaudium et Spes* 4, the church, in reading the signs of the times, is to interpret them *in the light of the gospel*.' Bosch further asserts, 'We may not, however, without ado convert the context into the text.' For Bosch, the '*theologia localis* should ... challenge and fecundate the *theologia oecumenica*, and the latter, similarly, [should] enrich and broaden the perspective of the former.'<sup>37</sup>

At the Jerusalem Council we see what Vanhoozer calls a critical or disciplined contextualization—that is, a 'genuinely contextual theology [which] is accountable both to the theodrama (and hence to canonical texts) and to the contemporary situation'.<sup>38</sup> Timothy Tennent construes the outcomes of Acts 15 as 'a generous compromise';<sup>39</sup> while I acknowledge his observation, for our purposes the stronger resonance of 'faithful improvisation' is a more fitting term than 'compromise' for the contextual theology that emerged in Jerusalem.

Vanhoozer calls for 'creative fidelity' in theological production, a pro-

mary of) the narrative flow of the canon as 'the Great Story.' See e.g. Provan, *The Reformation*, Kindle Locations 1063-69.

<sup>35</sup> Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 348 (emphasis in original).

<sup>36</sup> Vanhoozer, 'One Rule', 118.

<sup>37</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, 20th anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 422, 491, 420.

<sup>38</sup> Vanhoozer, 'One Rule', 114.

<sup>39</sup> Tennent, *Theology in the Context*, 204.

duction executed in subjection to the canon. This is a fidelity in which the identities of Scripture, of the story, and of the God and people of that story remain stable and continuous. Yet new enactments of theological truth appropriate to a new time and place are fleshed out. Throughout time, the Gospel is transmitted, translated and expressed in changed ways, in changed contexts—all this with faithfulness to the judgements or ‘communicative action’ of the canonical theodrama. In faithful improvisation the *same* gospel, not another gospel, is handed on.<sup>40</sup>

As the message is translated into new contexts, the church and its theology are contextualized or, perhaps more precisely, enculturated. This is not merely an expansion of the church, but the Church ‘being *born anew* in each new context and culture’.<sup>41</sup> Necessarily, productively, and by design, tensions remain throughout the process of mission and enculturation, always and everywhere—even in the Western world. Again, the Spirit forms, challenges and critiques local expressions of the *ekklesia* by means of canon and (catholic) community.

The Church can be conceptualized as a ‘universal hermeneutical community, in which Christians and theologians from different lands check one another’s cultural biases’.<sup>42</sup> The

‘local’ may celebrate its distinctiveness, but not in isolation, for ‘any theology is a discourse about a universal message’.<sup>43</sup> The Gospel is both vitally at home in *and* incisively at odds with *every* people and place. In Andrew Walls’s formulation, the dialectic tension between the ‘indigenizing’ and ‘pilgrim’ principles is constant.<sup>44</sup>

Certainly, theological understanding of Scripture must not and cannot be ‘confined to the past’. Even translation involves interpretation, or perhaps improvisation.<sup>45</sup> Historical-critical sensitivity to the original context of the biblical text is vital, but it does not constitute the whole theological process; if it were, then theology would be reduced to perpetual ‘duplication’.<sup>46</sup> This is not how improvisational drama works. ‘Though the church’s script is sufficient, it is not enough simply to repeat one’s lines when the cultural scene changes.’<sup>47</sup>

But the equal and opposite defect is an interpretation that cuts the interpreter off from the authority of the past and of the text by a totalizing commitment to the contemporary context or regnant ideology. This is,

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1985, 16.

<sup>43</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 15th anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), xxxvi. This and the previous sentence are drawn from Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 450, who quotes Hiebert and Gutiérrez.

<sup>44</sup> Walls, ‘The Gospel as Prisoner’, 7–9.

<sup>45</sup> Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 351; cf. 129–33.

<sup>46</sup> Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 351, with reference to Mikhail Bakhtin, ‘Response to a Question from the *Novy Mir* Editorial Staff’, in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 7.

<sup>47</sup> Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 336.

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<sup>40</sup> Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 127–33. Vanhoozer helpfully employs Ricoeur’s distinction between two kinds of ‘sameness’, *idem*-identity (brittle, duplicative) and *ipse*-identity (dynamically faithful) (pp. 127–28).

<sup>41</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 447; cf. 445–50.

<sup>42</sup> Paul Hiebert, ‘The Missiological Implications of an Epistemological Shift’, *Theological Students Fellowship Bulletin* (May–June),



among other things, a failure to faithfully remember; it is, rather, to engage in 'blocking'.

A move in either direction, then, distorts and misappropriates Scripture by seeking to entrap it within either the ancient or current epoch. The 'canon itself avoids both mistakes. It neither leaves earlier texts in their own epochs nor distorts what they were originally about. On the contrary: later biblical texts reincorporate the earlier material. They translate; they improvise.'<sup>48</sup> They are 'creative'.<sup>49</sup>

The Jerusalem Council faithfully *and also freshly* read God's script and then improvised. James and the Jerusalem band were creative in multiple ways:

- in their catholic incorporation of all the relevant actors—apostles, leaders, advocates and complainants;
- in their reference to recent actions of accepting offers, remembering and reincorporating, such as Peter's experience with Cornelius;
- in their submission to the Spirit, the Director (Acts 15:8, 28); and
- in their reference to the canon of Scripture—remembering, reincorporating and overaccepting in light of the 'Big Play'.

## V. Conclusion

Thanks to developments in the global South, we now realize that *all* theology is essentially mission-

ary theology, arising out of the need to translate and incarnate the gospel in and into particular cultural settings. Just as important is the renewed consciousness that theology is something that is lived. Doctrinal truth must be not only systematized but also *shown*; stated, yes, but also staged and even suffered.<sup>50</sup>

Theology without discipleship is fatally deficient. Christian truth is to be 'performed'; it is dramatic. A critical aspect of the dramatic paradigm of Scripture, with its climax in the story of Jesus, is the virtue of faithful theological improvisation. And, in faithful mimesis, 'the task of systematic theology is to train actors with good improvisatory judgment, actors who know what to say and do to perform and advance the gospel of Jesus Christ in terms of their own cultural contexts.'<sup>51</sup>

The expansion, development, and multi-directional movement of the church in mission engender and require ever-new theologizing. But for this church to remain recognizably the one *ekklesia* of Jesus, the pulsing energy of myriad contextual theologies must be channelled canonically, by the Spirit of Jesus, in a shared universality. The resulting catholicity 'is not a "colorless uniformity" but a coat of many threads and many colors'.<sup>52</sup>

The canonical template of faithful improvisation itself exerts a sort

<sup>48</sup> Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 351.

<sup>49</sup> Each term is a potential pitfall. Vanhoozer points out that this faithful creativity is *not* a creation *ex nihilo* (*Drama of Doctrine*, 351).

<sup>50</sup> Vanhoozer, 'One Rule', 122–23.

<sup>51</sup> Vanhoozer, 'One Rule', 121.

<sup>52</sup> Vanhoozer, 'One Rule', 118, referring to Shoki Coe, 'Contextualization as the Way toward Reform', in *Asian Christian Theology: Emerging Themes*, edited by J. Elwood (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1980), 48–55.

of normative pressure on the church in mission throughout history. Consider, for example, the famous conciliar creeds, promulgated during a time of dramatic expansion of the early church. Vanhoozer terms them 'theodramatic discoveries' worthy of respect.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, mission, and thus translation, contextualization and improvisation continue today in all Christian contexts. As Craig Ott states:

[We may] affirm that theological formulations in the Western tradition are no less true in Africa or Asia than they are in Europe or America. However, they are not necessarily equally relevant, understandable, or adequate in all contexts. Nor are such formulations exhaustive. Here is where theological insights from non-Western perspectives hold so much promise. They open the door not necessarily for *alternative* but rather for fuller theological understanding.<sup>54</sup>

The fateful Jerusalem Council, occurring two decades after the resurrection, grappled with fundamental crises of ecclesiology, theology, ethics and salvation as a radical Jewish renewal movement was confronted with a wave of Gentiles entering the

Messiah's fold. What was God doing? Who are the people of God and how are they constituted? The new covenant represents a theological *tour de force* in which consummate pagans were, by faith, swept into the company of the chosen, alongside believing Hebrews. As Bosch observes, this is the epitome of contextual theology, 'holding together in creative tension *theoria*, *praxis* and *poiesis*—or, if one wishes, faith, hope, and love'; such is 'the missionary nature of the Christian faith, which seeks to combine the three dimensions'.<sup>55</sup>

Andrew Walls speaks of the early church's move towards incorporating Jews and Gentiles into one body as a fleeting but critical watershed for subsequent church history; he then contends that today's globalized church is poised on the cusp of another such defining 'Ephesian moment'.<sup>56</sup> The epochal decisions emerging from the drama of Acts 15 constitute a Spirit-breathed improvisation, the redemptive consequences of which have echoed down the centuries. Their consequences echo even today as the theodrama continues on its globalizing arc.

53 Vanhoozer, 'One Rule', 119.

54 Craig Ott, 'Conclusion: Globalizing Theology', in Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland (eds.), *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 315.

55 Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 424.

56 Andrew Walls, 'The Ephesian Moment', in *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 72–81, available online at [www.calvin.edu/admin/provost/multicultural/documents/ephesian\\_moment.pdf](http://www.calvin.edu/admin/provost/multicultural/documents/ephesian_moment.pdf).

# Incarnations, Christian and Hindu: Christology in Conversation with Vaishnavism

Steven D. Boyer

## I. Introduction: Learning Christianity by Means of Hinduism

The contemporary discipline of comparative theology is often pursued in a way that would seem incompatible with core evangelical commitments. But the work of understanding a religious tradition different from ours on its own terms as a means of understanding our own tradition better has much to commend it. In particular, confidence in the Christian gospel can be bolstered as we examine strikingly similar teachings in other faiths and thereby see the distinctiveness and winsomeness of our own teaching more clearly.

Toward that end, this essay looks at Hindu and Christian understandings of ‘incarnation’, considering the classical Christian teaching in light of Indian concepts that are often regarded as similar to it. We will look specifically at the branch of Hinduism known as Vaishnavism—that is, Hindu devotion to the god Vishnu—since most (though not quite all) talk about incarnations among Hindus comes

from this source.

As many readers may be unfamiliar with the history and theology of Hinduism, I wish to begin by removing one common misconception. It is often assumed that similarities regarding a single notion like ‘incarnation’ will inevitably prove inconsequential in light of the much larger dissimilarities between Christianity and Hinduism as comprehensive religious outlooks. There is some truth to that point, but Hinduism is an extraordinarily diverse phenomenon, and so it matters very much which particular tradition one is considering. There exist vibrant, sophisticated expressions of classical Hinduism (for example, the popular school of thought known as Visistadvaita Vedanta, or ‘qualified nondualism’, that originated with the eleventh-century Vaishnavite saint Ramanuja) that are explicitly and unequivocally monotheistic (not monistic or polytheistic); rooted in *bhakti*, or personal love and devotion (rather than in *jnana*, knowledge or philosophy); and utterly dependent on the gracious initiative of God (rather than on human spiritual

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attainment). This God-loving, grace-based version of Hinduism may surprise some of us, for it comes much closer to the ordinary intuitions of historic Christianity than we might have expected.<sup>1</sup>

For the purposes of the present essay, it is especially significant that this more user-friendly expression of Hinduism is not similar to Christianity in only a vague, generic way. Rather, Vaishnavism is intensely committed to a doctrine of incarnation. More specifically, it frequently expresses its teaching about a personal God and a saving love using the important and rather technical language of *avatars*.

This word has become widely known in the West, though often in contexts I can't imagine a Hindu holy man approving. The term itself derives from Sanskrit roots that mean 'to cross (over)' and 'down'. Hence, Hindus use the term to refer not, of course, to personas in virtual technology, but to the 'descent', 'manifestation' or 'incarnation' of a deity in recognizable, embodied form.

For Vaishnavite Hindus, the loving initiative of God is concretely expressed in exactly this way: God himself (Vishnu) enters our world for us and for our salvation. What are we to make of this surprising parallel between Christianity and Hinduism?

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<sup>1</sup> For more on Ramanuja, see the fine discussion by Julius Lipner in *The Face of Truth: A Study of Meaning and Metaphysics in the Vedantic Theology of Ramanuja* (Albany, SUNY Press, 1986), especially chap. 7. Some aspects of Ramanuja's teaching would require further exploration (beyond the scope of this essay) to consider the extent of their similarity to Christianity.

## II. One Revelatory Incarnation or Many?

As is generally known, standard Hindu doctrine affirms multiple avatars or incarnations, each of which is an occasion for the overflow of divine favour into a broken world; by contrast, the Christian doctrine speaks of only one incarnation, the unequivocally final coming of Jesus Christ into our midst. This difference regarding the number of incarnations is an apt place to begin, because its significance is sometimes thought to be self-evident, as if simply declaring that 'they have many incarnations, but we have only one' clearly and obviously explains what distinguishes the two approaches.

But I'm not sure that the significance is really so clear and obvious. What exactly is at stake here? *Could* there be more than one incarnation, on Christian grounds? Interestingly, no less a Christian luminary than Thomas Aquinas thought so. He maintained that, in actual fact, there was only one incarnation, but he saw no reason to deny that there could be more than one if God so desired.<sup>2</sup>

This way of thinking is, of course, somewhat shocking to us (and I frank-

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<sup>2</sup> See *Summa Theologia* iii, 3, 7. For reflection on the significance of Aquinas's speculations for evaluating the differences between Christian and Hindu approaches to incarnation, see Noel Sheth, 'Hindu *Avatara* and Christian Incarnation: A Comparison', *Philosophy East and West* 52, no. 1 (January 2002): 107; Julius Lipner, 'Avatara and Incarnation?' in David C. Scott and Israel Selvanayagam (eds.), *Re-visioning India's Religious Traditions: Essays in Honour of Eric Lott* (Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, for the United Theological College, Bangalore, 1996), 131.

ly have no idea what some of Aquinas's odd speculations on this topic actually amount to), but the point is that the difference in number may not be conceptually absolute. The Bible speaks of just one incarnation, and that settles the matter both for Aquinas and for us. But could there have been more? What is gained or lost by the Christian insistence on the singularity of Christ's incarnation?

We may be tempted to think that the justification for a single incarnation grows out of the finality of the revelation that Jesus provides, since the Bible states clearly that Jesus represents the full, complete revelation of God (cf. Heb 1). Yet it is hard for this claim to stand on its own theologically without some other line of argument undergirding it. From a Hindu point of view, it seems simply absurd to imagine that a single, finite image could decisively capture the infinite mystery of God. Wouldn't an infinite series of diverse images get at the incomprehensible truth more effectively? If we think of Jesus primarily as a revelation, then it could be quite reasonable to conclude that our preoccupation with Jesus alone is regrettably narrow.

In fact, this apparent narrowness has prompted some Christian theologians to expand the Christian vision precisely by supplementing it with insights that come from (among other places) Vaishnavism. I do not endorse this move, but its logic is very instructive.

For example, Lutheran theologian Kristin Largent advocates what might be called a mutual enrichment model for drawing together Vaishnavite and Christian approaches to God. In her book *Baby Krishna, Infant Christ*, she argues that Hindu images of

Krishna's childhood playfulness can enrich Christian devotion to Jesus. She writes, "The young Krishna does not desire to be worshiped in awe, nor does he desire to be feared; instead, Krishna desires that his devotees enter into an intimate relationship of pure love and devotion with him, modeled on the [relationship] a mother has with her child."<sup>3</sup>

Largent does not mean to reject images of God that involve awe and fear; rather, we can accept them alongside their Hindu counterparts. Thus we end up with two different sets of images (Christian and Hindu), which together reveal God in richer ways because of their complementary nature.

Note the emphasis here on how the images *reveal* God. If we think of incarnation primarily as a mode of revelation, then this wider, more comprehensive account of that revelation can hardly be objected to.

### III. The Nature of a Hindu Incarnation

We will return to the emphasis on revelation in a moment, for it will help us to understand not only why there can be more incarnations in Hinduism than in Christianity, but also why Hindu incarnations have their particular character. But first we need to ask explicitly: what is that character? What does it mean for Vaishnavites to speak of an incarnation?

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<sup>3</sup> Kristin Johnston Largent, *Baby Krishna, Infant Christ: A Comparative Theology of Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 50. For related observations about Christian and Hindu practice, but without the same syncretistic overtones, see Sheth, 'Hindu Avatara', 122, note 74.

We can begin by correcting a simple mistake. Some Christians have imagined the various avatars in Hinduism to be docetic 'appearances' or 'projections' of Brahman, not 'real' in any significant sense. But the sacred texts of Hinduism (most prominently the *Bhagavad Gita*, where the doctrine of avatars first makes an unambiguous appearance) and the classical commentaries on those texts show without a doubt that the avatars are, in fact, real embodiments that have real effects on the world.<sup>4</sup>

In the *Gita*, the avatar is Krishna, the charioteer and counsellor for the befuddled warrior Arjuna, who is wrestling with how to fulfil his religious duty in a world gone mad. Krishna does not simply pop into Arjuna's visual field like Hamlet's ghost; rather, he is a regular character in the story. He is born, grows up, eats and drinks, drives a chariot and even dies. There is every indication that this is a real, concrete embodiment, one (the *Gita* says) that includes 'material nature' (*prakṛti*).

Even for the famous eighth-century Hindu monist Sankara, whose interpretation of Hinduism is well-known in the West and would make the docetic claim appear supremely plausible, this avatar is every bit as real as his environment (though the entire environment is not real in any

unqualified sense). For Ramanuja and the rest of Hinduism's non-monist tradition, it is all the more certain that Krishna is real.

But the reality of the incarnation is not the whole story; there are still at least four important differences between Krishna and ordinary mortals like Arjuna and us. First and most obviously, Krishna is divine. He is the great God Vishnu, whom foolish people overlook when they gaze upon the manifestation (the physical embodiment) and fail to recognize the higher essence.

Second, Krishna has taken his current form not (like ordinary mortals) as a result of the inexorable workings of karma, but by his own free decision and power, which suggests that his entire existence is not quite like ours; it is sovereign, free, unconstrained.<sup>5</sup>

Third, the actual matter of Krishna's body may differ from our own. I say that it *may* differ because, in fact, the Vaishnavite tradition is mixed on this point. There is some indication in the *Gita* itself that Krishna has an ordinary material body like Arjuna's, but many in the tradition (most notably Ramanuja himself) say that Krishna's material form is derived from a

4 See the seminal work of Geoffrey Parrinder, *Avatar and Incarnation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 119. For a similar discussion, see Lipner, 'Avatara and Incarnation?' 138; Sheth, 'Hindu Avatara', 108. For a different (and unconvincing) conclusion, see Robert W. Stevenson, 'The Concept of Avatara in Ancient and Modern Commentaries on the *Bhagavadgita*', *Journal of Studies in the Bhagavadgita* 3 (1983): 61.

5 Lipner maintains ('Avatara and Incarnation?' 137) that this difference between Krishna and ordinary human mortals makes the Vaishnavite account fundamentally different from orthodox Christianity's account of Jesus, since Jesus is said to be fully human, like us in every way except for sin. But the phrase 'except for sin' strikes me as doing exactly the same theological work for Christians that Krishna's freedom from karmic determination does for Hindus. So I would argue that this is actually a parallel between the Vaishnavite and Christian accounts, not a significant difference.

pure and divine kind of 'matter' that is unique to the deity.<sup>6</sup> We need not resolve that question here.

Finally, Krishna has no human soul or spirit; he is simply Vishnu. In this respect, the Vaishnavite teaching is somewhat reminiscent of fourth-century Apollinarianism in Christianity (the 'God in a body' Christology, where Jesus is understood as fully divine on the inside but with a physical body like ours on the outside).

#### IV. The Purpose of a Hindu Incarnation

Whatever we make of the various details, all these points indicate that the divine Self of the avatar dominates the Hindu portrayal. Krishna, for all his involvement in ordinary life events like chariot driving, is always presented as displaying what Geoffrey Parrinder describes as a kind of transcendent divine 'aloofness'.<sup>7</sup> He is interested in our world; he comes to instruct and aid us in our weakness; hence, he willingly takes part in our little drama—yet he is never subject to it.<sup>8</sup>

In this respect, as many people have pointed out, the avatar is not

unlike the theophanies of the Old Testament. Consider the three men who appear to Abraham in Genesis 18, or the mysterious figure who appears to Samson's parents in Judges 13. In such stories, a certain human ordinarieness is initially presupposed in the figures, but they turn out to be not human at all in any serious sense—and once their special, divine character becomes known, no one is interested in the human ordinarieness at all. When Jacob realizes that he has been wrestling with God in Genesis 32, he fears for his life, but he never stops to marvel theologically that deity and humanity have come together in a permanent hypostatic union. On the contrary, once deity is revealed, supposed humanity is forgotten altogether. It is not even a subject of speculation, for the reality of God relativizes all such considerations.

Hinduism follows this same line of thought, and insofar as Hindu incarnations can be viewed as parallel to Old Testament theophanies, the approach seems sensible. Like Old Testament Jews, Vaishnavites happily celebrate a multitude of instances of God appearing among us, a multitude of so-called 'incarnations', that are (in the words of Richard De Smet) 'not hypostatic, but manifestative, or ... instrumental'.<sup>9</sup> God does not *become* a man; instead, he shows himself *as* a man, and in this way he is present among us to provide what we need, namely a revelation of God or of God's truth that can restore the cosmic order (*dharma*) whenever ignorance

6 See Steven Tsoukalas, 'Krishna and Christ: The Body-Divine Relation in the Human Form', in Catherine Cornille (ed.), *Song Divine: Christian Commentaries on the Bhagavad Gita* (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 152–53.

7 Parrinder, *Avatar and Incarnation*, 226. Lipner agrees: 'In the Krishna-narratives, the divinity of Krishna is often barely containable' (*'Avatara and Incarnation?'* 138).

8 Lipner succinctly makes a perfect contrast with Christianity: 'Krishna could not be a Man of Sorrows in the way Jesus was perceived to be, and has never been thus described' (*'Avatara and Incarnation?'* 138).

9 Richard De Smet, 'Jesus and the Avatara', in Jerald Gort, Hendrik Vroom, Rein Fernhout, and Anton Wessels (eds.), *Dialogue and Syncretism: An Interdisciplinary Approach* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 159.

and corruption and evil have grown strong enough to threaten it seriously.

Of course, this deliverance is only local, not universal, but Vaishnavites (like Old Testament Jews) are content with that, at least for the moment. God's coming among us at all is an event to be celebrated; one doesn't necessarily assume that its effects will last long in the cosmic scheme of things. The truth is reaffirmed, to be sure, but the people who have seen the truth will all too soon wander back into their blindness. The frightful disaster is averted and we are at peace, but only until the next potential disaster looms on the horizon. The marvellous appearances of God offer great instruction and comfort and even rescue to God's people, but they do not provide ultimate rescue, for Hindus any more than for Jews. They do not finally, decisively, unequivocally change things.

And on the Hindu account, we see *why* they do not unequivocally change things: it is because the world does not need final, unequivocal change. The world is a troubled place, no doubt, but that trouble can be addressed and escaped if we follow good instructions in order to penetrate the veil that has fallen over our minds. The wheel of karma has captured us, and its power needs to be broken, but it *can* be broken by understanding the ultimate nature of things more fully.

An 'incarnation', according to this view, simply reveals that ultimate nature. It reveals God's kindness and love, and it reveals our own deepest nature as well. When we have seen wickedness all around us for so long that we ourselves have begun to copy and internalize it, then God manifests himself to point out the lie, renew our failing vision, and draw us back into

the union of love proper to a Creator and his creatures.

This is a lovely vision in many ways, and Christians can affirm large swaths of it. But Christians who know their early church history also remember the great champion of a similar understanding of the nature of brokenness in our world. That champion was a fifth-century British monk named Pelagius, who steadfastly insisted that believers must learn to recognize the evil in the world and separate themselves from it—and that they *can* recognize it and separate from it, with the help of God's gracious instruction. Christians, led by the indomitable Augustine, found much that was true in this teaching, but also a fatal optimism about human nature that could not be sustained either by Scripture or by human experience.

According to the historic Christian view, human brokenness runs deeper than Pelagius thought; it runs into the very nature of our humanity. As Parrinder has noted,<sup>10</sup> however strong Hindus believe the chain of karma to be, however difficult it may be to break, it is never understood as entailing a comprehensive Fall that corrupts the whole human person. Yet this is exactly what Christians insist upon.

## V. The Distinctiveness of Christ's Incarnation

It is in light of this large-scale problem that Christians understand the nature and role of God's incarnation in Christ. Where Hinduism offers a 'manifestative' or instrumental understanding of incarnations, in which

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<sup>10</sup> Parrinder, *Avatar and Incarnation*, 238.



God appears in human form or adopts human features to accomplish certain short-term objectives, Christianity speaks very self-consciously of the hypostatic union of deity and humanity in Christ. God truly becomes man, though without ceasing to be the fulness of the eternal God, and this unprecedented union permits two impossible things to happen, both of which lie utterly outside the imagination of Hindu teachers and seers.

First, when God becomes a man, *he suffers and dies*. Jesuit Indologist Noel Sheth argues that this element constitutes what is 'uniquely Christian' about the Christian view of the Incarnation.<sup>11</sup> God becomes astonishingly subject to the conditions of this sinful world, in such a way as to overcome the deep liability that humanity incurred by violating the very character of reality.

This part of the human problem is what we Christians refer to as *guilt*, which makes humanity subject to divine wrath. This part of the solution may be summarized in the breathtakingly simple word *atonement*. An unimaginable exchange has taken place to allow the Creator to bear the guilt of his creatures, to allow the Moral Lawgiver to receive the punishment for moral lawlessness. The paradoxes here can be piled to the sky, but the basic fact is that *the living God dies on behalf of sinners*. No wonder Paul describes this as a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Greeks, yet to us the power and wisdom of God.

Second, not only does God become a man to suffer and die, but he then *rises from the dead precisely as a man*,

thereby doing something shocking to human nature itself. Christ is the beginning, the 'firstfruits', of a much larger program, and those who are united with him are in for quite a ride.

The Athanasian Creed famously declares that deity and humanity become one in Christ 'not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking of the manhood into God'. Redemption is not simply a return to innocence; eschatological humanity is something higher and greater than unfallen humanity had been. We are reminded that the eternal God has accomplished something unimaginable: he has drawn a mere creature, a mere image, a mere reflection into his own eternal reality. We become, in the words of 2 Peter 1:4 (KJV), 'partakers of the divine nature' in Christ.

Sin's penalty is paid and sin's power is broken precisely because the nature of the one penalized, the nature of the one in bondage, has now been united forever to the personal righteousness and power of God himself. Those who are in Christ are no longer merely themselves. In the marvel of God's gracious work, they are drawn into the very life of God. The broken puppet Pinocchio is not merely mended; he becomes a real boy.

Thus we come, via a rather roundabout route, to be reminded of what Christians have always believed, and perhaps also to see its significance more clearly by contrast with its Hindu competitors. We might have thought that Hinduism, with its talk of multiple divine incarnations and of Atman being the same as Brahman and so forth, was presenting too lofty a picture of divine-human interaction. But it is not so; in fact, almost the reverse is true.

Clearly, the monistic Hinduism of

<sup>11</sup> Sheth, 109 (cf. 111, 115). See also Parinder, *Avatar and Incarnation*, 213.

Sankara, with its unrelenting insistence that 'all is Brahman', keeps its adherents from grasping even what it means to say that a true creature becomes a partaker of the divine nature. With no real doctrine of creation, everything intrinsically partakes of the divine nature, and so Sankara's notion of salvation ends up being a rather ho-hum affair. Nothing really changes, ever.

The monotheistic Hinduism of Ramanuja, by contrast, does have a real doctrine of creation, and so we expect salvation in this view to have something more of a Christian feel to it. And it does, after a fashion; something *does* change. For Ramanuja, forgiveness and restoration are obtained through a combination of sheer personal grace on God's side and intense love and gratitude on the human side. This is real forgiveness and real restoration, and that's good. Yet from the Christian vantage point, it is still *mere* forgiveness and *mere* restoration; both are simply revealed, *not unimaginably achieved*. It is a forgiveness without the staggering anomaly of God's atoning death, and a restoration that involves merely a return to innocence, not a hypostatic union between creatures and their Creator.

## VI. Conclusion: Remembering What We Know

The real power of the Christian vision of the God-man becomes clearest right here, when contrasted with a tame, sensible, reasonable alternative like that offered by Hinduism. The Vaishnavite account shows God whittling himself down to our size, so that we can understand him and benefit from his presence; what is more sensible than that?

But the Christian account turns this on its head. God does not just appear among men but rather becomes a man, to do things for and to humanity that are frankly scandalous. A more serious human disease required a more radical treatment, and so God did not just provide a perfect law (as Judaism holds) or an ideal prophet (as Islam contends). He did not even just come himself and appear among us, as Hinduism holds (in line with the Old Testament theophanies). Instead, the eternal God sweeps into creation to take human nature upon himself, to link human nature permanently to the divine nature in a hypostatic union, and thereby to redeem as well as to remake humanity. This is the colossal achievement that the incarnation in its distinctive Christian sense offers.

I do not view Hinduism in general, or Vaishnavism in particular, as self-contradictory or ridiculous. On the contrary, the Hindu outlook seems to me to make very good sense. If anything, it is the Christian vision that does not make (ordinary) sense. Instead, it involves what Christians have always very intentionally referred to as a mystery, and a mystery as vast and luminous as the incarnation ought to shock us. But we Christians tend to become accustomed to our mysteries, and we forget how shocking they are. I find that Hinduism's doctrine of avatars helps me to remember the shock.

In this respect, sympathetic Christian engagement with Hinduism offers two somewhat surprising advantages. First, it may have apologetic value, not by demonstrating incoherence in the Hindu outlook, but instead by assuming basic coherence and then offering a richer, more provoca-

tive, more exhilarating coherence as an alternative. This kind of strategy may inspire fresh conversations with traditional Hindus, but even more so, it could help us reach the multitudes of Westerners who are drawn to the exotic East primarily out of disenchantment with the commonplace ordinariness of their home culture and its prosaic traditions. Apologetics in this mode aims precisely at dispelling these illusions of ordinariness and showing us instead where true adventure lies.

But second, even for convinced Christians who do not need a promise of intellectual adventure to draw them to Christ, engagement with Vaishnavism has an intriguing pedagogical value, as it leads us to understand the distinctiveness of our own tradition more clearly and vigorously. To believe that God became a man in Christ is certainly a good thing, as far as it goes. But to indwell the classical biblical logic of the hypostatic union, with its unimaginably lofty implica-

tions for our understanding of the divine achievement and of human destiny—well, this is something different altogether. The Christian vision of a single, once-for-all, world-shaking incarnation displays a higher drama and a fuller glory than we can easily bear in mind.

Understanding clearly what a tame, sensible 'incarnation' would look like (compliments of Vaishnavism), and then asking how the Christian doctrine of incarnation goes further and reaches deeper can help us to see afresh—and with increasing wonder—the marvels we have already seen in our faith. Here we find the centre of what Lesslie Newbigin called a 'universal history' that Hinduism cannot match.<sup>12</sup> The highest achievement of Vaishnavite theology may be to point us to a gospel that is dazzlingly, breathtakingly higher still.

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<sup>12</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 90.

# Learning from African Theologians and Their Hermeneutics: Some Reflections from a German Evangelical Theologian

Hans-Georg Wuench

There are at least two dangers in comparing African and European (or Western) theology. These dangers are generalization or even stereotyping, on one hand, and subjectivity or even arbitrariness on the other hand. One should not think of all Africans as similar in their way of doing theology. In fact, there is nothing like *'the African theology'*, just as one cannot identify *'the European theology'* or even *'the European Evangelical theology'*. This article therefore presents a very subjective and selective view. In no way is it meant to be an exhaustive academic survey of the specialties of African theological thinking.

Some years ago, I was a co-supervisor for a German master's student in Old Testament at the University of South Africa (UNISA). We were at a study conference for master's and doctoral students in Germany, and my student was presenting a paper on the ideas and plans for his dissertation. Two UNISA professors were also present at this presentation. At the end of it, one of them asked the

student what the relevance of his dissertation would be for the church in Germany and his own personal Christian life. I shall never forget the look on my student's face. He had never ever thought about this. His dissertation was on an academic-theological question. Why should it have relevance for the church or for his own Christian life?

I observed the same phenomenon time and again in the students who followed him. It became clear to me that there is a difference in the understanding of 'theology' between Africa and Germany. In this article, I shall look into this difference in greater detail.

In the first main section of this article, I will refer primarily to essays from *African Theology on the Way: Current Conversations*, edited by Diane B. Stinton. This book serves as a starting point for an attempt to identify ways of looking at theology that could be considered especially African.

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## I. African Theology on the Way: Identifying Specialties

### 1. African theology as opposed to Western theology

In his article on biblical hermeneutics in Africa, Gerald West from the University of KwaZulu-Natal presents his hermeneutic as a development of so-called 'intercultural hermeneutics', which is, according to West, the 'most common African form of ideological orientation'.<sup>1</sup> One important element of this intercultural hermeneutics is 'the recognition that African biblical interpretation is always in some sense "over against", or in opposition to, the forms of biblical interpretation imposed by and inherited from missionary Christianity and Western academic biblical studies'.<sup>2</sup>

The period of colonization and mission, which were connected to a great extent, strongly influenced theology in Africa. Perhaps one should rather say that it dominated African theology for a long time. Missionary theology was imposed on African churches as *the* theology of the Bible. There was no distinction whatsoever between the Bible and the theology proclaimed by missionaries.

This missionary theology had at least two main weaknesses, as John Parratt points out. The first was the 'awareness that Christianity had been introduced into Africa during the colonial era, and seems to have prospered largely because it had been

supported by the ruling European powers'. The second weakness 'was the tendency of missionary Christianity to devalue traditional African culture and especially to dismiss traditional religion as heathen or pagan'. This leads to 'the two chief concerns of theology in Africa', as Parratt goes on to say, namely, 'on the one hand its relationship to political power, and on the other its relationship to African culture'.<sup>3</sup>

It is, however, not only the influence of the missionaries in presenting the gospel, defining theology and building churches that must be noted. The missionary influence also led to the prominence of Western (very often German) academic theology in African theology. As South African Bishop Desmond Tutu complained in 1997, 'We are too much concerned to maintain standards which Cambridge or Harvard or Montpellier have set, even when these are utterly inappropriate for our situations'.<sup>4</sup>

For a long time, for example, one had to study at least a few semesters of theology in Germany if one wanted to be a 'real' theologian in South Africa. These two forces, 'missionary Christianity and Western academic biblical studies', as West puts it,<sup>5</sup> are still very strong in Africa. Hence defining an 'African theology' always means consciously grappling with this reality.

This discussion with the colonial

<sup>1</sup> Gerald O. West, 'Biblical Hermeneutics in Africa', in Diane B. Stinton (ed.), *African Theology on the Way: Current Conversations* (London: SPCK, 2010), 23.

<sup>2</sup> West, 'Biblical Hermeneutics', 24.

<sup>3</sup> John Parratt, 'Introduction', in Parratt (ed.), *A Reader in African Christian Theology* (London: SPCK, 1997), 3–4.

<sup>4</sup> Desmond M. Tutu, 'Black Theology and African Theology: Soulmates or Antagonists', in John Parratt (ed.), *A Reader in African Christian Theology* (London: SPCK, 1997), 43.

<sup>5</sup> West, 'Biblical Hermeneutic', 24.

past can be seen in almost every essay cited in this article. The responses are manifold and in part even contradictory. What *has* found consistent approval among all of them is the stress on the necessity to connect biblical truth to everyday life in Africa.

## 2. Integrating real life and theology

Something that strikes a European theologian as very specifically African—even if it is not explicitly mentioned in any article—is the numerous citations of African proverbs in many of the articles. The very first sentence of Stinton's book is a proverb: 'When spider webs unite, they can tie up a lion.'<sup>6</sup> This may not sound strange to African readers, but for theological books in Germany, it would sound somewhat strange and inappropriate to start with a proverb.

This shows one of the major differences between African and Western theology: African theology always strives to be rooted in everyday life. According to Holter, this '*presence* within the social, political, and ecclesiastical context of Africa' can be seen as a 'most characteristic feature of African theology'.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Diane B. Stinton, *African Theology on the Way: Current Conversations* (London: SPCK, 2010), xiv.

<sup>7</sup> Knut Holter, 'It's Not Only a Question of Money! African Old Testament Scholarship between the Myths and Meanings of the South and the Money and Methods of the North', *Old Testament Essays* 11, no. 2 (1998), 241.

## 3. Integrating real life means integration of non-academics

Gerald West writes, 'The African biblical scholar is never allowed to settle in the academy alone; there is a constant call from ordinary African interpreters for African biblical scholars to engage with them and their realities'.<sup>8</sup> Whereas there is a growing distance between the academic world and the everyday life of Christians in Germany (and also in many other countries of the Western world), African theology consciously tries to bring these two worlds together.

Stinton, a Canadian/African theologian, stresses this in her preface to her edited volume. There she refers to the story of the Emmaus disciples:

Just as the Emmaus disciples shared their hopes and fears, their certainties and their doubts, their grief and their joy 'on the way' of discovering the Risen Jesus with them, so African believers continue to grapple with recognizing and appropriating the Risen Christ in our midst today.<sup>9</sup>

Stinton calls this discussion between the disciples and Jesus a 'Christian Palaver' that has many similarities with the African culture. One very important element in this kind of African palaver is the following: 'Every member of the community has the right to participate, whether in speech or symbolic action. Hence African palaver guarantees equality in terms of accessing speech'.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> West, 'Biblical Hermeneutics', 29.

<sup>9</sup> Stinton, *African Theology*, xx.

<sup>10</sup> Stinton, *African Theology*, xvii.

#### 4. Integrating real life leads to a less strict and extreme theology

The fact that theology in Africa seems far more rooted in everyday life than is often the case with European theological thinking has certain consequences. One of these is that African theology often seems less strict and extreme than Western theology. Or, as the late Ghanaian theologian Kwame Bediako wrote in his reflections on William Wade Harris, he (Harris) 'appropriated the truth of the Bible not as patterns of "belief in" the truth, but more in line with the African pattern of "participation in" the truth.'<sup>11</sup>

In his article in Stinson's book, Gerald West depicts liberation theology and feminist theology in Africa. What is very clear from his presentation is that both theologies are rooted in the experiences of everyday life. With respect to feminist theology (with their special African implementations of 'womanism' and 'bosadi'), West writes, 'It is from within African feminist hermeneutics that the most sustained engagement with postcolonial hermeneutics has come.' This theology has its 'starting point in the realities of ordinary Africans'.<sup>12</sup>

The Catholic theologian Agbonkhanmeghe Orobator formulates this idea with the following words: 'Theology is about life.' Making sense of the experiences of everyday life, Orobator says,

in the light of faith is what makes theology contextual. Understood

this way what we call theology differs considerably from the exact sciences. Researchers engaged in the latter always strive to isolate their experience so that they can examine the data objectively, that is, without allowing their emotions, feelings and personal experience to influence the result of the experimentation.<sup>13</sup>

Another consequence of integrating real life and theology is that the personality of the theologian is not excluded from but consciously included in her or his theology.

#### 5. Integrating real life means integrating the theologian himself or herself

During the 1970s and 1980s, there was a consistent thrust in the academic world at German universities for a 'neutral' and 'nonbiased' approach to theology. Students in their first semester were asked to leave their childish faith behind when they entered university. Only in the last two or three decades has this view gradually changed. It has now finally been replaced with an increasing realization that there is no such thing as neutrality when it comes to theology. This realization is often viewed as something very sad, but which cannot be changed.

African theology, in contrast, gladly embraces the fact that we as human beings as well as our circumstances and cultural surroundings always were and will be part of our theology.

<sup>11</sup> Kwame Bediako, 'Biblical Exegesis in Africa: The Significance of the Translated Scriptures', in Diane B. Stinton (ed.), *African Theology on the Way* (London: SPCK, 2010), 16.

<sup>12</sup> West, 'Biblical Hermeneutics', 24–27.

<sup>13</sup> Agbonkhanmeghe Orobator, 'Contextual Theological Methodologies', in Diane B. Stinton (ed.), *African Theology on the Way* (London: SPCK, 2010), 4.

As S. I. Ihuoma says, 'All that happens in one's life has some religious connotations. ... This is not a problem which we have to cope, but an opportunity to make our theology "fit for life"'.<sup>14</sup>

Many articles thus contain references to personal aspects of the author's experience. Stinton explicitly encourages the reader to pay attention to these aspects: 'Even before listening for the content of their ideas, get a feel for who the speaker is through the bio-data provided and through any additional research you can do. A person's theology almost certainly reflects his or her life experience, so try to discern what has shaped the person's view.'<sup>15</sup>

## 6. Integrating real life means dialogue between culture and Bible

The last and most important consequence of integrating real life and theology is the importance of the context for theology. West cites Justin Ukpong, a key commentator on the comparative method, who says that 'the goal of comparative interpretation is the actualization of the theological meaning of the text in today's context so as to forge integration between faith and life, and engender commitment to personal and societal transformation.'<sup>16</sup> To West, this is

something that distinguishes African biblical hermeneutics from traditional Western hermeneutics:

While Western forms of biblical interpretation have been reluctant, until recently, to acknowledge that text and context are always, at least implicitly, in conversation, the dialogical dimension of biblical interpretation has always been an explicit feature of African biblical hermeneutics. ... Interpreting the biblical text is never, in African biblical hermeneutics, an end in itself. Biblical interpretation is always about changing the African context. ... While Western forms of biblical interpretation have tended to hide or omit the contemporary context of the biblical interpreter, African biblical interpretation is overt about the context from which and for which the biblical text is interpreted.<sup>17</sup>

For Orobator, the concentration on the African context is most important. Context for him is 'the primary factor of theological reflection in African Christianity and presents theology as a discipline grounded in the ordinary experience of Christians and their faith communities'. An appropriate theology, therefore, is a theology 'that makes sense not only to the theologian, but also especially to his or her community. ... Context is to faith what soil is to a seed.'<sup>18</sup>

The dialogue between the biblical text and today's context can be seen as a very dynamic one. Jesse N. K. Mugambi, professor at the University

<sup>14</sup> Sylvester I. Ihuoma, *Paul Tillich's Theology of Culture in Dialogue with African Theology: A Contextual Analysis* (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction, 2004), 193–94.

<sup>15</sup> Stinton, *African Theology*, xx

<sup>16</sup> West, 'Biblical Hermeneutics', 22, citing Justin S. Ukpong, 'Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions', in Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube (eds.), *The Bible in Africa:*

*Transactions, Trajectories and Trends* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 24.

<sup>17</sup> West, 'Biblical Hermeneutics', 22–23, 31.

<sup>18</sup> Orobator, 'Contextual', 3–5.



of Pretoria and professor extraordinarius at UNISA, writes as follows:

I opt for the ... approach, which allows unrestricted movement between the text and the context. On the one hand, the context provides the operational platform on which theology has to be done. On the other, the text provides the analytical stimulus for creative reflection. The theology of reconstruction is based on this two-way communication between the text and the context.<sup>19</sup>

With the term 'theology of reconstruction' Mugambi denominates a theology that tries to reconstruct the Biblical truth in light of the questions of today. Mugambi writes further: 'This approach takes biblical hermeneutics seriously, discerning the meaning intended by canonical texts and relating that meaning to specific cultural contexts. The message takes precedence over the medium of its transmission.'<sup>20</sup>

We have just identified five features that characterize African ways of reading the Bible and doing theology: (1) the integration of real life, which leads to (2) the integration of non-academics, (3) less strict or extreme theology, (4) the integration of the theologian personally and (5) dialogue between culture and the Bible. We shall now show how these five features are applied to the interpretation of biblical texts and used in theological discussions. To do so, we

will refer to the *Africana Bible* and the *Africa Bible Commentary*.

## II. The *Africana Bible* and the *Africa Bible Commentary (ABC)*: The Application of African Specialties

The *Africana Bible* is a project initiated by the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL). Scholars from Africa and the African diaspora came together to present a broad view on what could be called 'African views on the Hebrew Bible'. The different authors were, as the editors write in their preface, asked 'to demonstrate how *Africana* traditions, lore, and lived experience can be creatively deployed in reading, probing, conversing with, challenging, (at times) ignoring, extending, and creating meaning from and in partnership with the First Testament, the Apocrypha, and the Pseudepigrapha'.<sup>21</sup>

The second book to which I refer is the *Africa Bible Commentary (ABC)*. This commentary on the whole Bible was initiated by the Association of Evangelicals in Africa (AEA) and produced together with the mission organization Serving in Mission. It is aimed at pastors and lay people in churches in Africa. Its preface states, 'The *ABC* should be African in terms of its authorship and its content, which must reflect its African context. While remaining true to the biblical text, it must apply biblical teachings and truths to African realities.'<sup>22</sup> All au-

19 Jesse N. K. Mugambi, 'Theology of Reconstruction', in Diane B. Stinton (ed.), *African Theology on the Way* (London: SPCK, 2010), 144.

20 Mugambi, 'Theology of Reconstruction', 144.

21 Hugh R. Page and Randall C. Bailey, *The Africana Bible: Reading Israel's Scriptures from Africa and the African Diaspora* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2010), xxvii.

22 Tokunboh Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Com-*

thors of the *ABC* are seminary or university professors living and working in Africa. They were encouraged to 'use African proverbs, metaphors and stories to make it speak to African believers in the villages and cities across the entire continent'.<sup>23</sup>

The *ABC* contains more than 1,600 pages. For this article I reviewed its commentaries on Genesis, Judges, Ruth, Job, Isaiah, Hosea, Amos, Joel and Malachi, as well as all 78 additional articles on special theological questions. I sought to determine how the abovementioned specialties of African theology were appropriated in these books or, in other words, how theory revealed itself in practice.

In discussing the findings, we shall see some differences between the two books. Some of these differences are due to the different ideas behind the books; others arise from the fact that the *ABC* is intentionally an evangelical work.

## 1. Integrating real life and theology

The integration of real life and theology dominates both the *Africana Bible* and the *ABC* from the beginning. The preface to the former starts with the sentence, 'Culture and life circumstances affect the way people read sacred literature.'<sup>24</sup> As already cited, the *ABC* states its task as applying biblical teachings and truths to African realities. Both books therefore strive to integrate the real life of African people today into theology.

Both books make extensive use of African proverbs, songs, adages and metaphors. While this may be more or less normal for African readers, it is not in the Western context. There are numerous examples in both books. An article on 'African and African Diasporan Hermeneutics' starts with the adage, 'The grass is always greener on the other side.'<sup>25</sup> 'Women, Africana Reality and the Bible' from Madipoane Masenya starts with a Zulu song from South Africa: 'What have we done? Our sin is our blackness—Whites are dogs.'<sup>26</sup> The same author opens her article on Jeremiah with a Northern Sotho proverb: 'A child who refused to listen [to advice] landed in "initiation schools" and claimed that the schools were his extended family.'<sup>27</sup> This proverb then serves as a kind of *leitmotif* throughout the rest of the article. It summarizes the message of the book of Jeremiah, as this result was especially true for Judah in Jeremiah's time.

The same connection between theology and real life is also found in the *ABC*. There are numerous examples, but the case can be made clearly by looking at the commentary on Ruth by Isabel Apawo Phiri, who was born in Malawi but now works at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The commentary takes up only six pages, but it cites nine proverbs from the Chewa

mentary, 2nd ed. (Nairobi: WordAlive, 2006), ix.

<sup>23</sup> Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary*, ix.

<sup>24</sup> Page and Bailey, *The Africana Bible*, xxv.

<sup>25</sup> Randall C. Bailey, Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, Madipoane Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele), and Rodney S. Sadler Jr., 'African and African Diasporan Hermeneutics', in Page and Bailey, *The Africana Bible*, 19.

<sup>26</sup> Madipoane Masenya, 'Women, Africana Reality and the Bible', in Page and Bailey, *The Africana Bible*, 33.

<sup>27</sup> Madipoane Masenya, 'Jeremiah', in Page and Bailey, *The Africana Bible*, 147.

in Malawi.

Another way to integrate real life and theology is to link theological truth to examples of everyday life. These examples could either be stories of true people or legends that reflect on situations from everyday life. Following are a few examples from both books, starting with the *Africana Bible*.

In her article on 'Women, Africana Reality and the Bible', Masenya tells the story of Bathepa Maja, a retired nurse, who engaged herself in establishing a community home-based care center in her rural village in Limpopo. She then uses this story as 'a hermeneutical lens through which one can get a small glimpse of Africana women's realities in relation to the Bible'.<sup>28</sup>

Davidson, Ukpogon and Yorke, in their article on 'The Bible and Africana Life', use 'two popular African stories' to show the difficult relationship between the Bible and Africans:

One story relates that when white missionaries first came to Africa, they presented Africans with the Bible and asked them to close their eyes for prayer. On opening their eyes, Africans discovered that the whites had taken away their land and left them with the Bible. ... The other story tells of an African woman who carried the Bible with her wherever she went. When asked why she did that, she responded that it was because the Bible was the only book that could read her.<sup>29</sup>

We find the same connection to

everyday life also in the *ABC*. In his article on 'Leadership', the Nigerian theologian Tokunboh Adeyemo starts with an African legend: 'Many traditional African ideas about leadership are embedded in the Kikuyu legend about the despotic king Gikuyu who was overthrown because of his tyrannical rule and replaced by a council of elders, chosen from the older men of the community who had previously been warriors'.<sup>30</sup>

This example is very interesting because it shows that the content of the legend itself is not as important. One could easily replace this story with the general statement that throughout history, tyrannical rulers were overthrown and replaced by people from the military. What is the effect of citing an old legend? Does it give credibility to the statement itself? It seems that the effect is just to link the theological truth to experiences of everyday life, which are somehow preserved in this legend.

## 2. Integration of non-academics

In his article on 'The Bible in Twenty-First-Century Africa' in the *Africana Bible*, David Tuesday Adamo, a theologian from Nigeria, cites these words from Justin Ukpogon: 'The ordinary people's approach to the Bible is informing scholarly reading practices; critical reading masses are being nurtured at the grassroots, and the hitherto muted voices of the ordinary people are coming alive in academic biblical discourse.' According to Adamo, this is part of the 'distinctive African tradition of interpretation', which began to emerge during the twentieth

<sup>28</sup> Masenya, 'Women', 34.

<sup>29</sup> Steet Vernyl Davidson, Justin Ukpogon, and Gosnell Yorke, 'The Bible and Africana Life', in Page and Bailey, *The Africana Bible*, 40–41.

<sup>30</sup> Tokunboh Adeyemo, 'Leadership', in Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary*, 546.

century. Adams refers to Ukpong and West as the pioneers of this methodology and adds, 'I believe very strongly that this type of African reading should be classified alongside other academic approaches to the Bible.'<sup>31</sup>

Masenya writes of her experiences with the laywoman Bethepa Maja, introduced above:

I am intrigued by her hermeneutics. It does not require a background in Bible studies or biblical language proficiency. ... This is a refreshing break from those approaches to hermeneutics and theology that most of us have been trained to employ, particularly during the apartheid era: individualistic, detached, spiritual, and futuristic.<sup>32</sup>

There were no clear examples of the integration of non-academics into the theological debate in the *ABC*, likely due to this book's character as a commentary.

### 3. A less strict and extreme theology

The relevance of this point can only be shown indirectly, since there is, unsurprisingly, no intentional reflection on it. Nevertheless, it can still be seen very clearly in the overall attitude of both books. The *Africana Bible* makes this point very clearly from the beginning:

[This book] uses various methodologies, some more traditional and others decidedly experimental. Contributors to *The Africana Bi-*

*ble* have been encouraged to 'step outside' of established disciplinary and genre boundaries and to employ African and African Diaspora stories, poetry, art, and music as actual dialogue partners in the interpretive process. ... Readers should leave this volume with an appreciation of the remarkable diversity, scope, and tone that characterize modern Africana encounters with the First Testament.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, from the beginning, the *Africana Bible* seeks intentionally to be colourful, diverse and multi-faceted.

The *ABC* has a somewhat more restricted basis for its theological thinking, because contributors were 'expected to accept the AEA Statement of Faith as a guideline for their work'. However, there is still a great diversity at work. As Adeyemo indicated in defining the project, 'The contributors to the *ABC* should be chosen to reflect the diversity of Africa as regards denominations and languages, and should include both men and women. The theological editors will respect this diversity, within the bounds set by the AEA Statement of Faith.'<sup>34</sup>

To make clear the differences that are possible within the *ABC*, let us look at one example. In his article on 'The Role of the Ancestors', the Nigerian theologian Yusuf Turaki speaks about the place of ancestors in traditional African thinking. He then discusses whether it is possible to present Jesus as an African ancestor. He sees some advantages in this approach but also some problems. He concludes:

The best approach may be modelled on the one taken in the book

<sup>31</sup> David Tuesday Adamo, 'The Bible in Twenty-first-century Africa', in Page and Bailey, *The Africana Bible*, 28–30.

<sup>32</sup> Masenya, 'Women', 37.

<sup>33</sup> Page and Bailey, *The Africana Bible*, xxvii.

<sup>34</sup> Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary*, ix.

of Hebrews. ... Taking this approach, it can be said that Jesus has become the mediator between God and African society. Consequently, African veneration, worship and respect for the ancestors should now properly be addressed to Jesus as the mediator. ... And just as he fulfilled, transformed and supplanted the Jewish religious system, so he has fulfilled, transformed and supplanted the ancestral cult and traditional religions of Africa.<sup>35</sup>

This approach to African religions and cults seems relatively moderate. Instead of bluntly rejecting the idea of the role of ancestors, Turaki tries to modify this idea so that it fits with Christian truth.

In his article on 'Idolatry', Emeka Nwankpa, also from Nigeria, takes a rather different position. Nwankpa writes:

Unlike Paul, some African theologians have called for accommodation of African traditional religions, claiming that the High God worshipped in those religions is the same as the God of the Judeo-Christian religion. Some even refer to Jesus as 'a paramount ancestor'. By doing this, they validate traditional religious beliefs and worship that the Bible condemns.<sup>36</sup>

#### 4. Integrating the theologian personally

There are many examples of the integration of the theologian with his or

her personal history in both books. In the *Africana Bible*, one example stands out. In her article on the book of Job, Masenya introduces her approach by saying, 'In the story that follows, the narrator [Masenya herself], a contemporary Job, picks up on some of the issues raised by the character of Job in the Hebrew Bible in her own struggle to wrestle with God amid suffering.'<sup>37</sup>

Masenya then tells about the tragic loss of her son in a car accident and her questions about this tragedy. 'Why did my son die?' she asks. Masenya opens her heart and pours out her questions, her doubts and her accusations, just as Job did. At the end she writes:

So huge and sovereign is this Sacred Other, who has become and continues to be the object of our yelling, anger, criticism, and frustrations, that God remains patient with all those who wrestle with God in the midst of unjust suffering. If these sufferers persist in their steadfastness with God, they, like the biblical Job, will eventually say: 'I heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eyes see you' (Job 42:5).<sup>38</sup>

There are other examples of the integration of the theologian's life into theology in the *Africana Bible*, but none as impressive as this one.

We also find examples in the *ABC*. In the commentary on Genesis, the Beninese theologian Barnabe Assohoto, one of its two authors, writes as follows:

It is very encouraging to have the

35 Yusuf Turaki, 'The Role of the Ancestors', in Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary*, 480.

36 Emeka Nwankpa, 'Idolatry', in Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary*, 866.

37 Madipoane Masenya, 'Job', in Page and Bailey, *The Africana Bible*, 237–38.

38 Masenya, 'Job', 239–40.

Most High as one's defence. I (Dr Assohoto) can testify that there was a time in my own life when those who loved me felt that others were seeking evil power to destroy me. From two different sources I received plaques engraved with the words of Isaiah 54:17: 'No weapon forged against you will prevail.' Whenever my eyes caught these words, I felt a sense of assurance that I was well guarded.<sup>39</sup>

In her commentary on the book of Ruth, Isabel Apawo Phiri tells of one of her sisters, who was named Manzunzo (suffering) because she was born two months after the death of their father.<sup>40</sup> Tewoldemedhin Habtu from Eritrea, in his commentary on Job, tells about a habit in his own culture, which shows similarities to the story of Job:

In my culture, when a person dies the bereaved family sit in mourning for seven days, with community members constantly coming to console them. With the pressure of modern life, these days of mourning have now been reduced to three.<sup>41</sup>

To African readers, these examples may not be recognized as something special. However, in the Western context, they are unusual. Authors typically do not reflect on their own personal life experience in their biblical commentaries. In African culture, it seems to be perfectly normal.

<sup>39</sup> Barnabe Assohoto, 'Genesis', in Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary*, 33.

<sup>40</sup> Isabel Apawo Phiri, 'Ruth', in Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary*, 319.

<sup>41</sup> Tewoldemedhin Habtu, 'Job', in Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary*, 574.

## 5. Dialogue between culture and Bible

The last and most important aspect of African Bible interpretation is its dialogue between culture and the Bible. It is not possible to show the abundance of examples on this point. The few mentioned here simply scratch the surface.

There are at least two ways to understand this dialogue. Both of them could be found in both books, but with different accentuations. The first way is to understand African culture as the receiver in this dialogue. Maybe it would be better to speak of it as a monologue since the culture is not really active. The goal is to make biblical truth understandable and conceivable in the African culture. The second way is to see this relationship of Bible and culture more as a kind of dialogue between equals, with the goal of furthering an inter-relationship between Bible and culture. In *The Africana Bible*, the second way is prominent, whereas in the *ABC* the first one plays the biggest role.

### a) The Bible speaking into African culture

Elelwani Farisani, recently chair of the Department of Biblical and Ancient Studies at UNISA, writes in his article on the book of Obadiah in the *Africana Bible*, 'Ethnic tension described by Obadiah between the Israelites and the Edomites may have relevance in Africa today, especially in the context of recent xenophobic attacks on foreign nationals in South Africa.'<sup>42</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Elelwani Farisani, 'Obadiah', in Page and Bailey, *The Africana Bible*, 181.

In his article on Micah, Farisani writes: 'Micah's meticulous relevance for Africa intensifies as poverty, corruption, HIV/AIDS, and moral decay plague the African continent. Accordingly, there is a need for socioeconomic, political, and moral renewal in Africa.' He further argues, 'The most important way to reflect on the eighth-century prophet Micah is to use him as a new paradigm in a quest for an African theology of renewal, transformation, reconciliation, and reconstruction.'<sup>43</sup>

The examples of this way of letting the Bible speak into the African culture in the *ABC* are numerous. Instead of piling up examples, I will turn now to an article on this specific question, written by the Ghanaian theologian Kwame Bediako and entitled 'Scripture as the Interpreter of Culture and Tradition'. It starts by declaring, 'The *Africa Bible Commentary* attempts to relate the Scriptures and African cultures and in so doing to seek ways in which the gospel may be seen to be relevant to African cultures.' Bediako continues, 'We need to allow Scripture to become the interpreter of who we are in the specific concrete sense of who we are in our cultures and traditions.'<sup>44</sup>

Bediako states that our task is more than simply 'extracting principles from the Bible and applying these to culture. Rather, he contends:

The application of Scripture to our cultures is a gradual process of coming together, of life touching

life. ... To look for a once and for all biblical 'answer' to a particular cultural problem is to misunderstand the process whereby a community and people come to see themselves as called into the people of God and come to participate in that community.<sup>45</sup>

## **b) Bible and culture as partners in dialogue**

We can find many examples of mutual dialogue between African culture and the Bible in *The Africana Bible*. First, the Bible and African culture are brought into dialogue by way of analogy, such as in the article by Makhosazana K. Nzimande from the University of Zululand on Isaiah. Nzimande writes, 'Ancient Israelite and Judean struggles under the Babylonian empire that Isaiah sought to address are analogous to black people's struggles in post-apartheid South Africa.'<sup>46</sup> She adds a few pages later:

Evidently, Europe and America have emerged as the 'Babylonian empire' of our time. Within this economically suicidal postapartheid context, the prophet's anti-Babylonian political stance in Isaiah is deeply needed in levelling a sharp theological critique against the capitalist exploitation of globalization and the subsequent suffering it inflicts on South African blacks.<sup>47</sup>

Another example of this way of analogy can be found in Madipoane Masenya's article on Jeremiah:

<sup>43</sup> Elelwani Farisani, 'Micah', in Page and Bailey, *The Africana Bible*, 190–92.

<sup>44</sup> Kwame Bediako, 'Scripture as Interpreter of Culture and Tradition', in Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary*, 3.

<sup>45</sup> Bediako, 'Scripture as Interpreter', 4.

<sup>46</sup> Makhosazana K. Nzimande, 'Isaiah', in Page and Bailey, *The Africana Bible*, 139.

<sup>47</sup> Nzimande, 'Isaiah', 142.

The 587 B.C.E./1994 C.E. catastrophes in Judah and white South Africa, respectively, show that no human leader is indispensable. Thus human leaders need to remain humble and vigilant even as they serve fellow human beings who have equally been created in the image of the divine leader.<sup>48</sup>

Examples of this kind of dialogue are rarer in the *ABC*, but still they can be identified. In his article on 'Christians and Politics', the Nigerian theologian James B. Kantiok writes:

Jesus, too, did not separate religion and politics. In his mission statement in Luke 4:18–19 he declared that his ministry was to those suffering various forms of bondage and oppression, including economic oppression (poverty), physical oppression (diseases and disabilities), political oppression (injustice and oppressive rule) and demonic oppression (various forms of occult practices). These same evils plague Africa today.<sup>49</sup>

George Kinoti, a theologian from Kenya, writes in his article on 'Christians and the Environment':

If we are to be obedient to God and look after his creation, we must not ignore what is happening. Like Noah, we must work to rescue all creatures in danger of extinction—whether the danger comes from pollution, habitat change, overfishing, poaching or any other cause.<sup>50</sup>

### III. Conclusions

What can Western theologians learn from African theology? The answer to this question is not easy, keeping in mind that there is neither *the* Western theologian nor *the* African theologian. However, noting the differences between Western and African ways of doing theology can stimulate and eventually even change our ways of theologizing.

Knut Holter identified one of the most important things to learn from African theology as 'the question of relevance. ... African scholars', he stated, 'are, generally speaking, far more eager than their Western colleagues in emphasising that OT scholarship should serve church and society.' Holter warns that 'without listening to these concerns, I fear that the guild of Western OT scholarship might ultimately face the danger of being of interest to nobody but itself'.<sup>51</sup>

To really learn from African scholars presupposes an open-minded dialogue. The point of such a dialogue 'is not to copy each other's interpretative experiences and concerns, but to challenge each other's more fundamental biblical interpretation'.<sup>52</sup>

If we as theologians want to be relevant to our society, we have to take the context of our readers and our churches more seriously in the process of exegesis. It is not enough to do appropriation *after* exegesis, but we should learn to understand context

48 Masenya, 'Jeremiah', 151.

49 James B. Kantiok, 'Christians and Politics', in Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary*, 1027.

50 George Kinoti, 'Christians and the Environment', in Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary*, 618.

51 Holter, 'It's Not Only a Question', 248.

52 Knut Holter, 'Does a Dialogue between Africa and Europe Make Sense?' in Hans de Wit and Gerald O. West (eds.), *African and European Readers of the Bible in Dialogue: In Quest of a Shared Meaning* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008), 75.



as something that accompanies the whole process of understanding biblical texts. As Snoek stresses, there was a 'long discussion held in Western Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries about the relation between exegesis and actualisation. For a multitude of reasons ... exegesis and actualisation have become increasingly distant from each other within academia.'<sup>53</sup>

It is our task to overcome that distance and make theology relevant for our culture and society. This calls for more wholeness or unity of theology and life, academia and church. The task before us cannot be simply to copy methods or contents of African

theology. However, we can learn from each other. For example, the words of Bishop Desmond Tutu stress the need for an African theology:

Let us develop our insights about the corporateness of human existence in the face of excessive Western individualism, about the wholeness of the person when others are concerned for Hellenistic dichotomies of soul and body, about the reality of the spiritual when others are made desolate with the poverty of the material. Let African theology enthuse about the awesomeness of the transcendent when others are embarrassed to speak about the King, high and lifted up, whose train fills the temple.<sup>54</sup>

May Western theology join in this enthusiasm!

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**53** Hans Snoek, 'Key Concepts in the Dialogue between African and European Biblical Scholars', in Hans de Wit and Gerald O. West (eds.), *African and European Readers of the Bible in Dialogue: In Quest of a Shared Meaning* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008), 92–93.

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**54** Tutu, 'Black Theology', 44.

# Wilhelm Lütgert and his Studies of the Apostles' Opponents: Aspiring to a Better Understanding of the New Testament Letters

Thomas Schirrmacher

'The freedom which Jesus gives is not a heathen lawlessness.'  
—Wilhelm Lütgert in his 1919 commentary on Galatians

The work of Wilhelm Lütgert (1867-1938) in New Testament studies and systematic theology receives insufficient recognition today. The central topics of his theological work were (1) his critique of idealism, (2) the recovery of the doctrine of creation for epistemology and the recovery of 'nature' for the doctrine of God, and (3) the recovery of the significance of love in ethics.<sup>1</sup>

Lütgert's exegetical work on numerous New Testament books was ground-breaking. He successfully broke away from Christian Baur's reigning tradition that James and Peter represented a legalistic and Paul an antinomian Christianity. Overall, Lütgert viewed Paul as being caught between two fronts that had formed:

Jewish-Christian legalists on one hand and Gentile, enthusiastic antinomians on the other. Against the legalists, Paul emphasized freedom from the law and life in the Spirit, and against the antinomians Paul emphasized that God's Spirit never endorses sin and that the Old Testament continues to be God's word.

## I. Personal Background<sup>2</sup>

After completing his college preparatory studies in 1886, Lütgert studied theology in Greifswald under representatives of the so-called 'Greifswald School': Hermann Cremer (1834–

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<sup>1</sup> These points are discussed in a longer version of this paper, available from the editor on request.

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<sup>2</sup> On Lütgert, see Paul Althaus, Gerhard Kittel and Hermann Strathmann, *Adolf Schlatter und Wilhelm Lütgert zum Gedächtnis* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1938); Werner Neuer, 'Wilhelm Lütgert: Eine kleine Einführung in Leben und Werk eines vergessenen The-

1903), professor of systematic theology, and Lütgert's later longstanding friend and co-worker, Adolf Schlatter (1852–1938) from Switzerland.

After his move to Berlin, and in addition to attending lectures by Adolf von Harnack, he attended history lectures given by Heinrich von Treitschke. After his theological exams, Cremer invited him to pursue a doctorate. In 1892 he completed his licentiate in systematic theology on the topic 'The Method of Dogmatic Proof in its Development under Schleiermacher's Influence', becoming an associate professor of New Testament in 1895.

In 1898 Lütgert married Martha Sellschopp, with whom he raised seven children as a caring and warm father. In 1901, he obtained an additional doctorate for his research on the Johannine Christology, and the following year he was granted a full professorship. In 1913, he was named professor of systematic theology and became head of the seminary at Halle. In 1929 he moved to Berlin as a systematic theologian and director of the theological seminary.

In 1934, Lütgert spoke out against the use of Aryan paragraphs related to the church, and as a result the district leadership of the *National Socialist German Workers' Party* complained to the government. In 1935 he was removed from office and pro-

hibited from lecturing.<sup>3</sup> In 1936 two of his lectures were forbidden before he could present them, whereupon he had them printed. Lütgert participated in the illegal examinations held by the confessing church,<sup>4</sup> although he was very sceptical regarding Karl Barth's influence. In 1938 Lütgert died after a short illness.

## II. Lütgert's Attitude towards the Historical-Critical Method

Nowhere did Lütgert deny the historical-critical method, nor did he explicitly endorse an interpretation of Scripture that began with its infallibility, as did for instance his contemporary Benjamin Warfield. His position is, however, free from all historical suspicion regarding the canonical text, and in introductory questions (about authorship and origin) Lütgert always concurred with the tradition.

As a typical example, at the beginning of his examination of the Pastoral Letters, Lütgert acknowledged that given the contemporary state of scholarship, the Pauline origin of the letters could not be presupposed. However, he added, 'I am personally convinced that Paul is the author of the letters.'<sup>5</sup> The results of his study could be used to support this position, but the topic was settled for him. Similarly, in his study of the Johannine gospel and letters, he considered John the author without categorically representing the position that it could not be otherwise.

In his essay 'The Reliability of the

ologen', *Jahrbuch für evangelikale Theologie* 1 (1987): 108–24; Gerhard Bially, 'Wilhelm Lütgerts These vom 'Zweifrontenkrieg des Paulus gegen Nomisten und Enthusiasten' (M.Th. thesis, University of Wuppertal, 2000), 7–22; Jochen Eber, 'Lütgert, Wilhelm', *Biografisch-Bibliografisches Kirchenlexikon*, vol. 16 (2000): 870–74, which contains the longest bibliography.

3 Bially, 'Wilhelm Lütgerts These', 16–17.

4 Ibid., 120.

5 Wilhelm Lütgert, *Die Irrlehrer der Pastoralbriefe* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1909), 7.

Image of Christ in the Gospels', Lütgert declared that 'the entire image of Christ is the same throughout all the Gospels.'<sup>6</sup> Historically, he considered this image to be completely reliable. Thus he had no doubt, historically or with respect to his faith, about Jesus' confession that he was the Messiah. This picture emerges more fully from his study 'The Worship of Jesus'.<sup>7</sup>

Lütgert's affirmation of the ascriptions of authorship presented in the New Testament and believed by the early church was a great hindrance to his acceptance in German historical-critical research. For that very reason, evangelical theologians should consider it an honour to maintain Lütgert's legacy.

### III. Lütgert's Main Thesis

In a 1935 letter, Lütgert reflected on his several decades of preoccupation with the topic of Paul's opponents:

According to the theological tradition which was brought to a close by Ritschl, the Pauline gospel rested on a rejection of the law. According to this, Marcion appeared as the consistent representative of the Gospel. It is no accident that the last large theological work by Harnack dealt with Marcion. The rejection of the Creator was also at this point tied to the rejection of the lawgiver. With it the current crisis was initiated. It had long been

clear to me that in complete opposition to it, Paul's gospel rested on an acknowledgement of the law. From that there came the knowledge that Paul was not only in opposition to the legalists, but also in opposition to the antinomians. Given this, there was not only a new point of view with respect to the explanation of several of the Pauline letters, but also a notion of the history of the Apostolic era which went beyond that of the Tübingen School as well as that in Ritschl's 'The History of the Formation of the Old Catholic Church.' In a number of individual studies I have pursued my notion of the history of Jewish Christianity up into the second century and back into Judaism at the time of Christ. A summarized presentation of this course of history, which also includes the emergence of the first persecution of Christians, is the next larger task which is placed before me in my studies. I have the urgent desire to still achieve this wish. This is due to the fact that from the opinions about my investigations which have been published up to now, I see that otherwise the recognized results of this work would be for naught and that beyond the details no discussion regarding the overall concept of early Christianity would occur. I delayed this work because, instead of New Testament theology, I assumed the responsibility for systematic theology. Late, too late, did I achieve my scholarly goal.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Wilhelm Lütgert, 'Die Glaubwürdigkeit des Christusbildes der Evangelien', in his *Gottes Sohn und Gottes Geist: Vorträge zur Christologie und zur Lehre vom Geiste Gottes* (Leipzig: A. Deichert'sche Verlagsbuch, 1905), 22.

<sup>7</sup> Wilhelm Lütgert, *Die Anbetung Jesu* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1904), 49–66.

<sup>8</sup> Wilhelm Lütgert, *Antwort auf die mir am 7. Mai überreichte Adresse* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1935).

Following is a chronological review of Lütgert's exegetical studies on Paul's letters.

### 1. Corinthians: Libertine Spirituality

Ferdinand Christian Baur and the Tübingen School assumed that in New Testament times, there was on one hand a legalistic Jewish Christianity represented by Peter and James, and on the other hand an antinomian Gentile Christianity with Paul, a Jew, as its spokesman. What came from this, according to Hegel's scheme, was the synthesis of early Catholicism. Baur's interpretation determined the prevailing understanding of 1 Corinthians for a long time; he saw the same Jewish opponents in the Christ 'party' that he saw in the letter to the Galatians.

In 1908, Lütgert opened his investigation of the opponents in Paul's letters with 'The Preaching of Liberty and the Spirits of Enthusiasm in Corinth: An Article Concerning the Characteristics of the Christ "Party"',<sup>9</sup> which above all was directed against Baur's representation of history. In the opening sentence he wrote, 'The Christian church has, from the beginning, had to stand between two fronts ... the circle of Apostles had opponents on both sides.'<sup>10</sup>

As Lütgert saw it, Paul stood between Jewish Christian legalists and Gentile Christian antinomians: 'In [Paul's] view, freedom from the law was always just as far from antinomi-

anism as it was from legalism.'<sup>11</sup> Whoever is free from the law, according to Lütgert's understanding of Paul, is in fellowship with God and for that reason free from sin.<sup>12</sup> This means that to be a Christian is demonstrated in the fact that the Christian wants to avoid sin. The law is not abolished; rather, it is fulfilled in life.

Lütgert closed his investigation with these words:

It was with certainty that Paul maintained freedom in his struggle against legalistic Judaism; he exhibited the same certainty when the issue was the validity of the law in his struggle with the antinomians. The clarity with which he knew how to unite the two tendencies is paradigmatic for all times.<sup>13</sup>

To Lütgert, the antinomians were 'libertine spiritualists'<sup>14</sup> and Gnostics. The faith, however, does not rest on human wisdom, but rather 'on God's power'<sup>15</sup> (1 Cor 2:5). For that reason, the church does not have to seek *gnosis* but rather faith. 'Preaching does not save those who understand, the wise, but rather those who believe. ... What we have in the Corinthian church is for the first time a Gnosticism in the sense that it is a gnosis that surpasses faith, which rests upon revelation and the possession of which accounts for Christian perfection and counts as the essence of Christianity.'<sup>16</sup>

Lütgert's view has been disputed; he claimed that asceticism was sup-

9 Wilhelm Lütgert, *Freiheitspredigt und Schwarmgeister in Korinth: Ein Beitrag zur Charakteristik der Christuspartei* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1908).

10 Lütgert, *Freiheitspredigt*, 7.

11 Lütgert, *Freiheitspredigt*, 143.

12 Lütgert, *Freiheitspredigt*, 16.

13 Lütgert, *Freiheitspredigt*, 157.

14 Lütgert, *Freiheitspredigt*, 86.

15 Lütgert, *Freiheitspredigt*, 112.

16 Lütgert, *Freiheitspredigt*, 111, 134.

pressed libertinism and assumed that both stemmed from the same movement, instead of seeing two contradictory deviations from God's creation ordinances.

## 2. Philippians: The Perfected Ones

In 1909 Lütgert published an examination of 'The Perfected Ones in the Letter to the Philippians'. As his point of entry, Lütgert argued that Philippians 3 makes it clear that Paul stood between two fronts.<sup>17</sup>

When Paul was active in Philippi and when he wrote this letter, according to Lütgert, there were a large number of libertines in Philippi. They denied the preaching of the cross and thought they had already achieved the resurrection, making the hope of a resurrection and of the *parousia* irrelevant. The fear of God, humility and obedience were for them a lower form of piety.<sup>18</sup>

The Jews treated the Pauline gospel as deserving to be thrown into the same pot with these notions. In Paul's view, they shared several features with the libertines: the rejection of humility and of the cross, the lack of proper fear of God, and their scepticism regarding the hope of resurrection.<sup>19</sup>

Lütgert took the unusual position that the terms 'mutilators of the flesh' and 'dogs') in Philippians 3:2 do not concern mockery of Jewish circumcision—something that he believed

would have been unthinkable for Paul—but rather a reference to pagan circumcision rites. Lütgert maintained this stance in his view of the term 'emasculate' in Galatians 5:12.

## 3. Thessalonians: The Enthusiasts

Also in 1909, within the same volume, Lütgert published 'The Enthusiasts in Thessalonica'. There is no generally accepted answer surrounding the historical situation of the letters.<sup>20</sup> Whether both letters to the Thessalonians addressed the same situation is also unresolved, although Lütgert ultimately affirmed this and considered the second letter's authenticity to be important.<sup>21</sup>

Describing the overall picture of the early Christian church, Lütgert suggested that 'in the Apostolic era there were more trends and tendencies, that the life of the community was richer, more colorful, and more diverse than it appears in the traditional historical view.'<sup>22</sup> For him it was amazing that 'Christian literature begins with a polemic against libertine enthusiasts and those who denied the resurrection. With this the portrayal of history is significantly changed.'<sup>23</sup>

## 4. The Pastoral Letters: Order instead of Gnosis

Still in 1909, Lütgert's study 'The False Teaching of the Pastoral Letters' appeared. He understood this work

17 Wilhelm Lütgert, 'Die Vollkommenen im Philipperbrief', in his *Die Vollkommenen im Philipperbrief und die Enthusiasten in Thessalonich* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1909), 1.

18 Lütgert, 'Die Vollkommenen', 53-54.

19 Lütgert, 'Die Vollkommenen', 54.

20 Wilhelm Lütgert, 'Die Enthusiasten in Thessalonich', in his *Die Vollkommenen im Philipperbrief und die Enthusiasten in Thessalonich* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1909), 55.

21 Lütgert, 'Die Enthusiasten', 81.

22 Lütgert, 'Die Enthusiasten', 102.

23 Lütgert, 'Die Enthusiasten', 102.

as a direct continuation of his examination of the Corinthian letters.<sup>24</sup> To Lütgert, the false teachers in the pastoral letters were Jewish antinomians who preached freedom from the law. As spiritualists, they were Gnostics who claimed a higher knowledge than the Scriptures. They were shaped by asceticism and a rejection of every kind of order. Antinomianism, asceticism, Gnosis, and enthusiasm were the catchwords by which they were distinguished, as well as an unwillingness to suffer.<sup>25</sup>

Again here, the central point is the correct integration of the law into the Gospel. Like Romans 2:16 and 7:12, according to Lütgert, 1 Timothy 1:9 also correctly understood law as an ethical order integrated into the Gospel.<sup>26</sup> The defence of the correct use of the law is at the same time a defence of the Scriptures, as in particular 1 Timothy 3 makes clear: 'In that the false teachers wanted to lead the congregation beyond the Scriptures, they also rip themselves loose from a connection with the piety of Israel.'<sup>27</sup>

What the opponents of the Corinthian letters have in common with the opponents of the pastoral letters is that as liberal Jewish antinomians they distort the preaching of freedom. They invoke wonders, visions and a knowledge that is independent of the Scriptures. Both reject suffering and lowliness as well as the hope of resurrection. 'The difference consists in the fact that Paul's opponents in Corinth were libertines and the false

teachers of the pastoral letters were ascetics. Still, this asceticism is only a suppressed libertinism.'<sup>28</sup>

## 5. The Letters of John: Office and Spirit

In 1911, Lütgert devoted himself primarily to First John in the first part of his work *Service and Spirit in Battle*. He found John to be disputing against libertines, among others. The author emphasized that love also always means freedom from sin.

1 John 5:17 ('All wrongdoing is sin') was central for Lütgert. The church has 'no privileged wrongdoing'.<sup>29</sup> 'What is sin for the rest of the world is sin for them. Their freedom does not consist in there no longer being sin for them.'<sup>30</sup>

This is how Lütgert understands the disputed statement in 1 John 1:8 and 20 about being sinless. The false teachers do not consider themselves sinless because they actually do not sin, but rather because they no longer consider what they do to be sin.<sup>31</sup> 'Antinomianism and perfectionism are therefore tied together.'<sup>32</sup> I consider this observation to be exegetically justified and a central insight for eth-

<sup>24</sup> Lütgert, *Die Irrlehrer der Pastoralbriefe*, 73.

<sup>25</sup> Lütgert, *Die Irrlehrer*, 73.

<sup>26</sup> Lütgert, *Die Irrlehrer*, 13–14.

<sup>27</sup> Lütgert, *Die Irrlehrer*, 68.

<sup>28</sup> Lütgert, *Die Irrlehrer*, 92.

<sup>29</sup> Wilhelm Lütgert, 'Johannes und die Antichristen', in his *Ant und Geist im Kampf: Studien zur Geschichte des Urchristentums* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1911), 23.

<sup>30</sup> Lütgert, 'Johannes', 23.

<sup>31</sup> Lütgert, 'Johannes', 23–24.

<sup>32</sup> Lütgert, 'Johannes', 24. It is interesting that Lütgert views this perfectionism as justified, although he was familiar with another type of perfectionism of his time, as is demonstrated in his talk *Sündlosigkeit und Vollkommenheit: Ein Vortrag* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1897).

ics.

Lütgert made more use of John's letters in both of his large works on love than practically all Protestant ethicists. The church must to be protected against the 'lax feature' of the false prophets:<sup>33</sup> 'I write this to you so that you will not sin' (1 John 2:1).

Also characteristic of John's letters is the struggle against Docetism and the denial of the hope of resurrection. Furthermore, one again finds an emphasis on knowledge as opposed to apostolic preaching and the commandments:

The false prophets are therefore libertine Gnostics. Because they are Gnostics, *gnosis* stands out so strongly in John. The letter speaks much more frequently about knowledge (2:3, 4, 13, 14; 3:1, 6, 20; 4: 6, 7, 8, 16; 5:20) than it does about faith. To know God and to obey him are the two most important parts of Christianity as far as this letter is concerned.<sup>34</sup>

Within the framework of his results, Lütgert draws parallels between the false teachings in John's letters and those considered in his previous studies. He arrived at this arrangement:

Antinomian libertines: Corinthians, Philippians, Thessalonians

Enthusiasts: Corinthians, Pastorals

Gnostics: Corinthians, Pastorals

Spiritualistic deniers of the resurrection: Corinthians, Pastorals (the resurrection has already occurred), Philippians (the resurrection has already been achieved)

Christians who wanted to rescind the internal contrast between the church and the world: Corinthians  
Absence of love as characteristic: Corinthians

Aversion to the death of Christ: Corinthians, Philippians

'All of these phenomena are features of a movement', he concluded.<sup>35</sup>

## 6. The Letter of Clement and the Letter of Ignatius: Service and Spirit

Together with his study of John's letters, Lütgert continued his investigation of the opponents of the early Christian documents beyond the New Testament.

In 'Turmoil in Corinth' he primarily studied Clement's first letter, addressing Clement's second letter briefly in an appendix.<sup>36</sup> He emphasized the close relationship between those letters from the time of Paul. Among the opponents, he simultaneously found asceticism and sexual excesses of the worst order.<sup>37</sup>

In 'Separation among the Churches of Asia Minor' he looked into Ignatius's letters. Ignatius's opponents recognized the gospel but rejected the authority of the Old Testament which was held up to them; that is to say, they rejected all Scriptural evidences.<sup>38</sup> Here, Lütgert saw parallels

<sup>35</sup> Lütgert, 'Johannes', 48–49.

<sup>36</sup> Wilhelm Lütgert, 'Der Aufruhr in Korinth', in *Amt und Geist im Kampf: Studien zur Geschichte des Urchristentums* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1911), 111–18.

<sup>37</sup> Lütgert, 'Der Aufruhr', 79.

<sup>38</sup> Wilhelm Lütgert, 'Die Separation in den kleinasiatischen Gemeinden', in *Amt und Geist im Kampf: Studien zur Geschichte des*

<sup>33</sup> Lütgert, 'Johannes', 48.

<sup>34</sup> Lütgert, 'Johannes', 47.



to the false teachers referred to in the Pastorals and John's letters.<sup>39</sup>

To the best of my knowledge, the studies Lütgert conducted on these earliest writings by church fathers have not been taken up in scholarly discussion, although their content lies not far from the present-day consensus.

## 7. Romans: Antinomianism, Anti-Semitism, and Revolution

In 1913 Lütgert continued his investigation of New Testament books by addressing Romans.<sup>40</sup> Lütgert assumed that Romans defends against many misunderstandings prevalent among Gentile Christians. Otto Michel briefly summarized Lütgert's concerns:

According to W. Lütgert it is incorrect to understand Romans only in an anti-Jewish sense. Many remarks (e.g. Rom 3:31; 8:4; 13:8–10) teach a positive evaluation of the law and appear completely inexplicable in an anti-Jewish sense. It is more probable that Paul had to address a Gentile antinomianism. Indeed the Apostle himself stood under suspicion of being a participant in the emergence of this antinomianism (Rom 3:1–8). That Romans 6 is directed against libertine tendencies is generally admitted. Romans 9–11 captures a more lively picture, if one understands this section historically and assumes an anti-Semitic Christian-

ity that enjoys a haughty disdain of Israel.<sup>41</sup>

Lütgert himself summarized the results of his study as follows:

Romans is meant to protect the predominantly Gentile church in Rome from an antinomian Christianity, which at the same time joins a disdain for Israel and a Jewish-Christian lack of freedom and feeds revolutionary tendencies in the church. This Christianity is rampant in the Gentile churches, initially invoking Paul but already having begun to move in opposition to him. Paul therefore has reason to demarcate the Gospel with respect to what these people were saying, to warn the Roman church about them, and in so doing to ensure acceptance which is necessary for effectiveness in the Roman church. From this it can be explained why he emphatically expresses his positive stance in Romans towards the law and why he gives his teaching on grace the form of a teaching on justification. With this approach his positive relationship to the law can be absorbed into his teaching on grace. ... Paul is compelled to embrace the law and Jewish Christianity against Gentile Christians.<sup>42</sup>

In Romans, therefore, Paul addresses disdain for the law (antinomianism<sup>43</sup>), disdain for Israel (anti-Semitism<sup>44</sup>), and revolutionary tendencies in the Roman church.<sup>45</sup> With the third

*Urchristentums* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1911), 153.

<sup>39</sup> Lütgert, 'Die Separation', 137, 163–64.

<sup>40</sup> Wilhelm Lütgert, *Der Römerbrief als historisches Problem* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1913).

<sup>41</sup> Otto Michel, *Der Brief an die Römer* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978), 40.

<sup>42</sup> Lütgert, *Der Römerbrief*, 111–12.

<sup>43</sup> Lütgert, *Der Römerbrief*, 69–79.

<sup>44</sup> Lütgert, *Der Römerbrief*, 79–90.

<sup>45</sup> Lütgert, *Der Römerbrief*, 98–111.

point, Romans 13:1–7 receives its natural place, as does the end of chapter 12. Based on the first two points, there is reason to clarify the relationship between the Gentile Christian church and Old Testament revelation. Romans 9–11 then becomes a truly integral component of Romans.

## 8. Galatians: Law and Spirit

The culmination of Lütgert's studies regarding the opponents in New Testament letters is surely his 1919 study of Galatians, 'Law and Spirit'.<sup>46</sup> A central passage for Lütgert is Galatians 5:13. The Galatians are 'called to be free', but must 'not use ... freedom to indulge the sinful nature' but 'rather, serve one another in love.'

Galatians itself reports on controversy in the church. The clearest example is Galatians 5:15: 'If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.'<sup>47</sup> It is unlikely that this passage deals simply with personal quarrels between individual church members, but rather it presumably involves disputes about the stance towards Old Testament law. The same applies to Galatians 5:26: 'Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.'

Since the Galatian church consisted predominantly of Gentile Christians but Jewish-Christian problems were also prevalent, it stands to reason that the letter would address the false teaching of both Jewish and Gentile opponents.<sup>48</sup>

It is unlikely that a largely Jewish-Christian church would have opened itself completely to the Jewish temptation. If, however, some Gentile Christians had followed the Jewish corrupters and others rejected the Jewish temptation—not necessarily with Apostolic arguments—then that would explain why the letter speaks repeatedly about contention among believers.<sup>49</sup>

Only a part of the church is addressed in Galatians 3:1, where Paul refers to 'you who are spiritual'.<sup>50</sup> Here we are dealing with Christians who consider themselves more spiritual than the rest of the church. Theodore Zahn<sup>51</sup> called this group 'spiritualists', correctly equating them with the 'strong' Gentile Christians in Romans 14–15 who elevate themselves above the 'weak' Jewish Christians.

Lütgert's view of Galatians was taken up by James Hardy Ropes<sup>52</sup> in 1929 and Frederic R. Crownfield<sup>53</sup> in 1945. The fact that Paul did not rescind the validity of the moral law was confirmed by the Swedish Lutheran Ragnar Bring in his commentary on Galatians.<sup>54</sup>

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49 Lütgert, *Gesetz und Geist*, 11.

50 Lütgert, *Gesetz und Geist*, 12–13.

51 Theodor Zahn, *Der Brief des Paulus an die Galater* (Wuppertal: R. Brockhaus, 1922, rpt. 1990), 270–72; Lütgert refers to Zahn in *Gesetz und Geist*, 13–14.

52 James Hardy Ropes, 'The Singular Problem of the Epistle to the Galatians', *Harvard Theological Studies* 14 (1929).

53 Frederic R. Crownfield, 'The Singular Problem of the Dual Galatians', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 64 (1965): 491–500.

54 Ragnar Bring, *Commentary on Galatians* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1961).

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46 Wilhelm Lütgert, *Gesetz und Geist: Eine Untersuchung zur Vorgeschichte des Galaterbriefes* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1919).

47 See Lütgert, *Gesetz und Geist*, 9.

48 Lütgert, *Gesetz und Geist*, 9–11.

#### IV. Reactions to Lütgert

The reactions to Lütgert have varied greatly. The most heated response concerned his view of the Corinthian letters; his work on Romans was the least disputed. That result may have been affected by the fact that Adolf Schlatter relied on Lütgert's work in his monumental commentary on the Corinthian letters. Though Schlatter made considerable new contributions, he adopted Lütgert's description of Paul's opponents as enthusiasts.<sup>55</sup>

In 2001 Michael D. Goulder acknowledged that Lütgert had a central place in investigations of the Corinthian letters,<sup>56</sup> although he took a different position in his designation of the Christ party.<sup>57</sup> As Goulder saw it, Lütgert in 1908 was the first to exhaustively criticize Baur's reconstruction of the parties in the early church:

Lütgert's analysis convinced many and is a basis for the modern discussion of the two letters, even if parts of it have been discarded. It is on account of his sharp thinking that the Tübingen theory lost its position among the wise and those in the know.<sup>58</sup>

In 1995 Will Deming described

Lütgert's interpretation of the Corinthian letters as a radical change, writing, 'In one way or the other Lütgert's explanation has received broad support.'<sup>59</sup> According to Deming, Lütgert's convincing insight was to trace libertinism and asceticism back to the same source. To Deming, Lütgert's viewpoint and later variations of it were eventually substituted by Ernst Käsemann's similar thesis that not Gnostic but rather apocalyptic movements related to 'realized eschatology' were in the background of these letters. Deming himself supported Käsemann in his critique of Lütgert's viewpoint.<sup>60</sup>

#### V. The Gnosis Discussion

A longstanding discussion in religious studies, as well as in research on the New Testament and the early church, concerns the question of 'Gnosis.' According to Adolf Harnack,<sup>61</sup> this was a Christian heresy that emerged out of Judaism and Christianity. For the representatives of the so-called history-of-religions school, it was an independent pre-Christian and non-

<sup>55</sup> Adolf Schlatter, *Paulus, Der Bote Jesu: Eine Deutung seiner Briefe an die Korinther* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1969), 42, cf. 20–46; Schlatter, *Die Theologie der Apostel* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1922, rpt. 1997), 403–32.

<sup>56</sup> Michael D. Goulder, *Paul and the Competing Mission in Corinth*, (Peabody, MS: Hendrickson, 2001), 13–15, 25–29.

<sup>57</sup> Goulder, *Paul and the Competing Mission*, 27–29.

<sup>58</sup> Goulder, *Paul and the Competing Mission*, 14.

<sup>59</sup> Will Deming, *Paul on Marriage and Celibacy: The Hellenistic Background of 1 Corinthians 7* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 22..

<sup>60</sup> Deming, *Paul on Marriage and Celibacy*, 31–32. As a further example of a newer appraisal of Lütgert's studies of Paul's opponents, see Robert Jewett, *Paul's Anthropological Terms: A Study in Their Use in Conflict Settings* (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 19–20.

<sup>61</sup> Adolf von Harnack, 'Rezension über: Wilhelm Bousset, Hauptprobleme der Gnosis' (originally published 1908), in Kurt Rudolph (ed.), *Gnosis und Gnostizismus* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1975), 231–37.

Christian religion that then became mixed with Christianity. With respect to the New Testament, there was the additional question of whether a first-century Gnostic religion influenced Christianity and in particular Paul, or whether the New Testament, especially Paul, fought vehemently against this impulse. Primarily Rudolf Bultmann and his students held the former view; in theology Walter Schmithals is above all associated with the latter position, and in religious studies the leading name is Kurt Rudolph.<sup>62</sup> Theologian Martin Hengel is associated with the denial of the latter position.<sup>63</sup>

With all due respect to Hengel's arguments, he can maintain his view only on the basis of a late dating of several New Testament writings. The famous warning in 1 Timothy 6:20–21 against 'what is falsely called knowledge' is, for Hengel as well as for Lütgert, directed against Gnostics. However, contrary to Lütgert, the warning is not Pauline: 'The earliest evidence for a Christian "Gnosis", 1 Timothy 6:20, belongs in the beginning of the second century.' Hengel dates the book in 110–120 AD, and he does the same with Ignatius's letters.<sup>64</sup>

The question of the origins of Gnosticism is nowadays farther away than ever from being cleared up.

**62** Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: Wesen und Geschichte einer spätantiken Religion* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990).

**63** Martin Hengel, 'Paulus und die Frage einer vorchristlichen Gnosis', in his *Kleinere Schriften 3: Paulus und Jakobus*. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 473–510. The most important literature is mentioned in the notes on pp. 474–76.

**64** Hengel, 'Paulus', 492.

Hans-Martin Schenke correctly wondered whether, in light of the controversies and breadth of the textual findings, a summary presentation of Gnosis is possible.<sup>65</sup> H. J. W. Drijvers declared, after modern discoveries of many new sources relating to Gnosis, 'The problem of the origins of Gnosticism is today one of the most disputed questions in the field of religious studies.'<sup>66</sup>

Lütgert is responsible for initiating the discussion of the relationship between Gnosis and the New Testament. It is for this reason that Bultmann, of all people, interacted with him extensively.<sup>67</sup> But Lütgert had nothing to do with the viewpoint that Paul himself was influenced by Gnosis, since he implicitly rejected it. Philosopher Hans Leisegang wrote in 1924, in his classic presentation of Gnosis, that the gospels 'were all more or less filled and infiltrated with Gnostic motives' and that 'the apostle Paul lived in the world view of Gnosis and thought along its lines.'<sup>68</sup> In 1927

**65** Hans-Martin Schenke; 'Hauptprobleme der Gnosis' (originally published 1965), in Kurt Rudolph (ed.), *Gnosis und Gnostizismus* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1975), 586.

**66** H. J. W. Drijvers, 'Die Ursprünge des Gnostizismus als religionsgeschichtliches Problem', in Rudolph (ed.), *Gnosis und Gnostizismus*. 841.

**67** See Walter Schmithals, *Die Gnosis in Korinth: Eine Untersuchung zu den Korintherbriefen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965, revised 1969), 113–16; Schmithals, *Neues Testament und Gnosis* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1984), 25, 29–30 on Lütgert and Adolf Schlatter's significance to Bultmann and the Bultmann school's critique of Lütgert.

**68** Hans Leisegang, *Die Gnosis* (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1924, rpt. 1985), 2–3; see also Hans

Richard Reitzenstein named Paul 'not the first, but arguably the greatest of all Gnostics'.<sup>69</sup> For Lütgert, in contrast, it was beyond question that Paul was the greatest debunker of Gnosis.

As far as Lütgert is concerned, the concepts 'Gnosis' and 'Gnostic' have no relationship to Gnosis in church history. He does not mention any precursors of later movements. To consider his position disproved by subsequent research would do him an injustice. For Lütgert, 'Gnostic' describes a movement in which the acts of God or salvific revelation but rather a higher knowledge is at the centre. Here is his definition: 'With the Corinthian church we have for the first time Gnosticism in the sense that Gnosis surpasses faith, with that Gnosis based on revelation so that the possession of it makes for Christian perfection, the essence of Christianity.'<sup>70</sup>

As Hengel correctly indicates, the idea of Gnosis was not precisely defined until around 1960, and before that point various meanings were attached to the notion. Not until Schmithals was the term defined more precisely.<sup>71</sup> One should not look at Lütgert's writings prior to World War I in light of the discussions that occurred between the World Wars or since 1960, although Lütgert played a large part in initiating the discussions surrounding the relationship between Gnosis and the New Testament. Lütgert's outlook can be reconciled with Hengel as well as with Schmithals; in contrast, Bultmann's view that Paul

was himself a Gnostic was an abuse of Lütgert's position. For Lütgert it was clear that Paul fought relentlessly against Gnosis everywhere.

Whether one describes Paul's opponents as Gnostic, proto-Gnostic, libertine or antinomian (all of which notions are contestable in one way or another) does not alone decide what these opponents stood for. The most important issue is what they advocated or what Paul opposed, even if the origin of these perceptions is not always clear. For instance, in 1 Corinthians 6:16–20 some people visited prostitutes without seeing themselves as having breached God's will, while others practiced sexual abstinence in marriage. These circumstances are important for our exegesis as well as for our systematic theological evaluation, regardless of whether we can reconstruct the provenance of the points of view and find the exact terms to describe them.

At the time of 1 Corinthians, the church in Corinth was divided with respect to numerous questions. One person did not eat meat sacrificed to idols, and another participated in an observance of an idol in order to eat this meat. One individual favoured sexual laxness, whereas another rejected even sexuality in marriage. Paul, however, practically never conceded a point to one or the other Corinthian party. He equally admonished both parties in Corinth, since neither opinion corresponded to godly thinking. This undisputed initial position should play a much larger role in the overall interpretation of the letter as well as in doctrinal evaluation, instead of getting lost in the question of the anterior historical reconstruction.

Leisegang, *Denkformen*. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1928), 87–127.

69 Quoted by Hengel, 'Paulus', 473.

70 Lütgert, 'Freiheitspredigt', 134.

71 Lütgert, 'Freiheitspredigt', 474.

## VI. Law and Freedom

Lütgert also supported the principle of law and freedom outside of theology, even if he initially derived the principle from theology. In his 1917 lecture 'Law and Freedom', delivered when he assumed the position of rector at the University of Halle-Wittenberg, he made the following statement, which summarized his world view: 'Law and freedom are the two poles, the two focal points of our lives. Neither of the two lets itself be reduced to the other. Such a duality points to a uniform will, which re-

veals itself in both of these norms.'<sup>72</sup>

I believe that the necessity of defending the Christian faith against legalism as well as lawlessness, which Lütgert demonstrates to be a central theme in many New Testament documents, remains an important legacy for evangelical theology, which continues to find itself struggling on these same two fronts.

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<sup>72</sup> Wilhelm Lütgert, 'Gesetz und Freiheit', *Hallische Universitätsreden 6* (Halle an der Saale: Max Niemeyer, 1917), 18.

# Law and Gospel: The Hermeneutical and Homiletical Key to Reformation Theology and Ethics

Thomas K. Johnson

Evangelicals should actively appropriate a central theme from the Protestant Reformation that provides a unified structure for faith, life and proclamation: the nuanced relation between law and gospel. A largely unified (but not woodenly identical) perspective can be learned from a comparison of Martin Luther (1483–1546) with John Calvin (1509–1564). Their significant similarity on these questions established patterns for quality teaching and preaching in the Protestant tradition.

The relationship between law and gospel is a hermeneutical/homiletical key to Reformation theology and ethics, both *historically* to understand the Reformation itself and *normatively*, setting a pattern to appropriate today. This complementarity offers evangelicals a proven tool for understanding the Bible, for proclamation in church and society, for balanced and authentic pastoral care, and for relating the Christian faith to questions of culture and politics.

## I. Differences between Luther and Calvin

There are theological differences between Luther and Calvin, but differences of literary style and personality seem larger. Calvin labours for elegance of expression and an orderly arrangement. The table of contents of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* offers an overview of how he connects the various themes in Christian proclamation.

Calvin finds repetition inelegant; in his commentaries he refers the reader to a previous book if he has already given a satisfactory exposition of a text or theme. He also distinguishes theology from biblical exegesis, representing the Renaissance care for precision in dealing with historical texts. To get Calvin's complete perspective on a topic, one must read his *Institutes*, not only his commentaries.

Luther does not clearly distinguish exegesis from theology. In his *Lectures on Galatians*, he often digresses from the text of Galatians to other texts and generally tells his students all they

should know relative to the themes before him. His *Lectures on Galatians* describe faith and life in light of Galatians, not merely exegeting the Pauline book. Luther had a tremendously systematic mind, but his love of the gospel constantly breaks his orderly presentation. This makes Luther repetitive though never monotonous.

Behind the difference in literary style between Luther and Calvin lay a difference in personality so great that one can mistake it for a difference in core theology. Lewis Spitz commented:

Calvin and Luther were temperamentally quite different. The younger man [Calvin] was shy to the point of diffidence, precise and restrained, except for sudden flashes of anger. He was severe, but scrupulously just and truthful, self-contained and somewhat aloof. He had many acquaintances but few intimate friends. The older man [Luther] was sociable to the point of volubility, free and open, warm and cordial with people of all stations of life. But in spite of their differences in personality, Calvin and Luther retained a mutual respect for each other that was rooted in their confessional agreement.<sup>1</sup>

A 'confessional agreement' deeper than their disagreements is what we find on law and gospel, though it is disguised by differences in terminology. Luther and Calvin have remarkably similar convictions, especially that the relationship between law and gospel is central for the Chris-

tian faith, for Christian proclamation, and for ethics, including social ethics. Luther's key text is his 1535 *Lectures on Galatians*. Calvin's 1548 *Galatians Commentary* is convenient for comparison; it must be supplemented by his *Institutes* because of his literary method.

## II. The Centrality of the Law/ Gospel Relationship

For Luther, the relationship between law and gospel is the centre of true Christianity; the ability to distinguish properly between law and gospel qualifies one as a theologian. 'Therefore whoever knows well how to distinguish the gospel from the law should give thanks to God and know that he is a real theologian.'<sup>2</sup>

The real problem in theology through Luther's time was the failure to articulate this distinction:

You will not find anything about this distinction between the law and the gospel in the books of the monks, the canonists, and the recent and ancient theologians. Augustine taught and expressed it to some extent. Jerome and others like him knew nothing at all about it. In other words, for many centuries there has been a remarkable silence about this in all the schools and churches. This situation has produced a very dangerous condition for consciences.<sup>3</sup>

This distinction is no mere theoretical abstraction. It is an existential reality

1 Lewis W. Spitz, *The Renaissance and Reformation Movements*, 2 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), vol. 2: *The Reformation*, 412.

2 Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, ed. and trans. Jaroslav Pelikan, vol. 26: *Lectures on Galatians*, 1535 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1963), 115.

3 Luther, *Galatians*, 313.



of the highest import; it is the heart of the Christian faith; it is the key to keeping the gospel pure and distinguishing authentic Christianity from distorted faiths and religions. 'Let every Christian learn diligently to distinguish between the law and the gospel.'<sup>4</sup>

Without this distinction people either fall into despair, finding that they cannot earn God's favor by law-keeping, or they fall into false confidence, presuming that they can earn God's favor. However, the proper distinction is not a matter of memorizing proper terms or using certain words; it is more an art than a science. It must be made in the midst of life experience. Luther confessed, 'I admit that in the time of temptation I myself do not know how to do this as I should.'<sup>5</sup>

Calvin appropriates a clear distinction between law and gospel from Luther, but he understands it to really come from the Bible: '[Paul] is continually employed in contrasting the righteousness of the law with the free acceptance which God is pleased to bestow.'<sup>6</sup> Because Calvin avoids repetition, one such statement suffices to show that Calvin sees this contrast as central to the faith. But he thinks it is prominent in the entire Bible.

When discussing Abraham, Calvin notes, 'For faith,—so far as it embraces the undeserved goodness of God, Christ with all his benefits, the testimony of our adoption which is

contained in the gospel,—is universally contrasted with the law, with the merit of works, and with human excellence.'<sup>7</sup> He echoes Luther: 'We see then that the smallest part of justification cannot be attributed to the law without renouncing Christ and his grace.'<sup>8</sup>

### III. What Is the Gospel?

For Luther, justification by faith alone (not faith plus anything else) is the centre of the gospel. By faith a person is united with Christ and received by Christ so that Christ's righteousness becomes one's own and the believer is declared righteous by God. While the legal status of being justified is an enduring condition in relation to God, a person's faith remains dynamic; one may only be aware of the status of justification to the extent one presently trusts the gospel.

If it is true faith, it is a sure trust and firm acceptance in the heart. It takes hold of Christ in such a way that Christ is the object of faith, or rather not the object of faith but, so to speak, the one who is present in the faith itself.<sup>9</sup>

But the work of Christ, properly speaking, is this: to embrace the one whom the law has made a sinner and pronounced guilty, and to absolve him from his sins if he believes the gospel. 'For Christ is the end of the law, that everyone who has faith may be justified' (Rom 10:4).<sup>10</sup>

4 Luther, *Galatians*, 120.

5 Luther, *Galatians*, 115.

6 John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, trans. William Pringle (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1854; rpt. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 67. Modernized spelling and punctuation.

7 Calvin, *Galatians*, 85.

8 Calvin, *Galatians*, 151.

9 Luther, *Galatians*, 129.

10 Luther, *Galatians*, 143.

Calvin uses slightly different language. Salvation is accomplished solely by the work of Christ; salvation is received solely by faith. About Galatians 2:15–16, Calvin observed:

Since the Jews themselves, with all their advantages, were forced to betake themselves to the faith of Christ, how much more necessary was it that the Gentiles should look for salvation through faith? Paul's meaning therefore is: 'We ... have found no method of obtaining salvation, but by believing in Christ: why, then, should we prescribe another method to the Gentiles? ... We must seek justification by the faith of Christ, because we cannot be justified by works.'<sup>11</sup>

The Reformers understand the gospel in contrast to the law. Believing the gospel is the opposite of seeking to achieve a proper relationship with God by following the law or performing 'works'.

#### IV. Faith and Works

From the start of the Reformation, Luther was misunderstood to say that if people do not need to earn their eternal salvation by doing good works, then people are free from all moral restraint and free to sin. This antinomian misunderstanding threatened to contribute to the widespread social chaos of the time, an outcome Luther feared.

In his 1520 treatise *The Freedom of the Christian*, Luther rejects antinomianism with his ear-catching irony that, in addition to being a perfectly free lord of all, each Christian is also a perfectly dutiful servant of all. Luther

claims that true faith in Christ moves people to love and serve within the everyday social structures without any rejection of the moral law. Faith leads to good works, and if real faith is present, good works can be expected.

Therefore we, too, say that faith without works is worthless and useless. The papists and the fanatics take this to mean that faith without works does not justify, or that if faith does not have works, it is of no avail, no matter how true it is. That is false. But faith without works—that is, a fantastic idea and mere vanity and a dream of the heart—is a false faith and does not justify.<sup>12</sup>

Luther interprets the representatives of the Roman Catholic Church of his day to say that works were necessary in order to be justified, the central problem of the 'papists'. Luther also thinks that the 'fanatics', his term for some Anabaptists, follow the papists at this crucial point—a claim not always noticed. Luther teaches that good works will always follow any justification that is authentic, but such good works do not contribute to justification.

In addition to holding a different view of the relation between faith and works, Luther also claims to teach a different view of an appropriate 'good work'. As a papist he performed works that were explicitly religious in nature; he entered a monastery, fasted, took pilgrimages, and spent long hours confessing sins.<sup>13</sup> After coming

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<sup>12</sup> Luther, *Galatians*, 155.

<sup>13</sup> This is what later scholars often call 'extra-mundane asceticism' in contrast with the 'intra-mundane asceticism' taught by Luther and Calvin.

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<sup>11</sup> Calvin, *Galatians*, 66, 67.

to the Reformation faith, he taught that good works are primarily in the everyday world:

For such great blindness used to prevail in the world that we supposed that the works which men had invented not only without but against the commandment of God were much better than those which a magistrate, the head of a household, a teacher, a child, a servant, etc., did in accordance with God's command.<sup>14</sup>

The good works resulting from justification by faith are those commanded by God in the Word within the everyday created order:

Surely we should have learned from the Word of God that the religious orders of the papists, which alone they call holy, are wicked, since there exists no commandment of God or testimony in Sacred Scripture about them; and, on the other hand, that other ways of life, which do have the word and commandment of God, are holy and divinely instituted ... , on the basis of the Word of God we pronounce the sure conviction that the way of life of a servant, which is extremely vile in the sight of the world, is far more acceptable to God than all the orders of monks. For God approves, commends, and adorns the status of servants with his Word, but not that of the monks.<sup>15</sup>

For Luther, works do not contribute to justification before God. One is

justified by faith alone, meaning that nothing one does contributes to justification. But real justifying faith necessarily leads to obedience to God's command in the Word.

Calvin's doctrine of faith and works resembles Luther's. Though some have misperceived Calvin to be a stern legalist, in his time the French-speaking Reformation was perceived to be antinomian in a manner that contributed to social chaos and wanton vice. This was similar to Luther's problem, a result of saying that good works and the moral law do not contribute to our salvation. From the 'Prefatory Address to King Francis' in the *Institutes*, Calvin clarifies his doctrine of the relation of faith to good works, partly to teach his people but partly as an apologetic response to this continuing allegation against the Reformation.

Using Galatians 5:6, Calvin defines these matters: 'It is not our doctrine that the faith which justifies is alone; we maintain that it is invariably accompanied by good works; only we contend that faith alone is sufficient for justification.'<sup>16</sup>

From Luther to Calvin, there is a small development in the terminology of good works. Whereas Luther talks about loving service within the created orders of everyday life in obedience to the command of God, Calvin usually talks about obedience to the law of God as the standard for good works. This is a tiny change in terminology, not a substantial development in content. Like Luther, Calvin describes good works as love for others within the framework of everyday life:

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14 Luther, *Galatians*, 212.

15 Luther, *Galatians*, 213. For Luther, the fact of these biblical commands indicates that being a servant is a proper way of serving God.

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16 Calvin, *Galatians*, 152.

But we must inquire into the reason why all the precepts of the law are included under love. The law consists of two tables, the first of which instructs us concerning the worship of God and the duties of piety, and the second instructs us concerning the love of neighbor .... Piety to God, I acknowledge, ranks higher than love of the brethren; and therefore the observance of the first table is more valuable in the sight of God than the observance of the second. But as God himself is invisible, so piety is a thing hidden from the eyes of man. ... God therefore chooses to make trial of our love to himself by that love of our brother, which he enjoins us to cultivate.<sup>17</sup>

Calvin uses the term *law* to describe the function of Holy Scripture in guiding the life of gratitude and good works, whereas Luther uses the term *commandment*. This difference in terms is based on a deep agreement—real faith leads to good works that are practiced in everyday life according to the commands or law of God in Scripture.

## V. The Gospel and the Old Testament

Throughout Christian history, the relationship between the two testaments has been a recurring issue. Some, such as the group that disturbed the churches in Galatia in the first century, minimize any transition from the Old to the New Testament. Others, such as Marcion in the second century, minimize any continuity between the testaments, believing

that the Old Testament contains only law while the New Testament only preaches the gospel. Against such extremes, with small differences, Luther and Calvin fundamentally agree on seeing both law and gospel in both the Old and the New Testament. Neither obliterates all distinctions between the two testaments; both see substantial continuity.

Luther loved to describe Moses as the preacher of righteousness by law:

Moses does not reveal the Son of God; he discloses the law, sin, the conscience, death, the wrath and judgment of God, and hell. ... Therefore only the gospel reveals the Son of God. Oh, if only one could distinguish carefully here and not look for the law in the gospel but keep it as separate from the law as heaven is distant from earth.<sup>18</sup>

Representing the apostle Paul, Luther writes, 'You have not heard me teach the righteousness of the law or of works; for this belongs to Moses, not to me.'<sup>19</sup>

If this were all Luther said, one might imagine an absolute antithesis between the two testaments. However, with no sense of self-contradiction, Luther notes, 'The patriarchs and all the Old Testament saints were free in their conscience and were justified by faith, not by circumcision or the law.'<sup>20</sup> It is true that 'Moses, the minister of the law, has the ministry of law, which he [the apostle Paul] calls a ministry of sin, wrath, death, and damnation',<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Luther, *Galatians*, 72.

<sup>19</sup> Luther, *Galatians*, 73.

<sup>20</sup> Luther, *Galatians*, 85. By the term 'free in their conscience', Luther means awareness of a status of full acceptance before God.

<sup>21</sup> Luther, *Galatians*, 147.

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<sup>17</sup> Calvin, *Galatians*, 159, 160.

yet Moses preached justification by faith alone.

The gospel in the Old Testament, Luther claims, is also about Jesus Christ. The faith of the patriarchs was a faith that looked to the future acts of God for their salvation. 'The sound of the promise to Abraham brings Christ; and when he has been grasped by faith, then the Holy Spirit is granted on Christ's behalf.'<sup>22</sup>

Though the promises related to the gospel were especially given to Abraham, these promises were also available to whoever believed. In discussing how the Roman centurion (Acts 9) was righteous *before* he heard the gospel from Peter, Luther claimed:

Cornelius was a righteous and holy man in accordance with the Old Testament on account of his faith in the coming Christ, just as all the patriarchs, prophets, and devout kings were righteous, having received the Holy Spirit secretly on account of their faith in the coming Christ.<sup>23</sup>

The main contrast between the gospel in the Old Testament and in the New Testament is that 'the faith of the patriarchs was attached to the Christ who was to come, just as ours is attached to the One who has already come.'<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the book of Genesis was primarily a book of gospel:

In Jewish fashion Paul usually calls the first book of Moses 'law'. Even though it has no law except that which deals with circumcision, but chiefly teaches faith and testifies that the patriarchs were pleasing

to God on account of their faith, still the Jews called Genesis together with the other books of Moses 'law' because of that one law of circumcision.<sup>25</sup>

Just as Luther claims that the Old Testament is full of gospel, so he finds law in the New Testament, although the New Testament is pre-eminently gospel:

The gospel, however, is a proclamation about Christ: that he forgives sins, grants grace, justifies, and saves sinners. Although there are commandments in the gospel, they are not the gospel; they are expositions of the law and appendices to the gospel.<sup>26</sup>

Calvin's distinction between the testaments is similar to that of Luther. At the beginning of his Galatians commentary, he complains that the false apostles disturbing the churches removed the distinction between the two testaments, which is the distinction between law and gospel. 'It is no small evil to quench the light of the gospel, to lay a snare for consciences, and to remove the distinction between the Old and the New Testament.'<sup>27</sup>

Like Luther, Calvin regards the Old Testament as largely law, whereas the New Testament is largely gospel:

That office which was peculiar to Moses consisted in laying down a rule of life and ceremonies to be observed in the worship of God, and in afterwards adding promises and threatenings. Many promises, no doubt, relating to the free

22 Luther, *Galatians*, 255.

23 Luther, *Galatians*, 210.

24 Luther, *Galatians*, 239.

25 Luther, *Galatians*, 433.

26 Luther, *Galatians*, 150.

27 Calvin, *Galatians*, 14, 15.

mercy of God and of Christ, are to be found in his writings; and these promises belong to faith. But this is to be viewed as accidental.<sup>28</sup>

Though Calvin agrees with Luther that Moses is primarily a writer of law, Calvin's statements about Moses are more positive than Luther's. Calvin genuinely loved the Law of Moses and wrote a multi-volume study on the last four books of the Pentateuch. Luther chose to write more on the book of Genesis than on the other Mosaic books, probably because he saw Genesis as containing more gospel.

For Calvin, the way of salvation was the same under the old covenant as it is under the new, i.e. justification by faith alone:

Abraham was justified by believing, because, when he received from God a promise of fatherly kindness, he embraced it as certain. Faith, therefore, has a relation and a respect to such a divine promise as may enable men to place their trust and confidence in God.<sup>29</sup>

Calvin explains why Moses added the law so many years later if the gospel had already been given to Abraham. His comment would have pleased Luther—to show people their sin and need for the gospel. 'He means that the law was published in order to make known transgressions, and in this way to compel men to acknowledge their guilt. ... This is the true preparation for Christ.'<sup>30</sup>

Like Luther, Calvin hears the gospel throughout the Old Testament,

making the difference between the two testaments one of degree and place in the history of redemption:

The doctrine of faith, in short, is attested by Moses and all the prophets: but, as faith was not then clearly manifested, so the time of faith [Galatians 3:23] is an appellation here given, not in an absolute, but in a comparative sense, to the time of the New Testament.<sup>31</sup>

Indeed, the Old Testament ceremonies spoke of Christ and served as a schoolmaster to lead people to the coming Christ:

Beyond all doubt, ceremonies accomplished their object, not merely by alarming and humbling the conscience, but by exciting them to the faith of the coming Redeemer. ... The law ... was nothing else than an immense variety of exercises, in which the worshippers were led by the hand to Christ.<sup>32</sup>

The Reformers agree in seeing continuity of development from the Old Testament to the New Testament. Old Testament believers looked forward to the redemption in Christ, whereas New Testament believers look back to Christ, but all believers are justified by faith alone in the promise of the gospel. Although the New Testament is pre-eminently a book of gospel, that gospel is properly understood only in relation to the moral law contained in both testaments.

Whether in the time of the Old or the New Testament, Luther and Calvin see the biblical message as always having two distinct but inseparable dimensions: command and promise,

<sup>28</sup> Calvin, *Galatians*, 99.

<sup>29</sup> Calvin, *Galatians*, 84.

<sup>30</sup> Calvin, *Galatians*, 100.

<sup>31</sup> Calvin, *Galatians*, 107.

<sup>32</sup> Calvin, *Galatians*, 109.

law and gospel. This is the continuous structure of the biblical divine-human encounter.

## VI. Reason and Law

'Reason cannot think correctly about God; only faith can do so.'<sup>33</sup> Such statements give Luther the reputation of being opposed to reason. Some view him as irrational. Calvin, meanwhile, is sometimes presented as an unfeeling rationalist. Neither interpretation is accurate, because they assume no differentiation in terms of the object to which reason must be applied.

Both Luther and Calvin see reason as properly pertaining to the law; when reason is used within this realm, it is a tremendous gift of God. But when reason exceeds its proper bounds, going into the realm of gospel, then reason becomes an enemy of faith.

For Luther, the primary problem with reason is its claim that people can be justified by works of the law, rejecting the gospel:

Human reason and wisdom do not understand this doctrine [the gospel]. Therefore they always teach the opposite: 'If you want to live to God, you must observe the law; for it is written (Matthew 19:17), "If you would enter life, keep the commandments."' <sup>34</sup>

Let reason be far away, that enemy of faith, which, in the temptations of sin and death, relies not on the righteousness of faith or Christian righteousness, of which it is completely ignorant, but on its own righteousness or, at most, on the

righteousness of the law. As soon as reason and the law are joined, faith immediately loses its virginity. For nothing is more hostile to faith than the law and reason.<sup>35</sup>

For Luther, faith is not merely affirming religious propositions, though Luther accepts such classical Christian credal statements as the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. Faith is personal reliance on the gospel. But during assaults on the soul (German *Anfechtungen*), or temptations to doubt God's grace, believers are prone to move from trusting in the gospel to trusting in obedience to the law, and *sinful reason supports this tendency*. During spiritual assaults, fallen reason confuses law and gospel, so believers fall either into despair of pleasing God or else into false confidence, assuming that they please God without the gospel:

When it comes to experience, you will find the gospel a rare guest but the law a constant guest in your conscience, which is habituated to the law and the sense of sin; reason too supports this sense.<sup>36</sup>

Reason rarely overcomes the tendency to forget the gospel and rely on the law. Luther does not think that people should become irrational. The solution is to employ reason to its fullest in its proper realm: everyday, practical affairs. Reason is properly applied in the realm of the 'orders'—the realm of the civil use of the law. Discussing a popular proverb, 'God does not require of any man that he do more than he really can', Luther tightly connected reason to everyday

33 Luther, *Galatians*, 238.

34 Luther, *Galatians*, 156.

35 Luther, *Galatians*, 113.

36 Luther, *Galatians*, 117.

affairs:

This is actually a good statement, but in its proper place, that is, in political, domestic, and natural affairs. For example, if I, who exist *in the realm of reason*, rule a family, build a house, or carry on a government office, and I do as much as I can or what lies within me, I am excused.<sup>37</sup>

With this understanding of the proper realm of reason, Luther could praise Greek political philosophy and Roman law, though he also describes reason and philosophy very negatively. Of itself, reason knows nothing about the gospel and tends to confuse law and gospel; nevertheless, reason can know much about the moral law and its application in everyday life. In this realm reason must be treasured. The knowledge of the moral law possessed by reason is the result of God's revelation through creation. Because of sin and unbelief, this reasonable knowledge of the moral law will need to be corrected by the command of God in the Scriptures; nevertheless, reason can know the law. Therefore, by reason, civil righteousness is possible for many who do not know the gospel:

The sophists, as well as anyone else who does not grasp the doctrine of justification, do not know of any other righteousness than civil righteousness or the righteousness of the law, which are known in some measure even to the heathen.<sup>38</sup>

Calvin's doctrine of reason is simi-

lar to Luther's with a subtle shift. After celebrating the ability of human reason in the natural realm, the result of God's general grace and general revelation, Calvin asked what reason knows of God:

We must now analyze what human reason can discern with regard to God's Kingdom and to spiritual insight. This spiritual insight consists chiefly in three things: (1) knowing God; (2) knowing his fatherly favor in our behalf, in which our salvation consists; (3) knowing how to frame our life according to the rule of his law. In the two first points—and especially in the second—the greatest geniuses are blinder than moles!<sup>39</sup>

Calvin distinguished knowing what God is like (point 1 above) from knowing how God relates to man in the gospel (point 2). Though reason is not always completely wrong about God's being, statements on this topic by philosophers 'always show a certain giddy imagination'.<sup>40</sup> But unaided reason is 'blinder than moles' in regard to understanding God's fatherly care and the gospel. To properly trust in God's fatherly care, the gospel, Scripture, and the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit are needed.

Though reason is worthless in the realm of the gospel, Calvin emphasizes reason in area 3, 'how to frame our life according to the rule of his law'. This is the realm of the civil use of God's moral law, the natural moral law, and civil righteousness.

<sup>37</sup> Luther, *Galatians*, 173, 174. Emphasis added.

<sup>38</sup> Luther, *Galatians*, 261.

<sup>39</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), II, ii, 18.

<sup>40</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, II, ii, 18.



There remains the third aspect of spiritual insight, that of knowing the rule for the right conduct of life. This we correctly call the 'knowledge of the works of righteousness.' The human mind sometimes seems more acute in this than in higher things. For the apostle testifies: 'When Gentiles, who do not have the law, do the works of the law, they are a law to themselves ... and show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their thoughts accuse them among themselves or excuse them before God's judgment' [Rom. 2:14–15]. If Gentiles by nature have law righteousness engraved upon their minds, we surely cannot say they are utterly blind as to the conduct of life. There is nothing more common than for a man to be sufficiently instructed in a right standard of conduct by natural law.<sup>41</sup>

Reason often knows right and wrong based on the natural (God-given) moral law, and this knowledge can provide 'a right standard of conduct'. Calvin never suggests that this knowledge equips people to earn God's favour. Even though people often know the good and are able to attain civil righteousness, they are still sinful; the natural knowledge of right and wrong received by reason renders people blameworthy before God.

Calvin carefully qualifies what reason knows about the moral law. Sin darkens our knowing process. We do not always in fact know what we should in principle know by reason. The written moral law is extremely

important:

Now that inward law [the natural moral law], which we have above described as written, even engraved, upon the hearts of all, in a sense asserts the very same things that are to be learned from the two Tables [the Ten Commandments]. For our conscience does not allow us to sleep a perpetual insensible sleep without being an inner witness and monitor of what we owe to God, without holding before us the difference between good and evil and thus accusing us when we fail in our duty. But man is so shrouded in the darkness of errors that he hardly begins to grasp through this natural law what worship is acceptable to God. ... Accordingly (because it is necessary both for our dullness and for our arrogance), the Lord has provided us with a written law to give us clearer witness of what was too obscure in the natural law, shake off our listlessness, and strike more vigorously our mind and memory.<sup>42</sup>

There is a difference between how Luther and Calvin understand the influence of sin on our perception of the natural moral law. Calvin emphasizes the way in which the content of our knowledge is darkened, while Luther emphasizes the way in which people misuse this knowledge to earn God's favour. They agree that knowledge of God's natural moral law is available to reason and allows people to know right and wrong, but unaided reason cannot know how to relate properly to God. And the Bible is needed to know more fully what kinds of good

41 Calvin, *Institutes*, II, ii, 22.

42 Calvin, *Institutes*, II, viii, 1.

works should follow faith.

## VII. The Uses of the Law

Some see a large difference between Luther and Calvin regarding the proper uses of the law. The evidence shows a difference in terminology, literary style, and personality-driven reactions to the moral law within a substantially similar perspective. Calvin may have taken Luther's doctrine and refined the terminology, though Luther might have been dissatisfied with some aspects of this development.

If the moral law is not to be used to earn God's favour, what are its proper uses or functions? Luther speaks of two proper uses of the law, the civic and the theological, with the theological use being primary. While discussing Galatians 3:19, Luther claims:

One must know that there is a double use of the law. One is the civic use. God has ordained civic laws, indeed all laws, to restrain transgressions. Therefore, every law was given to hinder sins. Does this mean that when the law restrains sins, it justifies? Not at all. When I refrain from killing or from committing adultery or from stealing, or when I abstain from other sins, I do not do this voluntarily or from the love of virtue but because I am afraid of the sword and of the executioner. This prevents me, as the ropes or chains prevent a lion or a bear from ravaging something that comes along. ... The first understanding and use of the law is to restrain the wicked. ... This is why God has ordained magistrates, parents, teachers, laws, shackles, and

all civic ordinances.<sup>43</sup>

Though the civic use of the law is important to make civic righteousness possible, it is not the most important use of the law. The ultimate use of the law is to show us our sin and need for the gospel:

The other use of the law is the theological or spiritual one, which serves to increase transgressions. ... Therefore the true function and the chief and proper use of the law is to reveal to man his sin, blindness, misery, wickedness, ignorance, hate, and contempt of God, death, hell, judgment, and the well-deserved wrath of God.<sup>44</sup>

At this point Luther waxes eloquent about the value of God's law, but his point is clear—there are two uses of the moral law that must be distinguished from each other. In the civic use, the law restrains sin to make civilization possible, whether the law comes directly from God or indirectly through human laws, civic authorities, or other humane influences. The theological use leads a person to despair and prepares him for hearing the gospel. Because of its close relation to the gospel, the theological use of the law is primary.

Calvin speaks about three uses of the law, but he does not discuss all three uses in relation to Galatians because he does not think that Paul discussed all three uses there. In discussing Galatians 3:19, Calvin offers a rare criticism of Luther:

For many, I find, have fallen into the mistake of acknowledging no other advantage belonging to the

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<sup>43</sup> Luther, *Galatians*, 308, 309.

<sup>44</sup> Luther, *Galatians*, 309.

law, but what is expressed here. Paul himself elsewhere speaks of the precepts of the law as profitable for doctrine and exhortations (2 Tim 3:16). The definition here given of the use of the law is not complete, and those who refuse to make any other acknowledgment in favour of the law do wrong.<sup>45</sup>

Calvin agrees that Galatians teaches Luther's two proper uses of the law. Calvin insists that the rest of the Bible teaches a third use.

Calvin calls his first use of the law the primitive function of the law, similar to Luther's theological use:

Let us survey briefly the function and use of what is called the 'moral law'. Now, so far as I understand it, it consists of three parts.

The first part is this: while it shows God's righteousness, that is the righteousness alone acceptable to God, it warns, informs, convicts, and lastly condemns, every man of his own unrighteousness. For man, blinded and drunk with self-love, must be compelled to know and to confess his own feebleness and impurity.<sup>46</sup>

Calvin compares the law to a mirror; as a mirror shows the spots on one's face, so the law shows sin, though with different results among believers and unbelievers. Unbelievers are terrified; believers flee to God's mercy in Christ. Calvin and Luther use different language to describe this use, reflecting differences in personality. Luther seems to have gone through a two-step process, dropping into despair before turning away

from the law and toward the gospel. The continuing, repeated assaults on his soul are echoed in his language about the law. Calvin seems to have gone through a one-step process, immediately turning from the law to the gospel without intermediate despair; his language about the law does not usually contain echoes of terror.

Calvin's second use of the law is Luther's first use—the civic or political use:

The second function of the law is this: at least by fear of punishment to restrain certain men who are untouched by any care for what is just and right unless compelled by hearing the dire threats in the law. But they are restrained not because their inner mind is stirred or affected, but because, being bridled, so to speak, they keep their hands from outward activity, and hold inside the depravity that otherwise they would wantonly have indulged.<sup>47</sup>

The differences between Luther and Calvin are small but noteworthy. Luther understands the moral law in its civic use as largely mediated through societal orders, whether the state, the family, the school or the church. Calvin conceives of the civil use of the law as being largely unmediated, in the direct encounter of an individual with God. Of course, Calvin believes the civil magistrate had to prevent societal chaos, which he regards as the worst of evils. But when he turns to his second use of the law, he first considers each person's direct encounter with God.

Calvin says the third use of the law is primary:

45 Calvin, *Galatians*, 99, 100.

46 Calvin, *Institutes*, II, vii, 6.

47 Calvin, *Institutes*, II, vii, 10.

The third and principal use, which pertains more closely to the proper use of the law, finds its place among believers in whose hearts the Spirit of God already lives and reigns. For even though they have the law written and engraved upon their hearts by the finger of God (Jer 31:33; Heb 10:16), that is, have been so moved and quickened through the directing of the Spirit that they long to obey God, they still profit by the law in two ways.<sup>48</sup>

Calvin's two ways in which the law helps believers are teaching the will of God, which believers desire to follow, and exhorting believers to continued obedience. Though Calvin does not use this terminology, they could be called 'Use 3A' and 'Use 3B'. Concerning Use 3A, Calvin claims the law 'is the best instrument for them to learn more thoroughly each day the nature of the Lord's will to which they aspire, and to confirm them in the understanding of it'.<sup>49</sup> He uses vivid language about Use 3B: 'by frequent meditation upon it to be aroused to obedience, be strengthened in it, and be drawn back from the slippery path of transgression'.<sup>50</sup>

Lest one think the desires of believers are all negative, Calvin explains:

For the law is not now acting toward us as a rigorous enforcement officer who is not satisfied unless the requirements are met. But in this perfection to which it exhorts us, the law points out the goal toward which throughout life we are

to strive.<sup>51</sup>

For Calvin, the law is a friend in a way Luther did not imagine. Calvin knows, like Luther, that the law always accuses believers, but for Calvin this accusation is in light of a deep, continuing assurance of God's fatherly care, so the threats and harshness can be removed from the believer's experience of the law. Like Luther, Calvin fully affirms the principle of *simul justus et peccator*, that the believer is simultaneously justified and sinful; therefore, the believer needs the law of God as a guide to life. But the new obedience to the law is an expression of gratitude for the gospel without any hint of using the moral law as a tool for self-justification.

Was Calvin's gentle criticism of Luther correct, assuming the validity of Calvin's threefold use? The answer is 'probably not,' because Luther's view of the uses of the law is closer to Calvin's than Calvin may have recognized, even though Luther does not use the term 'third use'. The reason for this claim is that the content of Calvin's Use 3B, that believers 'be drawn back from the slippery path of transgression', is included in Luther's civic use of the law, restraining sin. Luther and Calvin both think the sin of believers needs to be restrained. The difference in terminology is only where this theme appears in the outline.

Then there is the question of knowing the will of God, to which believers should aspire; Calvin calls this third use of the law 'primary', which Luther does not. But for Calvin this use of the moral law is 'primary' in an ideal sense if God's people were all

48 Calvin, *Institutes*, II, vi, 12.

49 Calvin, *Institutes*, II, vi, 12.

50 Calvin, *Institutes*, II, vi, 12.

51 Calvin, *Institutes*, II, vi, 13.

walking by faith and merely questioning what they should do. In practice, Calvin makes the theological, condemning use of the law very important. In his *Institutes*, the insightful discussion of the Decalogue is included in the section analysing the human predicament, prior to his discussion of the gospel. Calvin is using the law in its theological function to show sin. If Calvin had emphasized only the 'third' use of the law, he would have discussed the law only after his discussion of Christology and justification. In practice, Calvin's use of the law is close to Luther's recommendations about which use is primary.

At the same time, Luther's notion of the 'command of God' found in Scripture as the norm for the Christian life resembles Calvin's Use 3A, showing how Christians should live in gratitude for the gospel. The first problem with the works Luther had done as a monk was that they were intended to deserve or earn God's favour; the second problem was that his works were the wrong works. True good works have to be done in obedience to God's word in the Scriptures and flow from faith in the gospel, not substitute for faith in the gospel. This teaching of Luther approximates Calvin's Use 3A.

Luther made negative statements about the law. In the preface to his study on Galatians, he claimed:

The highest act and wisdom of Christians is not to know the law, to ignore works and all active righteousness, just as outside the people of God the highest wisdom is to know and study the law, works and active righteousness.<sup>52</sup>

Nevertheless, Luther also says, 'the works of the law must be performed either before justification or after justification.'<sup>53</sup>

When outward duties must be performed, then, whether you are a preacher, a magistrate, a husband, a teacher, a pupil, etc., this is not time to listen to the gospel. You must listen to the law and follow your vocation.<sup>54</sup>

Luther teaches that the works of obedience to the moral law not only follow justification in a chronological manner; obedience to the law is a fruit of faith:

Anyone who wants to exert himself toward righteousness must first exert himself in listening to the gospel. Now when he has heard and accepted this, let him joyfully give thanks to God, and then let him exert himself in good works that are commanded in the law; thus the law and works will follow hearing with faith. Then he will be able to walk safely in the light that is Christ; to be certain about choosing and doing works that are not hypocritical but truly good, pleasing to God, and commanded by him; and to reject all the mummery of self-chosen works.<sup>55</sup>

After contrasting the righteousness of the law with the righteousness of faith, Luther declares:

When he [Christ] has been grasped by faith, then the Holy Spirit is granted on Christ's account. Then God and neighbor are loved, good works are performed, and the

53 Luther, *Galatians*, 123.

54 Luther, *Galatians*, 117.

55 Luther, *Galatians*, 214, 215.

52 Luther, *Galatians*, 6.

cross is borne. This is really keeping the law ... . Hence it is impossible for us to keep the law without the promise.<sup>56</sup>

Luther elaborates:

Moses, together with Paul, necessarily drives us to Christ, through whom we become doers of the law and are accounted guilty of no transgression. How? First, through the forgiveness of sins and the imputation of righteousness, on account of faith in Christ; secondly, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, who creates a new life and new impulses in us, so that we may keep the law.<sup>57</sup>

Luther teaches that law-keeping by believers had three important purposes:

What is the purpose of keeping it [the law] if it does not justify? The final cause of the obedience of the law by the righteous is not righteousness in the sight of God, which is received by faith alone, but the peace of the world, gratitude toward God, and a good example by which others are invited to believe the gospel.<sup>58</sup>

Like Calvin, Luther teaches that keeping the moral law of God is the proper expression of gratitude for the gospel. There are differences in terminology regarding the proper uses of the law, with differences of personality behind those differences in terminology, but the massive agreement between Luther and Calvin sets

a standard for discussions of the use of God's law.

## VIII. Comments

Luther and Calvin agree that the relationship between law and gospel is central to the Christian faith for several reasons. They see this relation as central in the Bible, in *both* the Old and New Testaments; in other words, the biblical interpreter is not properly examining the Scriptures if this relation between law and gospel is not perceived. This consideration must not be forgotten. Following directly from this, the ability to clearly distinguish and relate law and gospel is regarded as central to recognizing a person as an evangelical theologian. This ability enables a person to apply the biblical message to human experience in a balanced manner that flows from a central structure of the biblical proclamation.

Closely related is the apprehension that the biblical relationship between law and gospel addresses one of the deepest existential dynamics within human beings. People will always respond to the moral law in some way, whether in despair because of inability to keep the law, in false confidence because of supposed earned righteousness, or by turning to the gospel. Others may turn to a deficient gospel, because believing a gospel is hard to avoid. This existential relation to law and gospel is constant and dynamic throughout a lifetime. For this reason, it is wise to address these issues continually in preaching and pastoral care. We should see law (in its multiple uses) and gospel as truly central to the application of the biblical message and central to the divine-human

<sup>56</sup> Luther, *Galatians*, 255.

<sup>57</sup> Luther, *Galatians*, 260.

<sup>58</sup> Luther, *Galatians*, 273. The term 'final cause' was a way of talking about purpose inspired by the terminology of Aristotle.

encounter.<sup>59</sup>

Some weaknesses in evangelicalism can be strengthened by Reformation teaching on law and gospel. One weakness has been forgetting the connection between the moral law and God's general revelation.<sup>60</sup> Forgetting this connection can cause us to miss the way in which people without the gospel already encounter God's law in both its theological and civic uses, thus weakening our approach to social ethics, culture, and missions. In social ethics, we should assume that all people already encounter God's moral law through creation and conscience; therefore, moral claims rooted in the Bible clarify and strengthen moral knowledge that people already have, though this knowledge is darkened or misused.

In missions, we can expect that people will normally have questions and anxieties arising from their encounter with the moral law in its theological use, proclaimed by God's general revelation; this is the cause of the correlation or question/answer relation between the gospel and human experience.<sup>61</sup> In relation to culture, each of the uses of the moral law, as well as the gospel, implies a distinct relationship of the biblical message to culture.

Another weakness has been a fail-

ure to distinguish how the moral law relates to reason from how the gospel relates to reason. The claim that we are justified in Christ is purely a statement of faith in the gospel, whereas the claim that murder is wrong is based on reason as well as on faith. This leads to more differentiation in our discussions of faith and reason. This differentiation can strengthen how we discuss integrating evangelical theology and ethics with learning in the various academic fields.

A further weakness has been forgetting the civil use of the moral law. This makes it more difficult for evangelicals to develop social ethics that do not sound like either an attempt to flee the world (ethics of holy community) or an attempt to take over the world (ethics of theocratic domination). There is a distinct and proper relation of the moral law, given by God, to human experience, reason and society, which we must learn to use in our civic ethics. This will enable us to talk and act as responsible citizens contributing to the public good, being open about our Christian faith, without adopting a fight-or-flight relationship to society.<sup>62</sup>

Therefore, it is wise to see the relation between law and gospel as a hermeneutical and homiletical key in a twofold sense. Historically, this is the key to the Reformers' hermeneutics and homiletics, needed to understand the Reformation. Normatively, we should see the relation between

<sup>59</sup> The second question and answer of the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) clearly used this framework for preaching the Reformation faith.

<sup>60</sup> Unfortunately, Karl Barth did much to promote this problem by his rejection of general revelation.

<sup>61</sup> It is proper to use the term 'correlation' in Reformation-based theology without intending everything that Paul Tillich meant by that term.

<sup>62</sup> I have addressed these topics in *Natural Law Ethics: An Evangelical Proposal* (Bonn: VKW, 2005) and in 'Biblical Principles in the Public Square', MBS Text 108, available at [www.bucer.eu](http://www.bucer.eu). This forms the background for my *Human Rights: A Christian Primer* (World Evangelical Alliance, 2008).

law and gospel as a hermeneutical/homiletical key to interpret, apply and proclaim the biblical message in a balanced and full manner in late mo-

dernity. This distinction gives a substantial and unified structure to our hermeneutics, theology, social ethics, practical theology and homiletics.



# The Little Seminary That Could: Trinity School for Ministry

Michael King, Bob Jamison  
and Bruce Barron

Upon entering the Trinity School for Ministry library in Ambridge, Pennsylvania, USA, one sees an open area to the right, designated as the Stanway Africa Alcove in honour of the school's founding dean. Against the back wall of the alcove, as is common at organizations interested in world mission, a map of the world is posted. But this is not a typical map—relative to most representations of our planet, it is upside down. Africa and South America dominate the viewer's attention in this arrangement, with Europe and North America dangling nondescriptly at the bottom.

The map focuses viewers' eyes on parts of the world where this young, modest-sized school has made an incredible impact. It is also an apt image for Trinity, which has specialized in turning things topsy-turvy. In 40 years it has grown from a tiny, unpromising outpost to a globally prominent seminary, overturning the pecking order in theological education while also playing a significant role in the reshaping of Anglican relationships worldwide as well as in world mission. Trinity's history embodies

what God can do when a few gifted, determined people respond sacrificially to a widely perceived need.

## I. Overcoming Functional Deism

Stephen Noll was a young Episcopalian with a bright ministry future. Converted to Christ as a Cornell University undergrad, he had earned his master of divinity degree from an Episcopal seminary in California and was active in his first ministry at Truro Church, a vibrant northern Virginia parish impacted by charismatic renewal.

Wanting to provide biblically sound teaching to the Episcopal renewal movement, Noll had been accepted to enter a Ph.D. program at Manchester, England in 1976 and study under the esteemed New Testament scholar F. F. Bruce. But he wondered how he would support his family, with a third child on the way.

Noll shared his concerns with John Rodgers, an evangelical professor at Virginia Seminary, who calmly told him, 'If God is calling you, you just

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have to trust the Lord.’

It was good advice—but little did Noll know that Rodgers was simultaneously on the other side of another very similar conversation, struggling to apply that advice to himself. Alfred Stanway, an Australian native who had been an Anglican bishop in Tanzania for 20 years, was asking Rodgers to leave his post at the Episcopal Church’s largest seminary and become one of the original professors at a fledgling school near Pittsburgh.

The idea of starting a new seminary had emerged from the highly charged, ambitious atmosphere of the Pittsburgh Offensive, a citywide Christian strategic planning group. Episcopal seminaries in the United States had been strongly affected by modern and liberalizing approaches, and the vibrantly evangelical Episcopal preacher John Guest was tired of telling promising ministry candidates that they needed to travel across the pond to his native Britain to obtain sound biblical education.

In 1974, fellow Offensive participant R. C. Sproul urged Guest to consider founding a school in the United States. Guest pitched the idea to one of his wealthy parishioners at St. Stephen’s Church in Sewickley, Nanky Chalfant, who responded enthusiastically and jump-started the project with a \$250,000 gift.

As recounted in Janet Leighton’s excellent history of Trinity School for Ministry, Guest approached the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, who expressed scepticism about the need for another seminary but offered backhanded encouragement: ‘If you have the sense that God is calling you to do this, then even though it doesn’t seem wise to me, I know that

you have to go and pursue that call.’<sup>1</sup>

At the recommendation of John Stott, perhaps Anglicanism’s most respected evangelical theologian, Guest recruited Alf Stanway out of retirement in Australia and persuaded him to become the founding dean of a non-existent dream. Stanway arrived in 1975, intending to spend his first year hiring faculty, finding facilities, and attracting students so that the school could commence operations in fall 1976.

Thus, by late 1975, Stanway was challenging Rodgers to take a leap of faith and lend his credibility to the new, self-consciously evangelical Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry—so named to signal a departure from the heavy academic emphasis and limited preparation for practical pastoral work typical of most seminary programs.

In one sense, Rodgers was ready to take the leap. He had studied under Karl Barth, one of the twentieth century’s most towering theological icons and leader of the ‘neo-orthodox’ reaction to liberal theology, at Basel, Switzerland. As an evangelical at Virginia, he felt frustrated that ‘we were not turning out graduates who could withstand the power of secularity. They cared about people but had no supernatural resources, because they didn’t believe in the supernatural and were not confident of biblical authority.’

Rodgers even considered leaving the world of Episcopal education for more evangelical pastures but ultimately—‘surprising even myself,’

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<sup>1</sup> Janet Leighton, *Lift High the Cross: The History of Trinity School for Ministry*, updated and expanded edition (Ambridge, PA: Whitchurch, 2014), 10.

he commented—declined a job offer from Fuller Seminary in California.

But in another sense, he was not ready for Stanway's recruiting visit in January 1976. By his own admission, Rodgers was theologically evangelical but, in financial matters, functionally deist; that is, he wasn't certain that God would intervene directly in his financial situation. Leighton records their conversation as follows:

Rodgers: How can I accept such a call and place my wife and children in such a shakily financed venture?

Stanway: Do you believe God loves your wife and children?

Rodgers: Well, yes.

Stanway: If he's calling you, isn't he committing himself to provide for your wife and children?

Rodgers: Well, that is what Christ teaches, but we've never lived that way.

Stanway: Maybe it's time to start!<sup>2</sup>

Rodgers agreed to come. So did Peter Davids, a biblical scholar who had also studied under F. F. Bruce. Les Fairfield, a Purdue University history professor contemplating a career change, came as both church history instructor and student. With them as the main faculty and 17 students enrolled, Trinity opened in September 1976 in rented facilities at Robert Morris University. Rodgers, Davids, and Fairfield's credentials immediately established the school's academic quality.

As for Noll, he took the leap of faith too—more than once. After finishing his Ph.D. at Manchester, he joined Trinity's faculty in 1979. And the

money never ran out, although the Trinity community lived quite frugally in its early years.

## II. A God-Ordained Location

Trinity's first leaders thought that Sewickley, home to Guest's church, would make the most logical permanent location. Sewickley was (and still is) a quaint, fashionable, well-manicured town along the Ohio River, 13 miles downstream from Pittsburgh. Historically, it had been the community of choice for managers who oversaw the big industrial operations farther downriver—the steel mills of Aliquippa and U.S. Steel's American Bridge factory in Ambridge.

God, however, obviously thought otherwise, because he firmly shut the doors to Sewickley. Some Sewickley residents, perhaps confusing the clientele of an Episcopal divinity school with stereotypical college undergrads, actively opposed permitting Trinity to move in, fearing an onslaught of noisy seminarians.

During Trinity's second year, a church building and a former grocery became available in Ambridge, by then a town in socioeconomic decline. The properties were anything but glamorous, but they were highly affordable. Trinity bought both properties and has made Ambridge its home since 1978. School leaders contemplated relocation to a more attractive site at times during the next seven years, but after Trinity was miraculously spared from substantial damage during two fires at a factory immediately behind the former grocery in early 1985, they concluded that God wanted them to stay.

Downtown Ambridge is not an ideal school location—for decades,

2 Leighton, *Lift High the Cross*, 47.

there was no nearby recreation area—but it offered affordable housing and proved a great fit for Trinity’s mission. Students gained practical ministry experience in serving the needy community surrounding them through food and clothing distribution, door-to-door evangelism, and after-school activities for children. The favourable local response to those actions led to the founding of the Church of the Savior in 1985, with Trinity student Joe Vitunic as pastor. (Until then, Trinity was an Episcopal seminary in a town with no Episcopal church.) Vitunic would serve the church for its first 20 years.

Noll found that most of the early faculty fit into their humble setting quite well. ‘We felt like pioneers, and we all had a radical side, so we didn’t feel out of our element in Ambridge’, he said. ‘We didn’t mind carpooling in someone’s broken-down vehicle. After all, the students, most of whom had come to Trinity without an endorsement from their bishop, were making sacrifices too.’

Trinity eventually constructed two additional buildings on land formerly occupied by a used car lot and two stores. During the planning process, school leaders discovered the extent to which locals’ initial suspicion of a religious school moving in had turned to appreciation. Trinity asked the borough council to vacate a one-block alley so that the school could develop the property. When the council refused, Trinity representatives suggested that maybe they would have to move. ‘Immediately’, Noll recalled, ‘signs saying “Save Trinity Seminary” started appearing in shop windows, and there was a big meeting at the high school with 200 people saying we were the best thing that had hap-

pened to the town in years. After all, students were getting to know their neighbours and serving them in humble ways, and buying things in their stores as well. Council promptly reversed its position.’

### III. ‘Determination Is Better Than Frustration’

Alf Stanway provided remarkably disciplined, determined leadership as Trinity’s first dean. His personal devotional life was fervent and fixed, as captured in one of his favourite phrases: ‘No Bible, no breakfast.’ From his long association with the Anglican Church Mission Society, he derived the principle of ‘start small, even while intending great things.’ He made money a secondary issue, believing that if one obeyed God in ministry, the money would follow.

Guided by unshakable reliance on a sovereign God, Stanway refused to become frustrated by apparent setbacks. Leighton tells of one instance when Stanway and Trinity’s treasurer made an appointment to visit an available property. When they arrived, praying that God would give them unmistakable direction, they learned that the property had already been sold. Showing no sign of disappointment, Stanway exclaimed, ‘A clear indication!’<sup>3</sup>

Stanway retired from Trinity in 1978 due to the onset of Parkinson’s disease. D. A. Carson, of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School near Chicago, described visiting Stanway in Australia: By then, his Parkinson’s had progressed to the point where he could not talk and had to answer

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3 Leighton, *Lift High the Cross*, 73.

questions in barely legible writing. Carson asked Stanway how, after such a powerful and productive life, he was dealing with virtually complete incapacity. Stanway had to write out his response three times before Carson could decipher it: 'There is no future in frustration.'<sup>4</sup>

John Rodgers replaced Stanway as dean and president in November 1978. As a symbol of Trinity's hard-earned acceptance, Episcopal bishop Robert Appleyard hosted and participated personally in the installation ceremony at downtown Pittsburgh's majestic Trinity Cathedral. Three years earlier, Rodgers had shown respect for Appleyard by telling him, 'If you don't want this seminary to start, I won't come.' Appleyard had not stood in the way, but neither had he sent Trinity any ministry candidates while waiting for the school to prove itself. Now he told Rodgers that the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh was open to him and to Trinity.

With that promise of support, and with Trinity's first students ready to graduate in 1979, the school could embark in earnest on its mission of reshaping the Episcopal Church. As historian Jeremy Bonner said of the school's opening, 'For the first time since the nineteenth century, an expressly countercultural seminary had been established under Episcopal auspices.'<sup>5</sup> Typically, when religious organizations drift off their original moorings toward more liberal views,

clergy lead the way; when Protestant denominations hold their national assemblies, the clergy display more progressive voting patterns than the laity. Trinity intended to reverse the process by sending pastorally effective, spiritually renewed, theologically evangelical graduates into Episcopal parishes.

The results were impressive. Over the next 30 years, the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh moved in a markedly conservative direction, both at the parish level and at the top. The diocese called theologically charismatic Alden Hathaway—who would have lost the election without the votes of Trinity faculty—as bishop in 1981 and, upon Hathaway's retirement in 1997, chose staunchly orthodox Robert Duncan to replace him. Moreover, from 1984 to 1992 the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh planted nine new churches, six of them led by Trinity graduates.

Trinity benefitted in turn from the change it helped to produce in the diocese, as Pittsburgh provided a path to ordination for Trinity graduates whose home bishops, viewing them as too conservative, had not endorsed them as candidates for ordained ministry.

#### IV. Surmounting Tensions

From its beginnings, Trinity, though solidly committed to biblical faithfulness, has had to build bridges between competing views. Some of its early leaders had been deeply impacted by charismatic renewal (which put their forms of expression significantly at odds with the more staid British version of evangelical Anglicanism); others had not. One of the founding trustees objected strongly to the char-

<sup>4</sup> D. A. Carson: *A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 141.

<sup>5</sup> Jeremy Bonner, *Called Out of Darkness: A History of the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh, 1750–2006* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009), 267–68.

ismatic practice of seeking baptism in the Spirit subsequent to salvation, arguing that it introduced a false, two-tiered view of Christian piety.

'We had some very aggressive charismatic students who brought frequent 'words from the Lord' to chapel and prayer meetings', Rodgers said. 'We had to write a manual on biblically faithful openness to extraordinary gifts.'

Trinity overcame potential threats to harmony by remaining anchored in classic Reformation doctrine and intentionally practicing charity in non-essential matters.

'John Rodgers set the course', said 'Laurie' Thompson, a charismatic Trinity faculty member since 1997 and now the school's dean and president. 'He developed an ethos early on that made us all feel welcome, making it clear that neither high-church people, charismatics, nor evangelicals would be stigmatized.'

At moments of internal tension, Rodgers would call the Trinity community to refocus. 'We knew something was going on', Thompson recalled, 'when John walked into class singing "Seek ye first the kingdom of God." We learned to pray.'

Trinity's constant effort to keep Bible, tradition, and subjective inspiration in balance is reflected in its carefully worded motto: 'Evangelical in faith, catholic in order, Spirit-led in mission.'

Legitimate differences of opinion are welcome at Trinity; creating disorder is not. Rodgers related one occasion when four female students came to his office and presented him with a list of written demands. Rodgers gave the piece of paper back to them and defused the conflict by stating calmly, 'You are looking at a dean

who doesn't respond to demands. If you would like to rewrite this as a discussion piece, the faculty will be happy to talk with you.'

The hot-button issues on campus change over time, but the commitment to collegiality and seeking community-wide consensus has not. Thompson encountered a new area of sensitivity a few years ago after a celebrant at a chapel service told participants where to take their children should they make noise during the liturgy. (Ironically, the gospel reading that day was 'Suffer the little children to come unto me.') The following week, a group of students brought Thompson a four-page discussion paper. 'We discovered that the younger generation is very protective of children', he remarked. 'It became clear that we need to include family-focused spaces in our long-range planning.'

## V. Navigating Disagreement on Gender Roles

The issue of women's ordination aroused particularly strong feelings at Trinity. The Episcopal Church had voted to ordain women in 1976. For many conservatives, the decision itself was discomfiting but the stated rationale, grounded more in civil rights than in Scripture or tradition, raised deeper concerns that the denomination was placing cultural considerations above theological integrity.

As a widely respected leader who had supported women's ordination while bishop of Tanzania, Stanway established a pattern of openness to Christians on both sides of the issue. Trinity accepted female students into all degree programs from the begin-

ning, taking the position that it was a training institution, not an ordaining body, and would equip all Christians for what they felt called to do. Whatever their personal opinion, all students grew by interacting with deeply committed fellow believers who held a different view.

But keeping the peace wasn't easy. When Mary Hays arrived as Trinity's first female professor in 1989, teaching pastoral theology, some students opposed to women's ordination declined to take communion from her or to attend chapel when she was preaching. 'They would hold their own morning prayer in the chapel basement', Hays said, 'so I had to walk right past them to hang up my vestments.'

Hays endured that difficult experience because she understood that the dissenters from women's ordination were seeking to follow their conscience. She believed in Trinity's mission and was convinced that to function effectively, Trinity needed to be open to multiple points of view.

'The Scriptures are not univocal on women's roles', Hays stated, 'so someone who is thoughtful and biblically grounded could have a different view from me. I think they are wrong, but that is not the same as saying you can't have a different position.'

Hays stayed at Trinity for nine years before becoming an assistant to Bishop Duncan; Trinity has had at least one woman on its faculty at all times since then. Interestingly, Trinity got a two-for-one deal when Hays came. At Rodgers's encouragement, her husband, Whis, created a youth ministry training organization, Rock the World, and spent two years developing what became the first Anglican master's degree program in youth

ministry anywhere in the world. He directed the program as a Trinity faculty member from 1991 to 2006, modelling his curriculum on the work of Gordon-Conwell Seminary professor Dean Borgman. Whis Hays estimates that more than a thousand teens found Christ through the retreats that he and Trinity students coordinated during those 15 years.

## VI. Gracious amidst Division

Trinity and its faculty played prominent roles in the intense debates that would ultimately divide the Episcopal Church. Noll was Trinity's academic dean in 1987 when the Episcopal Church sent proposed new liturgies written in inclusive language (i.e., avoiding the use of male pronouns when referring to God) to its 11 seminaries for comment. 'If we don't express our objections, no one else will', he told the faculty. Noll received approval to write a paper representing Trinity's views on language for God. Trinity students also reviewed the liturgies and submitted their responses, although the denomination declined to count them officially since Trinity decided not to actually use the texts for worship.

In the early 1990s, Noll entered the fray again, drafting a document on the Anglican doctrine of Scripture at the request of a Trinity board member who was on the Episcopal House of Bishops' theology commission.<sup>6</sup> Then in 1996, John Howe, Bishop of Central Florida and previously on staff with

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<sup>6</sup> This and other papers are collected in Stephen Noll, *The Global Anglican Communion: Contending for Anglicanism 1993–2018* (Newport Beach, CA: Anglican House, 2018).

John Guest at St. Stephen's, asked Noll to write briefs for the church trial of Bishop Walter Righter, who had been charged with knowingly ordaining a homosexual for ministry. Many conservatives in the Episcopal Church believed that the trial was their last chance to reverse the liberalizing tide in their denomination.

Noll prepared two briefs, on church doctrine and church discipline, for the Righter trial. He also coordinated Trinity's response in 1997 when the Episcopal Church asked seminaries for their opinion on 'same-sex blessings' of homosexual couples.

After Righter was acquitted, conservatives in the Episcopal Church began to consider creating alternative affiliations. They had formed the American Anglican Council in 1996 to advocate for classical biblical doctrines, but up to this point they had still sought to work within the Episcopal denomination. Now, increasingly viewing that course as fruitless, they turned overseas, where their positions were still overwhelmingly supported within worldwide Anglicanism. In fact, the Lambeth Conference (the international convening of Anglican bishops, held every 10 years) of 1998 had declared homosexual practice incompatible with Scripture by 526 votes to 70.

In January 2000, some Anglican conservatives took a bold step by consecrating two Americans, including John Rodgers, as missionary bishops under the authority of archbishops from Rwanda and Singapore, respectively. The purpose was to offer alternative ecclesiastical oversight to Episcopalians in the United States. This action was controversial even within conservative circles, as it directly challenged the Episcopal

Church's structure of diocesan oversight. But the approval of practicing homosexual Gene Robinson as bishop of New Hampshire in 2003 solidified evangelicals' desire to pursue new affiliations.

In this context, Trinity and its alumni took on an increasingly strategic role. According to Duncan, then Pittsburgh's bishop, 'the national leadership exercised by Trinity alumni was such that two-thirds of those who were on stage at A Place to Stand [a fall 2003 conference organized in response to Robinson's ordination] were Trinity grads, giving encouragement to the more than two thousand orthodox attendees gathered from all across the United States.'

In 2008, Duncan indicated his intention to remove the diocese from the Episcopal Church and align it with the Anglican Province of the Southern Cone, which comprised six South American countries. (Tito Zavala, a Trinity graduate, was Bishop of Chile within this province and would serve as presiding bishop of the province, now known as the Anglican Church of South America, from 2010 to 2016.) Before the diocese could act, the Episcopal bishops called a special meeting and removed Duncan from his position.

Within two weeks, the Pittsburgh Diocese voted 240-102 to withdraw from the Episcopal Church and align with the Southern Cone; another month later, it elected Duncan as its bishop. Remarkably, the margin in favor of withdrawal was greater among clergy (79 percent) than among lay participants (63 percent). Trinity School for Ministry—which removed the word *Episcopal* from its name in 2007—played a major role in this result.



Also in 2008, more than a thousand conservative Anglicans met in Jerusalem for the first Global Anglican Future Conference (GAFCON), with Duncan representing North America and Noll serving on the conference's statement drafting committee. GAFCON's website reflects how heated the rhetoric had become, explaining that the conference occurred because 'moral compromise, doctrinal error and the collapse of biblical witness in parts of the Anglican communion had reached such a level that the leaders of the majority of the world's Anglicans felt it was necessary to take a united stand for truth.'

While holding firmly to evangelical convictions about Scripture, Trinity has always sought to serve all concerned parties with grace. In 1992, it invited proponents of a liberal, social justice-oriented Episcopal magazine, *The Witness*, to celebrate their publication's seventy-fifth anniversary at Trinity, where they engaged in honest but respectful dialogue with their hosts. It remains an approved Episcopal seminary and continues to receive Episcopal students, although members of the Anglican Church in North America (ACNA), founded in 2009, outnumber them.

Duncan, who served as the ACNA's first archbishop through 2014, has been a Trinity trustee since 1996 and has taught the school's Introduction to Anglican Worship course since 2017.

## VII. An Expanded Global Profile

The tensions within the worldwide Anglican communion had an upside for Trinity that no one could have planned: they made the school fa-

mous in Africa.

With Stanway at its helm, Trinity had African connections—and a few African students—by its second year. Its very early establishment of a two-year master of arts in religion program, alongside the three-year M.Div. degree required of American seminarians seeking ordination, helped to attract overseas students too. But the global connections mushroomed as ecclesiastical conflicts in America burnished Trinity's image as the best option for African Anglicans wishing to study in the United States.

In 1996, the Archbishop of Uganda, Livingstone Nkoyoyo, visited Trinity and expressed his desire to expand an existing theological college in his homeland into a full-blown Christian university. In 1997, he asked Noll, Trinity's academic dean, to become its vice chancellor. Noll said he would pray about the possibility, but he and his wife didn't get around to visiting Uganda until two years later.

By the end of that trip, they sensed that God was calling them. 'I wrote to the archbishop,' Noll explained, 'saying that I will come under the condition that this will be a Christian university not just in name but in substance.' By fall 2000, he was the vice chancellor of Uganda Christian University (UCU). He would stay for 10 years as the school grew to over 10,000 students on four campuses.

Even though they felt called to Uganda, the Nolls wondered why; after all, Steve Noll knew how to manage a theological school, but not departments of engineering, law, or business. But he knew one crucial thing very well: how to obtain accreditation, which he had overseen at Trinity. In 2001, the Ugandan government passed legislation giving private

universities a path to accreditation; three years later, UCU became the first institution to meet the requirements.

At UCU, Noll replicated much of what he and his colleagues had done at Trinity. Departing from the Ugandan academic system, which followed the British emphasis on college as a place for professional specialization, he introduced four foundation courses in Bible and Christian thought, drawing directly from Trinity's syllabus for two of them. 'The Old Testament course I constructed in 1990 has been taken by hundreds of Americans and thousands of Ugandans', Noll pointed out.

He also developed an 'Instrument of Identity' document that went beyond a simple statement of faith, encompassing morals and spirituality along with essential Christian doctrine. He met with each faculty member, just as he had seen John Rodgers do at Trinity, to discuss their faith commitment and secure their affirmation of the identity statement. Noll believes that UCU was only the second university in all Africa to take such steps.

Actions that made Trinity an epicentre of global mission included the creation of the Stanway Institute for World Mission and Evangelism in 1989 and the relocation of two mission organizations to Ambridge: the South American Missionary Society (now the Society of Anglican Missionaries and Senders, with a broader global reach) in 1988 and the New Wineskins Missionary Network in 1990. John Macdonald, a 1986 Trinity graduate, further invigorated this emphasis when, after twelve years as a missionary to Honduras, he joined the faculty in 2002.

Macdonald was profoundly shaped by two of Pittsburgh's most prominent Christian leaders. He grew up at St. Stephen's in Sewickley and committed himself to Christ under John Guest's youth ministry. During his college years, he frequently drove 65 miles to the Ligonier Valley Study Center on summer evenings to learn from R. C. Sproul.

Macdonald enjoyed a highly mission-oriented environment when studying at Trinity in the 1980s, but when he returned as a professor in 2002, the Stanway Institute's initial energy had waned. Not until several months later, when he inquired about taking a group of students to Uganda for short-term mission, did Macdonald learn that he had a travel budget. But after the watershed moment of Gene Robinson's ordination, forming a network of recognizably orthodox mission agencies that Global South archbishops could trust became a high priority. Macdonald became Trinity's 'secretary of state', representing the school about six times a year in international contexts and building a huge set of contacts.

The crisis in the Episcopal Church actually helped Macdonald overcome the sense of paternalism that often pervades First World mission efforts in Africa. When preaching in Uganda shortly after Robinson's election, Macdonald said, 'For decades, white Europeans and North Americans have told you that they are the experts and that you need to learn from them. But now I come to you with hat in hand, because you are the guardians of the historic, biblical Christian faith. We need your prayers and support.'

Macdonald sees relationships between American and Global South Christians as mutually beneficial. On

one hand, areas of the Global South where Christianity is growing rapidly have demonstrated expertise in evangelism; on the other hand, Americans offer a higher level of theological training, which Macdonald considers especially important today as theological liberalism and shallow versions of the prosperity gospel compete for adherents.

Another influential ambassador for Trinity in Africa was Grant LeMarquand, who served as a missionary in Kenya before joining the Trinity faculty in 1998. From 2012 to 2017, LeMarquand was Bishop of the Horn of Africa (which includes Ethiopia, Somalia, and Eritrea). Stationed near Ethiopia's border with Sudan, he and his wife Wendy, a medical doctor, responded to the spiritual and physical needs of thousands of refugees from the Sudanese civil war and established a theological college there. LeMarquand has since resumed teaching at Trinity.

Trinity now requires all M.Div. students to participate in at least one overseas mission trip, typically two to three weeks long, which can include preaching, leading Bible studies for adults or children, or mentoring local ministry candidates. Recent destinations have included Kenya, Tanzania, and Indonesia. In addition, Trinity funds scholarships for about eight international 'Stanway Scholars' each year.

In 2008, Qampicha Daniel Wario, a Stanway Scholar from northern Kenya, told a classmate that the best way to bring the gospel to his home community would be a Christian school. Two years later, they started sharing the idea with others at Trinity, and interest grew rapidly. Macdonald travelled to Kenya to confirm that

community leaders would back the project, discovering that coincidentally, an Anglican priest with a similar vision had been raising animals on a small plot for 20 years to protect it from Kenya's land expropriation policy. With initial support coming entirely from Trinity students and alumni, the school opened on that property in 2011 and now enrolls 450 students in grades K-8, about 80 percent of them from Muslim families who value the high-quality education regardless of its Christian component.

In 2016, Qampicha became Anglican Bishop of Marsabit. His territory, ironically, bordered that of one of his Trinity instructors, Bishop LeMarquand.

Trinity is also delivering both online and on-site instruction to Nigerian theological students in partnership with the Christian Institute of Jos, Nigeria, led by Bishop Benjamin Kwashi, a Trinity doctoral degree holder and board member. Kwashi has said that Africans used to aspire to go to Oxford or Cambridge, England for theological training, but now they all want to drop the C and go to Ambridge.

In September 2018, Macdonald (newly retired from Trinity and intending to devote himself more fully to international theological training) and Noll met with the archbishop of Rwanda to discuss revitalizing a seminary there. It was *déjà vu* for Noll when the archbishop said, 'I want one of you to be my vice chancellor.'

## VIII. Ambassadors for Anglicanism Too

Trinity's motto as 'an evangelical seminary in the Anglican tradition' hints at its dual identity. It promotes evangelical conviction among Angli-

cans, but it also promotes the treasures of historic Anglicanism to evangelicals, many of whom tend not to appreciate liturgical worship and find little value in church history between the first and sixteenth centuries.

Trinity upped its game on this front in 2012 by attracting the Robert E. Webber Center for an Ancient Evangelical Future, named for the late evangelical Anglican theologian and long-time Wheaton College professor, to Ambridge.

Centre director Joel Scandrett, who also teaches historical theology at Trinity, was a perfect fit. He had been ordained by the American Anglican Council and placed under Robert Duncan's oversight, making him 'canonically resident' in Pittsburgh even before he moved there. But beyond that, his presence and that of the Webber Center have helped Trinity to strengthen its liturgical formation of students, balance the evangelical and catholic elements of Anglicanism, and attract young evangelicals interested in reclaiming the tradition of the early church so as to renew today's church.

The Webber Center holds an annual Ancient Evangelical Future Conference and is also developing resources to improve catechesis—that is, sound training, firmly rooted in church tradition, in Christian doctrine and practice. Its longer-term plans include training courses in catechesis and a lecture series in early Christian studies.

Scandrett sees Trinity as capitalizing on evangelicals' recovery of the church fathers, an emphasis that Webber prefigured in his book *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail*. His writings have helped to raise Trinity's visibility in the U.S. evangelical community, along with those of faculty

colleagues like Wesley Hill, a first-rate New Testament scholar who has also written about his gay sexual orientation and his commitment to celibacy.

Scandrett's efforts to promote traditional Anglicanism and Trinity in a broader ecumenical context are bolstered by two interesting partnerships. The North American Lutheran Church, a breakaway from the mainline Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, has its own seminary administrative centre collocated with Trinity; its students are overseen by two Lutheran professors on the Trinity faculty, one of whom is the North American Lutheran Seminary's president. In addition, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church's Presbytery of the Alleghenies has partnered with Trinity as an approved seminary; faculty member and EPC pastor Rich Herbst serves as director of Presbyterian studies.

'The Lutherans are happy because we are more sacramental than other evangelical schools', Thompson stated. 'And the Presbyterians—with whom our polity is very much in line except for who has the authority to appoint pastors—know they are free to express their leadership in their own style as well.'

Herbst indicated that the EPC benefits from having a theologically compatible, geographically convenient educational partner that values the planting of new churches and the intentional training and formation of Christian leaders. 'They're not on the Canterbury trail', he said of the approximately ten Presbyterian students at Trinity, 'but they take a greater appreciation of liturgical worship into their ministry and their personal devotions.'

## IX. Perspectives from Recent Students

Austin Gohn graduated from Northgate High School just outside Pittsburgh; his father pastored the nondenominational Bellevue Christian Church, and Austin joined that church's staff after his undergraduate study. When he began considering seminary and a friend told him about Trinity, he visited Wikipedia to find out what Anglicans are.

Gohn wanted a school that was theologically conservative but not too insular; Trinity met his desires perfectly, even though his background was so low-church that when Robert Duncan, then ACNA presiding bishop, came to campus to visit with students, Gohn asked him, 'What's a bishop and why do we need them?'

By his third year, Gohn knew the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* well enough to step in and assist with leading evening prayers on short notice. He hopes that one day the curriculum might include a nondenominational track without the current handful of required courses on Anglican history and theology. (Presbyterian and Lutheran students avoid that inconvenience because Trinity offers alternative courses rooted in their traditions.) But he has gained an appreciation of the liturgical year that he said will permanently impact his preaching, especially at Lent and Advent.

'One of my closest friends in Bellevue is an Anglican priest', Gohn stated. 'My personal network now goes far beyond my nondenominational circles, and I can relate to other Christian traditions easily because of my Trinity experience.'

Robert Osborne, a cradle Episco-

palian raised in Connecticut, worked internationally on human rights and relief issues and kept running into people connected to Trinity—Stephen Noll in Uganda, a professor at Oxford, Anglican priests in Nigeria. When he decided that his human rights discourse needed stronger theological underpinnings, Trinity was the logical choice.

As an Episcopal Church ministry candidate, Osborne represented Trinity at various events hosted by other Episcopal seminaries, where his experiences led him to a surprising conclusion: 'At Trinity, you have the freedom to think differently.' Some might have assumed exactly the reverse—namely, that freedom of thought would be more restricted at the most evangelical seminaries. But Osborne observed that whereas the more progressive schools tend to develop their own orthodoxies to which everyone is expected to adhere, at Trinity, within the boundaries of classical theological orthodoxy, all economic, political, and social views are welcome.

Osborne treasured Trinity's 'beautiful community' of students who lived in low-budget houses all over town, with their doors open to each other and to their Ambridge neighbours. Some of his classmates took people battling addiction into their homes; Osborne volunteered on the borough's beautification committee and assisted refugees in Pittsburgh. 'I heard a lot of sermons at other schools about caring for refugees,' he said, 'but Trinity actually does it.'

Rosie (last name omitted for security reasons), a New Zealand native, found the healing experience she needed at Trinity after doing relief and development work in the Middle East during the Arab Spring up-

heavals of 2011 and thereafter. She also appreciated studying at a school where instructors ‘get emotional in class when talking about the nature of God. It is not just heavy theology—it touches their heart.’

Because of its focus on training Christian mission leaders, Trinity faculty embraced Rosie’s penchant for writing essays as if speaking directly to the Muslims who had asked her about Christ amidst the Arab Spring turmoil. Trinity challenged her to ‘let the [biblical] text create your world’ rather than the reverse, she said. As of September 2018, Rosie was returning to New Zealand to be ordained a deacon. In the Anglican tradition, she noted, ‘Deacons take the presence of Christ outside the church. Trinity has prepared me to do that.’

## X. Amazing Growth

As these student profiles illustrate, Trinity’s student body is incredibly diverse geographically, socioeconomically, and denominationally. Its growth has also been impressive. Official 2016–2017 statistics indicated a total enrolment of 199, ranking Trinity second behind only Virginia among Episcopal seminaries. This figure counts only those enrolled in degree programs; hundreds more participate in online coursework or come for special courses during brief sessions in January and June.

The ‘Jan and June terms’ have become effective feeders into the residential programs, as students who spend three weeks experiencing the Trinity community usually want to come back for more. Short-term visitors help to sustain a new hotel constructed immediately adjacent to the seminary—an economic boost to Am-

bridge.

Generous scholarship assistance makes Trinity more accessible. The average Trinity student pays less than one-third of the total tuition cost; Justyn Terry, the dean and president before Thompson, energetically raised funds to provide full-tuition scholarships to five new domestic students each year, in addition to the overseas students supported by endowment monies. ‘It is immoral to send students into ministry with huge debt’, Rodgers stated flatly. Thanks in large part to this financial aid, the average age of Trinity students, now 34 and dropping, is much lower than at most seminaries.

## XI. Learning from a Great Ride

Trinity School for Ministry happened because gifted people with big visions exercised faith in a big God. But it didn’t come easily. Even John Rodgers, of whom the middle-aged Scandrett said that ‘I want to be like him when I grow up’, could trust God theologically but not financially until Alf Stanway jerked him out of his comfort zone.

Stanway lived by the dictum that ‘money follows ministry’—in other words, serve people well and the funds will come in. But Trinity has also reduced its dependence on money by not spending lavishly. The school purchased two buildings in a humble location and deployed considerable sweat equity to renovate a former grocery. Today, Trinity’s three buildings plus a chapel across the street actually look like a small campus, but for the first 20 years Trinity was a brave outpost amidst urban blight.

Unintentionally, the school’s appearance may have strengthened its

spiritual intensity by causing those less firmly devoted to their call to look elsewhere. To paraphrase from Samuel's anointing of David (1 Sam 16:7), some prospective students may look at outward appearance, but the Lord looks for committed hearts.

Trinity's story shows that there is no contradiction or conflict between spiritual fervor and academic excellence. The quality of scholars it has consistently attracted to its faculty dispels any suspicion that Trinity maintains an outmoded or anti-intellectual worldview. 'We are not fighting contemporary knowledge', Rodgers explained. 'We use critical scholarly tools, but we do not marry them to anti-supernaturalist principles.' In fact, Rodgers turns the anti-intellectual arguments against sceptics, claiming that 'there is nothing more ridiculous than a reductionist worldview.'

However, Trinity has looked beyond academic credentials and theological orthodoxy, selecting instructors who also have a deep pastoral concern for enabling students to apply Christian truth to their own lives, their ministries, and the society around them. That combination of priorities has enabled Trinity to enjoy a close-knit learning community from its beginning (Rodgers described the initial faculty as 'a crazy, happy group, starting a new thing and believing that the money would come in') to today. 'We had our regular faculty prayer meeting yesterday', Thompson said when we interviewed him, 'and nobody left for ten minutes after it ended. We are a family who care for each other.'

Mary Hays similarly described Trinity as a 'place of prayer', recalling the occasion when the whole school

suspended classes and went to the chapel to pray for a student's seriously ill wife (who recovered). Her interactions with faculty at other seminaries reinforced her sense that Trinity's intense emphasis on prayer and spiritual formation is both invaluable and distinctive.

Many American and European Christians struggle to make meaningful investments in economically needy areas of the world without appearing to be patronizing. This problem is particularly acute in theological education. In this regard, Trinity has found a silver lining in the unfortunate division within Anglicanism, as it has enabled Americans who value Global South Christians' upholding of biblical orthodoxy to build true partnerships based on mutual appreciation.

Finally, Trinity's history illustrates powerfully that God's vision is always bigger than ours. John Guest, when seeking to launch Trinity in 1974, envisioned a school that would be a credible exponent of evangelical theology within the Episcopal Church and would function as a school for ministry rather than a seminary. That sounded ambitious enough. But he never imagined three other things that Trinity has become: a globally significant, ecumenical institution reinvigorating a struggling community.

To John Macdonald, this pattern of God doing more than we could ask or think once we take the first step of obedience should be the norm. 'What Trinity is now was in God's mind from the beginning', he stated, invoking Old Testament interpretation to prove his point. 'Psalm 119:105 says, "Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path." Back then, people used oil lamps that only illuminated their

next step forward; they didn't have a spotlight showing the whole path. We need to keep that visual image in mind, because that is how the Lord works.'

Actually, Trinity's first 43 years

read more like a roller-coaster ride through battle zones—both theological and literal—than a smooth path. But its people have never lost faith. They've had quite a trip, but God has unmistakably led them at every step.



## Books Reviewed

Philip G. Ziegler  
*Militant Grace: The Apocalyptic Turn  
and the Future of Christian Theology*  
Reviewed by Brian H. Tung

Hans Boersma  
*Scripture as Real Presence:  
Sacramental Exegesis in the Early  
Church*  
Reviewed by Kenny Silva

Raymond Ibrahim  
*Sword and Scimitar: Fourteen  
Centuries of War between Islam and  
the West*  
Dario Fernandez-Morera  
*The Myth of the Andalusian Paradise:  
Muslims, Christians, and Jews under  
Islamic Rule in Medieval Spain*  
Reviewed by David Upchurch

Mike Higton and Jim Fodor (eds.)  
*The Routledge Companion to the  
Practice of Christian Theology*  
Reviewed by Michael Borowski

John Jusu (ed.)  
*Africa Study Bible*  
Reviewed by Judith L. Hill

Keith Ferdinando  
*The Message of Spiritual Warfare*  
Reviewed by Tim Stabell

Stephanie A. Lowery  
*Identity and Ecclesiology: Their  
Relationship among Select African  
Theologians*  
Reviewed by Gregg Okesson

## Book Reviews

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*Militant Grace: The Apocalyptic  
Turn and the Future of Christian  
Theology*

**Philip G. Ziegler**

**Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018**

**Pb., 238 pp., bibliog., indices**

*Reviewed by Brian H. Tung, PhD  
candidate in systematic theology, Trinity  
Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield,  
Illinois, USA*

In *Militant Grace*, Philip Ziegler (current-  
ly chair in dogmatics at King's College,  
University of Aberdeen) seeks to recover  
a vision of apocalyptic theology that,  
rather than being morosely pessimistic,  
is vibrantly committed to the eschato-  
logical content of the gospel of God, who  
has interrupted the world and over-  
turned the passing age. In particular,

Ziegler considers apocalyptic theology  
to be 'uniquely suited to articulate the  
radicality, sovereignty, and militancy of  
adventitious divine grace', and he sets  
out to unveil apocalyptic Paulinism in an  
'ardently Protestant' way.

The work has three major sections.  
First, Ziegler outlines the features of  
his apocalyptic theology. In chapter  
1, he establishes the necessity of an  
eschatological dogmatic for Christian  
theology. Drawing from Gerhard Forde,  
Ziegler observes the radical discontinu-  
ity introduced by the in-breaking of God  
through the death and resurrection of  
Jesus Christ. Salvation is a divine act that  
turns the world on its head and thus  
requires an 'eschatological grammar' in  
order to 'do justice to the very logic and  
form of divine grace'. Apocalyptic theol-  
ogy flies in the face of historicism by  
placing Jesus Christ as the crux around

which the ages turn.

In chapter 2, Ziegler turns his attention to the features of a Pauline apocalyptic. A 'fresh hearing' of Paul's apocalyptic tenor will recover the radical nature of the gospel, focus intently on Christology as its center, emphasize the disjunctive nature of salvation, account for the redemption of humanity from the powers of sin, death, and the devil, see the cosmic scope of salvation, and anticipate God's ultimate victory over the powers which oppose him.

In part two, Ziegler engages in thematic explorations of apocalypse. Chapter 3 explores the apocalyptic nature of the kingship of Christ, finding that it directs God's people into 'the present struggle between the old and new ages' as people claimed by divine love, dispossessed from the world and conscripted into God's service.

Chapter 4 argues for the sufficiency of the *Christus victor* model of redemption through apocalyptic radicalization. A broader understanding of Christ's victory does justice to the full range of salvation themes in the New Testament when theological anthropology is subsumed under an apocalyptic cosmology. 'Salvation comes on us as liberation that, precisely because it translates the sinner from one sphere of lordship to another, gives radical evangelical substance to notions of forgiveness, justification, and new life.'

Chapter 5 reorients the Reformed doctrine of effectual call as not merely an interior work of the Spirit but also an indication of his triumph by the enactment of a faithful confession (1 Cor 12:1-3). Effectual call, therefore, is apocalyptic in that the creature shares in divine victory through the gift of the Spirit and demonstrates it through public declaration.

Chapter 6 engages in an apocalyptic reading of the second petition of the

Lord's Prayer, 'Thy kingdom come.'

Drawing from Calvin and Barth, Ziegler notes the eschatological character of the request for God's kingdom to break into the fallen world. This is a prayer 'propelled by grace' that 'draws the supplicant into an agonistic situation of spiritual and moral struggle'.

Closing his thematic explorations, Ziegler explores judgement unto eternal life in chapter 7. Both Jüngel and Moltmann connect divine justice to eternal life, seeing that the final judgement involves the ultimate defeat of death itself. Rather than 'being merely a retrospective cementing of the fates' of human beings, 'the last judgment is actually another decisive step in the outworking of God's gracious salvation.'

The concluding section explores various implications of apocalyptic theology for Christian living. Chapters 8 and 9 examine ramifications regarding natural law, which ought to be located under the redemption and lordship of Christ rather than the doctrine of creation. Doing so imbues the teaching with greater 'dogmatic density', setting it near the heart of the gospel and anchoring Protestant ethics in the reality of the world that is being recreated by divine grace, as opposed to abstract notions of ideal behavior.

Chapters 10 through 12 present three lenses through which to discern an apocalyptic ethic: Calvin on moral agency, Kierkegaard's inverse dialectic, and Bonhoeffer on justification. Ziegler concludes by highlighting apocalyptic theology's emphasis on the Christian life as discipleship, as the Christian faithfully inhabits 'the world being remade by the living lordship of Christ'.

*Militant Grace* deserves great commendation. Ziegler's erudite and clear prose enhance his insightful and provocative exploration of apocalyptic Paulinism.

This book can be heartily recommended for the seminary context (especially courses on soteriology and eschatology) as it will undoubtedly stoke spirited and fruitful theological reflection on a wide variety of topics. Regardless of the extent to which one agrees with Ziegler's construction and applications of apocalyptic theology within the Protestant context, *Militant Grace* is a thoroughly stimulating read.

Even so, a word of caution is necessary: while this work will surely whet one's appetite, it might not fully satiate due to the constraint of space. Ziegler is well aware of this limitation and offers additional avenues of exploration throughout the book. But this is not a critique; rather, it indicates the promising theological soil that has yet to be tilled and calls for the apocalyptic task to continue. Only time (and much more research and writing!) will determine the ultimate success of this venture. I, for one, will be anxious to see what comes next.

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*Scripture as Real Presence:  
Sacramental Exegesis in the Early  
Church*

**Hans Boersma**

**Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017**

**Hb., 316 pp., bibliog., indices**

*Reviewed by Kenny Silva, PhD student in  
systematic theology, Trinity Evangelical  
Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois, USA*

Hans Boersma, J. I. Packer Professor of Theology at Regent College, calls for a retrieval of the sacramental hermeneutic that drove patristic exegesis. In his introductory chapter, he lays out the four main features of this sacramental approach to reading Scripture. First, meaning must not be limited to a single

sense located in the author's intention. Second, reading is a transformative process in which we participate with God morally and spiritually. Third, the depth of our Christian maturity impacts the results of our biblical interpretation. Fourth, history is an indispensable dimension of interpretation, because God's providence ensures the sacramental presence of heavenly realities in earthly events. Modernity, with its (anti)-metaphysical commitment to naturalism, cannot abide such a thoroughly enchanted world.

Boersma then proceeds to expound the many facets of sacramental exegesis. He draws from a broad sweep of patristic sources: Athanasius, Augustine, Basil the Great, Chrysostom, Gregory of Nyssa, Melito of Sardis, Origen and more. While not glossing over the legitimate differences between interpreters, Boersma labours to show that they all share a common sacramental sensibility. The distance between Antiochene 'literalism' and Alexandrian 'allegory', in particular, is not as great as many have been led to believe.

Rather than pinning sacramental exegesis down with a single descriptor, Boersma devotes chapters 2 through 10 to describing the many forms this reading of Scripture took among the church fathers and could take today: literal, hospitable, other (i.e. allegorical/typological), incarnational, harmonious, doctrinal, nuptial, prophetic and beatific.

Perhaps the most significant form for Boersma's readers, given the modern sensibility he wishes to redress, is the Fathers' version of 'literal' reading. A common misconception surrounding premodern exegesis is that there was little concern for the literal meaning of a text and its historical referent(s). As Boersma shows in chapter 2, however, both Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine

evinced a clear concern for the literal sense in their commentaries on creation. However, they understood that literal sense much more broadly than we do today.

For moderns, the literal sense refers to what lies behind the text. For premoderns, however, it more fully considers the text's divine referent: 'only by taking into account the theological subject matter of the text can one do true justice to the literal meaning of the text' (28). This conviction demands a thick conception of the literal sense such that clean lines between it and the 'spiritual' senses (i.e. allegory, anagogy, tropology) cannot easily be drawn.

Boersma proposes not so much an exegetical method as an interpretive sensibility—a mode of reading that takes seriously the participatory reality in which we find ourselves and the text. Although such a metaphysic would be considered odious to modern sensibilities, it nevertheless describes the *real* world as we find it in Scripture. At the very heart of sacramental reading is the conviction that Christ, from whom and through whom and to whom are all things, is the treasure hidden in the field of *all* Scripture—including the Old Testament (Irenaeus; cf. Matt 13:44). Insofar as the written word participates in the divine Word, Christological reading is both good and necessary.

*Scripture as Real Presence* is as impressive in its scope as in its depth. Boersma's presentation of the Fathers' sacramental reading betrays an apologetic thrust; it regularly challenges our modern assumptions and asks whether they comport with the realities inscribed in Scripture.

To that end, I highly recommend this book, but with a word of qualification. Boersma is right to take every hermeneutical thought captive to the

obedience of Christ, but does that entail the adoption of a Christian-Platonist metaphysic? Must a world in which Scripture's readers participate with God covenantally also be one in which *all things* participate with God sacramentally? Boersma, it seems, would answer in the affirmative. Indeed, the very ground of his hope for retrieval is the conviction that patristic exegesis 'is based on a theologically informed metaphysic that is—to put it bluntly—true' (275). For readers who wish to affirm Boersma's vision for *ressourcement* without jettisoning their reservations about Platonic metaphysics, this is the fly in an otherwise helpful jar of ointment for biblical interpreters in both the church and the academy.

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***Sword and Scimitar: Fourteen Centuries of War between Islam and the West***

**Raymond Ibrahim**

**New York City: Da Capo Press, 2018**

**334 pages**

***The Myth of the Andalusian Paradise: Muslims, Christians, and Jews under Islamic Rule in Medieval Spain***

**Dario Fernandez-Morera**

**Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2016**

**358 pages**

*Reviewed by David Upchurch, M.Div., retired secondary school history teacher and retired U.S. Army chaplain*

The subtitle of Ibrahim's fine history could have been '1,400 Years of Jihad against the West'. The author tells us not only of the importance and military strategy of eight 'turning-point' battles, but also of the motivations and eth-

ics of Christians and Muslims in these conflicts. Ibrahim's writing has given me a far greater appreciation of the courage and boldness of those present-day Muslims who have renounced jihad, seeking religious tolerance and an end to persecution of non-Muslim religions. These Muslims wrestle with a cultural history that has been consistently and profoundly hostile to the non-Islamic world.

A one-page map near the beginning of the book shows the extent of Islamic conquest of formerly Christian lands, along with the areas raided for plunder and slaves during the last fourteen centuries. That map alone is worth the price of the book for its boldness and clarity. Beginning in the Arabian desert in the seventh century, continuing as far north and west as Tours in north central France in 732, and including the reduction of Vienna to rubble in 1683, infidels have suffered from astounding brutality and destruction in Allah's wars.

Sadly, as Ibrahim also points out, the Christian response to jihad has itself been immoral at times. In fact, Thomas Aquinas composed his now-famous rules of just warfare while wrestling with this problem.

Ibrahim, a Hoover Institution scholar, writes from primary sources, many of which he translated from Arabic. He quotes contemporaneous accounts of the battles he describes, including both Muslim and Christian sources on the same events. The considerable agreement between these sources lends weight to the presumption that Ibrahim understands and accurately depicts these events.

His evidence points to an 'ends justifies the means' underpinning of all these Muslim campaigns against the West. When Muslim soldiers were preparing for battle, their leaders promised them

a 'win-win' scenario. By killing infidels, raping their women, enslaving those whom they conquered and enriching themselves with loot, they would win in an earthly sense. If they died fighting, because they were engaged in jihad, they would immediately go to paradise where similar fleshly rewards awaited them.

The resulting style of warfare was ruthless, brutal and barbaric. Muslims used terror tactics such as mass beheadings and impalings to discourage their enemies. They deceived, agreed to treaties they had no intention of keeping, and at times even feigned conversion to Christianity when it suited their purposes. Ibrahim argues persuasively that regardless of their tribal background or the particular Muslim ruler, all Muslims consistently used the same rationale and approach to conquest.

Ibrahim gives two compelling illustrations of Muslim beliefs and practice. First, Islamic rulers during their centuries of rule in Iberia became noticeably 'whiter' with each generation. Originally from North Africa, they preferred infidel, white concubines for their harems. They either enslaved whites from within or near their territories or purchased them from Viking raiders who captured them from northern Europe. Additionally, white slaves from conquered Slavic Europe were so popular that the etymology of the English word *slave* reflects the millions carried off from this region.

As a second example, in the 1683 siege of Vienna the caliph, in his rage at infidel resistance, used his artillery to reduce the city to rubble. He then ordered wave after wave of attackers against the walls. The caliph promised his soldiers the spoils of war or paradise, knowing that eventually, even with the death of thousands of his own men, the Christians would be overwhelmed. Only the

last-minute arrival of the Polish Catholic army overcame the attackers and drove them east toward Constantinople.

*The Myth of the Andalusian Paradise* provides additional understanding of life during and after the Muslim conquest of Spain. Fernandez-Morera, an associate professor of Spanish and Portuguese at Northwestern University, addresses the currently widespread notion that tolerance, creativity and harmony characterized southern Spain during the conquest.

Contemporary tour guides, historians and politicians often speak of this era in history as some kind of golden age in which everyone got along and the writings of ancient civilization were preserved by Islamic scholars. The gross inaccuracy of this view becomes obvious as the author quotes and summarizes primary sources and contemporaneous accounts of life in Andalusia throughout the hundreds of years of Islamic rule.

For example, the routine destruction of churches and the killing of priests and monks alone show that harmony did not prevail. The author also demonstrates that ancient literature was preserved primarily by Greek and Latin Christian monks and scholars; Islamic scholars learned of it from them.

When Ibrahim addresses Moorish rule in Spain, on several occasions he quotes Fernandez-Morera and his sources.

Questions regarding how to relate to present-day Muslims abound in these histories. Muslim religious views justifying jihad against all who oppose Allah remain very much with us. Indeed, according to the Islamic worldview, such conquests please Allah and reward the conqueror in this life or the next. Both of these books challenge us to look more appreciatively at Western civilization and its Christian foundation, as well as to recall that those peaceful Muslims

who go against the tide of their own history deserve our admiration and our prayers.

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***The Routledge Companion to the Practice of Christian Theology***

**Mike Highton and Jim Fodor (eds.)**

**London: Routledge, 2015**

**978-0-415-61736-9**

**pp 463, index**

*Reviewed by Michael Borowski,  
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Over the last decades, evangelicalism has spent much time and energy, justifiably, on the nature of Scripture, hermeneutics and exegesis. However, moving from Scripture to theology is a more complex procedure that calls for greater attention to the actual practice of 'doing Christian theology'. Mike Highton (Durham University) and Jim Fodor (St. Bonaventure University) edited this book with that purpose in mind, seeking to address 'the ongoing habits, the persisting patterns of activity, involved in the pursuit of Christian theology' (p. 1).

The book is structured around four sources of Christian theology: reason, Scripture, tradition and experience. As Highton and Fodor readily confess, this structure derives from John Wesley. The result is an exciting contribution with significant value for an evangelical seminary setting. Each section has a skilfully composed editorial introduction.

In the section on reason, the contributing authors lay out the nature, relevance

and application of reason for the practice of theology. For instance, theology is affirmed to be an argument (e.g. Brad J. Kallenberg, Nicholas Adams), and it must be done according to certain rules of which clarity may be the most important (Karen Kilby). Theology has always engaged with philosophy through the church's history, and Oliver lays out some of these developments in one concise chapter. C. C. Pecknold claims that theology can be done in the public square even within secular societies, and he outlines an approach for doing so.

In the next section, the *Companion* affirms a personal interaction with Scripture, reading Scripture critically yet primarily as a means of discipleship (Fodor and Higton). Gerard Loughlin wrestles with the quest for the literal sense of Scripture while seeking to preserve its sense. Kevin J. Vanhoozer draws on David Kelsey, proposing ways to defend doctrine biblically. William T. Cavanaugh outlines dangers in applying Scripture to political questions (a very timely chapter in particular for evangelicals).

The section on tradition begins with an essay by Jason Byassee, who presents some examples of drinking from the 'well of faith handed on' that he hopes will lead to faithful worship by the Christian community. Other questions posed in this section include the following: How and why should we read classic texts (Morwenna Ludlow)? How can we apply creeds and confessions (John Bradbury)? How do we work with tradition that may be damaging in some way (Rachel Muers)? Stephen Plant addresses interaction with modern

theologians—their particular questions, benefits and dangers. Paul Murray closes the section by challenging the church to take a bifocal perspective that is both empirical and doctrinal, focusing on a given community's tradition and its actual practice.

The section on experience is more extensive than the others, encompassing interaction with feminist, black, liberation and post-colonial theology as well as with the arts and popular culture. Some of these chapters might lie outside the boundaries of evangelical thinking, but they exemplify thought-provoking applications of the fourth pillar of Wesley's quadrilateral. Garrett Green opens the section with a chapter on interweaving personal work with one's theology, a topic that should stir critical, relevant debates within evangelical settings.

The book seems to be brief in some crucial areas; in particular, section two is rather short (but maybe that is actually an advantage for evangelicals, as we tend to focus on this area anyhow). On the other hand, some included areas were not necessary in my judgement, particularly in section four. Perhaps most significantly, some chapters are quite discrepant with evangelical convictions. But that last feature is valuable in a way, because it forces us to engage critically with other theological constructions. The *Companion's* contributors interact as faithfully as they know how with Scripture and the other sources of Christian theology. Such interaction is overdue in many parts of the evangelical (sub-)culture, and the *Companion* is a great tool for facilitating these needed discussions.

(The following three reviews are re-printed with permission from BookNotes for Africa.)

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### ***Africa Study Bible***

**John Jusu (ed.)**

**Wheaton, IL: Oasis International, 2016**

**2144 pp.**

*Reviewed by Judith L. Hill, professor of New Testament, Faculté de Théologie Evangelique de Bangui (FATEB), Yaounde, Central African Republic*

This major production from Oasis International uses the modern New Living Translation of the Bible (NLT), with additional expertise from the creators of the *Life Application Study Bible*. Valuing the Bible as the final authority, the organizing committee members, including various African Christian leaders, established as a basic principle an intent to mirror the diversity of the church in Africa.

Theologically, they grounded the ASB on 'correct and accepted Christian beliefs ... while allowing for differences in opinion on non-essential issues'. The goal was to provide a study tool that would anticipate and answer readers' questions, indicate practical applications and advice, and explain truths in readable, culturally relevant ways.

Contributors to this work, from the initial planning through the writing, translation and editing stages, included hundreds of African pastors, leaders and theologians, from fifty countries and many denominational perspectives. The 350 contributors (of whom sixty-nine were women) composed in English, French, Portuguese, Arabic or Swahili, and their materials were then translated into English as necessary. (The publica-

tion of a French version of this study Bible is anticipated for 2019.)

More than 2,600 added features define the educational aspects of the ASB. 'African Touch Points' correlate Scripture with Africa in one of three ways: by noting biblical references to Africa, by quoting early church fathers who lived in Africa (such as Athanasius), or by explaining insights into passages provided by African culture. Also, each book begins with introductory material about the author and the original audience. Attached to many passages are application notes, pinpointing relevant implications for daily life in modern Africa.

African proverbs and stories illuminate biblical truths with wisdom passed down through oral culture. Longer articles highlight specifically African interests, such as 'The Sovereignty of God and Colonialism' or 'African Traditional Beliefs and the Bible'. 'Learn Notes' provide commentary on various Christian beliefs (such as 'The Great Commission' or 'Tithes and Offerings'), written from an African perspective.

The ASB concludes with an account of the history of Christianity in Africa, followed by a narrative timeline of God's work in Africa from Abraham through 2016. Charts, maps and a Bible reading plan contribute further to its overall usefulness as a study tool.

The long process of evaluating the need for such a study Bible and the many levels of editing have produced a theologically responsible, well-presented tool for African pastors, lay leaders and other Christians desiring to understand biblical content and theology while discovering how the Bible relates to everyday reality in today's Africa. The abundance of study helps and the strong ties to African life make the ASB a unique and valuable resource, a basic study guide which can then be complemented by the



*Africa Bible Commentary* (described in Hans-Georg Wuench's article in this *ERT* issue) for deeper insights into biblical texts.

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***The Message of Spiritual Warfare***

**Keith Ferdinando**

**London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2016**

**283 pp.**

*Reviewed by Tim Stabell, pastor of Prairie Winds Church in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, Canada and instructor at Briercrest Seminary*

This book is a robust defence of the 'classical' understanding of spiritual warfare. This view stands over against contemporary interpretations that either take the biblical language of spiritual conflict as metaphorical allusions to impersonal, oppressive human institutions or see spiritual warfare exclusively in terms of deliverance from the power of demons. The classical view focuses rather on the moral conflict that believers must engage in as they live in a world that is in rebellion against its Creator.

The enemies that Christians are called to resist include not just Satan and his demons, but also their own sinful desires and the temptations or lies that characterize the societies in which they live. In this struggle, they can be confident because God himself is committed to fighting and ultimately overthrowing his enemies and the enemies of his people.

Ferdinando has structured his presentation around a number of significant bib-

lical passages that address the question of spiritual warfare. Each of the twenty-one chapters of the book provides in-depth exposition of one such passage. All of this is organized into four parts. In part one, Ferdinando examines passages indicating that even where the enemies are doing their worst, God remains in control of the situation and will use even enemy efforts to accomplish his own purposes. In part two, he discusses the crucial role that Jesus assumes in the battle with the enemy forces. Part three looks at passages on the deliverance that believers have experienced from the powers of darkness, and it then examines our role in bringing the good news of this deliverance to others still held captive by the enemy. Finally, part four considers ways in which believers are called to engage in spiritual warfare so as not to give ground to their enemies in their own lives.

Ferdinando's extensive teaching experience at Shalom University in the Democratic Republic of the Congo makes him sensitive to issues particular to the African context. Although his emphasis is on the moral dimensions of spiritual warfare, he is no rationalist who would deny the reality of demonic powers or the possibility of being possessed by them. He discusses this dimension of spiritual conflict particularly in the chapter on Jesus' ministry of deliverance.

This book is a valuable resource for any who want to deepen their understanding of this important biblical theme, and in particular for those who teach on this topic in contexts where narrower views of spiritual warfare prevail.

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***Identity and Ecclesiology: Their Relationship among Select African Theologians***

**Stephanie A. Lowery**

**Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2017**

**254 pp.**

*Reviewed by Gregg Okesson, Asbury Theological Seminary, USA*

Lowery is a lecturer at Scott Christian University in Kenya, and this is the published version of her PhD dissertation, completed at Wheaton College in the USA. Here she lays out an impressive historical-theological analysis of literature dealing with the subject of identity in African ecclesiologies. She attempts to make explicit what African theologians mean by identity, especially as it relates to the church, and in relation to the social challenges that people experience on the continent.

Lowery begins by charting the theological terrain in Africa, showing that while the topic of community plays such a central role on the continent, the theme of ecclesiology is relatively underdeveloped. She traces what scholars actually mean by identity and then examines how theologians interpret various biblical passages in relation to identity. Five theologians are reviewed: from Nigeria, Elochukwu Uzukwu and Agbonkhanmeghe Orobator; from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Augiustin Bishwende and Tire Ande; and from Kenya, Paul Mbandi. In a concluding chapter, Lowery analyses all these writers' works

and then provides her own suggestions as to how a social identity approach strengthens ecclesiological understanding.

The book is both delightful and rather dense, filled with thoughtful, probing analysis and dealing with a thick array of integrated literature. Its density is in some respects intentional, as Lowery set out with the explicit purpose of integrating biblical studies, systematic theology, and social-science approaches to the study of identity in African ecclesiology. Nevertheless, the book is also eminently readable. The chapter exploring how theologians interpret Scripture helps to anchor the entire book upon a more empirical framework, unearthing not just what theologians think but also how they actually interpret different biblical passages to make their arguments. It might be interesting to see whether the topic of identity can be discerned not only from scholars writing to a global audience, but also through the voice of the churches of Africa, with their varied theological resources of doxology, song, dance, prayer and preaching.

This study is the most comprehensive scholarly treatment of African ecclesiology available today. Lowery effectively trumpets the voices of African theologians for all to hear. But rather than just summarizing what is already present in the literature, she also integrates insights from different fields of study and offers new resources to advance our appreciation of the multifocal nature of identity in African ecclesiology.