

Foundations

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Foundations

Foundations is an international journal of evangelical theology published in the United Kingdom. Its aim is to cover contemporary theological issues by articles and reviews, taking in exegesis, biblical

theology, church history and apologetics, and to indicate their relevance to pastoral ministry. Its particular focus is the theology of evangelical churches which are committed to biblical truth and evangelical

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EDITORIAL

Affinity convened its biannual theological studies conference in January this year, titled "Using the Bible Ethically". Unsurprisingly the conference generated stimulating debate as we grappled with questions concerning economic justice, the ethics of war, and the beginning and end of life. One of the highlights of the conference was its format with the opportunity to spend significant time in small groups discussing some of the issues raised in the conference papers. There is no conference like it (at least none that I am aware of) where church members, pastors and internationally renowned theologians get to spend hours together working through the implications of what they have heard. I was truly grateful for the opportunity to be involved.

One of the issues that inevitably arise in debates concerning Christian Ethics is the place of the conscience in the Christian life. Of course, conscience questions are not limited to academic debates about medical ethics or the use of torture; they arise frequently in day-to-day Christian living as believers ask themselves what godly conduct looks like in any given situation. A trend that I have noticed in recent times is the tendency to use "conscience arguments" to justify conduct which either falls short of what Scripture requires or short-circuits the hard-work of identifying precisely what Scripture does indeed teach. For example, a husband leaves his wife for another woman and justifies the decision by insisting that, according to his conscience, it is better to live with a woman whom he "really loves" than to carry on in a loveless marriage. Or, a student goes out with his friends and drinks four pints in one sitting claiming that his conscience permitted him to do so. Or, a GP admits that she doesn't really know what Scripture teaches about when human life begins but relies upon her conscience which is happy with her decision to prescribe post-fertilisation modes of contraception. In situations such as these, Christians use their conscience to justify conduct which falls short of what most Bible-believing Christians believe Scripture to require.

It seems to me that this is precisely the opposite of the direction that conscience arguments take in the New Testament. The word translated conscience in most English translations, *syneidēsis*, simply means an awareness of information about something (see BDAG and Louw & Nida), although it often carries the sense of "moral consciousness". The word is used in its various forms 30 times in the New Testament. The importance of having a "good" and "clear" conscience (Acts 23:1; 24:16; 2 Tim 1:3) is emphasised and the possibility of a person's conscience being "seared" or "defiled" is acknowledged (1 Tim 4:2; Titus 1:15).

For our purposes, it is Paul's discussion of the conscience in 1 Cor 8 and 10 that is of particular significance because it is here that Paul discusses how

the conscience ought to affect a believer's conduct and decisions. In chapter 8, he begins by insisting that believers are free to eat food sacrificed to idols since idols have "no real existence" (v. 4). He supports this by alluding to various Old Testament texts, most notably the *Shema* (Deut 6:4). He is quick, however, to insist that believers should not exercise this freedom to the detriment of others. Some in the church did not possess the same knowledge about their freedom in the matter (presumably because of their previous attachment to idols), and therefore their consciences (self-awareness) would have been defiled (v. 7). For that reason, they should not eat – even though biblically they "are no worse off if [they] do not eat, and no better off if [they] do" (v. 8). Moreover, Paul insists that the Christians who are aware of their freedom in this matter should refrain from eating too because to do so would wound another's conscience and hence constitute a sin against Christ (v. 12). The flow of Paul's "conscience argument" is clear. Believers should refrain from exercising biblical freedoms if to do so would detrimentally affect their own or another person's conscience.

The same pattern is evident in chapter 10. Once again the context is food sacrificed to idols and Paul insists, relying on Scripture (this time Psa 24:1) that Christians are free to eat anything (vv. 25-26). Having established the biblical principle, he warns the Corinthians that they should relinquish this freedom if to exercise it would endanger another person's conscience (this time an unbeliever). The apostle is quick to insist that this in no way determines the believers' own conscience (v. 29; see also 1 Tim 4:1-5), but it is right for believers to forgo their freedoms for the sake of others.

The pattern of "conscience arguments" in the Bible is clear. They are used to restrict the exercise of biblical freedoms rather than to liberate believers from the constraints of what the Bible teaches or from the effort of working out exactly what the Bible does indeed teach. Anthony Thiselton has put it really well: "Paul is *not* advocating the kind of 'autonomy' mistakenly regarded widely today as 'liberty of conscience'. Rather, he is arguing for the reverse. Freedom and 'rights' must be restrained by self-discipline for *the sake of love for the insecure or the vulnerable*, for whom 'my freedom' might be 'their ruin'" (*1 Corinthians* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000] p. 644). We must remember how arguments based upon conscience are used in Scripture, both in the public sphere and in personal morality (on the latter, see Kevin DeYoung's helpful recent discussion in *The Hole in our Holiness* [Wheaton: Crossway, 2012] pp. 41-45).

Turning to the current issue, I am delighted to be able to present four articles and one review article spanning the breadth of the journal's disciplines. Ted Turnau (one of the journal's Associate Editors) contributes an article critically examining the translation of *Road to Perdition* from its original form as a graphic novel to a film. He challenges the commonly-held view that Hollywood movie makers secularise their source material by

suppressing the religious, and argues instead that they tend to displace the religious by emphasis upon other “secular sacreds”. This, Turnau argues, is reflective of how humanity reacts to God’s general revelation by suppressing it and shifting their sacred commitments to other, created forms.

The following two articles engage in the field of Biblical Studies. In Issue 61 of Foundations, John Legg contributed a stimulating article contending that the traditional reading of the parable of the Good Samaritan was mistaken. According to Legg, instead of expanding the standard Jewish definition of “neighbour”, Jesus’ intent in telling the parable was to warn his listeners that if they did not love their fellow-Christians (“neighbours”) then they were showing themselves not to be Christians at all. In his contribution to this issue, Craig Blomberg challenges that reading and defends the classical interpretation of the parable. In Andrew Evans’ article, Evans examines possible allusions to the Song of Songs in John’s Gospel and Revelation. He argues that these allusions point to a typological reading of the Song which allows it to speak of human love and human lovers while maintaining a spiritual meaning as well.

Stephen Clark’s article is a revised version of the paper he delivered at the theological studies conference in January. It considers how Christians ought to use the Bible to engage ethically with the various challenges that twenty-first century living presents. It is broad in its scope, covering issues ranging from evangelism, to the workplace, and to the role of the state. The journal concludes with a number of book reviews including an article-length review of Tim Keller’s book, *Center Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012). I have found Keller’s book immensely helpful as we have laid plans for a church plant in the city centre of Manchester. Pickett raises some helpful questions and urges readers to make sure that they do the hard work of contextualising to their own situation rather than seeking to import a model from elsewhere (a warning Keller himself sounds).

I trust that the contributions to this journal will be of benefit to you and your church and, as ever, welcome correspondence and contributions to future issues.

Ralph Cunningham
May 2013

DISPLACING THE SACRED: THOUGHTS ON THE SECULARISING INFLUENCE OF HOLLYWOOD

*Ted Turnau**

The essay explores the claim that Hollywood movie makers secularise their source material, suppressing religious themes by examining in detail the changes made in *Road to Perdition* from its original form as a graphic novel to a Hollywood movie. After noting the tremendous impact of popular culture on how we make and receive meaning, we explore how popular culture functions as a type of religious discourse, a functional religion. "Secular" then means not so much a suppression of religion as a displacement of religion into different forms. In *Road to Perdition's* translation from comic to film, we can see a simultaneous eclipsing of traditional religious forms (theological discussion, the role of the Catholic church) and an emphasis on other "sacreds" (non-violence, the father-son relationship) through changes in story, as well as the use of cinematic techniques to create holy moments. The essay concludes with theological reflection on this process of displacing the sacred. It is not unique to contemporary Hollywood, but is rather a particular instance of how humanity reacts to God's general revelation by suppressing it and shifting their sacred commitments to other, created forms (a.k.a. idolatry). To understand popular culture well, we need to be sensitive to these secular sacreds when they appear.

It has become a truism in certain sectors of the evangelical world that Hollywood is godless and has a pernicious, secularising influence on society. I remember as a child my own father complaining somewhat bitterly about how Hollywood had purged or watered down the explicit religious themes of the musical *The Sound of Music* in its transition from a Broadway show to film. A similar pattern can be seen in how Hollywood adapts source material. The book *101 Dalmatians* contained religious references, including an important scene in which the puppies sought refuge from the cold and Cruella de Vil in a church decorated with a Christmas crèche. The book closes with the smallest puppy fondly remembering that night, so we can assume that it had some thematic importance to the author. In Disney's hands, all such religious references were expunged. Similarly, when translated from page to screen, the centre of gravity in C. S. Lewis' classic fantasy tale, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, shifted perceptibly from being centred on

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the saving arrival of Aslan (the not-so-subtle Christ figure in the tale) to being centred on the personal heroism of the Pevensie children (particularly Peter as a man-of-action). Hollywood has a knack for sanitising its sources by removing religion. There are exceptions, of course. Hollywood occasionally “gets religion” when religion proves itself on payday, as when the studios became temporarily enthralled with the box office returns of Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*. But for the most part, Hollywood seems uncomfortable with religion and reshapes pre-existing material into something more secular.

This essay seeks to complicate that picture somewhat, particularly by questioning the assumptions that we hold concerning the “secular”. It is my contention that popular culture (in this case, Hollywood films) wield an influence that does not so much erase religion as displace religion. That is to say, Hollywood takes traditional sacred symbols and repackages them into implicitly sacred forms. To explain what I mean, I shall examine a case study in some detail: the transition of the graphic novel *Road to Perdition* into a Hollywood film.¹

1. Popular Culture as a Social Force

Popular culture, far from simply being trivial entertainment, is an important force in contemporary society. It has always been, and the wise have perennially recognised that fact. Whenever Socrates would travel to a certain city, he always sought out the poets first (recitation or dramatic portrayals of poetry, especially epic and tragic poetry, was popular culture for the ancient Greeks). He wanted to debate with them, because it was through them that the popular imagination was shaped and trained.² In Acts 17 we see the apostle Paul doing something similar, debating in the Athens marketplace of ideas, drawing especially upon Greek poets and assumptions – that is, he engaged their popular culture. He engaged with the shaping force of the Athenian imagination.

During the late eighteenth century, the poet, artist, and novelist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe found out the hard way what an impact popular works can have on the popular imagination. His 1774 work, *The Sorrows of the Young Werther*, tells the story of a sensitive, artistic, young, lovesick man through his letters to a friend. Unable to pursue the woman of his dreams (she’s engaged to another), he becomes more and more depressed, and finally commits suicide. The novelette first inspired a fashion craze, as young

¹ The graphic novel was written by Max Allen Collins, with artwork by Richard Piers Rayner for DC Comics (New York/London: Pocket Books, 2002 [1998]). The film version was scripted by David Self and directed by Sam Mendes for 20th Century Fox in 2002.

² Paul A. Cantor, “The Art in the Popular”, *Wilson Quarterly* 25 (Summer 2001): 26-39.

men copied Werther's dress: open-collared poet shirt, blue vest, yellow trousers. But even more alarmingly, it also inspired hundreds of copycat suicides, the most famous being an episode where a young woman leapt to her death from the spire of a church clutching a copy of the book in her hand. In all, about two thousand lovelorn youths killed themselves. The anger that was stirred against Goethe became so intense, that he publically announced that he wished that he had never written the novel. Sociologists still call this phenomenon of people copying popular cultural suicides (such as Kurt Cobain's) "the Werther Effect".³

So historically, popular culture has had, at times, immense social effects. But perhaps that influence has grown in the past 70 years as Western societies have become ever more media saturated. Sociologist David Lyon talks about how postmodern people tend to use media texts (songs, television, movies, web content) as frameworks of meaning, ways to negotiate meaning in their lives, ways to understand themselves and their worlds.⁴ It might not be an overstatement to say that popular culture has emerged in the last seventy years as one of the most (or perhaps *the* most) important centres for the creation and distribution of meanings in society. Popular culture may *seem* light and insignificant, but it is not; it has a profound social impact on a whole spectrum of issues. Think of the gay marriage debate in the US and UK before and after *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) and *Milk* (2008). In the 1970s, a grassroots movement to protect nature drew inspiration from J. R. R. Tolkien's novels, and that inspiration was renewed by the movies made from the novels. But it is not just "issue-oriented" popular cultural works that change things. Our understanding of romance has been influenced by films like *Titanic*, (1997). Our understanding of religion and spirituality has been influenced profoundly by *Star Wars* (1977) and *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), which introduced the concept of "the Force", popularizing an essentially Eastern religious concept in the West. And even our understanding of evil has been shaped by horror films like *Halloween* (1978) and *Silence of the Lambs* (1991). Popular culture in general, and Hollywood in particular, has had a deep and lasting impact on how we in the West understand reality. That is to say, it has had a roughly *religious* impact.

II. Popular Culture and Religion: The Secularised Sacred

I realise that last statement might be a bone of contention for some, but I make it advisedly. It depends, of course, on how one defines "religion".

³ See John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 9-10.

⁴ David Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times* (Cambridge, UK: Wiley, 2000), especially chapter 5.

Defining religion has long been a complex and conflicted affair for scholars of religion, and there have been various schools of thought that each try to define religion according to their own respective interests.⁵ Some seek to define religion through locating its “essence”, an essential ingredient or marker or religiosity. The common candidates are usually orientation to the supernatural, or certain ritual behaviours or distinctive institutions. The problem with this definitional strategy is that not all recognised religions contain the essential distinctive beliefs, behaviours or institutions. So other scholars have tried to define religion by how it functions, how it meets human needs for social unity, emotional comfort, intellectual meaning and so forth.

Such a “functional” approach produces a much wider definition of religion, and this sometimes does not sit so well with some academics who have a vested interest in being (or appearing to be) “rational” and “objective”.⁶ In a secular academic climate so often markedly biased against religion (labelling the religious as irrational, emotionally dependent, intellectually childish, etc.), many academics are quite averse to any definition that might include them. And yet, such a definition does seem to capture something deeply true about the human thirst for meaning, to being placed in a context of something that is, finally, worth living for. *That*, it seems to me, is what constitutes the religious foundation of human existence, rather than some narrowly-defined set of ritual behaviours or belief in the supernatural. For the purposes of this essay, allow me to offer a short definition of religion from this broader tradition: *Religion is a passionate and imaginative investment into a system of belief and practice that makes certain assumptions about the world, identity, about what leads to human flourishing, and how practical moral reasoning should be accomplished.*⁷ At the centre of each of these belief systems is what may be called “the sacred”, that which is most precious and most deeply true.

If you consider that popular culture is effective precisely in guiding our passions and imaginations (and thus, our sense of the sacred) through its stories and images, then it becomes obvious that popular culture as such

⁵ For a fuller version exploration of the idea of popular culture as religion, see Theodore A. Turnau, III, “Popular Cultural ‘Worlds’ as Alternative Religions,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 37, no. 3 (Spring 2008): 323-45. See also Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy, “Introduction: Finding Religion in American Popular Culture” in *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 2001).

⁶ For instance, see fandom scholar Henry Jenkins’ allergic reaction to the possibility that popular cultural fandom might be classified as a type of religion in “Excerpts from ‘Matt Hills Interviews Henry Jenkins,’” in Henry Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2006), 16 ff.

⁷ I did not include “intellectual investment” in this definition not because I believe it is unimportant. Rather, recent studies affirm that our deepest beliefs are passionate and imagination *before* they become formalised in the intellect. See for example James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), especially chapter 1, “*Homo Liturgicus: The Human Person as Lover*”.

resonates within the realm of religion. And it resonates in religious tones even while remaining putatively “secular”.

From this perspective, it becomes clear that the classical theories of secularisation stand in need of revision. From the 1950s to the 1970s, the reigning assumption among sociologists was that religion was slowly but surely dying out worldwide. But then the 1980s came, and brought with it an immense and obvious resurgence of public religiosity (the rise of the Religious Right in the US, militant Islam in the Middle East, etc.). But even if the 1980s had never happened, popular culture alone would have (or *should* have) caused problems for the standard secularisation theory. The influence of popular culture strongly suggests that the sacred is not being erased from society, even if traditional religious institutions are in decline. The sacred is not being erased, but is rather being displaced, reconfigured into other forms more agreeable with the “secular” attitude of the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries.⁸

Let us consider a particular case study that explores this pattern: *Road to Perdition* in its transition from a quite explicitly religious graphic novel to an implicitly religious film.

III. Road to Perdition in Translation

In its broad outline, the story of *Road to Perdition* remains largely unchanged between its incarnations as graphic novel and film.⁹ Michael O’Sullivan (shortened to “Sullivan” in the movie) works as an enforcer for an Irish crime family run by John Looney¹⁰ (changed to “Rooney” for the film) in the Mid-Western US during the prohibition era. O’Sullivan’s eldest son, also named Michael, longs to know what his father does for a living. He stows away in his father’s car and witnesses his father and Looney’s son, Connor, kill several men.

When Connor finds out that there has been a witness he is furious, but O’Sullivan vouches for the boy’s loyalty and silence. Later, Connor decides that O’Sullivan’s word is not good enough and he kills O’Sullivan’s wife and younger son (mistaking him for young Michael). O’Sullivan vows revenge, but John Looney sends Connor into the protection of the Capone family in

⁸ There have been sociologists who have long recognised this. Among the more prominent would be German sociologist Thomas Luckmann’s *The Invisible Religion* (London: MacMillan, 1967), French sociologist Jacques Ellul’s *The New Demons*, translated by C. Edward Hopkin (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), and “implicit religion” associated with Edward I. Bailey and the “Network for the Study of Implicit Religion” (see www.implicitreligion.org).

⁹ Spoiler alert! If you have not yet read the graphic novel or seen the film, this would be a good time to do so. Both are works of high quality, sustain multiple readings/viewings, and worth owning, in my opinion.

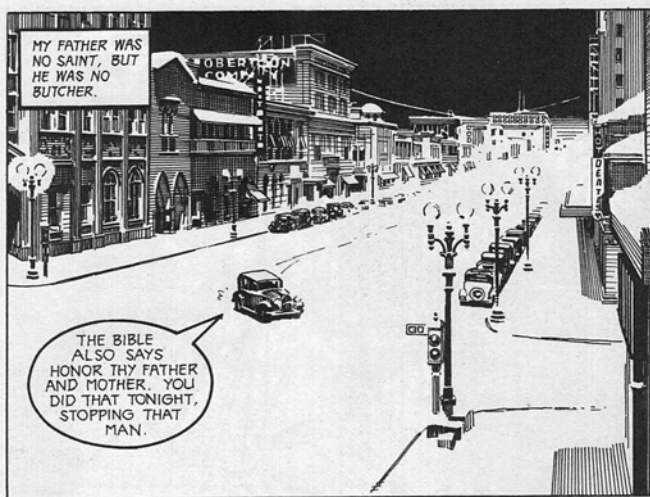
¹⁰ The mob boss Looney was an actual historical figure, a collaborator with the better-known Al Capone crime family.

Chicago, making him unreachable. In response, O'Sullivan and his son take to the road, robbing banks of the "dirty money" they hold for the Capone family.

Their goal is to make hiding Connor more expensive than giving him up. Eventually, Capone decides to give up Connor Looney, and O'Sullivan executes him. He and his son then drive to Perdition, Kansas, where O'Sullivan has relatives and where he believes they can live safely. A mob hit man awaits them, however, and O'Sullivan is killed, but Michael lives to tell the tale. That much the graphic novel and film have in common. It is a very effective hybrid combining elements of the classic road trip, gangster-adventure, revenge and coming-of-age story.

But the elements and places where the two versions of this story diverge are telling.

1. A Shift Away from Christian Theology



First, it is remarkable how much explicit theological discussion the graphic novel contains: discussions about the morality of killing and murder, heaven and hell, grace and forgiveness. For example, after young Michael kills a man who was about to shoot his father, he is overcome with guilt. This prompts a heart-to-heart discussion between father and son about sin and the possibility of forgiveness (see fig. 1). This element of the story is completely absent from the film. In

[Figure 1: Max Allan Collins, *Road to Perdition*, art by Richard Piers Rayner (New York and London: DC Comics/Pocket Books, 2002), p. 190. © 1998, 2002, Max Allan Collins & DC Comics. Note Rayner's use of light in darkness especially in the bottom right panel to provide atmosphere for this conversation about spiritual light and dark.]

fact, in the film, there is little discussion between father and son about anything beyond their own relationship and their strategy for forcing Capone to give up Connor Rooney. There is certainly no discussion about the morality of what they are doing, or about sin or forgiveness.¹¹ God doesn't merit a mention in the Hollywood version.

2. *The Church Invisible*

Further, much of the graphic novel is set inside Catholic churches. After his ordeal of having killed a man, father and son drive around until they find a Catholic church in which young Michael can pray for forgiveness.

Even more striking, his father, after each killing, finds a Catholic church to light a candle for each victim and to confess his sins to a priest (see fig. 2). The church is a place of refuge and comfort. In stark contrast, the Catholic church as an institution has been largely erased in the film version. Except for Sullivan's warning to his son to avoid the Catholic church (because of ties to the Rooney family),¹² there is no mention of the church. In fact,

[Figure 2: Collins and Rayner, 161. © 1998, 2002, Max Allan Collins & DC Comics. Notice how much attention Rayner gives to the religious iconography in the bottom panel (so much so that O'Sullivan must duck his head so we can see the crucified Christ).]



¹¹ The crime boss John Rooney does mention the impossibility of heaven for men who murder, like himself and Michael Sullivan. I will discuss this scene below.

¹² Michael O'Sullivan gives an identical warning in the graphic novel on pp. 83-84. But throughout, the graphic novel has much more to say about the Catholic church than the film.

there are no scenes that are set in a Catholic church with one exception: when Sullivan makes contact with Rooney while Rooney is at prayer to demand that he give up his son, Connor. The ensuing discussion happens in the basement of the church, its unused underbelly, among discarded furniture and statues of saints (see fig. 3). The atmosphere is one of darkness and disuse (perhaps this is visual commentary on the church itself?).

[Figure 3: *Road to Perdition*, directed by Sam Mendes, Twentieth Century Fox, 2002. © 2002, Twentieth Century Fox and Dreamworks.]



But even more telling is cinematographer Conrad Hall's brilliant use of lighting (we shall have much more to say about Hall in a moment). In the discussion between Sullivan and Rooney, even though both are standing adjacent to bare light bulbs, Hall casts both characters' faces in shadow (see fig. 4). The discussion circulates around themes of betrayal and murder. Sullivan presses his demand that Rooney surrender Connor.



[Figure 4: *Road to Perdition*. © 2002, Twentieth Century Fox and Dreamworks.]

"He murdered Annie and Peter!"

Rooney retorts (and Paul Newman's delivery is bristling with anger and pathos), "There are only murderers in this room. Michael, open your eyes! This is the life we chose, the life we lead. And there is only one guarantee: none of us will see heaven".

To which, Sullivan replies, "Michael could". Because, presumably, he is as yet innocent of the bloodshed that these men have known for decades.

Rooney's assertion of the certainty of hell for both men is the only time when the dialogue contains a specifically theological element. And Rooney's (and the film's?) theology states: there is no grace for such men as us. When all is said and done, they can expect only death and hell. Given the dialogue, Hall's lighting choice to put both men's faces in shadow makes sense. This is more than dramatic lighting. It is cinematographic commentary on the dialogue telling us that these men are creatures destined for darkness, that they are indeed doomed. This is the *only* scene in the movie that takes place in the church, as opposed to several significant scenes in the graphic novel. In the novel, the church offers consolation, grace and forgiveness, even to those who feel doomed and beyond redemption. In the film, the church stands as a silent witness to those who have placed themselves *past* redemption. In this way, the film strips away and waters down the graphic novel's theological content (its emphasis on Christian grace), replacing it with a more simplified theology where good people go to heaven and bad people go to hell. The film's God is distant, and he does not intervene to save sinners. Heaven is to open only to those who deserve it by keeping themselves from violence.

3. Unstained by Violence

Which leads to the next difference between graphic novel and film: the violence done (or not done) by young Michael. In the film, young Michael helps his father by driving the getaway car, but he never actually does anything remotely violent. When faced with the sadistic hit man who has just shot his father, he is sorely tempted to kill him, and he *almost* pulls the trigger. But he is saved at the last second from having to do it by his dying father, who shoots his attacker in the back as he tries to coax the gun away from young Michael. Michael stammers, "I couldn't do it", as he comforts (and seeks comfort from) his dying father. Young Michael remains blessedly innocent of bloodshed.

In the graphic novel, it is another story entirely. Young Michael kills not once but twice. On two separate occasions, he shoots and kills men who are attacking his father. The first time saves his father's life, and leads to the discussion about sin, hell and forgiveness between father and son. The second occurs after his father has already been fatally wounded.

His father's last wish is to be taken to a church for confession and for a priest to perform last rites so that he might be absolved of his sins (see fig. 5). As for young Michael, who has been narrating our tale in the graphic novel, the last pages reveal that he has grown up to become a priest, perhaps as a way

of trying to find his own peace with God. In the film version, the orphaned young Michael finds refuge with a friendly farming couple. In the graphic novel, the orphaned young man finds refuge in the church.

So far, the differences between graphic novel and film have been stated in terms of negation: the film "strips away" or "waters down" the graphic novel's theological specificity and commitment to the church. But I want to go further and say that the film offers an alternative "theology" by displacing the graphic novel's sacred into new forms, new sites for religious (that is, passional and imaginative) investment. The centre of the graphic novel's sense of the sacred lies with

traditional religion, with the rites and theology of the Catholic church. The sense of family is sacred as well, and

the bond that forms between father and son also receives quite a bit of attention in the graphic novel. In the film version, however, that father-son bond becomes all-important. That, plus a commitment to non-violence, becomes the film's new centre of the sacred. This new sacredness can be seen in the film's treatment of Michael Sullivan, Sr., his relationship with his son, his relationship with John Rooney, and finally the visuals that surround Sullivan's death at the end of the film.



[Figure 5: Collins and Rayner, 299. © 1998, 2002, Max Allan Collins & DC Comics. The dramatically lit angel in the bottom panel indicates the final destination of O'Sullivan's soul, the arches of the church suggesting the gateway to heaven.]

4. *The New Sacred: He's No Angel (of Death)*

In the graphic novel, Michael O'Sullivan, a WWI veteran, is feared and respected as the "Angel of Death". He is very, very good at killing people. And throughout the novel, he kills his enemies a lot, in very violent ways (taking a razor to his ex-colleagues, for example). And while he doesn't enjoy the brutality exactly, he's certainly not averse to it either. He even kills more than he needs to, if he thinks it will make his point (see fig. 6).

In the film version, Michael Sullivan is respected as an enforcer for the Rooney family, but he is no Angel of Death. That title, ubiquitous in the graphic novel, is *never* mentioned in the film. Instead, Tom Hanks' performance brings out an honest, down-to-earth, quality in Sullivan. Indeed, that is why directors cast Tom Hanks in their movies, because he is so skilled at playing the decent, ordinary everyman. The film's Sullivan is resourceful, quick, and kills when he must, but he is *much* less brutal than he is in the graphic novel.

5. *The New Sacred: The Father-Son Bond*

In the graphic novel, there is warmth between father and son from the beginning. But that warmth is disrupted by young Michael's shock and disappointment at how his father earns a living. He hides in his father's car so that he can see his father at work and be proud of him, as a boy should be. Instead, he witnesses a murder, and is horrified. The rest of



[Figure 6: Collins and Rayner, 151. © 1998, 2002, Max Allan Collins & DC Comics. The graphic novel's O'Sullivan is clearly used to blood and brutality in a way that the film's Sullivan is not.]

the novel has to do with young Michael overcoming this estrangement from his father by recognising their shared grief over lost family members, and working together towards the goal of revenge and then, hopefully, a peaceful life. In the midst of violence, the son learns to respect, understand and even love his father, even as the violence leaves its staining mark on him.

The father-son arc in the movie is more prominent. It begins with the *father* as distant and emotionally uninvolved with his children. As in the graphic novel, the two are thrown together by events and come to have a closer relationship. But the movie adds a crucial sequence that is missing in the novel. After being winged by a shot from a mob-hired hit man, Sullivan swoons from loss of blood. Young Michael drives to a farm and pleads for the older couple's help. They find refuge there, but the wound becomes infected and Sullivan becomes feverish. The farmer removes the bullet from Sullivan's arm while a concerned young Michael looks on. Afterwards, Michael patiently and tenderly nurses his father back to health. Putting Michael in the role of caregiver and protector, and the respite from the road and action, gives the two a chance to reconnect and discover the treasure they have in one another. In one beautifully lit scene (seriously, Conrad Hall is a genius with lighting and composition), young Michael, unable to sleep, has a late night conversation with his father (see fig. 7). Michael asks why his father liked his younger brother more than him.



[Figure 7: *Road to Perdition* (2002). © 2002, Twentieth Century Fox and Dreamworks.
Note the warmth of the lighting and colour scheme cinematographer Conrad Hall employs here: earthy, homey, embracing.]

Sullivan explains that Peter was “such a sweet boy”, whereas young Michael was more like him, and he didn’t want him to be. The father apologises for treating Michael differently, and before Michael returns to bed, he hugs his father. The physical contact catches Sullivan by surprise, and

he awkwardly returns the hug. But the connection has been made, and the expectation is placed in the viewer's mind that the affection between them will grow. The intimacy, pacing of the dialogue, the earthy-warm tones that pervade the scene all signal that here real life is found, that this is a sacred moment.

6. *The New Sacred: From Raving Looney to Surrogate Father*

To underscore the sacredness of the father and son theme, the film version adds another father-and-son subplot that is completely absent from the graphic novel: Rooney as a caring father who must choose between his corrupt and irresponsible biological son, and his decent and loyal "adopted" son. In the graphic novel, there is no question where Looney's loyalty lies. He wants O'Sullivan dead so that he and his son can get on with life (fig. 8). To get Looney out of the way, O'Sullivan sells him out to the feds (led by Elliot Ness), so that Looney can rot in jail and know that Connor died a violent death.¹³ In the graphic novel, there is no love lost between O'Sullivan and Looney. They are bitter enemies intent on the other's destruction.

The film, however, is a different matter. Early in the film, it is implied that Rooney may have taken in Sullivan as a child and acted as a sort of foster father. Sullivan admires and loves the old man, and Rooney regards Sullivan "like a



[Figure 8: Collins and Rayner, 213. © 1998, 2002, Max Allan Collins & DC Comics. Rayner's artwork makes Looney's attitude toward O'Sullivan alarmingly clear. Such rage at Sullivan in the film would be unthinkable for John Rooney.]

son", as he tells Sullivan in the church basement. The film adds a note of tragic conflict in John Rooney, portrayed with elegant gravitas by Paul Newman. He loves Sullivan, but cannot betray Connor, his own flesh and

¹³ Collins and Rayner, 199-200.

blood. So Sullivan is forced to kill Rooney. After Sullivan has dispatched Rooney's bodyguards, the two eye each other, and Rooney says, "I'm glad it's you". And Sullivan, eyes filled with pain and regret, pulls the trigger. Even in death, the father-son bond between them remains intact. By adding this note of pathos, the film version underscores the sanctity of the relationship between fathers and sons. It is something worth dying for, and killing for.

7. *The Secular Pieta*

But the capstone of the new sense of the sacred in the film comes from the visuals surrounding Sullivan's death scene. In the graphic novel, O'Sullivan is killed and dies in a confessional, having unburdened his soul before God. The priest tells young Michael that "your father is with God now".¹⁴ The death scene in the film is very different, and the visuals are haunted by a sense of the sacred. At the end of their journey, father and son make it to Sullivan's



[Figure 9: *Road to Perdition*, 2002. © 2002, Twentieth Century Fox and Dreamworks. The layering of the shot – Sullivan, the reflection of the lake and beach (you can see young Michael waving in the reflection on the left side of the window) – as well as the quietness of the soundtrack, gives the scene a serene, slightly surreal feel.]

sister's beach house. Sullivan walks in to find the house unoccupied, and in a pure, white room, he stares out of the picture window at a lake that seems to go on forever (fig. 9). The serene music fades to be replaced by the sound of waves lapping at the shore. The feeling is one of overwhelming peace and resolution. But this is brutally interrupted by two gunshots, and sprays of bright red blood on the window. Sullivan stumbles to reveal his assailant, the sadistic newspaper crime photographer, Harlen Maguire (fig. 10).

¹⁴ Collins and Rayner, 300.



[Figure 10: *Road to Perdition*, 2002. © 2002, Twentieth Century Fox and Dreamworks. With the gunshots, a new, colorful and shattering visual element is introduced, further complicating the complex layering (reflection, figure behind the window) by adding the plane of the window itself, visible now because of the blood. Sullivan's assailant, the sadistic Harlen Maguire, is visible just over Sullivan's right shoulder.]

Young Michael hears the shots, enters the house and confronts Maguire with Maguire's own gun, but he cannot pull the trigger. His father kills Maguire by shooting him in the back. His son cradles his father's head, a posture reminiscent of the Pieta, as his father dies, murmuring, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry", to his son (fig. 11). Unlike the graphic novel, he seeks absolution from no one but his son. The son, kneeling by his father, doubles over in grief, but there is a sense that posture is one also of sacred devotion, of the



[Figure 11: *Road to Perdition*, 2002. © 2002, Twentieth Century Fox and Dreamworks.]

son bowing down at his father's body as a worshipper. Even the movement of the camera adds to the sense of sanctity, as it slowly backs away from this sacred scene, not wishing to intrude further (fig. 12). During this whole scene, there is no soundtrack. There is nothing but the actors' voices and the hypnotic sound of the waves, occupying a pure white room accented by the bright red of the smeared blood of the father. It is a breathtaking sequence. Visually and aurally, it alerts us to the fact that we have reached



[Figure 12: *Road to Perdition*, 2002. © 2002, Twentieth Century Fox and Dreamworks. The composition here is stunning: whiteness, symbolising purity, infinity, eternity, unbroken except by the darkness of the dead bodies, the tripod, the dash of red on the wall, and the grieving son. It is a heartbreaking, but also manifestly sacred, moment in the film.]

the emotional and spiritual core of the film: when the bond between father and son is broken by violence, violence that the son will never partake in. As he tells us soon after in a voiceover, that was the last time he touched a gun. The moment he suffered terrible loss also cemented his commitment to non-violence. He escaped, not unscathed, but unstained.

IV. Displacing the Sacred

It is inevitable that there are going to be changes when source material is adapted for screen. What I find so fascinating is *how* and *what kind* of changes are made. In this instance, a good case can be made that the filmmakers decided to elide the traditional sacred (Catholic theology, practice and institutions) in favour of a new set of sacred symbols: the relationship between father and son, and non-violence. The film uses alternate plot lines, visual and audio clues to show us a new sacred, new sites for passional and imaginative (that is, religious) investment. These are the aspects of existence that, from the perspective of the movie, give to human

life its ultimate depth, meaning and purpose. In other words, if my argument is correct, the sacred doesn't disappear simply because explicit religious references disappear. Rather, the sacred is displaced into secular forms.

There are those who say that Hollywood and other popular cultural producers have a secularising, anti-religious agenda. There may be some validity to that. Hollywood can be very uninviting to traditional religions, including Christianity. But it would be a mistake to try to ferret out some liberal conspiracy here. Rather, the force that *really* steers Hollywood is not religion or politics, but money. Hollywood studios are businesses, and they make what they think will sell, and avoid that which might hurt sales. And although the U.S. sees itself as a bastion of traditional religion, recent scholarship has revealed that it is fairly shallow religiosity. Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton's recent sociological study reveals that many American teens (a key demographic for Hollywood) are actually very uncomfortable with particularising religious discourse, preferring what they call "moralistic therapeutic deism".¹⁵ The perspective of the film version of *Road to Perdition* resonates well with the type of least-common-denominator religion represented by moralistic therapeutic deism. There is no need for theologically specific doctrines such as grace for sinners. There is no need for God's intervention to save. The good find their way to heaven. The evil do not. That is to say, the Hollywood handling of *Road to Perdition* resonates well with an important sector of the American movie-going population that is increasingly allergic to theological precision and finds vague moralistic religion more palatable. Hollywood has its own allergies, and its greatest allergy is to anything that might hurt box office sales. Such things give studio execs a horrible rash. If traditional religion runs the risk of alienating potential viewers, it has ways of shifting that sacred content into different, less potentially offensive forms.

Road to Perdition is one very clear example, but you can see a similar pattern in other films. Hollywood does have a secularising influence, even if not intentionally, by marginalising traditional religious themes or silencing them altogether. But this does not mean that the films thereby become less religious. The explicitly religious is simply recast in other forms that are more implicit, hidden, deemed to be safer for a wider, more general audience. Popular culture in secular societies doesn't really erase religion. It displaces it. Religion is alive and well in the West, concealed in secular popular culture.

¹⁵ See Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

*Theological Postscript: Idolatry, Revelation,
and the Popular Imagination*

When I presented this paper to a few of my colleagues at a research colloquium at a secular university where I teach, one social theorist remarked, "Well, it's as Weber says – that's what capitalism does to religious belief; it hollows it out".¹⁶ I knew what she meant, but I also felt that she had somewhat missed the point. The story of the shifting of sacred commitments under the guise of secularity may be interwoven with the pressures and processes of capitalism, but this is simply a particular instance of a more general and ancient dynamic of how humans shift their utmost loyalties away from God and towards the things of this creation. This has been a mainstay of human religious life since the Fall of man.

My main concern in this paper was to document how this shift takes place in contemporary Hollywood by focusing on a particularly clear example. But some space must also be given to reflect as to *why* this shifting of sacredness happens. For this question, secular sociology and cultural studies are going to be of limited value. We need to turn to biblical anthropology.

The first relevant detail to note is that, according to Genesis 1:26-28, the first humans were created in the image of God. All humans brought into existence since then share this image. What does this mean? At the very least, it means that we are peculiarly oriented for relationship with God, sensitive to his presence in the world, hard-wired for intimacy with our maker. We were made to "glorify God and enjoy him forever", according to the Westminster Shorter Catechism. That is to say, humans are, according to the Bible, *homo religiosus*.

And then Genesis 3 happened, and that impulse for intimacy with God, our very *raison d'être*, was disrupted. But did that mean we stopped being God-oriented beings? Not in the least. We simply find god elsewhere. Moses warns the Israelites to be careful where they direct their sacred commitments: "And when you look up to the sky and see the sun, the moon and the stars – all the heavenly array – do not be enticed into bowing down to them and worshipping things the LORD your God has apportioned to all the nations under heaven" (Deut 4:19).

This is the central dynamic of that familiar biblical category of idolatry. Idolatry is just the act of taking the created things God has given us and making them sacred, into God-substitutes, into *the* things that make life worth living. And that holds true whether we are tempted by the grandeur of the sun, moon and stars, or by the warm beauty of a father-son relationship.

¹⁶ See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, translated by Talcott Parsons, introduction by Anthony Giddens (London: Routledge Classics, 2001 [1930]).

Hollywood is particularly adept at playing the idolatry game for fun and profit.

Furthermore, this shifting of sacred commitments does not happen in a vacuum. We ourselves are made in God's image, so we always feel the inescapable tug of the sacred. But we also live in a world suffused and resplendent with God's revelation. Psalm 19:1-4 tells of heavens (a metonymy for the whole of creation) that sing with the praises of God. Romans 1:18ff gives a darker but complementary picture, of the creation delivering a crushing message of God's displeasure and judgment.¹⁷ Thus we are stripped of the excuse of ignorance about God. But rather than hearing what creation has to tell us, we promptly and repeatedly shove that message down into the recesses of our minds and hearts (v. 18). That self-deafening to God's voice in creation is followed by exchanging God's glory for the things of that creation (vv. 22, 25). Revelation suppression is necessarily accompanied by idol formation.

This means that the definition of religion that I gave at the beginning of this essay must be seen in context. In section II, I defined religion as "a passionate and imaginative investment into a system of belief and practice that makes certain assumptions about the world, identity, about what leads to human flourishing, and how practical moral reasoning should be accomplished". Further, I asserted that each passionate and imaginative investment centres on a core commitment, a "sacred". Taken by itself, one could mistakenly suppose that religion is simply a matter of humans projecting their wishes and fantasies, one more aspect of human social construction in which we make meaning out of an otherwise meaningless world. The picture that a biblical perspective gives is more complex and layered. It is not simply a straightforward "imaginative investment", for the human imagination is, as it were, always already snared in a revelational matrix that engages the imagination, and to which it must respond. The pressure of general revelation forces our hand, you could say, into creating new sacreds for consumption (unless, of course, God's grace breaks in and turns us back towards the original Sacred).

I am drawn to popular culture, including film, because it has proven itself to be an amazingly fertile field for the generation of new sacreds in the popular imagination. Popular entertainment is so much more than mere escapism. Or if it is a type of escape, it is an escape to a sacred place. Theologian and cultural critic William Edgar calls entertainment "a conversation... with eternity".¹⁸ Christians would be well advised to pay

¹⁷ Paul most likely had Psalm 19 in mind when writing Romans 1:18ff.

¹⁸ Edgar draws this insight from the French root of the word, *entretenir*, which means "to converse". See his article "Company, Good Art, and a Good Laugh: True Entertainment Is a Profound Reflection of the Presence of God", *By Faith* (September–October 2005): 27–29.

attention to it. Popular culture is, at its base, of *religious* significance. It is a player in the realm of the new secular sacreds.

We have explored *Road to Perdition* because I want to show that the putatively secular could be sacred, and to track how that shift takes place. But from a biblical perspective, a sacred secular should come as no surprise. The human imagination has always had an amazing capacity for lowering our gaze from the throne of God to the things of this world. If we would understand the shape of religion in our world today, then we must understand the displacement of the sacred into new secular forms, and the impact this has on the popular imagination.

THE PARABLE OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN: REDEFINING “ISRAELITE” OR REDEFINING “NEIGHBOUR”?

*Craig Blomberg**

John Legg argues in a 2011 issue of this journal that the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37) does not universalise the concept of “neighbour” to all humanity but turns individuals like this Samaritan into true Israelites. His main supporting arguments have to do with the common Jewish definition of “neighbour” and the inversion of the lawyer’s question by Jesus at the end of the parable. Neither of these observations proves persuasive. Legg’s frustration with fairly bland interpretations of the parable does not stem from a universalising definition of “neighbour” but from the history of allegorising the parable followed by the overreaction by Jülicher a little over a century ago. Recognising the implications of the structure of the parable for interpretation and suggesting some contemporary contextualisations preserve the shocking nature of the original story as teaching that “even my enemy is my neighbour”.

In the Autumn 2011 issue of this journal, the Rev. John Legg presented a novel interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37), entitled “So Who Is My Neighbour?”¹ One might even call it iconoclastic, since it consciously broke with almost the entire history of interpretation of the parable. Not only that, but the article very much had an edge to it. The standard conviction that Jesus is universalising the concept of neighbour in this parable is termed an “error”, then a “false view” and eventually “a form of theological (or at least exegetical) political correctness”.² A variety of modern commentators are cited, only to claim how uniform their misunderstandings are on this issue, rather than to interact in any detail with their actual exegesis. Motives for their conclusions are imputed, however, as Legg suspects that some scholars understand the truth (his interpretation) but “feel they must nevertheless fall in with the general consensus, possibly lest they be accused of bigotry and narrowness in neglecting non-Christians”.³

What is this view that almost everyone has missed or covered up? Simply this: Jesus is not expanding the standard Jewish definition of neighbour to every person in the world, even one’s hated enemy. Rather he is adopting the perspective, pervasive throughout the Old Testament and Second Temple Judaism, that a neighbour is a fellow Israelite. But then he comes to the far

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¹ John Legg, “So Who Is My Neighbour?” *Foundations* 61.2 (2011): 24-30.

² *Ibid.*, 25-26.

³ *Ibid.*, 26.

more radical conclusion that those like the Samaritan, who cross ethnic and religious boundaries to offer help to a desperate individual, demonstrate that they are true Israelites, whereas those like the priest and Levite who fail to offer such help show that they are not true Israelites at all. Or, in Legg's own words,

The real shock of the parable is only felt when, and if, the Jewish listeners hear Jesus saying that a Samaritan is behaving as, and therefore is, a true Israelite, a neighbour of all other Israelites, a covenant-keeper! The priest and the Levite, on the other hand, behave unlike neighbours and therefore are not neighbours. Jesus has, in effect, admitted a Samaritan to membership of the covenant people and excommunicated the priest and Levite – and anyone who lives and behaves like them – from the people of God.⁴

A key reason this is so important for Legg is the consistent New Testament teaching, nicely summarised in Galatians 6:10, that believers must do good to all people, but especially to those of the household of faith. If even a Samaritan can be a neighbour, then we have one among various rationales for helping to break down some of the enmity between Samaritans and Jews (or any two comparable groups in other times and places), but if even Samaritans (or their equivalents elsewhere) can be true Israelites (or today true Christians), then God's people owe them the greatest priority attention when they are in acute need.

One can appreciate the extra power and significance that such an interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan would produce. But is that what Jesus intended? Has Legg really grasped something that virtually everyone else has missed, suppressed or avoided out of fear of how they would be viewed? Legg quotes an "all-star cast" of contemporary scholars, including, but not limited to, Kenneth Bailey, Leon Morris, I. Howard Marshall, Herman Ridderbos, D. A. Carson, R. T. France, Peter O'Brien and Ronald Fung, only to declare all of them wrong, while he cites not a single precedent for his own view.⁵ This does not by itself disqualify his view, but it does place a certain burden of proof on him to provide a rather strong argument in his favour. What is this argument?

As far as I can tell, it boils down to only two points. First, Jews uniformly used "neighbour" in a less than universalising sense. In fact, it was set in contrast to the alien or sojourner in the land, so that it meant fellow Israelite. The well-known levitical law, "you shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Lev 19:18)⁶ was not intended to be applied to all people in the world indiscriminately. Jews understood this to refer to those who were their national or spiritual kin. Jesus was a Jew, he knew all this, and he could

⁴ Ibid., 28.

⁵ For complete references, see *ibid.*, 30. My views receive similar criticism.

⁶ All translations of Scripture in this essay are my own.

therefore have been expected to adopt this same definition in his conversation with the lawyer.⁷

Second, when the lawyer asks the clarifying question of Jesus, “and who is my neighbour?” (Luke 10:29b), Jesus never answers the question. Instead he tells his famous parable and then reverses the lawyer’s question by asking him to identify who proved neighbour to the man left to die (Luke 10:36). As many others have observed, Legg notes that the lawyer could not even bring himself to say “the Samaritan”. He understood the shocking implications of Jesus’ story and his follow-up question. All he could mutter was “the one who showed mercy to him” (v. 37a). Legg believes that by reversing the question from “Who is my neighbour?” to “which of these three, do you think, became a neighbour to the man who fell among the robbers?” (v. 36), that is, by forcing the lawyer to imagine himself as the one who is helped, Jesus has not redefined the term neighbour to include the dramatically “other” but has adopted the conventional definition of neighbour as Israelite and forced the lawyer to include even a Samaritan in his category of Israelite.⁸

Neither of these arguments seems at all persuasive. Jesus, by the time he is traveling *en route* to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51), has in essence redefined numerous conventional concepts within Judaism. He has challenged interpretations about the Sabbath and will continue to do so. Is it a day intended to limit humanity and prevent people from doing good? Or was the Sabbath made for humanity and not humanity for the Sabbath (Mark 2:28)? Will the Pharisees’ long list of proscribed activities on the last day of the week (*Shab. 7:2*) forever make it impossible to heal non-life-threatening conditions or is it lawful to do all kinds of good things on this day, while still being true to God’s desires for his people to get adequate rest and have sufficient time for worship? Nor is it just Pharisaic additions to Torah that concern Christ. Even the Ten Commandments’ emphasis on Saturday as the day on which to do no work comes in for implicit questioning. Is this really the core of the commandment’s meaning? Are all its stipulations to be forever inviolable? The early church certainly did not think so, as it quickly shifted to Sunday as its special day, and the emphasis in the first three centuries of Christianity was much more on worship than on rest, since Gentile Christians prior to the time of Constantine did not have the luxury of having one day every week off work.⁹

Or consider the laws of ritual purity. What did Jesus understand the meaning of clean and unclean to be? What for him was pure or impure? His teaching about what came out of a person rather than what went into a person as that which made them unclean (Mark 7:14-20 par.) revolutionised

⁷ Ibid., 24.

⁸ Ibid., 27.

⁹ For full detail, see Craig L. Blomberg, “The Sabbath as Fulfilled in Christ” in *Perspectives on the Sabbath: 4 Views*, ed. Christopher J. Donato (Nashville: B & H, 2011), 305-58.

the reigning understanding of purity for those who were willing to accept it. He knew traditional Jewish definitions but he hardly intended to adopt them! When it came to healing a leper, the most ritually impure of all diseased people, Jesus, who elsewhere demonstrated he could heal at a distance, deliberately touched the leper (Luke 5:13 pars.). But instead of incurring the man's uncleanness, Jesus' touch made the diseased and impure individual well again and clean. He demonstrated that holiness/wholeness was more "contagious" than moral or ritual impurity, completely subverting contemporary Jewish conviction.¹⁰

For one more example, take the question of Jesus' own identity. By the time in his ministry that he tells the parable of the Good Samaritan, he has challenged conventional messianic expectations in a host of ways and will continue to do so. When people have acknowledged him as Messiah, he has told them to be quiet and not spread the word (Luke 4:41 pars., 5:14 pars., 9:21 pars., etc.). When people have asked him if he is the one to come or if they should look for another, he has replied very cryptically by alluding to his miracles and preaching of good news to the poor (Luke 7:18-23 par.). As Legg himself points out, Jesus has highlighted that his parables were not meant exclusively to reveal truth but also in some sense to conceal it.¹¹ He has disclosed himself plainly to a Samaritan woman with a reputation for immorality (John 4:24), while remaining cryptic with the upstanding religious authorities in Judaism all the way to just preceding his trial before the Sanhedrin (see, e.g., as late as Mark 11:27-33). He has adopted as his favourite title for self-reference the ambiguous expression "Son of man", rather than one of the more unambiguous titles for a divine messiah.¹²

In other words, no lawyer who has heard anything at all reliable about Jesus would have automatically assumed that Jesus was going to use conventional definitions for key theological terms. As Legg observes, too few interpreters pay sufficient attention to the context.¹³ Legg may have fallen into the same trap. Verse 25 makes it plain that this lawyer's question is no innocent request for information, no genuine desire for knowledge nor even a benign curiosity as to Jesus' perspective. He wants to put Jesus to the test (*ekpeirazei*, which can even mean "tempt"). He wants to see if Christ will measure up to the lawyer's already formed conclusions about what the

¹⁰ See throughout *idem*, *Contagious Holiness: Jesus' Meals with Sinners* (Leicester and Downers Grove: IVP, 2005).

¹¹ Legg, "So Who Is My Neighbour?" 24.

¹² An enormous bibliography surrounds the interpretation of "Son of man". See the summary comments in Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey*, 2nd ed. (Nottingham: Apollos; Nashville: B & H, 2009), 470-73, and the literature there cited.

¹³ Legg, "So Who Is My Neighbour?" 27.

correct answers to key theological questions are. So he asks him what he must do to inherit eternal life.¹⁴

Legg rightly rejects the approach that reads Jesus' reply as akin to Pauline theology (or, one might add, to his logic in the Sermon on the Mount).¹⁵ Jesus is not reciting key commandments so that if the lawyer insists that he has kept all of these, Jesus can reply triumphantly, "No you haven't. You've lusted, haven't you? You've gotten angry inappropriately, haven't you? I know you've coveted. So neither you nor anyone else can ever gain salvation through the Law. You need a Saviour and that's what I've come to provide you!" That's not even a terribly fair summary of what Jesus was doing in his Great Sermon or what Paul was doing in his epistles, and it certainly isn't the logic of the interchange with the lawyer preceding the parable of the Good Samaritan.

No, Jesus is deliberately answering the lawyer in a way that he knows will be acceptable to him, assuming that they both agree on the definitions of the key words involved. As long as the Mosaic covenant is in force, one *can* be saved by faithful obedience to the Law, because faithful obedience also includes offering the proper sacrifices when one sins (hence, Lev 18:5 in its original context). Of course, the Law was given after God's unconditional covenant with Abraham, who was reckoned righteous because of his faith, and it did not supersede that covenant (Gal 3:15-18). Of course, the Law was given after the Exodus, and intended to be the way an Israelite lived out a life of covenant faithfulness and attained eschatological salvation, in a world without anything approximating the Calvinist doctrine of the perseverance of the saints.¹⁶ But it was only after Christ's once-for-all sacrifice for sins that the Law became a cul-de-sac, because one could no longer offer animal sacrifices as (provisional) atonement for sin and therefore when one violated the Law, one could not obey its prescribed practices for receiving forgiveness and continuing in right relationship with God.¹⁷ Instead one had to become a follower of Jesus, the once-for-all sacrifice for all of humanity's sins.

Thus, Jesus could in good conscience address a Jewish leader before the inauguration of the new covenant and recite representative commandments of the Law as an answer to the question of how to obtain eternal life. But this would not satisfy a lawyer whose express purpose in questioning Jesus was to trap him in his words. So he asks him "who is my neighbour?" Why does

¹⁴ A potential, third argument comes from Legg's appeal to various passages from Paul's epistles throughout his paper. But none of these are among the Pauline quotations or allusions to the Jesus tradition, so it is methodologically inappropriate to use the later Paul here to interpret the earlier Jesus.

¹⁵ Ibid. Legg also refers to the interchanges between Jesus and the rich young ruler in Luke 18:18-22 and with the lawyer in Mark 12:28-34 pars.

¹⁶ Cf. Gordon Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 261.

¹⁷ E.g., Thomas R. Schreiner, *Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 205.

the man choose this particular law for clarification? We cannot be sure. But Luke's Gospel is the one that most stresses Jesus' concern for the outcast, the marginalised, the stigmatised even among the Israelites, including the poor, women, the diseased, and tax collectors and other notorious sinners. Luke also highlights Jesus' compassion for Samaritans and Gentiles, those who are not even true Israelites at all.¹⁸ It is natural to assume that the lawyer has heard something of all of this and is suspecting that Jesus would define the term "neighbour" more broadly than he thinks an upstanding, orthodox Jewish rabbi or teacher should. Contrary to Legg's assumption, we have every reason to believe that this story is building up to Jesus' redefinition of the term neighbour.

But how is Jesus to do this? If he gives a straightforward declarative reply, the lawyer will reject it out of hand and accuse him of being unfaithful to Jewish tradition, perhaps even to the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus has to speak more elliptically, more allusively. Parables provide perfect opportunities for precisely this kind of speech. So he tells the story of Luke 10:30-35, long before anyone ever named hospitals and laws protecting those who try to help others in public after the Good Samaritan! As Anthony Thiselton has so powerfully demonstrated, a "good Samaritan" would have been a choice oxymoron in Jesus' world.¹⁹ A faithful Jew could hardly have conceived of someone linking the two words as if they belonged together. It is shocking enough that the priest and Levite both fail to stop and help. But enough rabbinic stories at times took an anti-clerical twist, so that many might have imagined Jesus building to a climax in which an ordinary lay Israelite would be the hero.²⁰ But no, it is the hated other. And worse than the totally other, it is the Samaritan, the despised half-breed, or more precisely the despised descendant of the unlawful marriages of Jews and Gentiles centuries earlier. Legg does not have to worry that the interpretation that redefines the meaning of neighbour will not be shocking or radical enough. If a conservative evangelical white Scottish farmer is told that a liberal atheist African-American feminist lesbian is his neighbour, there can be quite an element of shock and even resistance!

But Jesus refuses to say this in so many words. He tells a story in which a character analogous to that woman, a visitor in the country, comes to the aid of a character like the farmer when she finds him almost gored to death by

¹⁸ Most recently, see Dario L. Rodriguez, *The Liberating Mission of Jesus: The Message of the Gospel of Luke* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012). On the parable of the Good Samaritan, see pp. 66-77. Rodriguez elaborates the interpretation that Legg rejects but in a way that is hardly tame, easily palatable or politically correct!

¹⁹ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1980), 352. Cf. also J. D. Crossan, "The Good Samaritan: Toward a Generic Definition of Parable," *Semeia* 2 (1974): 82-112.

²⁰ Dietfried Gewalt, "Der 'Barmherzige Samariter'? Zu Lukas 10, 25-37," *Evangelische Theologie* 38 (1978): 403-17.

the horns of some Highland cattle along the side of a B-road not too far to the east of Oban. Oh, and this happens only after the Moderator of the Church of Scotland and one of his high ranking clergymen have just driven by, slowed down, peered at the motionless man and decided to head on without stopping.²¹ Now Jesus asks who proved neighbour to the farmer. The reversal of the question does not suggest that Jesus is no longer dealing with the original question about the definition of a neighbour. Instead, he recognises that there are plenty of people, particularly those consumed with the study of Scripture or other religious tasks, who can agree that God's people must love and help others, even those so different from themselves that they are probably repulsed when they think about helping them. With great acts of condescension, however, they can bring themselves to give charity to the desperate who are very different from them. Turn the tables, though, and they would never admit their need to others in order to receive help from them. They can take care of themselves quite nicely, thank you very much. Well, maybe, if finances become unbearably depleted, they might confide in a very trusted friend – the truest kind of “neighbour” – perhaps one or two close churchgoing acquaintances. But someone as different as this unbelieving, immoral, perverse, foreign wretch, never! Never, that is, unless they are dying, unless they are too weak to resist, unless they realise that their only hope for physical survival rests in this person who shares nothing with them except a common humanity. Can all *homo sapiens* created by God in his image really be my neighbour, including this “pathetic misguided pervert” who stands for everything I despise? Damn right – pardon my French!²² The universalising interpretation is neither tame nor domesticated!

Put more prosaically, the parable is indeed more powerful and poignant because Jesus reverses the lawyer's original question and forces him to imagine himself receiving help from one to whom he can barely imagine offering help.²³ But that greater power and poignancy have nothing to do with some supposed acceptance of the lawyer's definition of neighbour as limited to a fellow Israelite. The fictitious Scottish analogy just presented does not turn the foreign woman into a true Scottish Christian, nor have the Moderator and his clergy friend just forfeited both their ethnicity and their salvation. The analogy teaches rather that even an atheist feminist African-American lesbian is my neighbour. It is as the lawyer feared. Jesus has

²¹ Cf. the illustration in Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 147.

²² If my insistence that my motivation for my interpretation has nothing whatsoever to do with being politically (or evangelically) correct has not yet convinced Legg, perhaps my shocking language can. If it offends other readers, then they have finally experienced the offence of Jesus' original parable in its original context!

²³ Cf. François Bovon, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas (9,51-14,35)* (Zürich and Düsseldorf: Benziger; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1996), 99.

redefined “neighbour” in an entirely unacceptable way from his point of view. Worse still, he has told a story and asked a question that forced the lawyer to admit the correctness of the redefinition, though he is unlikely to act upon his grudging admission. Yet, as if to sink the dagger in ever more deeply, Jesus concludes the account with precisely that mandate. The lawyer must act on his admission. Jesus commands him to go and do likewise (Luke 10:37b).²⁴

A structuralist analysis of the parables shows that every triadic or three-pronged parable has a unifying figure. A sizable majority of the time this is a person in a position of power (a king, master, landlord, shepherd, etc.) who is able to judge between good and bad subordinates. What makes such individuals unifying figures is their presence throughout the story. They interact with each of the other main characters and the lesson they inculcate is the most central one of the parable.²⁵ In the Good Samaritan, of course, it is the man in dire need of help who is present throughout the account, able to recognise who did and did not help him. So it is natural for Jesus to reword the lawyer’s question to ensure that he is putting himself in the position of the man left for dead, as the parable itself wants him to do.²⁶ The man is sufficiently shocked that he cannot even speak the word “Samaritan”.

I suspect the reason that the history of the interpretation of the Good Samaritan has seemed too anaemic, too domesticating of Jesus’ message, both to Legg and to many others, is because we have not often enough preserved this “sting in the tale”.²⁷ Yes, Jesus universalises the definition of neighbour. But he does much more. He uses the most extreme example in his world of someone who would have disgusted or repulsed the average Israelite as his illustration of his expanded definition. He uses one who is the enemy, but he also uses an enemy who is very much like oneself. At this point, the analogy with the visiting African-American lesbian to Scotland is still not powerful enough, still not completely parallel. Nor is a Jewish lawyer reflecting on a Samaritan hero fully analogous to a white, culturally Christian, American “redneck” being forced to think of the Chinese Maoist as a neighbour during the height of the Cold War or a Shi’ite Muslim in Iran being confronted with a Canadian Inuit shaman as his neighbour; these pairs of individuals are *too* different from each other. The better analogies are

²⁴ The common complaint that this command eviscerates the parable of its power, turning it into a bland example-story, so that v. 37b should be deemed inauthentic, is thus countered. For the tightly-knit unity of the whole passage, following a common rabbinic form of midrash known as *yelammedenu rabbenu* (“let our master teach us”), see Charles A. Kimball, *Jesus’ Exposition of the Old Testament in Luke’s Gospel* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1994), 133-34.

²⁵ See esp. Robert W. Funk, *Parables and Presence* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 35-54.

²⁶ See also Gerhard Sellin, “Lukas als Gleichniserzähler: die Erzählung vom barmherzigen Samariter (Lk 10, 25-37),” *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 65 (1974): 166-89; 66 (1975): 19-60.

²⁷ I owe the expression to one of the finest collection of sermons on the parables I have ever encountered: Roy Clements, *A Sting in the Tale* (Leicester: IVP, 1995).

Protestant and Catholic Irishmen in Northern Ireland at the height of the “Troubles”, Afrikaaner and English Reformed Christians in South Africa during the Boer wars, Hutu and Tutsi Baptists in Rwanda during the attempted genocide of the early 1990s, or Tamil and Sinhalese Muslim and Hindu background Methodists in Sri Lanka even today.²⁸ This is “sibling rivalry” at its worst, turned into sibling hatred, and always threatening to turn into sibling warfare. These pairs of people have much more in common culturally, ethnically, and religiously than they care to admit, but with key differences that threaten to lead them to mutual extermination. This is the dimension of the parable which has more often than not been lost in the history of its interpretation and exposition.

What has led to this loss? Neither failure to understand that Jesus was supposedly calling the outsider a true Israelite nor failure to understand the significance of Jesus standing the lawyer’s question on its head is to blame. Rather, it is the whole history of the array of methods used to interpret parables in general that has caused the problem. From roughly the mid-second century onwards, Jewish Christianity became so small a segment of the Jesus movement that distinctively Jewish backgrounds to Scripture were increasingly lost sight of. In keeping with common Greco-Roman forms of interpretation of sacred narratives, parables were interpreted as if they were detailed allegories, with almost every detail standing for some corresponding spiritual element in the history of salvation.²⁹ This parable was also quickly Christologised. Augustine’s famous interpretation of the man who was beaten and left for dead understood him to be Adam, with the priest and the Levite representing the inability of the Old Testament to save him, and with the Samaritan as a Christ-figure. Other details were allegorised to fit that basic plot: Jerusalem, the heavenly city from which Adam fell; the thieves, the devil who deprived Adam of his immortality; the inn, the church; and the innkeeper, the apostle Paul!³⁰

From the fifth century to the twelfth century, numerous creative allegorisations competed for acceptance concerning the import of Jericho, Jerusalem, the oil and wine, the Samaritan’s beast of burden, the inn, the innkeeper and so on. Bede adds that the traveller was stripped of the garment of innocence, and equates the oil with hope and the wine with fear. Gottfried of Admont used the parable to illustrate good and bad prelates. Hugh of Saint-Cher viewed the robbers as worldly people like the rich, doctors and lawyers. And Nicholas of Lyra took the binding of the injured

²⁸ I owe this last example to David A. deSilva, *A Sri Lankan Commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Galatians* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), 192.

²⁹ For numerous samplings of the interpretations of each parable throughout this period, see Stephen L. Wailes, *Medieval Allegories of Jesus’ Parables* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

³⁰ Augustine, *Questions on the Gospels. II*, 19.

man's wounds as wise counsel, with the oil representing mercy and the wine standing for justice. Examples could be multiplied at length.³¹ But even as late as the end of the 1100s, Radulfus Ardens could observe that the parable of the Good Samaritan taught four main points: "the ruin of the human race, the devil's persecution, the inadequacy of the Law, and Christ's mercy".³² The original context of the parable in Luke 10 truly had been lost sight of.

Calvin, in his *Harmony of the Evangelists*, recounts the common allegorical interpretation of the parable as he knew it in the sixteenth century, put forward by those he believed overemphasised human free will. Introducing this interpretation as "too absurd to deserve refutation", he describes it as follows:

Under the figure of a wounded man is described the condition of Adam after the fall; from which they infer that the power of acting well was not wholly extinguished in him; because he is said to be only *half-dead*. As if it had been the design of Christ, in this passage, to speak of the corruption of human nature, and to inquire whether the wound which Satan inflicted on Adam were deadly or curable; nay, as if he had not plainly, and without a figure, declared in another passage, that all are *dead*, but those whom he quickens by *his voice* (John 5:25). As little plausibility belongs to another allegory, which, however, has been so highly satisfactory, that it has been admitted by almost universal consent, as if it had been a revelation from heaven. This *Samaritan* they imagine to be Christ, because he is our guardian; and they tell us that *wine was poured*, along with *oil*, in to the wound, because Christ cures us by repentance and by a promise of *grace*. They have contrived a third subtlety, that Christ does not immediately restore health, but sends us to the Church, as an *innkeeper*, to be gradually cured.³³

Lest he leave us in any doubt about his opinions on all of this, Calvin then adds, "I acknowledge that I have no liking for any of these interpretations", and that "we ought to have a deeper reverence for Scripture than to reckon ourselves at liberty to disguise its natural meaning".³⁴

Undoubtedly to Legg's discomfiture, Calvin states quite plainly this natural meaning, "that the word *neighbour* extends indiscriminately to every man, because the whole human race is united by a sacred bond of fellowship".³⁵ Why then did Jesus tell the parable and invert his closing question as he did? "Christ intended to draw the reply from the Pharisee, that he might condemn himself. For in consequence of the authoritative decision being generally received among them, that no man is our *neighbour* unless he is our friend, if Christ had put a direct question to him, he would never have made an explicit acknowledgment, that under the word *neighbour* all men are included, which the comparison brought forward

³¹ Wailes, *Medieval Allegories of Jewish Parables*, 210-14.

³² Radulfus Ardens, *Homilies on the Gospels and Epistles II*, 29.

³³ John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 62-63.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 63.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 61.

forces him to confess".³⁶ Little wonder that Legg has discovered this to be a common understanding of the parable ever since.

Few interpreters were as sanguine as Calvin, however, and allegorical interpretations of the parables in general and of the Good Samaritan in particular continued to prove popular until the end of the nineteenth century.³⁷ As is well known, this was the heyday of Adolf Jülicher's *magnum opus*, a thorough history of the interpretation of each parable, demonstrating how rampant allegorising was and how contradictory many of the allegorical interpretations of each parable were.³⁸ Stressing that there was only one main point of comparison and thus only one main lesson per passage, he typically stripped the parables from all contextual material, including any interpretive remarks attributed to Jesus himself that would threaten his methodology. These Jülicher assigned to accretions added to the words of the historical Jesus either by the subsequent oral tradition or the compilers of the Gospels or any previous written sources they may have used. Jülicher's main points for many of the parables fit the spirit of the "old liberal" universalising theology of the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man so common in the late nineteenth century. It is this context that gives the approach to the Good Samaritan that sees it as universalising the concept of neighbour the blandness to which Legg rightly objects. About this passage, Jülicher declares, "The self-sacrificing exercise of love is of the highest worth in the eyes of God and humanity; no privilege of office or birth can replace it. The compassionate individual demonstrates, even when he is a Samaritan, a greater blessedness than the Jewish temple officials who indulge in self-seeking".³⁹ And it is not just Jülicher's theology but also his methodology, which swings the pendulum from one extreme to the other, that is at fault. Jülicher rightly rejected rampant allegorising but he still interpreted the parables in line with a Greek philosopher, Aristotle, rather than studying the hundreds of ancient rabbinic parables that parallel Jesus' stories more closely than any other short, fictitious narratives known from the ancient Mediterranean world.⁴⁰

Had he done so, Jülicher would have recognised that the rabbis consistently told short stories with two, three, or four main points of

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ See esp. Richard C. Trench, *Notes on the Parables of Our Lord* (London: Kegan Paul, 1870; New York: Appleton, 1873).

³⁸ Adolf Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 2 vols. in 1 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1899).

³⁹ Ibid., vol. 2, 596 (translation mine). One can also detect some imputation of motives to the priest and Levite that go beyond anything demonstrable from the parable. But this is written in Germany only a quarter of a century before the rise of the Nazis and Hitler to positions of power.

⁴⁰ A point stressed in two book-length responses to Jülicher by Paul Fiebig, *Altjüdische Gleichnisse und die Gleichnisse Jesu* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1904); and *idem*, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu im Lichte der rabbinischen Gleichnisse des neutestamentlichen Zeitalters* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1912). Unfortunately, Fiebig's works were ignored by most of twentieth-century parable scholarship.

comparison and spelled out their interpretations of the parables even more clearly and extensively than Jesus usually did.⁴¹ There is no reason, therefore, to imagine that Jesus' interpretive remarks appended to his parables in the canonical Gospels represent anything other than his own intended interpretations. In other words, Jesus, like the rabbis, used a limited form of allegory. But the emphasis is definitely on the adjective *limited*. Moreover, any symbolic import we ascribe to a detail in a parable must be one which fits its original historical and literary contexts. In other words, interpretations must involve meanings that Israelites living in their ancestral homeland in the first third of the first century could have understood. Of course, sometimes they needed more explanation than at other times, but the point is that the interpretations cannot be anachronistic to the context, like those that saw the innkeeper caring for the Good Samaritan standing for the Church!

Parable interpretation during the first two-thirds of the twentieth century can be summarised as a general acceptance of Jülicher without absolutising his principles. Longer and more complex parables were sometimes deemed exceptions and often elements of allegory snuck back in to interpretations that were allegedly non-allegorical.⁴² The "one point" of a passage was sometimes phrased clumsily, with more than one independent clause, making one question whether a given scholar was actually following his own methodology or not.⁴³ But in a majority of cases, Jülicher's method held sway, irrespective of the larger theological convictions of a given interpreter or interpretive community.

Kenneth Bailey's work in the late 1970s and early 1980s represented an early, important and evangelical shift from this consensus.⁴⁴ Reading the parables of Jesus in the light of decades of ministry in the Middle East among traditional Lebanese, Palestinian and Arab Christian communities, researching old Arabic Christian commentaries, and paying careful attention to the literary structure of each passage in its context in the Gospels, Bailey postulated a cluster of theological themes or motifs for each parable rather than trying to boil everything down to one central point. In the case of the Good Samaritan, treating all of Luke 10:25-37, Bailey identified nine items, which may be abbreviated and paraphrased as: 1) all attempts at self-justification fail; 2) a high ethical standard must still be sought; 3) a code-book approach to ethics is inadequate; 4) Jesus offers "a sharp attack on

⁴¹ See esp. Robert M. Johnston and Harvey K. McArthur, *They Also Taught in Parables: Rabbinic Parables from the First Centuries of the Christian Era* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).

⁴² See esp. Matthew Black, "The Parables as Allegory," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 42 (1960): 273-87.

⁴³ See the examples I give in Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove and Nottingham: IVP, 2012), 293, 307.

⁴⁴ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant: A Literary Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976); and *idem*, *Through Peasant Eyes: More Lucan Parables* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

communal and racial prejudice"; 5) love is something felt and done; 6) anyone in need, even an enemy, is my neighbour; 7) God works despite the disobedience of the official leadership of his people; 8) people can sin by either violence or neglect; and 9) salvation comes via costly, unexpected love.⁴⁵

Not all of Bailey's theological clusters of motifs are this detailed, but they do consistently raise several questions. Does Jesus really intend to teach *all* of these points? Of those he does intend to teach, are some logically subordinate to others? Could they therefore somehow be combined or streamlined into fewer points without sacrificing anything crucial to the parable? And by what methodology can we answer all these questions?

About the same time as evangelicals were rethinking Jülicher, many liberal scholars were exploring polyvalence. Parables, they believed, were excellent test cases of a theory that saw multiple meanings in texts not because their authors intended them but because of the inherent instability of all human communication and because readers/listeners always bring an element of their own creativity to the interpretive task. These two claims coalesced around the subdisciplines of hermeneutics known as deconstruction and reader-response criticism, respectively. Today they have taken their place among several tenets of postmodern interpretation more generally.⁴⁶ Parables could not be limited to one point, their exponents would insist, because interpretation can never be cordoned off. One can interpret forever. The only criteria of a "good" (not "legitimate" – that would be too exclusive) interpretation were consistency and cleverness. The interpretation had to hang together internally, whether or not it corresponded to any external reality, and it had to be creative enough to be interesting to read.⁴⁷

Enter a young Ph.D. student in the University of Aberdeen foolish enough to invade the horribly crowded field of parable research in the early 1980s. For a considerable time I wrestled with the question of whether there were any criteria or methods for establishing legitimate controls on interpreting Jesus' parables without the overly-truncated approaches of Jülicher and his followers. Then I discovered Pierre Grelot's two-part article on the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) read, in turn, through the eyes of its three main characters.⁴⁸ Grelot concluded that the one main point of the parable involved the possibility of repentance, no matter how far one had fallen from God, the need for others not to begrudge God's generosity to the wayward, and God's amazing love for both kinds of sinners.⁴⁹ I had my *kairos* moment.

⁴⁵ Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 55-56.

⁴⁶ Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 171-80.

⁴⁷ See esp. John Dominic Crossan, *Cliffs of Fall: Paradox and Polyvalence in the Parables of Jesus* (New York: Seabury, 1980), 25-104.

⁴⁸ Pierre Grelot, "Le père et ses deux fils: Luc, XV, 11-32," *Revue Biblique* 84 (1977): 321-48, 538-65.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

Grelot was absolutely correct; he just couldn't count! There were three main points to his conclusion, not one, and each corresponded to one of the three main characters of the parable. Each was necessary if one was to retrieve Jesus' full meaning, but none required allegorising any details besides the father and his two sons and those only in ways that were completely natural. All of the remaining details of the parable were recognisable as supporting props, once one understood first-century culture in Israel, working together to indicate the lessons we are to learn.⁵⁰

Readers can decide for themselves how successful they think my attempt to apply this methodology of one point per main character of the parables is to Jesus' stories as a whole.⁵¹ The only passage we are interested in here is the Good Samaritan. As is so often the case, those who have debated a single, central point have put forward three different points that compete for acceptance, and they line up according to the dying man, the priest and Levite, and the Samaritan.⁵² Legg quotes two-thirds of my summary of the parable's meaning, omitting my first point below:

"(1) From the example of the priest and Levite comes the principle that religious status or legalistic casuistry does not excuse lovelessness. (2) From the Samaritan, one learns that one must show compassion to those in dire need regardless of the religious or ethnic barriers that divide people. (3) From the man in the ditch emerges the lesson that even one's enemy is one's neighbour." The third point is the most crucial (italics mine).⁵³

Had Jesus wanted only to call his followers to imitate the kindness of the protagonist, he could have chosen an ordinary Israelite as the story's hero. Had he not wanted to take a jab at the spirit of some religious leaders that actually discourages them from doing God's will, he need not have used the priest and Levite as foils for the hero of the story at all. The specific combination of characters, with the priest and Levite functioning as one, leads to three emphases. In this sense, the parable does teach much more than that everyone is one's neighbour. But it teaches no less. And Jesus' reversal of the lawyer's question does not turn the Samaritan into a true Israelite nor excommunicate the priest and Levite from Israel. Legg's approach is provocative and worth consideration. But I do not see how it can displace the standard interpretation, which, when framed properly, is more than challenging in its own right.

⁵⁰ This is one of the main theses of Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*.

⁵¹ In addition to *ibid.*, see Craig L. Blomberg, *Preaching the Parables: From Responsible Interpretation to Powerful Proclamation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004).

⁵² For a full history of interpretation, see Werner Monselewski, *Der barmherzige Samariter: Eine auslegungsgeschichtliche Untersuchung zu Lukeas 10,25-37* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1967). Highlighting the three competing interpretations is G. Bexell, "Den barmhärte Samarien och den teologiska etiken," *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 59 (1983): 64-74.

⁵³ Cf. Legg, "So Who Is My Neighbour?" 24.

ALLUSION TO THE SONG OF SONGS IN JOHN'S GOSPEL AND REVELATION

Andrew R. Evans^{*}

This study looks at the influence of the Song of Songs on John's Gospel and the book of Revelation by analysing the validity of a number of claimed allusions to the Song in those books. Some attention is given to determining the right criteria for finding NT allusions to OT texts in general and it is found that many of the criteria previously proposed by writers in this field are somewhat unhelpful. A number of passages which it has been suggested allude to the Song are unconvincing, but it is concluded that the Song did have a significant influence on the writer(s) of John's Gospel and Revelation and/or their theological communities. The content of these allusions points somewhat to the NT writers taking a typological approach to the Song and it is suggested that this should form the starting point for contemporary hermeneutics.

One significant reason for the hugely divergent interpretations of the Song of Songs amongst evangelicals is the apparent lack of NT control for its interpretation, since it is often supposed that there is no direct quotation from and few allusions to it in the NT. Even those writers who hold that the NT is "pervaded" by references to the Song tend to understand NT connections as being to the themes rather than the text of the Song.¹

In fact there are a number of allusions to the Song in John's Gospel and Revelation. These can help us understand how the NT writers thought of the Song, and, therefore, how we ought to interpret it.²

Intertextuality, Allusion and Biblical Studies

*1. "Intertextuality", "Allusion" and "Echo"*³

Perhaps surprisingly, since the process of tracing OT allusions and echoes in the NT has given rise to an enormous literature in the last two decades, "the

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¹ Ernst W. Hengstenberg, "Prolegomena to the Song of Solomon," in *Commentary on Ecclesiastes with Other Treatises* (trans. D. W. Simon, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1860), 271-305.

² This paper is based on the author's M.Th. thesis: Andrew R. Evans, "An Evaluation of the Influence of the Song of Songs on the New Testament" (M.Th. diss., The University of Wales, 2012). Some additional material on the Song of Songs can also be found on the author's blog: www.andysstudy.org

³ The term intertextuality was coined by Julia Kristeva in the late 1960s. The seminal work is Julia Kristeva, *Le Texte du Roman* (The Hague: Mouton, 1970). In biblical studies, however, the term is used less in Kristeva's original sense and more as a semi-technical term for allusion or influence.

vast majority of those discussing the issue do not bother to define their terms.”⁴

This is strikingly illustrated in a major recent commentary on the NT use of the OT where the authors explain that all OT citations and all probable allusions are analysed, but later on in the book the criteria seem to change from probable allusions to those places where the NT “clearly alludes to the OT.”⁵ Despite the extensive introductory material reflecting on the different ways in which OT intertexts might be used by the NT writers no definition is offered as to what constitutes a “quotation” or an “allusion” or what criteria render an allusion “probable” or “clear,” despite the acknowledgement that there is “debate about what constitutes an allusion.”⁶

Many writers follow Richard Hays in using the terms quotation, allusion and echo to mean progressively less obvious intertextual references.⁷ But, as Jauhiainen points out, “since allusions themselves are usually considered subtle, one wonders what the value of such a definition of ‘echo’ is, unless it is used as a term for a perceived link between two texts for which there is particularly little evidence.”⁸

Some writers demand an element of authorial intent in order to establish an allusion: “An allusion is an *intended* indirect reference that calls for associations that go beyond the mere substitution of a referent.”⁹ However since we have no evidence at all as to the author’s intention beyond the NT text itself it is impossible, except where we have an explicit quotation, to have final certainty as to whether *any* OT intertext was intended by a NT writer.

I will use the term allusion to describe all intertextual references other than explicit quotations, regardless of the level of certainty that the reference was made intentionally by the author.¹⁰

Definitions of allusion which do not insist on the author’s intention to create an allusion also have difficulties. Hervey and Higgins say that an allusion is present when “an expression evokes some associated saying or quotation in such a way that the meaning of that saying or quotation

⁴ Stanley E. Porter, “The Use of the Old Testament in the New Testament: A Brief Comment on Method and Terminology”, in *Early Christian Interpretation of the Scriptures of Israel: Investigations and Proposals* (ed. Craig A. Evans and James A. Sanders; New York: Continuum, 1997), 79-96.

⁵ G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, eds., *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), xxiv.

⁶ *Ibid.*, xxiii.

⁷ Andrew C. Brunson, *Psalm 118 in the Gospel of John* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 13.

⁸ Marko Jauhiainen, *The Use of Zechariah in Revelation* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 24.

⁹ Irwin, “Against Intertextuality,” 227. *Italics mine.* Perhaps the most extensive consideration of the term is found in Irwin’s article: William Irwin, “What is an Allusion?” *JAAC* 59 (2001), 287-297.

¹⁰ Though, as set out below, an assessment of the likelihood that the author did intend the reference will be part of the process of assessing the validity of a claimed allusion.

becomes part of the overall meaning of the expression.”¹¹ But this definition assumes that the “meaning” of the original saying is tightly fixed, whereas much debate centres on the way in which quotations and allusions from the OT seem to be used by Paul (and other NT writers) “in ways that must have startled his first audience.”¹² While I would want to defend the idea that the NT writers always use the OT in ways that are consonant with its meaning when set in an appropriate context it seems unhelpful to require this *a priori* in defining an allusion.¹³

For our purposes then *an OT allusion is present in the NT when a NT writer, consciously or unconsciously, expresses himself using concepts, phrases, or other literary devices which informed readers can trace to OT passages or themes.*

2. Determining the Validity of Allusions

Hays set out seven “criteria for testing claims about the presence and meaning of scriptural echoes in Paul.”¹⁴ These are availability, volume, recurrence, thematic coherence, historical plausibility, history of interpretation and satisfaction. His work has been enormously influential and his tests widely adopted, but they are not without critics.

Porter finds difficulties with all the tests concluding, after a lengthy survey, that, “Hays has offered only three criteria for determining echoes, all problematic.”¹⁵

Generally, though, the tendency since the publication of *Echoes* has been to loosen the criteria. Paulien proposes two criteria for discerning allusions: external and internal evidence.¹⁶ Greg Beale believes this approach is “not cautious enough” and that Paulien “allows too many texts to be placed in the

¹¹ Sandor G. J. Hervey and Ian Higgins, *Thinking Translation: A Course in Translation Method* (London: Routledge, 1992), 197.

¹² Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989), 1.

¹³ That is, when the larger theological concerns of both the OT book being quoted from or alluded to, and of the OT metanarrative are properly considered.

¹⁴ Hays, *Echoes*. The discussion of the issues runs from 26-29 and the list of criteria for testing from 29-32. These criteria are then further elaborated in Richard B. Hays, *The Conversion of the Imagination: Paul as Interpreter of Israel's Scripture*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 34-47. Much of the literature concerns echoes of the OT in the Pauline epistles but similar approaches have also been applied to the rest of the NT corpus in, for example, McWhirter, *Bridegroom Messiah*, and Kenneth D. Litwak, *Echoes of Scripture in Luke-Acts: Telling the History of God's People Intertextually* (New York: Continuum, 2005).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 79-96.

¹⁶ Jon Paulien, *Decoding Revelation's Trumpets: Literary Allusions and the Interpretation of Revelation 8:7-12* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1988), 43.

‘probable allusion’ category.”¹⁷ Other approaches, both of which loosen Hays’ criteria, are proposed by Brawley and Litwak.¹⁸ *The (inevitable) result of using these looser criteria is that writers find a greater number of allusions.*

There is universal agreement on the existence of a rich and dense network of textual relationships between the NT and the OT, partly because, as Hays points out, Israel’s Scriptures are a “single great textual precursor” for the NT writers, privileged above other texts, and also because all texts “derived from a complex cultural stock, an unformulated text, that enables writers to draw on and combine elements from the repertoire in order to produce texts.”¹⁹ But it seems unlikely that there will ever be any universally agreed criteria for determining whether a particular text can be described as an “allusion” or “echo” precisely because these terms cover “a wide range of relationships among texts.”²⁰

Brawley summarises the issue at stake: “How is it possible to guard against whimsical correlations between texts and to recognise solid appropriations of textual patterns from precursors? Ultimately it is not. Readers are free to make whatever associations come to their minds.”²¹

The way to guard against excessive subjectivity in finding OT allusions in NT texts is not with a pseudo-science that pretends you have eliminated all subjectivity. We must recognise the irreducibly subjective element in finding allusions to one text in another. It is also healthy to acknowledge that, because a paper that finds allusions is more likely to be published than one that does not, academics are bound to have a bias towards “lowering the bar” for finding them! Such honesty liberates us to set forth the allusions we think we see, offer any evidence we have to commend them to other readers and allow them to agree, or not, with our conclusions.

3. Conclusions

I have adopted the wide definition that an OT allusion is present in the NT when a NT writer, consciously or unconsciously, expresses himself using phrases, concepts or other literary devices that informed readers can trace to OT passages or themes.

This means that unnecessary energy need not be expended deciding whether a particular suggestion “makes the grade” or fits into categories

¹⁷ Ibid., 424. Greg K. Beale, review of Jon Paulien, *Decoding Revelation’s Trumpets: Literary Allusions and the Interpretation of Revelation 8:7-12*, JBL 111 (1992): 358.

¹⁸ Robert Lawson Brawley, *Text to Text Pours Forth Speech, Voices of Scripture in Luke-Acts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995). Litwak, *Echoes*.

¹⁹ Hays, *Echoes*, 15. Brawley, *Text to Text*, 3.

²⁰ Patricia Tull Willey, *Remember the Former Things, The Recollection of Previous Texts in Second Isaiah* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), 68.

²¹ Brawley, *Text to Text*, 13.

such as “echo,” “citation,” or “allusion.” It results in a much more fluid system where fine judgments can be made as to the *importance* of an allusion. In the end the importance of an allusion depends not on whether it is described using one term rather than another but on several related factors including, but not limited to:

- Whether the NT author intended to make an allusion.
- Whether the first readers were likely to have understood the allusion.
- Whether the allusion is designed to make a theological point or merely enhances the aesthetics or tone of a pericope.
- If a theological point is intended, whether it is central to the issue under consideration by the NT writer or merely supporting or tangential.

Matters such as the level of textual correspondence between the proposed source and the text being studied, any evidence for the availability of the proposed source to author and first readers, the theological significance of particular words (either on their own or in relationship with other words) and the recurrence of that portion of Scripture throughout the NT corpus must all be considered.²² But it must also be acknowledged that these things are not as “objective” as we often like to imagine and that we have a tendency to see what we wish to see.

It is for this reason that Hays’ seventh criteria of “satisfaction” is, as he rightly points out, the “most important test.”²³ In the end every reader must be personally convinced that a proposed allusion is valid and each reader will give different weight, on different occasions to different factors. This means that rules for finding allusions are generally unhelpful.

None of this is to reject the possibility of general agreement about whether a particular text alludes to another text. But it is to recognise that the complexity of hearing allusions is such that nobody can fully define it for us and that different readers may well come to very different conclusions or, more often, to similar conclusions for somewhat different reasons.

Having set out some principles let us look at the one possible quotation and a selection of possible allusions to the Song of Songs in John’s gospel and Revelation.²⁴

²² A particular word (e.g. bone) may carry little theological weight in itself but becomes much more theologically significant in association with other words or concepts (e.g. Passover). I am grateful to Dr Tom Holland for this example in private correspondence.

²³ Hays, *Echoes*, 31.

²⁴ Since a verbal correspondence between two texts is only possible when those texts are in the same language, I have used the LXX. All LXX quotations are from A. Rahlfs and Robert Hanhart, eds., *Septuaginta* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2006). All NT quotations are from NA²⁷.

John 7:38 – The only Song of Songs Quotation in the NT²⁵

Only one NT passage with an explicit formula presenting it as an OT quotation has been claimed for the Song. John 7:38 reads: *ho pisteuōn eis eme, kathōs eipen hē graphē, potamoi ek tēs koilias autou rheusousin hydatos zōntos*. Mitchell and others argue that this is a quotation of Song 4:15: *pēgē kēpōn phrear hydatos zōntos kai rhoizountos apo tou Libanou*.²⁶

1. The source of the living water in John 7:38

There is a “difficult decision regarding the punctuation of the Greek text.”²⁷ The NIV footnote punctuates: “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me. And let him drink, who believes in me. As the Scripture has said streams of living water will flow from within him.” On this reading one might conclude that the “him”, from whom living waters flow, is Christ rather than the believer. This is the position taken by Beasley-Murray.²⁸

With the main NIV punctuation the more natural reading is that streams of living water will flow from believers: “Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.”

After extensive consideration of the arguments, Carson concludes that, although the main NIV text is to be “strongly favoured” on both textual and stylistic grounds, the Scripture reference “probably does only begin after the *kathos* clause” and that the idea that the streams of living water flow from Christ rather than from the believer is “just as justifiable” whatever view one takes of the punctuation.²⁹

This reading perhaps fits John’s Christological emphasis better than a suggestion that streams of living water will flow from believers. In John’s Gospel the Spirit flows from, and is sent by, the Father and the Son (e.g. 3:34, 14:16). Even the passage often said to be closest to 7:38, John 4:13-14, where Jesus says that “the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life”, has “no suggestion of the believer supplying water to other people.”³⁰

However we need not understand the phrase “streams of living water will flow from within him” in such a flat way. Especially if this is a quotation

²⁵ Scripture quotations, unless otherwise stated, are from NIV 1984.

²⁶ Mitchell, Song, 30. Andrew E. Steinmann, *The Oracles of God: The Old Testament Canon* (St Louis: Concordia, 1999), 92, 95 n. 148.

²⁷ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester: IVP, 1991), 323.

²⁸ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary (2d ed.; Nashville, Tenn: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 116.

²⁹ Carson, *John*, 328, 325 & 326.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 324.

from Song 4:15 Jesus may intend to convey an image of the blessing wrought in and by the life of a believer as a result of their coming to Christ to drink, rather than suggesting that the Spirit is somehow passed on from believers to others. Given John's emphasis that eternal life for the believer is life in Christ that begins now and lasts forever (e.g. 11:25-26), this understanding fits with the wider themes of the Fourth Gospel.

A decision as to the source of the living water is finely balanced. The Christological emphases of John's Gospel might make us lean slightly towards understanding Christ as the source but this should not be overstated, because John's realised eschatology renders the idea of the overflowing abundant life of the believer equally viable.

2. *The possibility of a general referent*

A tradition extending at least as far back as Calvin holds that "reference is made here not to any particular passage of Scripture but to common prophetic teaching."³¹ It is certainly the case that "John can elsewhere refer to the Old Testament without making it at all clear what passage he has in mind."³² However most commentators do see a particular passage of Scripture here. The margin of NA²⁷ notes Song 4:15 amongst other passages. Elliott argues that although John is not always clear what passage of Scripture is being quoted, the introductory formula he uses "clearly refers to something more precise than a *locus communis*."³³ It seems that a specific OT Scripture is in view here.

3. *Possible Locations for the Quotation*

Blomberg notes that a "cluster of possibilities lie in the background" as possible sources.³⁴ Some, such as Carson's suggestion of portions of Nehemiah 8-9, are supported by only one or two commentators. The most frequently offered alternative to Song 4:15 is Ezek 47:1-12 (also noted in NA²⁷ margin) where "a river flows from the eschatological temple."³⁵ In favour of the Ezekiel passage is the association with the temple complex where John 7 is set. Ezekiel 47:13-23 also deals with the division of the land and the feast of booths, which is the occasion for John 7.

³¹ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 240

³² Carson, *John*, 325.

³³ Elliott, *Song and Christology*, 3.

³⁴ Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel: Issues and Commentary* (Leicester: Apollos, 2001), 137.

³⁵ Rodney A. Whitacre, *John*, IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Leicester: IVP, 1999), 194.

However the linguistic evidence favours Song 4:15. The Ezekiel passage speaks only of a large and magnificent river. Song 4:15 includes references both to the mighty floodwaters of the Lebanese mountains, which fits with John's theme of huge eschatological blessing, and to a spring, which fits the language used by Jesus here. Song 4:15 also contains the key phrase *hydatos zōntos*.

The considerations are finely balanced but, especially where an introductory formula is used, a correspondence in the words of the referent text should be considered extremely weighty, given that the phrase is not common.

4. The speaker in Song 4:15

Most modern translations render Song 4:15 as Solomon speaking about his bride or, as in the NIV footnote, the Shulammite speaking of herself. This would appear to make Song 4:15 less likely to be the intended referent of John 7:38, firstly because the majority view is that the source of the living water in John 7:38 is Christ rather than the believer or believing community and, secondly, because even if the he of John 7:38 is the believer, the image of abundance in Song 4:15 seems to flow from the Shulammite in herself rather than from any relationship she has with Solomon, whereas in John 7:38 it is in receiving Christ's gift that streams of living water flow from the believer.

Song 4:15 is most likely the Shulammite speaking of her groom: "You are a garden fountain, a well of flowing water streaming down from Lebanon."³⁶ References to things being of or like Lebanon are fairly evenly split in the Song between the man (3:9, 5:15) and the woman (4:8, 4:11, 7:4). Here a reference to the man is to be preferred because of the contrast with 4:12. She is a closed spring and a sealed fountain; in contrast he is a well of flowing water, streaming down. She then (4:16) invites his blowing wind to awaken and open her garden, bringing her pleasure and joy. This makes better sense of the flow of the text and fits with the playful banter common throughout the Song.³⁷

Jesus' use of Song 4:15 in John 7:38 is entirely compatible with the view that Christ is the source of the living waters. Just as the Shulammite will be blessed as her garden is opened by Solomon, who is to her like streams of water, so Christ, the source of the eschatological Spirit, will bring blessing to whoever comes to him in faith.³⁸

³⁶ Although the identity of the speaker in Song 4:15 is not discussed in any of the major commentaries, the NIV footnote indicates that it is not clear.

³⁷ See, for example, the interchange between the lovers in 1:9-2:3.

³⁸ This section of the song (4:8-5:1) uses the word bride six times, suggesting strongly that a wedding has taken or is taking place and that 5:1 describes a moment after consummation, the time of coitus being discreetly placed between 4:16 and 5:1.

5. Conclusion

The introductory formula to John 7:38 suggests that a specific OT referent is in view. Song 4:15 provides the most likely source for this. The themes of the Song are strongly connected to those of John's gospel and the linguistic evidence favours Song 4:15 over the other major candidate, Ezek 47:13-23. Song 4:15 is quoted here in John's gospel.

Johannine Passages with Possible Song of Songs Allusions

Almost all the NT writers take up and develop at least some of the Song's major themes for theological purposes. But because the themes of the Song are amongst the most significant themes of the OT as a whole, we cannot trace their use in the NT specifically to the Song's influence. I will not consider these thematic allusions but focus on those allusions for which a claim has been made of a specific relationship between a Johannine text and a recognisable portion of the Song.

*John's Gospel*³⁹

The "Bridegroom Messiah" theme of John's Gospel lends itself readily to reflection on the Song and allusions have been proposed in many places.

(i) John 2:1-11

Mitchell notes a possible allusion to both Song 1:2 and Song 1:4 in this passage based on the use of *oinon*.⁴⁰ At first sight there is nothing to suppose that the use of a single, fairly common, noun should be sufficient to establish an allusion, especially as McWhirter states that at the Cana wedding "the messianic bridegroom is not clearly identified."⁴¹ It is very clear that it is the king who is in view in Song 1:4, "let the king bring me into his chambers." John 2:1-11 lays down clear markers that Jesus is the messianic bridegroom. In 2:11 we learn that, as a result of the miracle performed, "his disciples put their faith in him", a description which shows they saw something of the messianic sign behind the bare miracle.

³⁹ I understand the apostle John to be the author of the Fourth Gospel, the epistles 1, 2 and 3 John and the book of Revelation, though I recognise that some scholars dispute the authorship of each of these and the possible relationships between them. I refer to their author as "John" whilst noting that some consider them to be the works of two different individuals or communities.

⁴⁰ Mitchell, Song, 30.

⁴¹ McWhirter, *Bridegroom Messiah*, 50.

But understanding the significance of this miracle is not just for the disciples, because the message that he is here revealing himself as the messianic bridegroom lies very close to the surface of this story. It is well attested that the “host was responsible to provide the wedding guests with wine” at first century A.D. Palestinian weddings.⁴² So when Jesus is asked by his mother to acquire wine and replies with the words “my time has not yet come” (2:4) the obvious meaning is that because he is not the bridegroom he is not responsible for this, but that he will be on a future occasion when he is the bridegroom.⁴³ This occasion, Jesus’ hour of glorification, turns out to be his passion (John 12:23-28). McWhirter is right that Jesus’ “bride is not yet introduced,”⁴⁴ but there is no doubt that Jesus is presented by John as the messianic bridegroom even at this early stage.

Other passages provide a more likely background to John’s thought in 2:1-11. Most significant is Amos 9:11-14 where the prophet promises that on the day when the royal house of David is restored “new wine will drip from the mountains and flow from all the hills.” This makes sense of the quantities of wine provided by Jesus; miraculous, but not on the scale promised by the prophet. This in turn fits with John’s eschatological emphasis, presenting a kingdom that has now arrived but which is not yet fulfilled. As a backdrop to John 2:1-11, Song 1:2 provides an allusion which is more focussed on a particular king, rather than the Davidic kingship as an institution. The most we can say is that it may have formed part of the matrix of John’s thought.

(ii) John 6:44 and 12:32

Mitchell suggests that the “divine monergism” in John 6:44 and 12:32 can be compared to Solomon’s leadership in Song 1:4 and 2:4.⁴⁵ But there is no verbal parallel between these verses, and it is unlikely either that an allusion was intended by John or that it would have been picked up by his readers.

However there are important conceptual similarities between the divine monergism passages in John and Song 1:4 and 2:4. It is commonly asserted that the Song is entirely egalitarian: “there is no male dominance, no female subordination, and no stereotyping of either sex.”⁴⁶ It may be that this perception of undifferentiated equality between the couple is one of the reasons that some complementarian theologians are reluctant to see any typological connection between the lovers, God and his people. But although there is certainly mutuality and equality in the Song there is also a definite

⁴² Köstenberger, *John*, 92.

⁴³ Since this is the “first of his miraculous signs” presumably there is no reason for Mary to be expecting a supernatural provision at this point.

⁴⁴ McWhirter, *Bridegroom Messiah*, 50.

⁴⁵ Mitchell, *Song*, 30.

⁴⁶ Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 161.

strand of covenantal headship, hinted at in 1:4 and 2:4 and expressed most fully in 7:10: "I belong to my lover, and his desire is for me." The allusion here is to Gen 3:16, but in the Song, instead of sinful hostility between the sexes the "connotation is that the husband exercises his role of headship in the context of love and peaceful harmony in which both husband and wife rejoice in God."⁴⁷

John 6:44 and 12:32 are not allusions to the Song, but their portrayal of the divine initiative in the relationship between God and his people is essentially similar to the portrayal of the loving leadership of Solomon in the Song.

Although these claimed allusions are not compelling at the level of verbal correspondence the passages are linked to the Song thematically, and the presence of themes in John's gospel that connect Jesus, the Bridegroom Messiah, to the idealised, Solomonic, king-groom of the Song is one of the reasons for supposing that those passages in which there is more obvious evidence of allusion to the Song are important in John's theological agenda.

(iii) John 12:1-3

It has been suggested that John 12:1-3 may allude to a number of different passages in the Song, but only with 1:12 and 7:5 is there "more than one parallel."⁴⁸

Winsor suggests a possible allusion to Song 7:5, because in both passages a king is the "object of the hair's 'action.'"⁴⁹ However McWhirter points out that the verbal parallels are slight. Song 7:5 emphasises the woman's "tresses" (*paradromais*) rather than John 12:3's "hair" (*thrixin*). Hair does get mentioned in Song 7:5, using the parallel of a royal tapestry. As the king is held captive (i.e. depicted) in a royal tapestry so he is held captive (i.e. captivated) by her tresses. However the word used for hair (*plokion*) is different to that used in John 12:3.

Song 7:1-5 seems to be a description of the Shulammitte from afar. The captivation described is principally visual and there are no hints of her smell. Only in 7:7-9 does the desire explode into life with touching and kissing. By contrast in John 12:1-3 Mary's actions are felt and smelt as much as observed.

A better case can be made for an allusion to Song 1:12, which has three verbal parallels to John 12:1-3.

(a) *nardos*

It is frequently noted that there are differences in both the setting of this incident and the details of the description between John and the Synoptic

⁴⁷ Mitchell, *Song*, 402-3.

⁴⁸ Ann Roberts Winsor, *A King is Bound in the Tresses: Allusions to the Song of Songs in the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 20-26, suggests 1:3, 4, 12, 13; 5:3 and 7:5. McWhirter, *Bridegroom Messiah*, 81.

⁴⁹ Winsor, *A King is Bound*, 22.

Gospels. One of the differences for which there is no other obvious explanation is that Matthew and Luke both describe the substance poured out as perfume (*myrou*) rather than nard (*nardos*).⁵⁰ John follows Mark 14:3 in using *nardos*. A plausible explanation for John's choice of this word is that he is deliberately retelling the events in a way that clarifies the allusion to Song 1:12.⁵¹

(b) *osmē*

The LXX use of *osmē* is almost invariably associated with the pleasing aroma of the sacrifices offered to the Lord and only rarely with the smell of perfume.⁵² Only in John's account of this incident is the effect of the perfume as filling the house described, a "superfluity" that McWhirter notes "helps to signal an allusion to Song 1:12."⁵³ Only in Song 1:12 in the OT is the perfume giving this fragrance "identified as nard."⁵⁴

(c) *anakeimai*

In Song 1:12 the king is "at his table" (*anaklisei autou*) and in John 12:2 Jesus, with his friends is "reclining at the table" (*anakeimenōn syn autō*).

Although McWhirter believes that the wording is "only slightly reminiscent" at this point, the verbal similarity is definitely present.⁵⁵ The idea of reclining to eat is common in both OT and NT, but the parallel is suggestive because both passages are set at meals of celebration. In John 12:2 we are told that the dinner was given "in Jesus' honour." In Song 1:11 the reference to the meal is immediately preceded by the offer from the friends of a gift of gold, suggesting a wedding banquet.

As well as the three direct verbal parallels there is also supporting thematic evidence for an allusion. McWhirter points out that "every detail of characters, setting and plot in Song 1:12 – the king on the couch, the woman, her nard (*nardos*), and its fragrance (*osmē*) – is recapitulated in John 12:3."⁵⁶ This may be slightly overstating the case, as most of these elements have already been noted in the linguistic parallels.⁵⁷

Carson notes that "mention of the fact that the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume suggests... extravagant love" and Köstenberger

⁵⁰ Matt 26:7, Luke 7:38. On the basis that the Luke passage is describing the same occasion, although this is hotly contested.

⁵¹ Although fragrance images are common in the poetic writings, and especially in the Song, *nardos* appears only in Song 1:12 and Song 4:13-14 in the LXX.

⁵² E.g. Lev 1:9. Apart from John 12:3 all other NT uses of it (2 Cor 2:14, 16, Eph 5:2, Phil 4:18) also occur in contexts where the temple sacrifices, or some NT fulfilments or transformations of them are in view.

⁵³ McWhirter, *Bridegroom Messiah*, 83.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁵⁷ It seems to be a tendency in literature focussing on finding allusions to "double count" in this way.

recognises the overtly sexual nature of Mary's action, both in having hair loose in public and in acting "in such a way towards Jesus, a well-known (yet unattached) rabbi."⁵⁸ John's choice to describe it in terms which were clearly open to misinterpretation make rather more sense if an allusion to the Song is intended.⁵⁹

It should also be asked whether there is, in John's account, any hint that the typology extends beyond the king? Jesus is presented as the anointed royal bridegroom, reclining at the banquet of the kingdom and honoured for bringing life to his people even at the cost of his own life. But is there any suggestion that Mary, or behind her, the Shulammitte, is understood by John to be representative of the whole Church?

A first glance at John 12:1-8 suggests that Mary is not here identified as amongst the core of Jesus' new community; by contrast even Judas Iscariot is described as "one of his disciples" (John 12:4). But a more considered look at a longer section of John yields some tantalising insights, as John 13 picks up on the themes of John 12. Just as Mary, we presume, unbinds her hair in order to wash Jesus' feet with the nard, so Jesus removes his outer clothing in order to wash the disciples' feet (John 13:4). He explains that this is the model for all discipleship (John 13:15). Given the connection to the previous chapter he thus presents Mary as, in some sense, a model disciple. The parallels are not exact; there is some distance between Mary's loose hair, which could have been considered immoral, and Jesus' removal of his clothing which, while servile, was probably not thought of as morally questionable. But the parallels are definitely present; a meal, feet, cleansing, a protest and an explanation from the king.

If these connections are taken to inform the allusion to the Song I suggest that the typology is here more directed to the relationship between Christ and the individual believer (the model disciple) than to that between Christ and the corporate body of the Church.

(iv) John 20:1-18⁶⁰

Many elements in this pericope have prompted suggestions of parallels with passages in the Song including turning (Song 6:13 with John 20:14, 16), belonging (Song 2:16 with John 20:16), searching/looking/gazing (Song 2:9, 3:1-2 and 5:6 with John 20:5, 11), the prohibition of touching (Song 3:4 with John 20:17) and one who lives in gardens (Song 8:13 with John 20:15).

⁵⁸ Carson, *John*, 428. Köstenberger, *John*, 362.

⁵⁹ Blomberg notes that the "potentially objectionable" nature of the advance "means that no early Christian would readily have invented it." Blomberg, *Historical Reliability*, 177.

⁶⁰ A number of commentators hold that John 20:2-10 comes from a different source to 20:1 and 11-18. The validity or otherwise of that assertion is irrelevant for our purposes since it is clear on any view about source material that Mary is the main character only in 1-2 and 11-18.

(a) Mary's turning

There is an oddity in John 20:14-16. Mary is said to turn (*strephō*) twice to face Jesus (John 20:14 and 16). Winsor says that this puzzling feature draws the astute reader "to begin the disambiguating process by evoking a previously fruitful referent text."⁶¹ The links she has in mind are to Song 2:17, 6:5 and, especially, 6:14 (LXX 7:1): *epistrephe epistrephe hē Soulamitis epistrephe epistrephe kai opsometha en soi*. The link to John 20 is based on the fact that the subject of the verb is female and the repetition of *strephō*. However the double use of *strephō* is an odd way to evoke its fourfold use in Song 7:1 and, as McWhirter points out, the ungrammaticality is better explained on other grounds.⁶²

Winsor recognises that the link is tenuous but adds that "the norms of literary intertextuality include such highly elusive and oblique verbal echoes."⁶³ This may be so but the regularity with which such allusions are proposed doesn't help very much in determining whether there is any real possibility they were intended by the author or would have been noticed by readers!

An additional difficulty here is that the purpose of the text and its suggested intertexts seems to be very different. Song 6:13 praises the glory of the Shulammite and asks for her return that she might be gazed on and admired in her beauty. John's resurrection accounts, however, concern the glory of the risen Bridegroom Messiah; it is Christ who is to be gazed on and honoured.

Winsor notes that "the MT's *šûb* has the same double meaning as the LXX's *strephō*, implying either physical or spiritual and emotional turning" and suggests that the turning may imply repentance and faith.⁶⁴ This is certainly plausible in John's account but seems to take us even further from the setting of Song 6:13.

(b) Seeking, Finding and Holding

The vocabulary of looking for (*zēteō*) but failing to find a man (*kai ouk autou*) links John 20 to both Song 3:1-4 and 5:2-8.⁶⁵ McWhirter argues that the parallels with 3:1-4 are greater and include:

- A nocturnal setting.
- A searching woman.

⁶¹ Winsor, *A King is Bound*, 38.

⁶² McWhirter, *Bridegroom Messiah*, 90 referring to Godfrey Nicholson, *Death as Departure: The Johannine Descent-Ascent Scheme*, SBLDS 63 (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1983).

⁶³ Winsor, *A King is Bound*, 39.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 45 n8.

⁶⁵ Song 3:2 and 5:6: "*ezētēsa auton kai ouch heuron auton*"; John 20:13: "*kai legousin autē ekeinoi; gynai, ti klaieis? legei autois hoti ēran ton kyrion mou, kai ouk oida pou ethēkan auton*".

- A missing man.
- An encounter with a third party (the sentinels in the Song and the angels in John).
- The sudden discovery of the man searched for.
- A reference to holding on to the man.
- A parental reference – the woman taking the lover to her mother’s house in Song 3:4, Jesus returning to his Father in John 20:17.

Many of these parallels are conceptual rather than linguistic and the verbal correspondence between the texts is small. Taking the six parallels argued for by McWhirter:

- Whilst the settings are nocturnal the Song talks of *nyxin*, John uses *skotias*.
- Although both involve women searching, the connection between John 20:15’s *tina zēteis* and Song 3:1-2’s variations of *ezētēsa auton* wouldn’t immediately set bells ringing for readers. Despite McWhirter’s assertion that Mary weeps “just like the anguished bride in Song 3:1-4” there is in fact no mention of weeping in the Song.⁶⁶
- The missing man is described by Mary as her *kyrion* (John 20:13) but by the Shulammitte as *hon ēgapēsen hē psychē mou* (Song 3:1).
- There are no verbal correspondences between the conversation of the lover with the watchmen and that of Mary with the angels.
- Unlike the Shulammitte, Mary is never said to have found (*heuron*) Jesus. Indeed, the impression is very much that he finds her!
- The descriptions of the holding (or, in John 20:17, not holding) are different. As McWhirter acknowledges there is no particular reason for John not to use Song 3:4’s *ekratēsa* but he chooses instead the verb *haptomai*.
- Song 3:4 refers to the *oikon mētros mou* but John 20:17 simply to *ton patera mou*. A further reference to John 14:2 is necessary to find the parallel phrase *oikia tou patros mou*.

It seems that the principle links between this passage and the Song are thematic and include: a man and a woman, a garden, searching, voices and names, darkness and angels. A number of these do have significant links to Song 3:1-4 and I find it probable that John has consciously echoed that part of the Song in this episode.

We must avoid overstating the level of correspondence between the two passages, particularly because this set of themes is also strongly linked to Genesis 1-3, a passage everybody is absolutely certain John has already

⁶⁶ McWhirter, *Bridegroom Messiah*, 102.

alluded to in John 1:1. Given that John 20 forms the first of two conclusions to the gospel it is highly likely that he would form an *inclusio* by alluding in his conclusion to the passage in the OT he started with.⁶⁷ That said, the verbal parallels that there are here are with Song 3:1-4 rather than Genesis 1-3. The evidence in this one passage is insufficient for certainty that John is recalling the Song but, given his other allusions to the Song, I conclude that John has probably formed his *inclusio* by means of a reference to Genesis 1-3 via Song 3:1-4, a passage he may well have understood to be alluding to the creation account.⁶⁸

(v) Conclusion

One or two allusions to the Song in John's Gospel might be considered coincidental, given its emphasis on Jesus as the divine bridegroom and the inevitable overlap of language where similar themes are being considered. But the three strong claims to a quotation or allusion (John 7:38, 12:1-3 and 20:1, 11-18) together with numerous weaker ones add up to a reasonable case for supposing that the Song is a conscious presence throughout John's writing.

The evidence is too thin to make any forceful assertions regarding John's interpretation of the Song, but we can sketch some outlines. The allusions to the Song are found in pericopes with a variety of central themes; the identity and blessing of the Messiah (2:1-11), his anointing for death (12:1-3), the discovery of his resurrection (20:1, 11-18) and the overflowing blessing that comes to the Messiah's people (7:38). But the passages share a theme too; in each case we are presented with a Bridegroom Messiah whose marriage, though it will not be consummated until after the end of John's Gospel (20:17), is nevertheless enacted at the cross (2:4, 12:23, 7:38 and 20:22). There is no evidence that John read the Song allegorically, but it seems he found, in its portrayal of an ideal royal lover, shadows of the Christ who he knew loved him (13:23) and all the world (3:16).

Revelation

If John's gospel portrays the coming of the Bridegroom Messiah, then Revelation is undoubtedly "the story of the bridegroom and his bride."⁶⁹

⁶⁷ It is almost universally recognised that the gospel has a "double ending," this leading the majority of contemporary interpreters to the view that chapter 21 is, in fact, a later addition. For a full discussion see Carson, *John*, 665-668.

⁶⁸ The thematic connections suggest the possibility of an allusion in Song 3:1-4 to Genesis 1-3, but detailed investigation is beyond the scope of this study.

⁶⁹ Dave Bish, "The Bride and the Bridegroom in The Book of Revelation," n.p. [cited 9 June 2011]. Online: <http://thebluefish.org/2011/05/revelation-and-song-of-songs.html>.

Revelation, with its poetic description of the king and its climactic declaration of the indestructibility of his marriage (Rev 21:1-4, compare Song 8:6-7), bears more similarity to the Song than any other Bible book. At least half a dozen allusions have been suggested. We will look at four of the most plausible.

(i) Revelation 1:12-16

Leithart suggests that John's initial description of his vision of the risen Christ is a "wasf of Jesus" with "both the style and the specific order" coming from Song 5:10-16.⁷⁰ Comparing the passages it is certainly the case that the overall description in Rev 1:12-16 is strikingly similar to the Shulammite's description of Solomon, as are some of the specific elements:

Rev 1:14-16	Song 5:11-16 (LXX)
<i>kephalē</i> (head)	<i>kephalē</i> (head)
<i>triches</i> (hair)	<i>bostrychoi</i> (curls)
<i>ophthalmoi</i> (eyes)	<i>ophthalmoi</i> (eyes)
<i>podes</i> (feet)	<i>siagones</i> (cheeks)
<i>phone</i> (voice)	<i>cheilē</i> (lips)
<i>cheir</i> (hand)	<i>cheires</i> (hands/arms)
<i>stoma</i> (mouth)	<i>koilia</i> (body/abdomen)
<i>opsis</i> (face)	<i>knēmai</i> (legs)
	<i>pharynx</i> (mouth)

Three of the elements (head, eyes and hands) are verbal matches. Additionally "hair" and "curls," and "voice" and "lips" are close conceptual matches.

The *wasfs* in the Song tend to move straightforwardly either downwards (Song 4:1-5) or upwards (Song 7:1-5). In both Song 7:6 and Song 5:15, the detailed description is followed by a summary statement about appearance and then a focus on one additional aspect of the of the lover's appearance (respectively breasts and mouth). Revelation 1:14-16, in keeping with its overall setting of a sudden striking vision, is less ordered than the considered adoration of the Song. Nevertheless there are also some similarities in order between the passages.

One further intriguing detail suggests that the author of Revelation may well have had the lover of the Song in mind in 1:12-16. Revelation 1:13 *mastois* (NIV "chest," better "breasts") is a rather strange description of

⁷⁰ Leithart, "Song of Songs: Wasf of Jesus," n.p. [cited 13 June 2011]. Online: <http://www.leithart.com/2011/03/22/wasf-of-jesus#more-10838>.

man!⁷¹ Rainbow argues that that the anomaly may owe its origin to the LXX of Song 1:2, which renders the MT's *dōdēkā* as *mastoi sou*. Although in the majority of places where the LXX editors made this translation choice it is "poetically plausible," in Song 1:2 it "results in an aberration: because this line is on the lips of a female speaker."⁷² Rainbow suggests that "early interpreters of the Song were aware of the textual 'irritant' in LXX Cant 1:2, and that they referred to it implicitly when they wanted to evoke the Song of Songs for their particular purposes."⁷³

These multiple parallels strongly suggest a significant allusion to the Song that, in this setting, sets up an expectation that the risen Christ will be presented as a divine bridegroom. This is precisely the way Revelation subsequently unfolds.

(ii) Revelation 3:20

The connection between Rev 3:20 and Song 5:2 is probably the most widely advocated allusion to the Song in the NT. A number of verbal parallels exist between the verses:

Rev 3:20	Song 5:2 (LXX)
<i>krouei</i>	<i>krouei</i>
<i>thyran</i>	<i>thyran</i> (an LXX addition; MT does not have "door")
<i>phōnēs</i>	<i>phone</i>

Hardy notes that *krouō* "literally means 'call' rather than 'knock,'" which fits well with the emphasis in both passages on the voice of the lover.⁷⁴

In addition to these parallels there is a connection between the setting of the two passages. The Shulammite is "asleep" in Song 5:2, as is the church at Laodicea. In both cases their groom comes to them at a time when "they have settled down to rest and do not wish to be disturbed."⁷⁵ The allusion to Song 5:2 helps us to understand Rev 3:20 as "an invitation not for the reader to be converted but to renew themselves in a relationship with Christ that has already begun."⁷⁶ In Song 5:2 the lovers are already in a relationship and the emphasis is on a continuation of love rather than its beginning.⁷⁷

⁷¹ E.g. Longman, *Song*, 90 n15.

⁷² Jesse Rainbow, "Male mastoi, in Revelation 1:13," JSNT 30 (2007), 249-253.

⁷³ Ibid., 252.

⁷⁴ Frank W. Hardy, " "The One Desired by Women" in Dan 11:37," n.p. [cited 14 June 2011]. Online: <http://www.historicism.org/Documents/Jrnl/Dan1137.pdf>.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Beale, *Revelation*, 308.

⁷⁷ We do not have to be convinced that the lovers are married at this point for this point to hold, though Beale is. Beale, *Revelation*, 308.

Contextually the letters to the churches at Ephesus, Pergamum and Thyatira present the risen Christ in terms of the description from 1:12-16, a passage which alludes to the Song.

This combination of a threefold verbal parallel, a similar setting and the continuing echoes of the Song in the whole of Rev 1:12-3:22 make a very strong case for seeing an allusion to Song 5:2 in Rev 3:20. The acknowledged difficulty in interpreting Revelation makes these allusions significant for its interpretation. Storms believes an allusion to Song 5:2 in Rev 3:20 “lend[s] support to the possibility of a typological/figurative interpretation of [Revelation]”.⁷⁸

(iii) Revelation 12:1

Hardy claims that the allusion in this passage to Song 6:10 is “too broad to miss” and that “John had Song 6:10 specifically in mind as he wrote Rev 12:1.”⁷⁹

Certainly there is a clear verbal parallel between the two passages in the use of *hēlios* and *selēnē*. But these words are frequently paired. More unusual is the combination of sun, moon and stars, as found in Rev 12:1 and Song 6:10 (NIV). But in both Song 6:4 and 6:10 LXX has the phrase *thambos hōs tetagmenai*, “fearsome as arrayed [troops]”.⁸⁰ This is differently translated in the two places in the NIV, which opts for “majestic as troops with banners” in 6:4, but “majestic as the stars in procession” in 6:10.

Can two quite different translations be justified? Mitchell thinks so:

the definite article could point to specific troops or hosts. If so, then the context of 6:4, with the mention of earthly cities (“Tirzah... Jerusalem”), suggests that the hosts of Israel, the earthly troops of the OT church, are the ones in mind in that verse. But in 6:10 the heavenly bodies in the context (“sun... moon”) suggest that the hosts of heaven – the angels, spiritual being represented by the stars (Job 38:7) – are in view in that passage.⁸¹

In fact it is not necessary to posit a reference to angels in Song 6:10 – the bannered host is a straightforward reference to the stars themselves.

Given the ambiguity of LXX’s *thambos hōs tetagmenai*, and the context of *hēlios* and *selēnē* it is likely that an OT reader familiar with the LXX would understand Song 6:10 to refer to sun, moon and stars.

⁷⁸ Sam Storms, “The Letter to the Church at Laodicea (3:14-22),” n.p. [cited 15 June 2011]. Online: <http://www.samstorms.com/all-articles/post/the-letter-to-the-church-at-laodicea--3:14-22-/>

⁷⁹ Frank W. Hardy, “The One Desired by Women” in Dan 11:37,” n.p. [cited 14 June 2011]. Online: <http://www.historicism.org/Documents/Jrnl/Dan1137.pdf>.

⁸⁰ Mitchell, *Song*, 989.

⁸¹ Ibid., 990-991.

But this resolves only part of the problem, because a number of OT passages refer to this trio (especially Gen 37:9). What grounds are there for thinking that Rev 12:1 has Song 6:10 particularly in view? Only in Song 6:10 do we find sun, moon and stars language in the context of woman imagery. As Beale points out, Isa 60:19-20 “describes restored Israel in a similar way to Cant 6:10... but no stars are mentioned.”⁸²

A number of other factors also support an allusion to Song 6:10. In both passages there is an emphasis on the sudden appearing of the woman causing wonder or terror. It is also significant that, in its description of the Shulammitte, Song 6:4-10 “employs imagery that is unique in the Song and that is found elsewhere in the Scriptures only in a very small number of passages,”⁸³ of which Rev 12:1 is “the passage that most closely corresponds to Song 6:10.”⁸⁴ Although the NIV is right to render 6:10 with “stars” rather than “troops with banners” the military imagery of Song 6:4-10 is also eminently appropriate to the context of John’s vision, where the pursuit of the woman by the dragon and her subsequent rescue leads to “war” (Rev 12:7).

Although the precise verbal correspondence for this allusion is relatively weak the particular and unusual combination of celestial and feminine imagery gives a good case for a connection between Song 6:10 and Rev 12:1.

(iv) Revelation 22:1-2 and 17

Mitchell suggests that the similarity between the “garden fountain” of Song 4:15 and “the river of the water of life” in Rev 22:1-2, 17 could constitute an allusion.⁸⁵ The verbal parallels are greater than immediately apparent in English, because LXX Song 4:15 uses *hydotos zōntos*, the usual Greek expression for a spring or fountain.

The presence of this phrase alone is not a strong case for an allusion. But the example is worth exploring further because of the particularly rich thematic parallels. Mitchell expresses well the view of many commentators that “the Song contains a rich array of images that contribute to the biblical theme of the garden paradise.”⁸⁶

It is almost universally agreed that there is a relationship between the Song and the Garden of Eden, and also one between the Garden of Eden and the eschatological garden city of Revelation 21-22. This makes it difficult to establish allusions between the Song and the end of Revelation, because most verbal or thematic parallels could have come to Revelation straight

⁸² Beale, *Revelation*, 626.

⁸³ Mitchell, *Song*, 1011.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 1018.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 263.

from Genesis 1-3 rather than from the Song. However the existence of the three likely allusions earlier in Revelation mean we should not discount the possibility of allusions to the Song in the Bible's final chapters. A number of factors suggest that we may see the influence of the Song in the depiction of the eschatological bride and garden city in Revelation 21-22.

Song 4:13 "*akrodryōn*" (NIV "pomegranates") is linked not just generically to paradise but also, in the ancient Egyptian love songs of the Turin Papyrus to "a tree of life, one that would 'bear fresh fruit every month.'"⁸⁷

The influence of the Song also helps to explain one of the most significant differences between Eden and the eschatological vision of Rev 21-22. In Eden the couple are inhabitants of the garden. Although they are clearly a part of the paradise that God has created they are also sharply differentiated from it; the couple are not the garden.

In John's vision, however, this distinction almost completely collapses. The "Holy City" is the "bride beautifully dressed for her husband" (21:2). "Jerusalem" (21:10) has the names of the twelve tribes inscribed on its gates and those of the apostles on its foundations. Its measurements (21:16-17) correspond to multiples of twelve, the number used throughout Revelation to indicate the people of God (e.g. 7:4-8). The city, like the bride, has "nothing impure" about it (21:27).

How have we moved from a situation where there is a clear distinction between God's people and his place or land to one where it is almost impossible to distinguish between the two?

The Song provides many of the answers because it is here that the garden and bride metaphors collide in a single person. One of the remarkable features of the Song is the enormous emphasis on geography. It is full of place names, images of fortresses and towers and, especially, of gardens and their inhabitants. This is most clearly seen in Song 4:12-16 where both lovers identify the woman as a garden.

Clark recognises this connection, commenting that in Song 4:12-16 "it is a place as well as a person, which the reader is invited to admire."⁸⁸ Clarke's conclusion pushes beyond this and suggests that it is a place *rather* than a person, which we are invited to admire: "this beloved girl is the beloved land."⁸⁹

This appears to me to invert the message of the Song and the climax of its themes in Revelation. In both books it is the covenant relationship between God and his people that is primary: the garden city is the bride, the bride is not the garden city.

⁸⁷ Note also the use of *paradeisos* (NIV "orchard") in Song 4:13, a word strongly associated with the primeval garden (twelve times in Gen 2-3). Keel, *Song of Songs*, 146.

⁸⁸ Clarke, "Song of Songs," 36-37.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 37.

The Song provides the biblical template for John's use of garden imagery to describe not merely the place where God's bride lives but the bride herself. Though there is no verbal warrant for finding an allusion to Song 4:12-16 in Rev 22:1-2, 17 it seems very plausible that it is in the Song that John found a biblical precedent for the conflation of bride and garden images to describe God's people.

(v) Conclusions

Three of the possible allusions considered in this study can be considered viable and significant on grounds of verbal correspondence and are also a good fit, theologically, with the principle themes of Revelation and the Song. The fourth, Rev 22:1-2 and 17 with Song 4:12-16, has a much weaker verbal claim, but an analysis of the two passages' blurring of bride and garden images illuminates the deeper thematic connection between the books, since the Song provides the only OT warrant for Revelation's imagery of the garden-bride.

Conclusions and Implications

Although I have argued that the process of finding and assessing the importance of allusions is inevitably subjective, it remains helpful to set out my assessment of the importance of the possible allusions I have considered. I have done this in the list below, with those allusions I consider to be most significant at the top.

In compiling the list I have weighed a number of factors, including the verbal correspondence between the texts, the similarity of the themes being addressed, the distinctiveness of the phrases used and the emphasis given to the allusion by its location in the NT document being considered. In a list such as this the difference in importance between any two allusions near to each other is small. The purpose is not to produce an indisputable "league table" but to show the range of allusions, from those that are compelling, at the top, to those which are at best questionable, at the bottom.

1. List of Allusions Ranked by Importance/Significance

John 12:1-3
 John 7:38
 Rev 1:12-16
 John 20:1-18
 Rev 3:20
 Rev 12:1
 John 2:1-11

Rev 22:1-2 and 17

John 6:44 & 12:32

2. *Direction and Magnitude of the Influence of the Song of Songs*

Whether or not one is convinced, as I am, that the same author stands behind John's Gospel and Revelation, it is clear that the Song has some influence on him and/or his theological community.

I will return in a moment to the question of the *direction* of the Song's influence on John, but turn first to the *magnitude* of that influence. We have seen the Song has a real and noticeable influence on these documents, but not one that seems to reflect the rather hyperbolic treatment of the Song as a "Holy of Holies" in Rabbinic Judaism and in large parts of Church history.

Twenty centuries on we cannot know definitively why the Song was less influential on the NT writers than it seems to have been on subsequent generations of both Jews and Christians, but a couple of possibilities present themselves.

One is that the NT writers, with their enormous emphasis on the corporate nature of the Church and God's plan of salvation in Christ, perhaps felt that the implied individualism of the Song, with its two very distinct lovers, was not entirely in keeping with their themes. This might explain why the NT writers as a whole seem to make more use of the divine marriage theme from books such as Isaiah and Hosea with their more obviously corporate emphasis.

Another possibility is that the NT writers, along with many contemporary commentators, took the Song to be "merely" a set of love poems describing human romantic love. There is no doubt that the Song is a great celebration of sexuality and romantic love and that it should be read as such. If this is *all* the NT writers thought about it then it should not surprise us that they do not make much use of the Song in developing its theological themes. Indeed the supposed lack of NT allusion to the Song is precisely one of the grounds that "literalist" commentators on the Song use to justify their interpretation. The allusions we have considered, however, rather shatter this argument. Whilst the number of allusions is insufficient to provide us with a comprehensive view of how John may have interpreted the Song it seems likely that he understood it to be speaking of more than the love of two individuals.

From the allusions in John 12:1-3, 20:1-18 and Rev 1:12-16, supported by the other allusions in these books, we can say that the writer of the Fourth Gospel and Revelation understand Jesus to be the divine bridegroom of whom the Solomonic figure in the Song is a type or shadow. More tentatively I suggest, from Rev 3:20, 12:1 and 22:1-2, 17, that John may have understood the Shulammitte as in some way picturing the church, the bannered host at

whose door the Bridegroom knocks, and who is both God's people and his city. Whilst it could be argued that the female figures in those parts of John's Gospel which allude to the Song are more individualistic than those in Revelation, this is because the Fourth Gospel emphasises the bridegroom rather than because John rejected of any typological significance of the Shulammite.

Working with the allusions that we have, one is forced to conclude that, insofar as he considered the Song, John understood it to speak of a kingly bridegroom greater than Solomon of whom Jesus Christ was the fulfilment. There is also a small amount of evidence that both the individual Christian believer and the Church were in different ways understood to fulfil the role played in the Song by the Shulammite.

This does not, of course, answer the question of whether John would have thought of the Song allegorically or typologically, because either of those interpretive frameworks could lead to the allusions we have seen. In the end the question of whether the NT writers understood that the Song was *also* about human love and lovers must be decided on other grounds. For myself the abundant evidence that the NT writers understood other portions of the OT typologically rather than allegorically means that we should think of that as the default option in the absence of other evidence.

For me the passage that begins to hint at the NT writers having a typological understanding of the Song is John 12:1-3. The somewhat shocking image of Mary using her hair to anoint Jesus' feet demonstrates the complex interconnection between the physical/sensual and religious/spiritual worlds envisaged by the NT writers. As Davis comments: "the sexual and the religious understandings of the Song are mutually informative, and that each is incomplete without the other."⁹⁰ This provides *prima facie* evidence for understanding the NT writers' approach to be typological rather than allegorical.

3. Possible implications for contemporary interpretation of the Song

In our own day, amongst evangelicals at least, literal and allegorical interpretations of the Song predominate, with a yawning chasm separating them.

Representing the literalists, Estes comments that "when a text is allegorized, there is no objective standard by which the accuracy of the interpretation can be measured."⁹¹ But the level of objectivity that can be achieved with a literal approach is easily overstated. Certainly some of the

⁹⁰ Ellen F. Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 233.

⁹¹ Estes, "Song," 280.

conclusions about which parts of the lovers' anatomies are in contact with each other in particular verses of the Song reached by literalist interpreters are at least as contentious as the speculations of the allegorists, and they do not even have the merit of trying to place the Song in its context as part of the canon.

Although the number of NT allusions is not enormous it seems that it is quite sufficient to enable us to reject the approach of commentators like Tremper Longman and popular preachers like Mark Driscoll (who declares, having read Song 2:3 that "That is oral sex."⁹²) as inadequate because they fail to consider the NT use of the Song, which is never to provide advice on sex and relationships!

On the other hand the problems with the allegorical approach are well rehearsed: they tend to treat the poetic features of the text as "part of the disguise" and reject a "normal" grammatical-historical-contextual reading, often without offering any evidence from the text itself that an allegorical reading is intended.⁹³ Sometimes the lack of any control on allegorical readings produces arbitrary interpretations that are frankly "bizarre."⁹⁴

Throughout history almost all Christian and Jewish readings of the Song, including the most "literal", have recognised that there must be a "theological reading of the book" and that there are connections between the major themes of the Song (the lovers, the city, the garden, desire, consummation) and larger biblical motifs.⁹⁵

Given that the allusions in the Johannine corpus also point in this direction and the many problems with allegorical readings it seems that a typological reading of the Song is to be preferred.

This will differ from an allegorical understanding in allowing that the Song really is about human love and human lovers. Given the Song's identity as Wisdom literature this quite legitimately enables the preacher to draw practical conclusions for the congregation from the Song about love and lovers, just as we draw practical conclusions about dealing with suffering from Job.

A typological reading can also share the allegorical approaches' insistence that the spiritual meaning of the Song is not merely incidental but central to its composition and that this double-meaning was "intended by the author."⁹⁶ The Song is thus also a vehicle for the preacher to demonstrate the

⁹² Mark Driscoll, "Sex, a Study of the Good Bits from Song of Solomon," n.p. [cited 1 Nov 2012]. Online: https://docs.google.com/Doc?docid=dg4fc37g_6fjdd38c8&hl=en.

⁹³ Rosalind Clarke, "Song of Songs: A Biblical Theology" (M.Th. diss., Oak Hill College, 2006), 5.

⁹⁴ William E. Phipps, "The Plight of the Song of Songs", *JAAR* 42 (1974) 82.

⁹⁵ Longman, *Song*, 67.

⁹⁶ Estes, "Song," 280.

final inadequacy of romantic love for our needs and the absolute necessity of a better bridegroom than the one portrayed in the Song.⁹⁷

Central to the typological argument is the fact that human love and marriage are used throughout the Bible as types of the relationship between God and his people. Typological readings point to Hosea, Ezekiel and the messianic Psalms (especially Psalm 45) as evidence that the OT writers were aware that their writings on marriage and human love pointed to larger theological themes.

Those taking a more literal approach say that parallels with such passages are invalid because the text of the Song “gives no indication that it is intended as typology” and, importantly for our study, that “the NT does not draw this conclusion, as it does with the typical messianic psalms.”⁹⁸ However the presence of the allusions we have noted undermines this argument and means the preacher can say with some confidence that the NT does understand the Song as speaking of more than two individual lovers.

Such evidence as there is points to John’s taking a typological approach to the Song, one which recognised its surface meaning as entirely valid but also saw in it pointers to the fulfilment of the promises of God to his beloved people in the Bridegroom Messiah.

⁹⁷ Readers interested in the practical outworkings of this approach may be interested in the author’s faltering attempts at a sermon series on Song of Songs to be found at <http://www.christchurchliverpool.org/media/bible-talks/kiss-me/> n.p. [cited 1 Nov 2012].

⁹⁸ J. Paul Tanner, “The History of Interpretation of the Song of Songs,” *Bib. Sac.* 154 (1997), 34. Estes, “Song,” 280-281.

USING THE BIBLE ETHICALLY: AN INTRODUCTION TO CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

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This article reproduces the substance of a paper which was given at the Affinity Theological Study Conference which was held in January 2013. The title of the article is deliberately ambiguous; it is concerned both with certain aspects of biblical ethics and with *how* we read the Bible in an ethically appropriate way to formulate biblical norms. In addressing the question of how one evangelises people whose default position is that of ethical relativism, the article demonstrates that the biblical teaching on general revelation “fits” with the reality of human experience. This should be “exploited” when evangelising the many secularised people who have bought into ethical relativism. The article also touches on areas of Christian living, particularly where Christians may have differing understandings of the ethical requirements of God’s Word (e.g., divorce and remarriage and IVF treatment), as well as probing the concept of “structural sin” and the extent to which it is biblically requisite and practically possible for Christians to be expected to change the culture of industries such as City banking. Finally, the article considers, by way of a “case study” of a particular passage, the need to treat the biblical text seriously – that is, to read it “ethically” – when it sanctions behaviour which we may deem to be morally repugnant. Such “ethical reading” of the text (that is to say, a reading which treats it with integrity rather than which twists it to suit our predilections) is essential in properly formulating what are and what are not the ethical norms which Scripture requires. Furthermore, honest wrestling with such “problem texts” will yield a deeper understanding of the character of God and of the nature of Christian living.

Introduction

Over twenty-five hundred years ago, the Greek historian Herodotus told the story of how Darius of Persia asked some Greeks how much money he would have to pay them to eat the corpses of their fathers. They were shocked, and said that they would not do so for any price. Then, in the presence of these Greeks, Darius asked some members of an Indian tribe who *do* [sic] eat their parents’ corpses how much they would take to cremate them. The Indians were horrified. Herodotus goes on to say that anyone who ridicules another’s culture is “completely mad”.¹

In his elegant volume entitled *Descartes’ Baby*, which seeks to demonstrate how child development explains what makes us human, Yale Professor of Psychology, Paul Bloom, employs this story and Herodotus’s conclusion from it to support the rightness of moral relativism. (The question may be asked,

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¹ Paul Bloom, *Descartes’ Baby* (London: William Heinemann, 2004), 126.

however, if morality is relative, by which morality does one decide that moral relativism is right? But that is a question which I shall not pursue.) Bloom suggests that morality or ethics is somewhat akin to language. We are all “hard-wired” to be able to learn to understand and speak *language*, but the specific *languages* which we grow up to learn depend upon culturally variable factors. Thus the Japanese child grows up to speak Japanese, whereas the French child develops with the ability to speak French. Bloom works this out in the following way with respect to morality:

There are universals – killing babies is wrong – and there are views particular to cultures. For many fundamentalist Christians, homosexuality is immoral and physical punishment of children is not; for many secular Americans and Europeans, it is the other way around. There is a certain period during which these culturally specific notions are best learned from parents and peers (late childhood and adolescence). And to say that one moral system is objectively superior to another is just as chauvinistic and silly as saying that one language (English? Latin? Hindi?) is superior to the rest.²

Logicians will be quick to spot the fact that Bloom’s case depends upon reasoning by analogy. While it is undoubtedly the case that an analogy can at times be a very useful tool, especially when one is dealing with something unfamiliar or esoteric, it is nevertheless true that analogies can sometimes mislead the unwitting and may also be employed as a kind of intellectual sleight of hand (albeit unintentionally) to establish a position for which there is insufficient evidence. Ancient historians, as well as students of the modern world, will raise their eyebrows at Bloom’s contention that killing babies is universally regarded as wrong. Has he forgotten the practice in parts of the ancient world of abandoning a baby girl to the elements? Is he really unaware of the fact that, just as Pharaoh ordered the killing of Hebrew baby boys in the second millennium BC, the high command of one of Europe’s most cultured and civilised nations ordered the extermination of somewhere in the region of six million Jewish men, women, and children in the death camps of the Nazi controlled parts of Europe.³

And yet Bloom has identified something with which we shall be concerned in this paper, namely, the fact that while a sense of right and wrong, or good and evil, appears to be universal, people differ widely as to whether they regard certain actions as right or wrong, good or evil. Why should this be, and what does it indicate about “the human condition”? What light does the Bible shed upon this undoubted feature and fact of human life? And what challenges does it present for the church of Jesus Christ in fulfilling

² Ibid.

³ For a meticulously researched and documented account of the most notorious of these camps, Auschwitz, see Laurence Rees, *Auschwitz: The Nazis and “The Final Solution”* (London: BBC Books, 2005).

her mission in the world and for the individual Christian as he or she seeks to please God in what is, in the West, very much a morally pluralist society? These are some of the questions which this article will seek to address.

Using the Bible ethically is a wide-ranging activity, an activity which touches a diverse number of issues and which also presents a number of acute challenges to the church in the twenty first century. There is, of course, a certain ambiguity in the phrase “using the Bible ethically”, the phrase which provided the title for the conference at which this article was first presented as a paper, for the phrase is concerned both with the use of the Bible for obtaining ethical guidance or for formulating ethical norms and also with the way we read and use the Bible to obtain that guidance and to formulate those norms. I shall begin, therefore, by identifying some of the areas where we face specific challenges with respect to the ethical requirements which Scripture lays upon us, before clarifying the question as to how we are to read Scripture in an ethical way. I shall then explore each of these matters in turn.

I. Using the Bible ethically in a multicultural world: identifying the issues

Definitions

A word or two first about definitions. The *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* understands the term “ethics” to be “used in three different but related ways, signifying (1) a general pattern or ‘way of life’; (2) a set of rules of conduct or ‘moral code’; and (3) inquiry *about* ways of life and rules of conduct. In the first sense we speak of Buddhist or Christian ethics; in the second, we speak of professional ethics and of unethical behaviour. In the third sense, ethics is a branch of philosophy that is frequently given the special name of ‘metaethics’.”⁴ I shall adopt this as a working definition.⁵ While much of this

⁴ “History of Ethics”, Paul Edwards (Ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Volume 3 (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 81-82.

⁵ There are, of course, refinements which one might wish to add. For example, there are conventions which may be part of the way someone lives their life, as well as professional conventions, which one would, nevertheless, wish to distinguish from specifically *moral* or *ethical* aspects of one’s life or of someone’s professional life. For example, it is a parliamentary convention of the Westminster Parliament that the party which forms the government sits to the right of the Speaker’s chair and that government ministers and ministers of the shadow cabinet sit on the front benches. Few would dispute the fact that these conventions do not partake of a moral quality in the way in which lying to the House or the expenses scandal of certain members *is* an ethical matter. It would be a breach of convention for a client to be ushered into the room of the senior partner of a law firm, only to find that he was dressed in a roll neck jumper, jeans, and trainers. But this is not a breach of an ethical norm in the way in which most people would view the same senior partner stealing money which the client had

article will, therefore, be concerned with how the ethics required by the Bible is to be related to people whose “way of life” (first use) and whose “moral code” (second use) is very different from that of the Bible, as well as with how they are to be lived out by those who profess faith in Christ and seek to live under the Bible’s authority, I shall necessarily and inevitably be engaged, at points, with inquiry about ways of life and rules of conduct (third use), and to what extent biblical ethics and the ethical norms by which others live converge or collide.

Multiculturalism may well mean different things to different people. I am employing the term in this article to deal specifically with different ethical norms and values. The ethical norms of those who look to the Qu’ran for their guidance differ significantly from those who espouse what is sometimes called secular, liberal humanism. Both of these differ from those who look to the Bible as their authority in ethical matters. But there are also differences *within* these groups. For example, to look no further than to those who regard the Bible as God’s Word to us to guide us in all matters of faith and conduct, some believe that Scripture requires us to espouse a pacifist position while others hold to the “just war” theory. There are many other areas where ethical differences exist *amongst* evangelicals.

Taking the above as working definitions, I wish now to identify some of the areas where we face specific challenges.

1. Evangelism

The good news of Jesus Christ is a wonderfully inclusivist message in that it is for all people; it is for people of all nations and for all kinds of people. It is also an exclusivist message; the blessings it offers and promises are enjoyed only by those who repent of their sin and who believe upon Jesus Christ. But if people are to repent, they need to know what sin is, and this inevitably touches upon the ethical realm. It is here that we face a very particular challenge. Let me give a practical, real-life example which illustrates the nature of the challenge before us. At a recent university Christian Union mission a “lunch bar” meeting was being held at which people could text their questions to the UCCF staff worker who was leading the meeting. A number of people asked why Christians were “against people being gay”. The

deposited with him. Words such as “ought” or “should” sometimes refer to ethical norms and have a moral quality, whereas at other times they do not. Sentences such as, “I ought to wash the car”, or, “I ought to cut the grass”, or, “You should buy a different hat for Deidre’s wedding”, are using the words “ought” and “should” in a different way from the way they are used in the following sentences, where they *do* refer to moral norms: “Amnon should not have raped Tamar”, or, “We should remember the poor”, or, “You ought to confess your dishonesty”.

point to grasp here is that the questioners believed that it was *unethical* or wrong to believe that there was anything bad about homosexual behaviour. Just as we might find the Jehovah's Witness' unwillingness to agree to a child having a blood transfusion to save its life as an ethically "wrong" decision, so the people who posed the question regarded it as wrong to categorise homosexuality as sin. In other words there is something of a collision with respect to ethical matters taking place in our society between large swathes of the population and those who bow to the authority of the Bible.

If we are to serve God in our generation and be faithful in proclaiming the gospel to our contemporaries, we need to understand that what is going on is *not* a rejection of morality *per se* – that is to say, a rejection of moral *norms* – but, on the contrary, the adoption by many of a *different* morality.

The idea that the Bible presents an ethically deficient message or, even worse, an ethically abhorrent message has been popularised by numerous writers. Richard Dawkins does this in *The God Delusion*.⁶ Many who have never read the Bible may well pick up from Dawkins' book, and from books like it, the message that there is little to distinguish biblical ethics from the morality of the Taleban. Understandably this then leads many to a prejudiced view of the Christian message, even before they have heard it. How does one evangelise such people? This is a crucially important question, to which I shall return later.

Ethical relativism is also a phenomenon with which we have to deal. By this I mean the intellectual position which maintains that there are no moral absolutes. Clearly, if someone maintains that all ethical matters are relative, then the biblical concept of sin is thereby dissolved, as is the biblical emphasis that all people are under obligation to God to repent. A moment's reflection demonstrates that ethical relativism is inextricably linked with the further position that either there is no God or, if there is, he either has not made known the standards by which we are to live or that he himself approves of ethical relativism. Understanding the "worldview" of our contemporaries is as important for us in our evangelism as it is to those involved in cross-cultural mission.

2. Christian living in the world

John Stott has written that while holiness of life is *inevitable* for the Christian (because God has implanted the new life of his Spirit into the minds and hearts of all his people, in much the same way that the life of a plant is found, in embryonic form, in the seed), it is not *automatic* (just as a seed does not automatically grow into a plant, but needs the appropriate climate and

⁶ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Press, 2006).

nourishment: just so the Christian needs instruction and nurture).⁷ If God's Word is "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16-17), and if one of the purposes for which Christ has given certain gifts of gospel ministry to his church is that his people might come to maturity in Christ (Eph 4:10-13; Col 1:28), it follows that *one* area where pastors must shepherd God's people with skilful hands (Ps 78:72) is that of showing how ethical guidance may be drawn from God's Word to help God's people to live lives which honour him, faced, as we sometimes are, with a bewildering variety of ethical problems.

These problems may be faced by Christians in their personal lives and in wider spheres of service. For example, a Christian couple who have been unable to have children may be told that their only hope of having their own children is through IVF (*in vitro* fertilisation).⁸ However, since it is standard practice for a number of the woman's eggs or *ova* to be fertilised in this way, thereby creating "spare embryos", the question arises as to whether this is ethically acceptable. Secular society sees little or no problem with this, provided that the practice is properly regulated and certain safeguards are put in place; but a significant number of evangelical Christians – especially in the USA – join with the Roman Catholic Church in regarding the practice as morally abhorrent and contrary to the will of God, if it involves the destruction of the "spare embryos".

Let us imagine the following situation. A husband and wife who have been Christians for many years seek counsel from their pastor: is it morally permissible for them to "use" IVF? What does the Bible teach? Let us further imagine that in the same church there is a recently-converted couple who, because they have been unable to have children, decide to go down the IVF route. For them there is no issue at all and they see no need to seek advice from their pastor. Let us further suppose that the pastor of the church advises the couple who seek his counsel that the creation of "spare embryos" is contrary to God's will, and if IVF will involve this it would be sin for them to undergo such a procedure. What if they decide, regardless of the pastor's counsel, that they will have IVF? Is this then a disciplinary matter within the church? What if they accept the pastor's advice? Should the newly-converted couple be disciplined? And how does all this play out if a couple in a nearby church, which is equally committed to letting the Word of God rule in all areas of life, are advised by their pastor that there really is no moral issue involved at all? If we change the issue from that of IVF to remarriage after

⁷ I came across this in one of Stott's writings some years ago and am quoting from memory. I have been unable to track down the source.

⁸ This is the phenomenon popularly known as "test tube babies". The embryo is conceived *in vitro* rather than *in utero*, that is to say, conceived outside the womb and then implanted into the womb.

divorce, it will become immediately apparent that we are not dealing with abstract issues but with matters upon which evangelical people understand the Scriptures differently and that these differences can sometimes lead to problems between churches or within the same church.

Ethical dilemmas may arise in a Christian's work life. The issue of torture in a military context is one which is of perennial concern and which raises a whole cluster of questions for consideration. One question of contemporary interest concerns the issue as to when a soldier is taking justifiable and legitimate defensive action in shooting a civilian and when such an action would be tantamount to murder in God's eyes?⁹ The problems are no less complex, though perhaps not nearly as traumatic to deal with, if one moves from the dilemmas faced by those in the armed forces to those which one may meet in civilian life.

The CEO of a company has a duty to the board and, through them, to its shareholders – many of whom will be institutional investors, the profitability of whose investments will have consequences for the insurance premia payable by “ordinary people” and for the pensions paid to the same “ordinary people” – to maximise profits, but this may be best achieved by “outsourcing” work to countries where wages are substantially lower than in this country. This may lead to mass redundancies and the lives of many “ordinary people” will thereby be adversely affected, although, of course, the economic chances of many in the country to which the jobs are outsourced may be correspondingly enhanced. Is it simply down to “market forces” or, as some would argue, is it immoral just to let market forces decide? And if the CEO is a Christian but the board is not; and, assuming that it is a multinational company and that it will be reasonable to assume that many of the shareholders will not be Christians, what is the CEO to do? Is he to seek to run the company as he would a business of which he is the sole owner? But even if this were possible (which it almost certainly would not be), does he not thereby create something of a false situation precisely because he is *not* the sole owner? But is the alternative simply to succumb to “the system”, and

⁹ A soldier who has served in the British Armed Forces in Afghanistan recently told me of the different rules of engagement by which soldiers in the US Armed Forces operate from those of British Armed Forces. An American soldier had seen three “civilian women” in burkhas walking towards a checkpoint. He noticed that one of them was wearing men's shoes. He immediately shot dead the three “women”. On removing their burkhas it was found that they were all men with explosives strapped to their bodies. Had he not acted as he had the result would have been terrible carnage of not only the American service personnel but also of civilians in the vicinity. A British soldier would have had to issue certain challenges. One might speculate that in such a situation it would have been too late to prevent carnage by the time a British soldier had realised the imminent danger. On the other hand, were the wearing of a man's shoes to have been the result of a woman being poor, the American practice might have led to the slaughter of three innocent women. Of course, this raises further questions concerning the different regimes under which soldiers may serve and the obeying of orders.

see himself as nothing more than a cog, albeit a larger and rather more significant cog than most but still a cog no less, of a gigantic and impersonal financial or commercial machine?

To put these same questions somewhat more prosaically, is the CEO to seek to bring Christian ethical standards to bear, particularly as they relate to issues of greed, with respect to profit margins, share yields, and executive pay (what, in fact, do the Scriptures say about these issues?), or is he to concentrate his energies on personal holiness and godliness and, as far as these other issues are concerned, simply seek to make the company as profitable as he can? Do the Scriptures give any guidance on such issues?

The last question raises the interesting possibility that on some issues Scripture might have nothing at all to say. I do not mean by "some issues" things like nuclear warfare, which Scripture does not directly address for the very simple reason that nuclear weapons were not around when the Bible was written; for it is surely possible to say that while Scripture does not *directly* address such an issue, it may nevertheless lay out the principles by which decisions with respect to such matters are to be decided. It does not require a great leap of imagination to realise that the tenth commandment, while expressed in terms which were singularly appropriate in an agricultural community, has as much to say about the wrong of coveting my neighbour's Porsche as it did to the wrong of the Israelite coveting his neighbour's ox or donkey. My point, rather, is that there may well be issues upon which Christians might feel very strongly but where Scripture is, in principle, silent. In other words, for a variety of reasons Christian people may sometimes regard certain behaviour as belonging in a moral category, as belonging in a realm where there are ethical *norms*, when God has not laid down such norms. I shall take up this point in a later section of this article.

3. Matters of public and/or government policy

Christians are in the world though not of the world (Jn 17:15-16). Since we are to serve the Lord in every sphere of life, conflicts can sometimes arise when employers, professional bodies or other types of body associated with the work place, public bodies or institutions require behaviour which the Christian believes to be not in accord with the will of God. It may be thought that the issue is simply solved by recourse to the principle enunciated by the apostle Peter: "We must obey God rather than men!" (Acts 5:29). While this is a vital principle of godly living, I shall submit in a later section of this article that there are sometimes situations where recourse to this principle may well betray an overly simplistic analysis which fails to take account of all the data, and which can sometimes lead to Christians suffering unnecessarily.

4. The ethical use of the Bible

The Bible may still be the world's best-selling book but this does not mean, of course, that it is the most read book and it certainly does not mean that it is the best understood book. One of the identifying marks of an evangelical is a belief in the Bible as God's inspired, infallible and inerrant Word, which is sufficient for life and practice and which is, therefore, of supreme authority. This commitment to biblical authority requires that we use the Bible in an ethical way. The entailments of an ethical use of the Bible are numerous but, at root, they all flow from a responsible reading of the biblical text, and this involves a number of things. I shall explore what these entailments are in a later section of this paper; at this stage I simply wish to point out that an unethical reading of the sacred text will inevitably distort the ethical principles which one purports to find there and will lead to pastors giving ethical counsel or guidance which will seriously mislead God's people.

II. General principles

1. The importance of general revelation

(i) Theological realities which undergird general revelation

Fundamental to the biblical teaching concerning God and humanity are the twin truths that God is a God who reveals himself and that men and women are God's image bearers. The biblical teaching that God is love and that he is light conveys something about his essential being, namely that he is a God who communicates and relates. While God is one, he is not a monad, but is in eternal fellowship within himself in the relations of the persons of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit with each other. The omniscience of God means not simply that he knows everything that there is to know about the universe (since that would be finite knowledge) but that he knows all that there is to know about himself. But since he exists as Trinity, this means that his knowledge of himself is relational and personal. Although each person of the Godhead is possessed equally of the divine being or nature, the distinctions between the persons means that there is a *personal* property specific to each which is not shared by the others. But while this is true, it is nevertheless the case that the exhaustive knowledge which each has of the others is a knowledge of each of the persons in their capacity as distinct persons. This means that the knowledge is infinite (since each person, being God, is an infinite person) and involves a *giving* of each to the other, a *communicating* of each to the other. Were this not so it would mean that one person would be gaining "privileged" or "private" knowledge of the others which they did not wish to disclose or reveal.

While the creation is a “contingent” act of God, a work of God *ad extra*, it nevertheless expresses something of his being and character and, in Calvin’s memorable phrase, it is “the theatre of his glory”. It is the God who is light and who expresses himself within the Godhead who is thereby giving expression of himself. Since men and women are made in God’s image, this expression of himself constitutes revelation of God to us. Furthermore, we are part of the creation; therefore, we do not simply observe revelation *outside* of ourselves (what one might call the footprints of God which we observe in the cosmos), but we also experience something of that revelation *within* ourselves (what we might term the fingerprints of God within our consciousness). Since it is the same God who has created humanity and the rest of the universe, one sees, as Burnside argues, continuity both between the divine and the creation, and continuity between the created world and human behaviour. “As a result”, Burnside says, “biblical law reflects nature in that it is ‘the most perfect expression of law that is in accordance with creation rightly understood’. There is a correspondence between law and nature because both proceed from the same God, and both demand loyalty. As the psalms attest, ‘nature is by no means inanimate or dumb... it speaks with a voice which makes powerful claims of allegiance.’... The juxtaposition of nature and Torah – the glory of God in the heavens and the glory of God in Torah – ‘emphasises the universality of both.’”¹⁰

Burnside understands these continuities between the divine and the creation, between the created world and human behaviour, and between different forms of revelation and the universal knowledge of certain norms as being part of “natural law”. However, because of the different ways in which this phrase has sometimes been understood (ways which Burnside himself acknowledges), I prefer to identify them as aspects of general revelation. One of Burnside’s great contributions in this whole area is his concern to formulate his understanding by an inductive study of Scripture. I shall seek to do the same, though most of the passages to which reference will be made will be different from those which Burnside discusses. I shall then seek to demonstrate, in a later section, the relevance of these passages and of the teaching which is based upon them to the issue of evangelism in a multicultural context, and to living out the Christian life in the world and in society.

(ii) Biblical material germane to the reality of general revelation

There is, of course, a plethora of passages which deal with general revelation and so I shall have to be severely selective. I shall begin by looking at a

¹⁰ Jonathan Burnside, *God, Justice, and Society: Aspects of Law and Legality in the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 70-71.

passage which shows general revelation of “moral norms in operation”, then consider two passages which deal with the implications of that general revelation, before looking at the significance of the wisdom literature of the Old Testament and, finally, the classic teaching found in Romans, where there is a theological analysis of the reality of general revelation.

Genesis 20 is a very instructive passage. Although the LORD appears to Abimelech in a dream (special revelation), it is clear that Abimelech regarded the taking of another man’s wife as sin. Hence his protestation to the LORD in v. 5 that he had genuinely believed Sarah to be Abraham’s sister and, therefore, “I have done this with a clear conscience and clean hands”, and the LORD’s reply in v. 6, “Yes, I know you did this with a clear conscience and clean hands”. Abraham had resorted to the subterfuge of passing off his wife as his sister because he had thought that there was no fear of God in the place and that they would kill him because of his wife; therefore, when he started his life as a pilgrim he had arranged for Sarah to claim that she was his sister (vv. 11-13; cf. 12:11-16). Evidently Abraham believed that the king would not take his wife as long as Sarah was married to him but would have no compunction about killing him in order to take Sarah as a wife. Whether Abraham was right or not in this belief, what is unmistakeable from the account in chapter 20 is that Abimelech believed that the taking of another man’s wife was wrong. He is able to distinguish between something done innocently, with clean hands and a clear conscience, and something which would have been done with a guilty mind. Thus, to adopt legal terminology, although he was perilously close to having the *actus reus* of adultery (close, because it was only God who restrained him from the act itself), he did not have the *mens rea* or mental element. Evidently Abimelech believed that adultery was wrong and was wrong before God.

Another deeply instructive passage concerning sexual ethics is to be found in Leviticus 18. A range of prohibitions of sexual behaviour are laid down. Then in vv. 24-25 the LORD warns the Israelites not to defile themselves in any of these ways “because this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled. Even the land was defiled; so I punished it for its sin, and the land vomited out its inhabitants”. Clearly what the LORD is setting before his people by way of special revelation had also been made known to the nations before them as general revelation. The punishment is so certain that it is expressed to have taken place; it is the LORD who will drive out the nations, though Israel will be involved in this judicial process. At the same time this expulsion from the land is expressed to be the result of the land vomiting out the people because they had defiled it. The chapter is a good illustration of the nature and effects of general revelation. Thus, to adopt Burnside’s analysis and language, it shows continuity between the created world and human behaviour, it demonstrates universal knowledge

of certain norms, and it also shows continuity between different forms of revelation, namely, between general and special revelation.

In dealing with universal knowledge of certain norms, as a category within natural law, Burnside considers the significance and importance of the judgments pronounced by Amos upon the nations and upon Judah and Israel in the opening two chapters of his prophecy. Quoting the Old Testament scholar John Barton, he writes: "Amos 'simply assumes that other nations have a moral conscience, and that atrocities are wrong and are known to be wrong, by whomever and against whomever they are committed...' The Bible asserts that human beings, universally, have knowledge of certain norms which are the basis of divine judgement".¹¹ Burnside goes on to consider the source of this knowledge and, again drawing on the work of Barton, makes the following interesting observation:

Barton suggests that the nations are condemned on the basis of "international customary law". Yet the fact that Amos's hearers expect God to avenge breaches in international conduct suggests that the source is not simply a matter of human moral consensus. Behind Amos's oracles stands the belief that God is a certain sort of God who judges on the basis of knowledge of universal norms. The surprising thing about Amos's oracles is that universal norms have been made concrete in international consensus. This means that there are different modes of expression through which normative judgements come to be made, including, in this case, international consensus.¹²

The Wisdom literature of the Old Testament is also instructive for what it has to tell us about general revelation. With his customary clarity Derek Kidner makes the following penetrating observation:

...we shall come across sayings and concerns that were common property of Israelite and foreign sages; and we may notice that in 1 Kings 4:30-31 Solomon's wisdom is compared with that of the East and of Egypt, as well as that of his fellow Israelites. True, he outshone them all; but there was a basis of comparison between them. It was because his wisdom *surpassed rather than by-passed theirs*, that they flocked to hear him (emphasis mine).¹³

What is implicit in Genesis 20, Leviticus 18 and the Wisdom literature, especially Proverbs, and which becomes slightly more visible in Amos 1-2 is spelled out explicitly by Paul in his letter to the Romans. The gospel is presented as the remedy and answer to the problem of God's wrath upon human ungodliness and unrighteousness. God's wrath upon this aspect of humanity is because – *dioti* – what may be known about God is plain to them and this because – *dioti* again – certain things about God have been clearly

¹¹ Ibid., 80.

¹² Ibid., 80-81.

¹³ Derek Kidner, *Wisdom to live by: An Introduction to the Old Testament's Wisdom Books of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes* (Leicester: IVP, 1985), 15.

seen by men and women. This renders us “without excuse” (1:20). The nature of God’s wrath upon this ungodliness and unrighteousness is such that he gives people over (vv. 24, 26, 28) “in the sinful desires of their hearts” (v. 24), “to shameful lusts” (v. 26) and to a “depraved mind” (v. 28). At the end of this devastating indictment of human depravity and discourse concerning divine wrath, Paul states: “Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death...” (v. 32). Paul’s point is that humanity, even in sin, knows certain truth about God and also knows that certain attitudes and behaviour are such that it is righteous of God to impose the sentence of death for them and that humanity knows that such a sentence is deserved. However, because of the rebellion of the human heart which seeks to suppress the truth about God (vv. 18, 21), people still practise the things which they know deserve God’s righteous decree and “approve of those that practise them”. There is therefore a fearful dichotomy in the human heart: certain things are known to be right and other things are known to be evil but there is approval of those who practise evil. This is the very nadir of human depravity.

And yet it may be argued that the phenomenon we meet in the opening verses of the next chapter reveals human depravity at its basest, as clearly as do the closing verses of chapter 1. If chapter 1 closes with a woeful lack of moral discrimination being evidenced by those who not only do evil but who also approve of others who do the same, chapter 2 opens with the depravity of those who condemn in others the very things which they do themselves. Paul’s point in introducing this idea at this stage of his massive “case against humanity” is to demonstrate that, in judging others to be worthy of condemnation for doing those very things which those who are judging them are themselves guilty of, people are really condemning themselves out of their own mouths. By regarding people as *morally* blameworthy (that is to say, blameworthy for behaving in a way contrary to what they regard as moral norms), they are demonstrating that they have moral norms, even though they do not keep them themselves. Thus, Paul is establishing just how serious is the plight of humanity in sin, just how terrible is what he will later call “the reign of sin” (5:21) over humanity: some know that certain behaviour deserves God’s righteous decree of death, but they not only do those things themselves but also approve of those who do them; there are others who do not approve of behaviour which some display but judge them as morally blameworthy for that behaviour, but they then do exactly the same things themselves. While this establishes the depth and extent of human depravity, it also establishes something else: that the whole world has a moral sense.

This point is developed further by Paul in 2:12-16. I understand Paul to be making the observation that those who do not have the law have a certain knowledge of its requirements written on their hearts (v. 15), and when they

“do by nature things required by the law” (v. 14) – that is, things which the written law given to Israel requires, even though the Gentiles do not have that written law – they are demonstrating that the requirements of that law are written on their hearts. This is all that Paul is saying, and nothing more; he is not teaching a justification by works nor is he referring to the righteous life which those who have faith in Christ live. I believe this to be the correct understanding of these verses, though constraints of time and space will not allow me to argue this out at length. Going back to passages such as Genesis 20:4-5, 9-10, Leviticus 18:24-25, 27, and Amos 1-2, and reading them in the light of Romans 1 and 2, we see the theological explanation for what we find in these Old Testament passages: the general revelation of God’s moral requirements was made known, at least to some degree, to Abimelech and to the nations whom the LORD would drive out before the Israelites and to the nations around Israel who committed terrible atrocities. This revelation is rooted in creation and in men and women as God’s image-bearers, and goes back to certain creational realities.

While general revelation is insufficient to bring sinners to a knowledge of salvation and while many passages teach this (Psalm 19 being a classic text which deals with God’s general and his special revelation), special revelation “assumes” general revelation and, at points, sharpens it and brings it into clearer focus. Thus Burnside writes as follows: “...the Bible asserts a continuity between an innate knowledge and particular revelation such that the latter tends to be confirmatory of universal norms, even as that body of revelation becomes more detailed, and the people of God find fresh motivation to live obedient lives”.¹⁴

(iii) Response to three criticisms concerning the nature and importance of general revelation

It will be convenient at this point to pause in order to consider three objections to, or criticisms of, the position for which I have argued. The first objection is based on a misunderstanding of Psalm 147:19-20, especially v. 20b: “He has revealed his word to Jacob, his laws and decrees to Israel. He has done this for no other nation; they do not know his laws.” Burnside’s comments on these verses are helpful and illuminating: “What the other nations do not know is the particularity of the revelation at Mount Sinai and their reception as part of a specific experience of deliverance in the form of the Exodus. Indeed, Israel’s experience of the Exodus gives her some new *motivations* for keeping the law... indeed empowers Israel to that end”.¹⁵ These observations lie behind the following comments which Burnside

¹⁴ Burnside, *God, Justice, and Society*, 84.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 82.

makes: "...the Decalogue is uniquely addressed to a particular people in a particular time and place who have experienced a particular event... The specificity of her calling means that the Sinaitic laws cannot be carried over automatically to a relational context other than that between God and Israel because outsiders are not part of the story".¹⁶

The second objection is that since sin has entered the human race and creation is now under a consequent curse, one cannot link the wisdom found in God's Word (a wisdom, in any event, which finds its perfect embodiment in Jesus Christ and, in particular, in his cross, which is a scandal to those who consider themselves wise) with the wisdom displayed in God's world. The idea that objective moral norms and values are not only to be found in the commands which God has given us in his Word but also correspond to "the way the world is" is, according to the objection we are now considering, a deeply flawed idea. Just as it can be dangerous to try to read lessons from God's providence without the light of his Word upon providential events, so, it may be argued, it can be equally dangerous to try to derive ethical norms from "the way the world is" and from an inner sense of right and wrong, or from what "the majority", whoever they may be, believe to be right and wrong.

It will be useful, before responding to this objection, to consider the third criticism of the position which I have advanced, since it is related to the second objection. Given the range and differences of views and beliefs concerning specific moral issues, the question may be asked as to whether it makes sense to speak of human beings having a moral sense. The fact, as we have already noted, that in certain ancient societies it was regarded as perfectly acceptable to abandon a baby daughter to the elements; that in Nazi Germany there were those who really could see nothing wrong with exterminating Jews and treating them, together with others, as sub-human; the fact that some regard homosexuality as wrong whereas others view those who hold such a moral stance as being profoundly evil; the fact that some regard abortion as murder whereas others regard it as nothing more than a woman exercising her personal freedom; the fact that some believe that to blow men, women, and children to smithereens on the London Underground is a virtuous act, whereas others view this with utter abhorrence: given these differences of belief, does it make sense, ask some, to say that we all share a basic moral sense? In secular form, does this not lead us to some kind of moral relativism and to a denial that objective moral norms and values exist? Might there not be something to be said, after all, for Bloom's argument that morality is like language: evolution has hard-wired us to have a moral *sense*, in the same way that every normal human being is hard-wired with the ability to understand language, but the specific content which is

¹⁶ Ibid., 82-83.

poured into that moral sense varies as much as the different languages which are spoken upon the earth. In a Christian form, might it not lead to the position of men like Barth: "Karl Barth writes against the background assumption that the Bible cannot have a natural law theory".¹⁷

In response to these two objections the following points should be noted. First, the Scriptures themselves take seriously the noetic effects of the Fall and their consequences for our moral sense. One has only to read the first half of the book of Genesis to discover that polygamy, violence, and homosexual gang rape are lauded: see 4:23; 6:1-6, 11; and 19:1-9 respectively. Isaiah pronounces a woe against those who call evil good and good evil (Is 5:20), while Paul refers to those whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron (1 Tim 4:2). Furthermore, in the letter to the Ephesians Paul speaks of Gentiles who had "lost all sensitivity so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more" (4:19). He goes on to refer to the Christians to whom he is writing as having "not come to know Christ that way. Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires..." (4:20-22). This certainly indicates that there were certain behavioural norms which they were taught and which they learned, and they learned these, therefore, as a result of special revelation having come to them. To this extent there is force in the second and third criticisms which we are considering: just as it is impossible to gain a *clear* view of *all* of God's character from observing a world under curse¹⁸, so we certainly cannot formulate ethical norms on the basis of what one internally feels oneself or on the basis of what others feel, no matter how many they are.

The second thing to say is that Scripture does not teach that general revelation gives to all people in a state of sin and living on a cursed earth a full knowledge of every requirement which God has made of us. Paul's treatment of "issues of conscience" in Romans 14 makes it quite clear that, even amongst those who have experienced salvation in Christ, conscience might be "weak" and some might feel it would be wrong for them to enjoy something which it would be perfectly acceptable for them to enjoy were it not for the fact that their consciences were weak.¹⁹ A careful reading of that

¹⁷ Ibid., 95. Burnside cites Emil Brunner & Karl Barth, trans. Peter Fraenkel, *Natural Theology* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1946) in support of this assertion.

¹⁸ Ps 19:1 states that the heavens declare "the glory of God", while the skies "proclaim the work of his hands". In Romans 1:20 Paul says that it is God's eternal power and divine nature that are seen in what he has made. Books such as Ecclesiastes indicate the problem of trying to make sense of everything that happens "under the sun", and the book of Job shows us some of the wisest men in the world being unable to diagnose correctly why such terrible things had befallen such a righteous man.

¹⁹ For a fine treatment of the issues involved, see John Murray, "The Weak and the Strong", *Collected Writings of John Murray, Volume 4: Studies in Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth,

chapter indicates that, as a kind of overrun, those who feel that it would be wrong for them to do something which is otherwise perfectly legitimate might think it wrong for *anyone* to do or to enjoy those things which the weak feel to be wrong for themselves. At this point, of course, their consciences need to be enlightened and they must not judge their stronger brothers and sisters (v. 3). Even if after having been thus enlightened they still feel psychologically unable to do or enjoy certain legitimate things, spiritual maturity requires that they no longer regard such matters as evil *per se*. If, therefore, those who have experienced God's grace and who are the recipients of special revelation need to be instructed by that revelation as to what is right and wrong and what is good and evil, then *a fortiori* it inevitably follows that those who possess only general revelation will need their knowledge of good and evil to be corrected and significantly supplemented by special revelation. In a society where many of those who come to faith in Christ do so from a background of significant biblical illiteracy, it is imperative that those charged with pastoral responsibility ensure that folk converted from such backgrounds are carefully and thoroughly instructed in the standards which God requires of his people. What this means, of course, is that a person's moral sense does need to be instructed and trained. The corollary to this, surely, is that a person's moral sense may be wrongly instructed and, as a consequence, a person's "moral compass" may indeed start to point west or east when it should be pointing due north. When a society becomes like this, then a massive reinforcement of wrong moral values and standards takes place. This surely is part of what the Bible means when it refers to "the world", in a negative sense, and to the dangers which "the world" poses for the Christian.

Thirdly, and finally, in arguing for the fact that all people have a sense of right and wrong, nothing more is being claimed than the fact *that* people have a sense of moral obligation and of right and wrong, without specifying *what* is right and wrong. To this extent Romans 1 needs to be read in conjunction with those passages which speak of the deceiving and hardening properties of sin, and with those which warn us that people's consciences can become seared (e.g., Heb 3:13 and 1 Tim 4:2 respectively). Of course the fact that conscience has been seared and that someone has been hardened by the deceitfulness of sin indicates that there was a time when they were morally more sensitive. This last point notwithstanding, experience confirms that people who initially felt guilty about doing something evil may, after repeating such behaviour, feel less guilty until they reach a point where they

1982), 142-157. On the whole issue of conscience, Kenneth E. Kirk, *Conscience and its problems: An Introduction to Casuistry*, 2nd ed., (London: Longmans, 1936) will repay careful study.

have “normalised” such behaviour in their thinking and may no longer regard it as wrong. When this kind of thing takes place across society, a future generation grows up where “the background moral noise” is such that good may indeed be regarded as evil and vice versa. One has only to think of the changed attitudes to homosexuality over the last fifty to a hundred years to see how this kind of thing can happen. On a more positive note changed attitudes to the wrong of racism demonstrates that there may be a change in the “moral consensus” which is indeed a change for the better. In other words Romans 2:14-16 is not teaching that *all* the requirements of God’s moral law have been written on the hearts of all people; rather, when people approve of what is good or disapprove of what is evil, then *at that point and to that extent* they demonstrate that they *are* possessed of a moral sense, of a faculty which acknowledges moral categories *and*, at the point where they approve what is objectively good or disapprove what is objectively evil, they show that *on that specific*, the requirements of God’s law have been written on their hearts.²⁰ I shall work out the practical relevance and importance of all this in the realm of evangelism towards the end of this paper.

2. The purposes and ends of government or “the powers that be”

The purposes and ends for which government exists is a subject on which there has been a wide range of views not only amongst political philosophers and writers but also amongst Christian writers and within the Christian Church. For example, amongst political philosophers there has been a broad distinction between those, on the one hand, whose emphasis is mostly upon “the state” and the preservation of order, and those, on the other hand, who would put greater emphasis upon the liberty of the individual. Thus, Hobbes (influenced, as he was, by the upheavals attendant upon the English Civil Wars), accorded a lesser place to the rights of the individual (the right to life was *the* great right which he emphasised and which, he believed, it was the

²⁰ A striking example of this kind of thing is provided by Shirer in his account of Hitler’s last days. In the closing days of the war Hitler learned that Himmler had offered to surrender the German armies in the West to Eisenhower. After raging like a madman about this, Hitler told his followers who had remained loyal to him and who were with him in his bunker that this was the worst act of treachery he had ever known: see William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich, A History of Nazi Germany* (London: Bison, 1987), 245-246. When Paul refers in Romans 2:1 to moral inconsistency this is precisely the sort of thing to which he is referring: somebody behaves in a certain way and regards it as all right but as morally reprehensible when someone else behaves in the same way. Sometimes one has to be on the receiving end of such behaviour before one begins truly to appreciate its moral quality. The man who has been committing adultery but then is outraged when he discovers that his wife has done the same thing is another illustration of this fact. The man who goes with work colleagues to a strip club and who joins in enthusiastically in the “cat calling” may well be horrified if his twenty year old student daughter walks onto the stage, and be disgusted at his work colleagues’ cheering as she gyrates for them.

role of the sovereign to protect) and to toleration than did Locke.²¹ In the twentieth century Sir Patrick Devlin believed that the state had the right to enforce, through the criminal law, the shared morality of a society which, Devlin believed, acted as a kind of moral and social cement, whereas Herbert Hart, following John Stuart Mill, believed that the criminal law should not invade areas of “private morality”.²² At another level, John Rawls’s view of what a just society should be like and how government should seek to achieve it differed significantly from that of Rawls’s fellow American and distinguished political philosopher, Robert Nozick.²³ Although Christians have a shared authority in the Bible, there has also been a range of views within the Christian Church on the purpose of government, ranging from the “two kingdoms” view held by Luther, with roots in Augustine’s “two cities”, and held today by men such as Christian philosopher Paul Helm,²⁴ through various “transformationist” views²⁵ and “establishment principle”²⁶ views of the relationship of the church to the state, and on into views which marry a “reconstructionist” view of the relationship of the Christian to society with theonomist views of the relationship of the Mosaic Law to the New Testament.²⁷

The position which I take and which informs the current article is one which is broadly sympathetic to a two kingdoms approach (but with certain refinements and nuances) and which is accepting of political pluralism.²⁸ It would, of course, require at least a full-length article to argue this case out fully and this would take us well beyond the scope and purpose of the present study. The practical outworking of this approach will be developed later in this article.

²¹ See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. C.B. Macpherson (Oxford: OUP, 1969) and John Locke, *Two Treatises on Government*, ed. P. Laslett, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: CUP, 1968).

²² See Patrick Devlin, *The Enforcement of Morals* (Oxford: OUP, 1960) and Herbert L. A. Hart, *Law, Liberty and Morality* (London: OUP, 1963).

²³ See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971) and Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974).

²⁴ See Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. John Healey, ed. R. V. G. Tasker, 2 vols (London: Dent, 1945) and Paul Helm, *War and New Testament Ethics* being Paper 5 presented at the Affinity Theological Study Conference, 2013 (available on request from office@affinity.org.uk).

²⁵ See Dan Strange, *Not Ashamed! The Sufficiency of Scripture for Public Theology* in Foundations 61, Autumn 2011 (<http://bit.ly/11fqqlm>).

²⁶ See James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1960), vol. 1, 94-186 and vol. 2, 345-349.

²⁷ See Greg Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977) and Rousas J. Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973).

²⁸ Further on this, see “What has Jerusalem to do with Westminster?” in Stephen Clark, ed., *Tales of Two Cities: Christianity and Politics* (Leicester: IVP, 2005), and Stephen Clark, *Gay Marriage: How Should The Church Respond?*, Affinity Table Talk, posted on Affinity Website, 2012 (<http://bit.ly/SomtAK>).

3. On *“reading the Bible ethically”*

There are undoubtedly some “hard sayings” and some “hard incidents” in the Bible. In a day when militant atheists trawl through the Bible and can post these passages on websites and blogs which are read by millions, who may then refer to such passages in conversation with Christians as reasons why they cannot accept the Christian message, it is essential that those with pastoral responsibility have the courage to preach or give teaching upon such passages and to do so with integrity. Of course, since these passages are part of the canon of Scripture, it has always been important for them to have been preached and taught but one fears that this is a responsibility which has sometimes been honoured more in the breach than in the observance.

Passages which appear to encourage what would today be called “ethnic cleansing”, not to mention verses such as Psalm 137:8-9, which, on a superficial reading, might appear to gloat in the wholesale butchery of little children, need to be expounded in their total biblical context, else God’s people may steer clear of significant portions of God’s Word. It was, of course, a characteristic of a certain type of theological liberalism to dismiss the importance or significance of certain parts of the Old Testament because, it was claimed, these passages reflected a somewhat primitive stage in the evolution of the religious consciousness of the children of Israel. It was this kind of approach which left many congregations unprepared for the horrors of the First World War and the appalling display of human depravity witnessed in that conflict. This accounts, in part, for the disillusionment with “Christianity” which many experienced at the end of that war and also accounts for the saying that Barth’s Commentary on Romans – which, whatever deficiencies there may have been in Barth’s theology, did not endorse this “bottom up” approach to God’s Word – “fell like a bombshell on the theologian’s playground”. Exposure to the whole range of the teaching of God’s Word enables people to realise that, while it is true that, as a result of God’s common grace, people may be capable of extraordinary acts of kindness, generosity and humanity, it is no less the case that when God takes the brakes off societies which are going downhill, life can indeed be “poor, nasty, brutish, and short”.

An ethical reading of the Bible will not scour the sacred text simply for “good” verses upon which to “hang a sermon” but will, rather, seek faithfully to expound what a passage says. It will also, to adopt the title of a fine book by Greg Beale, avoid establishing “the right doctrine from the wrong texts”. As one who lectures systematic theology I am wholeheartedly committed to the importance of logically organising the biblical teaching on a particular matter so as to present that teaching in a coherent and systematic way. But while this is a crucially important discipline in its own right and important

for the help it provides in preventing one from misreading certain passages of Scripture, it is *not* the same as expounding a specific passage upon which one is to preach; furthermore, systematic theology can be abused to the point where, in the hands of some, it can effectively muzzle what Scripture says because, it is believed – on the basis of a systematic theology which has failed to consider *all* the biblical data on a given matter – “the Bible does not teach that”!

If an ethical reading of the Bible requires that we do not ignore passages which we may not find to be congenial and, further, requires that we do not distort Scripture’s meaning in order to make it fit into our theological grid, it is equally the case that an ethical use of the Bible means that we may have to accept that it does not speak on some issues and, therefore, that we must avoid “adding” to it by making it say things which it does not say or make it address issues which, even in principle, it does not address. The doctrine of Scripture’s sufficiency can be abused by failing to recognise these points. An *unethical* reading of Scripture is one which says that because we face a pressing issue which we regard to be of considerable moral importance, the doctrine of Scripture’s sufficiency must mean that somewhere the sacred volume will address the issue. An ethical reading of the Bible approaches the matter in an entirely different way: if, after patient and prolonged study, we discover that Scripture does not even address, in principle, a matter which we regard to be of pressing moral or ethical importance, the doctrine of Scripture’s sufficiency *must* mean that the matter does not have that significance or importance in God’s eyes, and we must learn to accept this and to live with it.

III. Application of general principles

1. Evangelism

Christian history is full of examples of pioneer missionaries who went to people groups who approved of practices which, from a Christian standpoint, were nothing other than abominable but who were won for Christ and who went on to live consistently Christian lives. One thinks of John G. Paton, who saw a spiritual and moral transformation amongst the people of the New Hebrides. Paton spoke of how spiritually and emotionally moved he was at the first communion of those who had once eaten human flesh and drunk human blood.²⁹ David Brainerd witnessed similarly great spiritual awakening

²⁹ “At the moment when I put the bread and wine into those dark hands, once stained with the blood of cannibalism, but now stretched out to receive and partake the emblems and seals of the Redeemer’s love, I had a foretaste of the joy of Glory that well nigh broke my heart to pieces.

amongst American Indians who, though having not been cannibals, had, nevertheless, been morally decadent. And, of course, this is but what we find in the New Testament itself. Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 are a wonderful reminder of the power of the gospel and of how people who are "far gone" in the ways of evil may be spiritually and morally transformed. We are not the first generation of Christians upon the earth to face the problem of a majority culture whose moral views and standards may well differ significantly from those which God requires. Without state endorsement, the apostle Paul saw massively significant spiritual advance; we need to have confidence in the gospel and in the power of God to save.

Gospel confidence, however, while necessary to the work of evangelism, is not sufficient; wisdom is also requisite. This is always the case but it is especially so in a situation like ours where, unlike that of Paul, Paton, or Brainerd, our evangelism takes place not in a "pre-Christian" context but, rather, in a "post-Christian" society. Of course many of those to whom we bring the gospel are largely ignorant of it and, to that extent, are no different from those evangelised by pioneer missionaries in history; since, however, our society has moved from one which was influenced by the Christian message to one which has been heavily secularised, the entire context in which we evangelise is one where there are certain false assumptions about the Christian message and the moral entailments of that message, assumptions which are frequently articulated with great sophistication. In this kind of situation we really do need to be wise; we need, in fact, to be as wise as serpents and as harmless as doves.

A simple and very good example of such wisdom is provided by Tim Keller. Keller has seen significant spiritual blessing and growth amongst heavily secularised and liberal young adults in Manhattan. I accept that God is sovereign in the granting of repentance and faith but he is, nevertheless, not an *arbitrary* sovereign, and he uses means. This being so, the example from Keller's ministry is, I believe, very instructive. He tells the story of a young couple who came to see him and who told him that they simply did not believe in moral absolutes. This was a kind of opening gambit to explain why the gospel could not make universal claims on people's lives and why, therefore, they could not accept it. The wife had "feminist" leanings and so Keller responded by saying that presumably the woman thought it was all right for those societies who believed that women did not have the same rights as men to go on in that way and that, therefore, there could be nothing wrong with that. The woman strongly disagreed, maintaining that such

I shall never taste a deeper bliss, till I gaze on the glorified face of Jesus Himself": John Legg, "John G. Paton", *Five Pioneer Missionaries* (London: Banner of Truth, 1965), 328.

rights of women were inalienable and that they should, therefore, be recognised and protected in such societies. It was an easy and short step for Keller to point out that the woman *did* believe in some absolutes and for her to have to accept that this was the case.³⁰ The important point to note in this account is that although the woman was a sophisticated, secularised, liberal, modern American woman, she believed in a moral requirement which should apply regardless of the cultures or societies in which people find themselves. To that extent the requirement was independent of any culture and therefore transcended the boundaries between different cultures. Getting someone to accept that there are such absolutes can be an essential aspect of a kind of evangelistic apologetic or “pre-evangelism”.

The example from Keller might of course be criticised along the lines of the argument which Bloom presented: although people may have strong moral convictions on some issues – as the young woman to whom Keller refers had strong convictions with respect to women’s rights – this is just the result of her cultural context, where one would expect such things of a young, secular, liberal woman in Manhattan. It is simply the moral language which she speaks, which is quite different from that of the societies which she criticises. But the criticisms which I have earlier made of Bloom’s position apply to this analogical argument. Indeed, there is a deeper criticism of Bloom’s position which needs to be made. Bloom argues that our *general* moral sense – that is to say, *not* the specific “moral languages” which we acquire through life but the possession of “moral language” *per se* – is something which we acquired through our evolutionary development. Certain matters are universal, whereas others will differ according to our cultural context. But all Bloom has done here is to present an argument as to *how*, he believes, we acquired a sense of right and wrong; he has, in effect, provided an epistemology of morality, an account of how we have come to acquire a faculty for regarding some things as good and others as evil. According to Bloom our evolutionary past has put a certain deep moral sense in place, and our own personal cultural context has then filled that sense with different moral content. What Bloom has *not* done is to provide an account of the *ontology* of morality – of what morality *is* – or of *why* some things are good or evil. He has not given any reason why anyone who enjoys gunning children down in a school, as happens from time to time, should be *morally* criticised. Yet Bloom would, by his own admission, regard such conduct as being wrong, utterly wrong.

Keller’s approach might also be criticised from the standpoint of cultural anthropology. A cultural anthropologist might regard the young woman’s position as a form of moral or cultural imperialism, and might go on to say

³⁰ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 149-150.

that, at this point, the young woman is behaving as one would expect a young, liberal, American citizen to behave. The anthropologist might strongly disagree with the woman and say that societies should be allowed to follow their own moral standards. But this simply invites the response that the anthropologist is behaving as one would expect a fairly typical cultural anthropologist to behave, and raises the question as to why such societies *should* be allowed to follow their own moral standards. Is this “should” to be placed within a *moral* category? If so, it simply pushes the question further on as to the basis on which this is being said.

The position which I am commending is that men and women are *essentially* moral beings and that no amount of relativising morality can deliver people from the dilemma that they *will* regard some behaviour as good and other behaviour as evil. Thinking that one can account for this sense in no way deals with the issue of that to which the sense refers.³¹

Once people realise that they do have moral absolutes, it is surely our task to bring home to them where they have failed to live *even by the standards which they themselves accept*. A good example of how this might be done is provided by Dick Dowsett. He had been working as a missionary in the Philippines. One day he was speaking with a Communist propagandist who came from a well-off home.

³¹ Locke’s well known distinction between the “primary” qualities of a physical object and its “secondary” qualities may help to illustrate what I am saying. A physical object’s mass is a primary quality, in that it is independent of a human observer: the number and the nature of the atoms within the object determine its mass. Its secondary qualities refer to those things we “sense” by our sensory apparatus. Thus the mass of a tomato exists whether the tomato is seen by a sentient being on earth or not. The seeing of its “redness”, however, and the appreciation of its distinctive taste *do* depend upon our sensory apparatus. The perception of redness and the taste of a ripe tomato cannot exist without our sensory apparatus. There is, nevertheless, an objective reality behind, or corresponding to, our sight and taste: the tomato skin absorbs certain light frequencies and reflects others, and thus we see a ripe tomato as red, whereas an unripe tomato is seen as green; similarly, the taste of the tomato is “triggered” by certain substances within the tomato, so that our sensory apparatus is such that a tomato tastes different from a piece of barbecued chicken. Of course, diseases may lead to distorted and deficient vision and loss of taste; nevertheless the “primary” qualities of the tomato – the chemical composition of the skin such that it absorbs some light frequencies and reflects others – remain. In the same way one may argue that there is an objective moral realm, such that some acts are good or evil – primary qualities – while our moral sense, when it is functioning properly, recognises the goodness or evil of the actions which are contemplated. Of course, the ethical realm is more complex than the physical realm, in that a person may perform an act which is intrinsically good but the performance of which is vitiated in God’s sight because it was badly motivated. This last point notwithstanding, the use of Locke’s distinction between primary and secondary qualities, though it has been subjected to certain criticisms, may be helpful in illustrating that there is a distinction between what *is* good and evil – ontology – and *how we perceive* something as good or evil – epistemology. Bloom appears to collapse ontology into epistemology.

She was lambasting the President's wife at great length for the way that she exploited people. After this had gone on for some time I... asked the girl if she had a servant in her home – I knew she would have, because almost every home had some poorer person working for them in those days. "Which is her day off?" I asked. She blushed, embarrassed. She had criticized others so fiercely for exploiting people, but my simple question revealed that she was also exploiting someone else. She stood condemned by her own criticism. And she knew it.³²

This is surely the sort of thing that Paul is saying in Romans 2:1.

2. *Christian living in the world*

This is a huge field and it has, of course, generated a significant body of literature.³³ I shall concentrate attention on a number of areas.

(i) Freedom of moral choice

Whether I cover the floors of my house with carpets or laminated wood flooring is hardly an ethical issue: it is simply a matter of taste. It could become an ethical issue if the only carpets which were available were extremely expensive Persian ones. I would then be faced with the question as to whether I would be morally justified in spending so much money on the decor of my house, when the same money might be put to other use, such as the translation and distribution of the Bible, the alleviating of hunger and poverty, and so on. Yet even then it would not be the same *kind* of moral question as to whether it would be morally right or wrong for me to go into a school and shoot all the children there. In the latter case I would be flagrantly violating a clear and specific command of God and doing something which would be utterly repugnant. In the former case the Bible does not specify how much I am permitted to spend on covering the floors of my house, and so I must seek to apply general biblical principles and seek wisdom from God. This having been said, it may be the case that the amount of money which would have to be spent on buying the Persian carpets would save the lives of many children in the developing world from starvation. So, it might be argued, by buying the carpets, rather than the wood flooring, I have failed to do good and my expensive purchase has meant that lives which might have been saved are lost.

³² Dick Dowsett, *God, that's not fair!* (Sevenoaks: OMF Books, 1982), 43-44.

³³ Recent "classic" texts include the following: Stanley Grenz, *The Moral Quest: Foundations of Christian Ethics* (Leicester: Apollos, 1997), Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), Kenneth E. Kirk, *Some Principles of Moral Theology and their application* (London: Longmans, 1926), John Murray, *Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957) and Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).

But how far do we pursue this line of reasoning? Food is certainly more essential than having laminated flooring in my house. So should I keep the floors bare in order to feed as many as I can? Is it right for me to enjoy relative luxuries when others in the world lack necessities? Before we dismiss these questions as so much armchair theorising, it may be worth pondering the fact that *one* of the sins of the rich man in Luke 16:19-31 was that he lived in luxury while his neighbour lived in utter penury (vv. 19-21). If the second greatest commandment is that we love our neighbour as we love ourselves, it hardly needs much thought to realise that the rich man was signally failing to obey that commandment. We may not have a beggar sitting at our gate; but in this age of instant communication beggars are brought into our homes via the television and the internet every day. So is it right for us to have full wardrobes, to go on holidays, to buy technological gadgets when many in the world have never heard of Jesus or the Bible and when many do not know where the next meal will come from?

My concern at this stage is simply to consider the *kinds* of questions which these are. For while it is true that there is much biblical teaching, by way of principle, command, example and warning concerning the right and the wrong use of wealth, the fact remains that there is a certain amount of freedom in this area, in the way that we are not, for example, free to commit adultery.³⁴ One wealthy Christian might liquidate all his assets and give everything away; another wealthy Christian might be generous and rich in good deeds but not divest himself of all his property. In the former type of case there may well be further distinctions to draw: one wealthy Christian who gives away everything might feel under a divine compulsion to do so, whereas for another it may be something that he felt free not to do but believed that it was the wisest way to use his wealth. Jesus told only one wealthy person to sell all and to give it away.

The idea of “moral freedom” lies behind the teaching found in 1 Corinthians 7:25-28. The passage is a difficult one to exegete and it is beyond my purpose to attempt to do so here.³⁵ The important points to observe are

³⁴ A number of passages clearly indicate that this is an area of “freedom”. In 1 Timothy 6:17-19 Paul acknowledges that there are those who are rich and those who are not. Those who are rich, while being told that they must be willing to share, to do good and to be rich in good deeds, are not told that they must divest themselves of all their wealth. Indeed God has given us all things richly to enjoy. What is clear is that godly enjoyment will involve generosity. Similarly in Acts 5:4 it is clear that Ananias and Sapphira had the freedom to retain their land and, having sold it, were still able to keep the proceeds for themselves. Paul’s letters to the Ephesians and to the Colossians indicate that there were masters and servants who were Christians, and whose economic status would inevitably have been different.

³⁵ I have done so elsewhere: Stephen Clark, *Putting Asunder: Divorce and Remarriage in Biblical and Pastoral Perspective* (Bridgend: Bryntirion Press, 1999). See also Gordon Fee, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) and Anthony

the following. First, Paul is not giving a command but expressing his judgment (v.25). The judgment is that of an apostle of Jesus Christ and the judgment is divinely inspired; it is, nevertheless, judgment not command that is being given. Secondly, the judgment is in the context of “the present crisis”.³⁶ There is, therefore, a clear “situational” element to what he will say. From this one may deduce that were the situational element different, he would not have given the same judgment. While it is the case that biblical ethics are not situation ethics, we must not fail to recognise that situational factors may well condition ethical judgments and ethical counsel. In the third place, much in this passage is concerned not with good and evil, with right and wrong, but with what is good and what is better (vv. 28, 35-38).

It has frequently been observed that “guidance” was not a problem for the Puritans in the way in which it is for many Christians of the present day, and that the reason for this was that the Puritans were masters in setting forth the ethical requirements of God’s Word and in the emphasis which they gave to God’s providence. This is as it should be. With respect to questions such as whether one should marry or remain single and, if one marries, how one goes about knowing who one’s spouse should be, the Scriptures do not teach that there is a divine blueprint for every Christian, kept alongside the book of life in heaven, and that in some way we must access its content in order to make the right decision and be “in the centre of God’s will”, and that failure to do so will mean that we will inevitably not enjoy “God’s best for our lives”. This kind of teaching has sometimes done untold harm to Christians and may well induce a kind of spiritual neurosis. The biblical emphasis is that we seek to live our lives to God’s glory, keep his commands, seek wisdom from him, and in that context and the context of prayerful dependence upon him, we are free to make certain decisions and choices one way or another (Prov 3:5-6).

(ii) Work and issues of conscience

I referred in the first part of this paper to the dilemma which might be faced by a Christian who is the CEO of a multinational company. Should he just concentrate on personal godliness and “go with the system” or should he seek to change the company’s approach to the way it makes its money? I

Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2000).

³⁶ Much has been written on what this means and there are widely differing views. Whatever view one takes, the fact remains that Paul’s judgment is conditioned by the context of the “present crisis”.

shall seek to set out certain guidelines which might help to identify the issues which have to be considered.

First, there are clearly certain areas of work in which a Christian cannot be involved. He could hardly be the CEO of a casino or betting office chain, or of a company which publishes pornographic magazines. But what of being the CEO of the part of a high street bank which engages in what is known as “casino banking”? What of being the CEO of an advertising company whose promotion of certain perfumes involves video clips of scantily-dressed women in seductive poses? Is “shorting” a form of gambling? When does something become pornographic? Is it different being the CEO of the “casino banking” arm of a high street bank from being a secretary in it? These questions inevitably raise another question, which touches the very heart of these issues: is there a difference between a body or organisation which is engaged in something which is *inherently* sinful and a body or organisation which pursues legitimate aims and ends which might *become* sinful or which may pursue legitimate aims in a sinful way. Let me give a fairly straightforward example. A hotel is providing a perfectly good and necessary service to the public. But it is possible for it to be used for all kinds of evil purposes. A receptionist may book two people into a room who are obviously not married. It may be clear to her that adultery will be committed. This no more involves her in the sin which is committed than a taxi driver who drives someone to a strip club is involved in sin. Associating and conducting business with people who commit sin is part of what living in this world entails (1 Cor 5:9-10).

Now let us see how the principles which have just been articulated might work out in a very different type of situation. Someone works in the civil service or is a government minister. Government is something which God has ordained, and it performs, therefore, a socially necessary and useful task (Rom 13:1-7). One surely has to assume that not everybody in the government will be a Christian, just as those who occupied positions of government were not all Christians in Paul’s day. This being so, it will inevitably be the case that there may well be practices which the government sanctions of which the Christian may not personally approve and, further, of which he believes that God does not approve, but this does not necessarily mean that he must leave the government or, if he is a civil servant, give up his employment. Daniel became part of Nebuchadnezzar’s education programme to become a top official in his “government” or court while Nebuchadnezzar was still pursuing practices and policies which were quite alien to God’s will. Indeed, it is clear that Daniel held an important post in Nebuchadnezzar’s government when the king erected the huge image to be worshipped. Evidently there was oppression in the king’s realm which had not been dealt with, yet Daniel continued to function in the king’s court (Dan 4:27). It is clear that Daniel sought to use what influence he had on the king but he did

not resolve that he could no longer serve him. (To say that Daniel had no choice in the matter is to fail to take account of the fact that he made an issue of not eating the king's food and drinking the king's wine; that he was prepared to be thrown to the lions rather than obey Darius; and that his three friends were willing to be thrown to the fire rather than bow down to the image.)

The tax collectors of John the Baptist's day raised money for a "system" which, while it provided roads and law and government, also contained manifest injustice. (Was not Jesus' trial before Pilate a travesty of justice, and Paul's being kept a prisoner by Felix an example of injustice?). Yet John did not tell them that repentance would require them no more to be part of that system, despised though it was by their fellow countrymen, but only that they should operate honestly within it (Luke 3:12-13). Jesus' commendation of the centurion (Matt 8:10-13) and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon Cornelius (Acts 10:1, 44) and his household are surely instructive at this point. In an era when much has been made of "structural sin", we need to ponder carefully the implications of these passages. Zacchaeus did not seek to reform the tax farming system of the day but one may surmise that his radical repentance became something of a talking point.

The same kinds of considerations which apply to government "systems" may apply to working in certain commercial organisations. Indeed, it would not be stretching a point to suggest that City bankers are viewed today as the tax collectors were in Jesus' day: to many they are parasites upon the working population and have become social pariahs in some circles. Yet if Zacchaeus could become an honest tax collector, then the same may be true for City bankers. Banking, like government, provides a useful service to the public and to business; like government, corruption and evil may enter it. This does not mean that Christians have to contract out of working in such an environment, nor does it follow that if they do not root out all the corruption and greed then one must regard their Christian witness as having failed.

But might more be said? Might not Christians work to promote "Christian values" in the work place and in government? On the other hand, might not a point be reached where the only honest thing for a Christian to do is to leave his post? I shall take these questions in reverse order, since the answer to the first question will lead on to the next main heading in this section.

A point may indeed be reached where an individual believes that he can no longer function, in all good conscience, in his position. This can be as true for a non-Christian as for a believer. The late Robin Cook resigned from Tony Blair's government because he could not support the invasion of Iraq. This was such a major issue that he felt, in all conscience, that he could no longer accept the collective responsibility which being a member of the British Cabinet entails. In the same way a Christian might well feel that a point has

been reached where he would be compromising his principles to continue in a particular position. This, however, must always be up to the individual's conscience, and we cannot legislate for others with respect to these things. Elijah confronted Ahab and was then sent by the LORD to a foreign land (1 Kings 17:1-6). Obadiah, by contrast, continued to function in Ahab's "court" and Elijah can refer to Ahab as Obadiah's master (1 Kings 18:2-8). Yet the divinely-inspired narrator can say that Obadiah was "a devout believer in the LORD, and he served the Lord faithfully and served his people" (1 Kings 18:2-8). Different servants of God have different callings; furthermore, one believer may function in a context with a good conscience where another believer could not do so. Each will stand to his own Master, for the Lord is able to make him stand (Rom 14:4).

With respect to the first question, as to whether a Christian may promote "Christian values", the following may be said by way of reply. First, the phrase "Christian values" surely needs to be defined. If one thinks of the Beatitudes, of the virtues which are commended throughout the New Testament, of the fruit of the Holy Spirit, these can only be brought about as a result of regeneration. A better approach than seeking to promote Christian values is to consider whether standards may be improved. If the doctrine of human depravity militates against the promotion of Christian values in the lives of those who have not experienced the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, then the doctrines of common grace and of man as God's image-bearer undergird the rightness of seeking to improve standards. Apart from legislation this can only be brought about from within the system. And, of course, Christians may make common cause with non-Christians to bring about change. The importance of passages such as Romans 2:1, 14-15 can be seen at this point. Unbelievers may well have high moral standards and we need to make common cause with them where this is possible. Although within the worldview which he holds an atheist may have no proper basis for believing in good and evil, being made in God's image and because of common grace and general revelation he may well believe in good and evil and have very high moral standards. One may make common cause with such and reason, in the way that I have indicated earlier in this paper, to persuade him of the wrong of some behaviour of which he approves. This leads on to the final area to be considered in this part of the paper.

(iii) Law and public policy

I have argued elsewhere that politics is the art of the possible and that it is *not* the task of Christian politicians or of those engaged in public policy making necessarily to be seeking to implement "Christian" legislation or

legislation which accords with the law of God.³⁷ As with the world of work, however, the Christian may make common cause with others who either agree with his moral position or who can be persuaded of it. As was argued in the previous section, the doctrines of humanity as God's image-bearer and of God's common grace are essential at this point.

But care is needed. There was a time when it was common to hear Christians speak of redeeming politics, redeeming art and culture, and so on. But this is a fundamental theological category error: as Paul says so eloquently in Romans 8:18-25, the creation will only be redeemed from corruption when the new age comes fully in its climactic glory. Politics, as something which belongs to this present age, cannot be redeemed by us. As I have argued elsewhere,³⁸ the Christian farmer does his work to the glory of God and seeks to make the best use of the land, to cultivate it well and to remove all that is harmful in the ground. He may enthuse others with some of the "techniques" which he employs and get them to follow him. All this is good and excellent, but the farmer is not redeeming his land. In the same way the Christian politician may seek to improve ethical standards in society and he may seek to influence his colleagues so that legislation is introduced which will have wholesome or positive outcomes for society. But he is not thereby redeeming politics or society.

3. The ethical use of the Bible

I wish, in this final section, to consider how an "ethical reading" of the Bible – that is, a reading which treats the text with integrity and which does not avoid but engages with difficult questions which the text presents – is essential in the task of formulating the ethical norms which derive from Scripture. To seek to formulate biblical ethical norms but to do so in an unethical way is to engage in a dishonest and somewhat self-defeating exercise. Therefore, the ethical use of the Bible is integrally tied to the whole question of formulating biblical ethics, and is a matter which needs to be addressed. I propose to do so by considering an ethical problem which is presented in a well known incident in the Old Testament. It is, however, a problem which is rarely, if ever, commented upon.

The incident is recorded in Genesis 22: the testing of Abraham in being called to sacrifice Isaac. The ethical problem is that Abraham is being called upon to do something which is morally repugnant. An ethical reading of this text must surely address this ethical problem. Given the significance of Isaac in the unfolding narrative, as the one through whom God's promises to

³⁷ See Stephen Clark, *What has Jerusalem to do with Westminster?*, 260-294 and Stephen Clark, *Gay Marriage: How Should The Church Respond?*

³⁸ Stephen Clark, *What has Jerusalem to do with Westminster?*, 272-273.

Abraham will be fulfilled, it is understandable that attention falls upon the test which God's command posed to Abraham's faith: how could the promises be fulfilled if Isaac were to die without offspring? Much that is of great value has been written on this incident and on this aspect of the incident.³⁹ Perhaps it is because the New Testament uses this incident to magnify the greatness of God's love and gift in not sparing *his* Son from the death of the cross, in the way that he told Abraham to spare his son; perhaps because it refers to the greatness of Abraham's faith in going through with the matter until the LORD intervened; and perhaps because it cites the incident as proof of the genuineness of Abraham's faith: perhaps it is for these reasons that the ethical dilemma faced by Abraham is passed over. But an ethical reading of Scripture requires us to face up to this aspect of the problem with which Abraham was faced.

Plato formulated what is known as the *Euthyphro* dilemma:⁴⁰ is something good because God commands it (in which case everything God commands is, by definition, good, and "the goodness of God" is something of a tautology: God is God and is, therefore, by definition good)? Or does God command something because it is good (in which case there is a standard outside of God to which he must conform, and God and his will are utterly irrelevant to the ethical realm, for things are good or evil independently of God)? The former view can lead to an arbitrary God, even a whimsical God; the latter appears to "de-God" God by saying that he must conform to a standard independent of him.

Part of Job's agony is surely that he feels that he is being dealt with by a God who, while almighty, is no longer good *as Job understands goodness*; there is something of a hiatus between what Job regards as good and just and the way that he believes he is being treated by God. If one accepts the views of some of the Jewish rabbis and, indeed, of Burnside, that much of the Mosaic law was "reminding" the people of what they already knew, then the dilemma faced by Abraham was even greater than if this were not the case. The Mosaic law categorically forbade the offering of human sacrifice. Although God never intended that Abraham sacrifice his son, Abraham did not know this at the time and so, existentially, he is faced with a command to do something which is morally repugnant. We should not gloss over this. How is it to be accounted for?

It is interesting to observe that Abraham had earlier been concerned at the thought that God might act "immorally". This is surely what lies behind his prayer in Genesis 18:23-32. His concern was that God would punish the

³⁹ Wenham's comments (Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1994) on this passage are particularly valuable for their examination of the literary techniques employed by the author and for the lessons which Wenham draws from the incident.

⁴⁰ So called because it occurs in the dialogue *Euthyphro*.

righteous with the guilty. In v. 25 he says that it is surely far from God to do this and poses the (rhetorical?) question: "Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" By "do right" Abraham means that which Abraham himself considers to be right. Underlying his question is the conviction that what *he* believes to be right and what God deems to be right will be the same: there is a congruence between Abraham's view of right and wrong and the LORD's view. If this were not so, Abraham's question would be pointless. For if one effectively says that *whatever* God does must, by definition, be right, then to sweep away the righteous with the wicked *would* have been right. But this is what Abraham cannot accept. He is not, therefore, holding a voluntarist view of God's goodness, the sort of view which William of Ockham and Kirkegaard held. The LORD's reply to his requests re-assures him that all was well.

Interestingly Abimelech has the same concern as Abraham. When confronted by the LORD in a dream and told that he is as good as dead because he had taken a married woman to himself, Abimelech says that he had done this with a clear conscience and clean hands, and asks, "Lord, will you destroy an innocent nation?" (Gen 20:4-5).

These two passages surely provide important background to the incident recorded in Genesis 22. They inform us that the LORD is not like the gods of some nations, possessed of great power but devoid of true justice and moral principle. Thus, when the test comes to Abraham, he is prepared to go through with it because he knows that the LORD is good, even when his ways may appear to us to suggest otherwise. By this I mean not only that he is good because he is God, but that his goodness is congruent with the idea of goodness which he has implanted within us. This is part of the triumph of Abraham's faith, just as it was of Job's faith: when Job exclaims, "Though he slay me, yet I will trust him", he is, in effect, saying that, however perverse he may feel the LORD's dealings with him to be, because of what he has known of the LORD he will continue to trust him. It is not that he is saying that he will trust a God who, he believes, is immoral but will trust him because he is God; rather, it is that, however things may appear to be, he *knows* that the LORD is not as appearances may suggest but because of the totality of who he is – that is to say, possessed of goodness as well as power – Job will continue to trust him. In the words of Isaac Watts, "Where reason fails / With all her powers / There faith prevails / And love adores". Where God appears to contradict himself, we rest on the fact that we do not know all of the facts, all of the data, all of the truth about him. This is what the LORD's speech at the end of the book underlines and of what the beginning of the book informs us.

This is important for ethics and for an ethical reading of Scripture. The resolution of the *Euthyphro* dilemma is surely as follows. There is no standard outside of God, for he is the ultimate. But he is love and that love is expressed in the self-giving within the Trinity. That same love overflows to those whom he has created and he implants within man a *sensus divinitas*

such that, in a state of perfection, we perceive as good that which is truly good, that which God calls good. Sin, of course, has damaged this moral faculty within us, but has not eradicated it. The restoring of that sense and the bringing of it to an indefectible state, an indefectibility which our first parents did not possess, could only be accomplished by the Father doing what he prevented Abraham from doing, in delivering up to the death of the cross his own beloved Son. There the eternal Son faced the ultimate horror and cried out, "Why have you forsaken me?" But the triumph of his trust was expressed by calling out to "My God, my God". That trust was publicly vindicated three days later in the resurrection and, as Oliver O'Donovan has masterly expressed it in his magisterial work, God's moral order was thereby affirmed and the new creation guaranteed.⁴¹

Conclusion

Ultimately we dare not and cannot divorce biblical ethics from the Person and Work of Jesus Christ. The goal to which God is moving in the transformation of his people is that we be conformed to the likeness of his Son (Rom 8:29; 1 Jn 3:2). When that process is finally completed for all the people of God, then the sons of God will be revealed (Rom 8:19; 1 Jn 3:2) and the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay. There will be no ethical dilemmas or ethical disagreements in the new heavens and the new earth. "Come, Lord Jesus."

⁴¹ Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and the Moral Order*.

REVIEW ARTICLE

CONSTRUCTING THEOLOGICAL VISION

CENTER CHURCH: DOING BALANCED GOSPEL-CENTERED MINISTRY IN YOUR CITY
Timothy Keller, Zondervan, 2012, 352 pp, £18.99

Tim Keller's philosophy of ministry, as laid out in *Center Church*, deserves to be carefully read and reflected on by all those seeking to minister in the city in the twenty-first century. This review article summarises the main arguments of the book, interacting with some key issues. The book's central thesis is then assessed and while affirming the approach the reader is urged not to substitute this book for the hard task of constructing one's own theological vision.

Tim Keller, the pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, has in this excellent book put us in his debt. I want in this review article to briefly summarise the main arguments of the book, interact with some issues I have with it on the way, and conclude with a reflection on his central thesis. Before I get going, though, I want to dispense with a few words on the book's presentation. Although this is the work of a particularly scholarly reflective practitioner the book is not, strictly, an academic work, as authors are often cited but not referenced and there is no bibliography. The format of the book has a couple of drawbacks for this reader. I can understand the desire to keep the book from busting the 400-page barrier but why do the footnotes have to be so eye-strainingly miniscule and printed on a grey background? For the most part the book is very well written but even native English-speaking outsiders to the peculiarities of the US tax system will struggle to imagine what a "501(c)(3)" is (325)! (Most of us call it a charity or NGO.) Having dealt with minor quibbles I now turn to the argument.¹

Theological vision

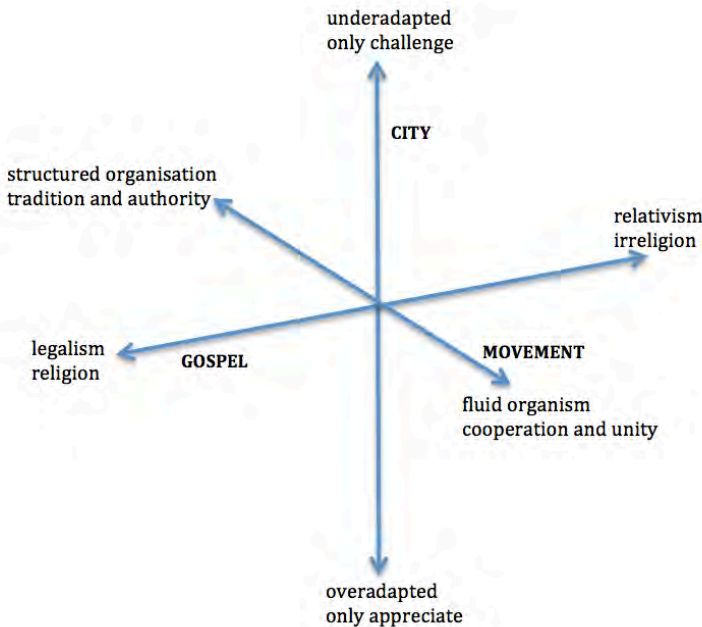
In introducing us to the subject of the book Keller briefly describes his own pilgrimage in ministry (small town pastor followed by a spell teaching at Westminster Seminary) and how he came to pursue his vision for church planting in New York City. As people began to ask the author what it was that gave their church such remarkable fruitfulness, Keller came to understand that it was neither merely their biblical and Reformed approach to doctrine, nor merely their evangelistic and teaching methods that were responsible for the fruit, under God. It was something else that stood between their

¹ Center Church is long – when you start to tire, take a break, look at the cover picture carefully and try to find the location using Google Earth – I did and found it in two minutes!

doctrinal foundation and the particular forms of ministry they employed. This was “the space where we reflect deeply on our theology and our culture to understand how both of them can shape our ministry” (17) and is identical to what Richard Lints, on whom he clearly leans heavily, calls a “theological vision”.² He shows how variations in this “middleware” lead to churches in similar situations with the same theology being deeply divided over ministry expressions and methods. Redeemer City to City, the organisation that is based at Redeemer Presbyterian Church, centres its training and coaching of urban church planting on this. Theological vision (how to see) comes between doctrinal foundation (what to believe) and ministry expression (what to do) (20). It is this theological vision that Keller calls “Center Church” (21).

Keller acknowledges the plethora of books to be published on the church in recent years and explains that his first concern in adding to them is that the term “centre church” may be used as a label or diagnostic tool as in “*This* is a centre church, but *that* one isn’t”. He has chosen this term for four reasons: the gospel is at its centre; the centre is the place of balance; this theological vision is shaped by and for urban and cultural centres; the theological vision is at the centre of ministry.

Keller goes on to express the theological vision that is Center Church in terms of three basic commitments: gospel, city and movement. These can be thought of as three axes, which Keller diagrams as continua (23). It might be better, however, to diagram it three dimensionally, thus:



² Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 9.

Keller believes that “the more that ministry comes ‘from the center’ of all the axes, the more dynamism and fruitfulness it will have” (24). His concern in this book is not to lay out a “Redeemer model” of church but rather to lay out “a particular theological vision for ministry that... will enable many churches to reach people in our day and time, particularly where late-modern Western globalization is influencing culture” (25).

The structure of the book then reflects this tripartite vision. Each section – gospel, city, movement – is further divided into two or three parts and each of these into a few chapters making 30 in all, along with the introduction and epilogue. Throughout the book Keller gives us his mature reflections on gospel ministry and in particular how that works out in the city – the sphere of his own ministry since 1989.

Gospel

Parts 1 and 2 constitute the first major division of Keller’s book – Gospel. In part 1, Gospel Theology, Keller addresses a number of current discussions and conflicts over the nature of the gospel. Drawing on the writings of J. I. Packer, D. A. Carson, C. S. Lewis, John Piper, Francis Schaeffer, D. M. Lloyd-Jones, Peter Berger and others, and engaging with key passages of Scripture (references are given but there is no Scripture index at the end) the author outlines what the gospel *is* and *is not* and its relation to the overall storyline of the Bible. He then argues that the gospel has two equal and opposite enemies: what he calls “religion” and “irreligion”, or as he also labels them, “legalism” and “antinomianism” (the ends of the gospel axis). Keller is at pains to point out that the gospel is not a simple thing: “it cannot be tamed into a single simple formula with a number of points” (39). A proper understanding of the gospel, rather, must draw on both synchronic (systematic-theological method) and diachronic (redemptive-historical method) views of Scripture (40), which he proceeds to unpack. Furthermore, says Keller, the gospel must be contextualised, something he works out in a later section.

Keller uses the term “religion” in an entirely negative way. Religion is contrasted with gospel in a complete antithesis (65, 76). “‘Religion’, or moralism,” he says, “is avoiding God as Lord and Savior by developing a moral righteousness and then presenting it to God in an effort to show that he ‘owes’ you” (63). Strange, then, that a few pages later he should commend Jonathan Edwards’ *Religious Affections*. Edwards’ thesis was, of course, that “True religion, in great part, consists in Holy Affections”.³ If there is such a thing as “true religion” as Keller would surely affirm then why does he use the term in contrast with gospel? This might seem a strange question to ask as we all know, we think, that Keller means something different from

³ Jonathan Edwards, *The Religious Affections* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1961), 23.

Edwards. After all, 266 years have passed between the publications' first printing. So why don't we just accept that he is using the word in a different way and ignore it? Because, whether we like it or not the term is used in many different ways, including by evangelicals on a daily basis. Evangelicals in the West often use the term "religion" in a pejorative sense – we say things like "Christianity is a faith, not a religion". But then we talk about the need for "freedom of religion" implicitly including *our* religion under that banner. Keller himself explicitly uses the term *positively* when he says that "syncretism... means not *adapting* the gospel to a particular culture, but rather *surrendering* the gospel entirely and morphing Christianity into a different *religion* by overadapting it to an alien worldview" (92-93, first two emphases his, last mine).

What is going on here? Why the inconsistency? It is widely recognised that the term "religion" is one of the most slippery and difficult to define terms in the English language. This is especially so since the nineteenth century and the inexorable working out of the Enlightenment in our universities at a time when European nations were discovering "exotic" peoples with hugely varied beliefs and customs. Until this time the study of religion was largely construed as one of reflection on one's own religion – hence Edwards' use. The nineteenth century encounter with the "other", then, led to the emergence of the discipline of comparative *religions* (plural). Religions, then, were the distinct traditions of different peoples as they reflected on their understanding of transcendent reality. The peoples of Europe and their colonies, in consequence, found that their religion was just one of many. It was not long before the rationalist project defined the religions in completely relativist terms. The church in the West was caught on the back foot and ever since has been struggling to respond to this phenomenon.

Keller's use of the term, then, is inadequate for three reasons: (1) he can't help but use the term in some contexts in a positive way and so fails to be consistent; (2) it leads to confusion when he tries to define syncretism (93); and (3), and most importantly, it leaves followers of Christ in much of the world facing impossible conundrums (e.g. do I have to call myself a "Christian" now that I follow Christ when my family and village will completely misunderstand that term and think I have rejected them and joined a foreign organisation with "Made in the USA" stamped all over it?). Keller's use of the term, then, is inadequate for mission in the twenty-first century world – even in his own NYC where communities of immigrants from hundreds of unreached peoples are ready to be engaged with the gospel (161). But perhaps Keller is not so far from appreciating this. In the quote above on syncretism he introduces the concept of *worldview*. Keller owes much to Harvie Conn. But Conn viewed religion as "the human

response to the revelation of God..."⁴ To Conn, religion "permeates the whole of life. It is the core in the structuring of culture, the integrating and radical response of humanity to the revelation of God."⁵ Our religion, then, consists chiefly in our affections and works itself out in our lifestyle and cultural activity. So Keller's insistence that the gospel has two equal and opposite enemies, religion and irreligion, is inadequate because irreligion is just another form of religion, a commitment in this case to relativism (Keller's other term for this concept). Moralism (the other term Keller uses for religion) is wrong because, like relativism, it is a commitment to orient one's life in a direction other than the gospel. Both moralism and relativism, then, amount to idolatry (as Keller indeed understands, 71). The gospel is not midway between the two but in stark antithesis to them both because they are one. That is a problem for Keller's theological construct but I would argue it is not only more consistent with the message of the Bible but also with the multifarious phenomena we observe in humanity without God.

In part 2, *Gospel Renewal*, Keller argues that gospel renewal is a life-changing recovery of the gospel which may be *personal* or *corporate*. Drawing on the work of Packer, Richard F. Lovelace, William Sprague, Archibald Alexander and Mark Noll he then demonstrates that a revival is not primarily the adding of the extraordinary operations of the Holy Spirit or an especially vigorous season of preaching but an intensification of the normal operations of the Spirit (54). Keller is happy, nevertheless, to show how revivals of the past, such as the Great Awakening of the eighteenth century were also a response to social and cultural realities such as the Industrial Revolution and market capitalism (56). The author goes on to argue against two serious criticisms of past revivals – that they were excessive and that they were fake – and argues that ongoing criticism in either vein is wrong because gospel renewal (which he sees as synonymous) fits our times and focuses on the heart. By arguing that revival fits our times he is affirming the need of the work of the Spirit today to "convert nominal church members" and to "bring the gospel home" to the hearts of all believers "for deepened experiences of Christ's love and power" (60). He argues, then for a "*balanced*" approach (his emphasis) to revival that does not undermine the work of the church (by focussing exclusively on the individual) but *is* the work of the church.

Throughout this part Keller repeatedly uses the term "revivalism". I understand by this he is talking of *an approach* to gospel work that looks to the work of the Holy Spirit to regenerate individuals and renew churches that have become moribund. As such the term may be useful. But my concern here is that the approach of Charles Finney (a particularly mechanical one)

⁴ Harvie M. Conn, "Culture," in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions* (ed. A. Scott Moreau; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 254.

⁵ Ibid.

might be conflated with Keller's approach (one very much leaning on the insights of Edwards, Sprague and Alexander). Although there are difficulties with Iain Murray's analysis of the phenomena it would have been good to see the insights that he gives brought into the discussion and a correspondingly nuanced use of terms.⁶

On the significance of idolatry Keller argues, after Luther, that "the root of every sin is a failure to believe the gospel message" (71). Where does this leave the person who has not had the opportunity to hear the gospel? Is he or she still guilty of failure to believe it? Adam and Eve sinned by breaking the command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen 3). There are many today who stand condemned, not because they have heard and rejected the gospel message but because they have not heard the gospel message at all. Idolatry, then, is not merely "a failure to look to Jesus for salvation and justification" but a more general setting up of surrogates for our devotion (Rom 1:18 – 2:16).

City

Parts 3-5 constitute the second major division of Keller's book – City. In part 3, Gospel Contextualization, Keller explains his approach to the interaction between gospel and culture. The theological vision of Center Church recognises that "center cities are wonderful, strategic, and underserved places for gospel ministry and... that virtually all ministry contexts are increasingly shaped by urban and global forces" (88). Keller's understanding of contextualisation draws on the works of Craig Blomberg, David Wells, David Hesselgrave, Scott Moreau, Natee Tanchanpongs, Bruce Nicholls, and especially Harvie Conn. He both argues for the necessity of contextualisation and warns of the dangers involved. The danger highlighted is that of syncretism, the result of "*surrendering* the gospel entirely and morphing Christianity into a different religion by overadapting it to an alien worldview" (93, original emphasis). But syncretism is more subtle than many of us think, says the author. "Harvie Conn," Keller's former colleague (and mentor it would seem) at Westminster, "argued that syncretism is most likely to occur when (in the name of culture) we forbid the *whole* of Scripture to speak" (93, no reference given). That can happen in our comfortable homogeneous churches at home just as much as in frontline missionary congregations. Indeed Keller, after Cornelius Van Til, argues that the great Princeton theologians B. B. Warfield and Gresham Machen were guilty of syncretism in relying too heavily on unaided human reason in their ministries (100, n23)!

⁶ Iain H. Murray, *Revival and Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism 1750-1858* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994).

Keller bases his understanding of culture and contextualisation on three key passages from Paul's letters: Romans 1 and 2 providing the basis, 1 Corinthians 9 the motive, and 1 Corinthians 1 the basic formula for contextualisation. He then goes on to look at Paul's messages in Acts for case studies as to how he worked these principles out in practice. He asserts, rightly, that a biblical view of culture "should be one of critical enjoyment and an appropriate wariness" (109). This perspective is founded on a Reformed view of creation and common grace – such that Keller has a high view of humanity's creative genius – and on the doctrine of total depravity – such that he has a high view of humanity's potential for corruption. Keller sees Paul's "formula" for contextualisation as "to confront and complete each society's baseline cultural narrative" (112).⁷

Keller then goes on to instruct his readers how to "enter a culture" and learn its ways.⁸ In communicating with the community you have entered you will need to "adapt to a culture in the way it persuades, appeals, and reasons with people" (122). He draws on the work of missiologist David Hesselgrave to describe three basic ways to reason: conceptual, concrete relational, and intuitional. I think Keller's adoption of Hesselgrave's trisystemic typology of cognitive style is uncritical and simplistic.⁹

Keller goes on to the task of discerning the dominant worldview or belief system of the community we have entered, looking in particular for two kinds of beliefs: "A" beliefs, which roughly correspond to biblical teaching, and "B" beliefs ("defeater beliefs") that "lead listeners to find some truth implausible or overtly offensive" (123). Keller's apologetic, then, consists of challenging and confronting B beliefs by demonstrating how they cannot be held consistently with the society's A beliefs (124). He then looks at some examples of that in contemporary Western urban society. This is an excellent account of Keller's apologetic approach for which he has become particularly appreciated through his books, e.g. *The Reason for God*.

⁷ Keller uses the expression "baseline cultural narrative" without any explanation. I take it to be equivalent to worldview and religion as I have expounded that concept above.

⁸ Throughout the book Keller uses the term "culture" in a loose way. Like religion, the word culture is one of the English language's most slippery concepts. I would plead for a more careful use of the term to refer to what a group of people feels, thinks and does, rather than the group itself. Hiebert's definition is as good as any: "the more or less integrated systems of ideas, feelings, and values and their associated patterns of behaviour and products shared by a group of people who organize and regulate what they think, feel, and do." Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 30.

⁹ I have serious reservations about Hesselgrave's designation of the three types as "Western" (conceptual), "Chinese" (concrete relational), and "Indian" (intuitional). Most of the Indians and Westerners I have met are as highly concrete relational as the Chinese. A conceptual cognitive style is, I believe, not a product of some deep cultural values but of the modern educational process, wherever that is imposed and the strength of intuition is surely directly proportional to the strength of traditional institutions in any particular culture.

In part 4, *City Vision*, Keller goes on to address the phenomenon of the city from biblical, theological and sociological perspectives. Many Christians, he points out, are indifferent or even hostile towards cities (135) but Keller takes pains to demonstrate that the biblical view of cities is neither hostile nor romantic. Nevertheless, Keller's exposition of the city in the Bible is overwhelmingly positive, owing more again to Harvie Conn than to his naysayer Jacques Ellul.¹⁰ The city, he says, is "humanity intensified" (ibid.). Referring to Psalm 122:3, Keller argues that, according to the Bible, the "essence of a city" is its close proximity, its density. Out of this flows three "signal features" that mark urban life: greater stability, greater diversity and, lastly, greater productivity and creativity. I am not convinced. The city, it seems to me, is first of all a humanly-created artefact of a society, and one that *enables* close proximity, greater stability, diversity and creativity, and is expressed by a flowering of symbols and, in particular, those symbols we call institutions. So density is a product of the city as much as is stability etc. This may seem like splitting hairs but if Keller's "essential" criterion of a city – density – is accepted then the crowd at the Millennium Stadium in the Six Nations tournament is also a city and so is the mob. Keller's assertion that "The city is an intrinsically positive social form with a checkered past and a beautiful future" (one that I would affirm, 151) makes no sense if it is essentially a densely-packed group of people. If it is expressed in symbols then it demands painstaking and sustained sociological reflection to understand those symbols and relate the Bible to them.

Throughout this section of the book Keller demonstrates, persuasively, the strategic importance of cities both in the Bible (especially in the book of Acts) and today, with the world's population having recently become majority urban for the first time in human history. In Redeemer's experience, church planting throughout the New York metropolitan area was made possible only because they first focussed on Manhattan, the city centre; "Cities are like a giant heart – drawing people in and then sending them out" (159). There are great challenges with reaching the city but along with them there are unique opportunities. Keller discusses four of these in relation to American cities: the younger generation; the "cultural elites"; accessible "unreached" people groups (diaspora communities of people from Majority World places where the gospel has not yet made a significant impact); and the poor. "I am not saying that all Christians should pack up and go to live and minister in urban areas. What I *am* saying is that the cities of the world

¹⁰ See Harvie M. Conn, ed. *Planting and Growing Urban Churches* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997); Harvie M. Conn and Manuel Ortiz, *Urban Ministry: The Kingdom, the City and the People of God* (Leicester, Inter-Varsity, 2001); and contrast with Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970). David W. Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations: Theology in an Urban World* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2011) attempts a middle path between these two contrasting positions.

are grievously underserved by the church because, in general, the people of the world are moving into cities faster than churches are” (166). Keller wants to address this deficit.

In part 5, Cultural Engagement, Keller focuses on the cultural crisis of the church in the twenty-first century as she finds herself in a world that no longer “tilts” in the direction of traditional Christianity (183). As he does so he introduces the reader to the emergence of models of relating to culture touching on the American “Religious Right” with its aggressively political approach, the approach advocated by Lesslie Newbigin – a “missionary encounter with Western culture” which he calls the “Relevance” model – favoured by a number who would identify themselves as “emerging” or “missional” (the latter is an especially fluid term that is definitely wider than the former), and two distinct approaches that are advocated by Reformed theologians – Kuyper’s “Transformationist” worldview approach and the approach Keller calls the “Two Kingdoms” model.

Keller then reviews the typology advanced by Richard Niebuhr more than half a century ago in his classic book *Christ and Culture* and aligns his fourfold typology with this.¹¹

<i>Keller</i>	<i>Niebuhr</i>	
Counterculturalist	Christ against Culture	
Relevance	Church of the Centre	The Christ of Culture
		Christ above Culture
Two Kingdoms		Christ and Culture in Paradox
Transformationist	Christ the Transformer of Culture	

Keller mentions a number of critiques of Niebuhr’s typology but thinks, nevertheless, that it is still helpful today. Among these critiques is D. A. Carson’s book-length critique which Keller mentions but, disappointingly, hardly engages with (196).¹² Keller is certainly at pains to combine what he

¹¹ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (London: Harper & Row, 1951).

¹² D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2008). In fact I think he is not quite fair in the way he reports Carson’s critique as two significant but unmentioned elements of the critique, it seems to me, are a tacit disapproval of Niebuhr’s whole typological project and a deep scepticism with regard to the “Christ transforming culture” position.

sees as the best of the views of other theologians on the issue. Each of the four models is described and some of their key proponents introduced. Then each, in turn, is critiqued. Keller then seeks to lead the reader to be “balanced” (a term Keller uses a lot in this book) by adopting the best insights of all four positions and avoiding their extremes (see graphic illustration on page 231). Each model has a “‘tool kit’ of biblical themes and approaches” that is more or less significant depending on the “season” in which the church in a particular place happens to find itself (238). The author is especially eager to seek an understanding between the recently polarised opinions of the Two Kingdoms and Transformationist positions, which are both advocated by Reformed theologians.¹³ In doing so he highly recommends an older work by Geerhardus Vos, *The Teaching of Jesus Concerning the Kingdom of God and the Church*.¹⁴

Keller also discusses the ecclesiological factor in cultural engagement: that is, the difference, as he puts it (after Kuyper), between the church *organised* and *organic* (240). Though Christians are not called to engage in, for example, political action, as the church (organised, i.e. in its institutional manifestation), they nevertheless continue to be the body of Christ (organic) when they go to work, and are involved in cultural activities.

Movement

Parts 6-8 constitute the third major division of Keller’s book – Movement. Keller’s concern in this section is to foster appropriate alliances and relations between gospel ministries: “Our goal as Christians and Christian ministers is never simply to build our own tribe. Instead, we seek the peace and prosperity of the city or community in which we are placed, through a gospel movement led by the Holy Spirit” (250). Loosely following Paul Hiebert, Keller advocates a “centred-set” orientation rather than a “bounded-set” orientation, in which “you work most closely with those who face with you toward the same center” (ibid.).¹⁵

¹³ This intra-mural debate is helpfully examined by Dan Strange, “Not Ashamed! The Sufficiency of Scripture for Public Theology” *Themelios* 36:2 (July 2011) 65, http://thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/not_ashamed_the_sufficiency-of-scripture_for_public_theology (accessed April 2, 2013). Strange calls the two models the “Common-Kingdom Model” and the “Confessional-Kingdom Model” and comes down firmly on the side of the latter.

¹⁴ Geerhardus Vos, *The Teaching of Jesus Concerning the Kingdom of God and the Church* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 1998).

¹⁵ Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 107-36. Reference not cited by Keller. Hiebert first published his ideas on set theory in 1978 but he is rarely cited by writers, presumably because the concept is assumed now to be common currency. Hiebert never commented publicly on the way his idea had been used in the decades subsequent to its publication. He died in 2007.

Building on the discussion of the previous pages, in part 6, Missional Community, Keller looks at the church's mission and its relation to the work of individual followers of Christ. In examining mission Keller engages with the works of key theologians who have had much influence on missiology over the past half-century or so: Karl Barth, David Bosch, and Lesslie Newbigin. Newbigin, and Bosch after him, are praised for rescuing mid-to-late twentieth century ecumenical discussions of the *mission Dei* and using it to help the church in the West come to terms with her place in the new situation of post-Christendom in which she finds herself.

Being missional means different things to different people and Keller helpfully constructs a typology of four different uses of the term: "evangelistic", "incarnational", "contextual", and "reciprocal and communal" (256-58). Keller argues that despite big differences between the "missional streams" they have a number of strengths in common and that they can form a consensus on: the recognition that, first, we live in a post-Christendom age; second, that the church has been in a cultural captivity to the values and ideas of the Enlightenment; third, that mission should be central to the purpose of the church; and fourth, though this is not always conceded, that the church must be a "contrast community" in our present society (259-60). Keller then goes on to outline three concerns with the way some are taking the central ideas of missional church: firstly, that those that view the missional church in purely and simply evangelistic terms are not comprehensive enough; secondly, that those that are too tied to a particular form of church (smaller house church, usually arguing against any kind of "attractional" aspect to meetings) are short-sighted; and, thirdly, and most seriously, that those that emphasise the communal aspect of missional church often pay scant attention to the need for an individual response to the gospel (264-71). Keller then goes on to argue that "a church can robustly preach and teach the classic evangelical doctrines and still be missional. That is, it can still have a missionary encounter with Western culture *and* reach and disciple unchurched, non-traditional nonbelievers in our society" (271). That is done, he says by (1) confronting society's idols, (2) properly contextualising our gospel presentations to avoid the simplistic and unnecessarily offensive, (3) affirming the role of *all* followers of Christ in mission (not just pastors and other "fulltime" workers), (4) understanding the church as a servant community for the common good, (5) allowing "porous" boundaries that enable outsiders to see the gospel fleshed out in the life of our communities, and (6) avoiding unnecessary divisions (271-74). These he calls the "marks of the missional church". He then devotes a chapter to the third of these, "Equipping People for Missional Living", aimed particularly at churches that overemphasise the role of the pastor, leaving the rest of the people of God feeling rather like extras than actors.

In part 7, Keller argues that “churches driven by a Center Church theological vision will pursue an integrative, balanced [there’s that word again] ministry” (291). Engaging on multiple fronts is required, Keller writes, by the nature of the gospel and the nature of the culture (because sacrificial service attracts outsiders to the gospel). After Ed Clowney, the author asserts that the plurality of metaphors for the church in the Bible suggests that focussing on any one of them will lead us to be unbalanced (292).¹⁶ No church will have a perfectly balanced set of gifts and strengths, however, and therefore each church will have to supplement its strong ministries by working on its weaknesses. In contrast with Clowney, Keller proposes that the ministry of the church should be along four “fronts”: (1) connecting people to God (through evangelism and worship), (2) connecting people to one another (through community and discipleship), (3) connecting people to the city (through mercy and justice), and (4) connecting people to the culture (through the integration of faith and work).¹⁷ These four ministry fronts are unpacked over the course of the following chapters. In so doing, Keller addresses among other issues, seeker-sensitive versus evangelistic worship, the Bible’s teaching on community, biblical foundations for ministries of mercy and justice, dualism versus “worldview Christianity” (Keller, as you may by now have predicted, affirms the latter), and the world of work.

Keller affirms both an *integral* (*holistic*) approach to mission – “Because the gospel renews not only individuals but also communities and culture, the church should disciple its people to seek personal conversion, deep Christian community, social justice, and cultural renewal in the city” (291) – and the *priority* of the ministry of the Word for the local church (324).

In part 8, Movement Dynamics, Keller contrasts movements and institutions and argues that, you guessed it, “organizations should have both institutional characteristics and movement dynamics... in the balance” (338). I think Keller’s exposition of this theme is very helpful. Movements and institutions are different in many ways but one must not automatically count institutions out while seeking a gospel movement in the city. Movements inevitably become institutions over time – “[T]hough new churches and ministries work hard at remaining informal, noncodified, and noncentralized, institutionalization is unavoidable. As soon as we make a choice... and begin carrying it into the future... we have begun to institutionalize that value or belief” (341). “Movements rely heavily on the sacrificial commitment of their members, especially when they are just getting started. In this start-up mode, members may max out their credit cards and tap into their savings to

¹⁶ Edmund P. Clowney, “Interpreting the Biblical Models of the Church,” in *Biblical Interpretation and the Church*, ed. D. A. Carson (Nashville: Nelson, 1985), 64-109.

¹⁷ Clowney’s three fronts (he doesn’t call them that or anything else either) are “the service of worship”, nurture, and mission; Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church*, Contours of Christian Theology, (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1995) chapters 9-11.

get this going. But this way of living is unsustainable" (342). So Keller affirms institutions while warning of the dangers inherent in the process of institutionalisation and arguing that a "strong, dynamic movement... occupies [a] difficult space in the center – the place of tension and balance between being a freewheeling organism and a disciplined organization" (ibid.). Keller's emphasis in these chapters, however, is on the importance of *movement dynamics* precisely because of this inevitable process of institutionalisation: "it is necessary for churches to *intentionally* cultivate the dynamics that characterize a healthy movement" (351). All churches should give careful thought to this issue. Much of the inertia that we experience in our churches, while understandable in terms of institutions is a serious obstacle to gospel ministry in our cities or wherever the Lord has placed us.

A key element in the movement dynamics of the Center Church theological vision is church planting. In encouraging the planting of new churches Keller, interacting with the writing of the missiologist and founder of Church Growth theory, Donald McGavran, John Stott and Tim Chester asserts, rightly in my view, that it can have a renewing impact on an established church. He argues that churches need to foster a natural church-planting mind-set in which the task is considered something that we do all the time rather than a cathartic experience that everyone is glad to be over with (356). He argues, even, that it should be regarded as a fifth "ministry front" (357). I find this odd. Is it a fifth front or not? If it is then perhaps he should have included it along with the other four he covered earlier. Perhaps he is wary of a "hardening of the categories" once such a construct is created but if that is so why is the rest of the structure of the theological vision so carefully defined? Or is Keller's own theological vision still developing?

Theological vision revisited

Which brings me back to theological vision. Keller has worked hard to formulate a theological vision for ministry in the city in late modernity. In doing so he is concerned that readers (and visitors involved in the City to City organisation) do not simply take the vision as a "Redeemer model" and apply it to their context uncritically (25). In fact, he reports that he has been "disappointed to visit some congregations that have imitated our programs – even our bulletins – and haven't grasped the underlying theological principles that animate us" (97). The imitators, says Keller, "haven't done the hard work of contextualization, reflecting on their own cultural situation and perspective to seek to better communicate the gospel to their own context" (ibid.). But part of the problem may lie in the way this theological vision has been communicated. Perhaps the trip to Manhattan with its jaw-dropping skyscrapers and incredible wealth and power overawes the visitor from Caracas, Cairo or Kolkata. The formulation of a theological vision for any one

of those cities will not be “Center Church”. It may look entirely different, for it will be borne out of a deep reflection not only on late modernity but on the many layers of religious tradition that are to be found there. So my advice to the reader, and one that I think Keller would, on reflection, affirm, is read Center Church carefully and prayerfully and then, don’t do as he *says*, do as he *does* – go and construct your own theological vision for the place and time that God has put you in his redemptive purposes.

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BOOK REVIEWS

Paul's Letter to the Romans (Pillar New Testament Commentary)

Colin G. Kruse, Apollos, 2012, 627pp, £32.99

The *Pillar New Testament Commentary* series began by drawing together four previously independent commentaries (Don Carson on John, Philip Edgcumbe Hughes on Revelation and Leon Morris on Matthew and Romans) and has since been expanding to cover the rest of the New Testament. There are currently 14 volumes available and the series is deservedly popular for achieving its goal of blending “rigorous exegesis and exposition, with an eye alert both to biblical theology and to the contemporary relevance of the Bible, without confusing the commentary and the sermon” (xiv).

Alongside this expansion there is also a recognition that the earliest volumes require updating. Carson is said to be writing on Revelation to replace Hughes' commentary and Kruse's new commentary on Romans replaces that of Morris. Although Morris' *Romans* is only 25 years old, the need to update was there almost from the beginning. Published in 1988, the same year as Dunn's flagship New Perspective work in the *Word Biblical Commentary* series, Morris makes no reference to E. P. Sanders' 1977 work *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. As a result readers have had to look beyond the *Pillar* series for critical reflection on the New Perspective, and have been well served by the commentaries of Douglas Moo (*NICNT*, 1996) and Thomas Schreiner (*BECNT*, 1998). In light of this, Kruse's new commentary was certainly required to keep the series up to date, but the question that many will ask is whether is it worth acquiring it either ahead of, or in addition to, those excellent commentaries? In search of an answer we will give a brief sketch of the approach Kruse takes, comparing it with Morris along the way and with Moo and Schreiner towards the end.

In keeping with the *Pillar* series, Kruse offers a brief introduction (34pp) and then exegetes the text verse by verse, based on the NIV 2011. The introduction deals with questions of the letter's purpose and integrity, and judiciously weighs the contributions of rhetorical studies of Romans and the New Perspective.¹ On the latter, Kruse concedes that Paul's doctrine of justification was articulated in defence of the Gentile mission and that the doctrine of justification is not itself the gospel, which Kruse defines as “the good news of what God has done through his Son's atoning death and

¹ Those looking for a more in-depth introduction to Romans could consult Richard N. Longenecker, *Introducing Romans: Critical Issues in Paul's Most Famous Letter* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2011) which is effectively a 500 page introduction to his forthcoming Romans commentary in the *NIGTC* series. On the other hand, Kruse's 34 pages distil the main issues and debates admirably.

resurrection to deal with the effects of the fall upon individuals, society, and ultimately the cosmos" (22). On the other hand Kruse insists that Paul was "equally if not more critical of the legalistic tendencies found among some of his fellow Jews" (21) as he was of their ethnocentrism and exclusivism, and that justification accordingly "has to do with God's gracious acquittal of guilty sinners" (22). The introduction concludes with a helpful overview of theological themes in the letter and a discussion of where to locate the centre of Paul's theology. Like Morris, Kruse notes the "overwhelmingly theocentric nature" of Romans and, taking that as a guide, argues that "the centre, heart, and organizing principle of Pauline theology is the action of God through the person and work of Jesus Christ to deal with the effects of human sin, individually, communally, and cosmically" (33).²

Kruse outlines the flow of Romans as follows:

- I. Letter introduction (1:1-17)
- II. Exposition and defence of the gospel (1:18-11:36)
 - A. Humanity under the power of sin and exposed to wrath (1:18-3:20)
 - B. God's saving righteousness revealed (3:21-4:25)
 - C. Justification brings freedom and hope (5:1-8:39)
 - D. Israel and the purposes of God (9:1-11:36)
- III. The ethical outworking of the gospel (12:1-15:13)
- IV. Paul's ministry and future plans (15:14-33)
- V. Conclusion (16:1-27)

Embedded within the exegesis of those sections are the "additional notes." These are adopted from Morris' commentary, rather than being a regular feature of the *Pillar* series, and are one of the highlights, but whereas Morris had 6 additional notes, and none after chapter 3, Kruse has 49 by my count. These vary in length from a few paragraphs to a few pages and they vary somewhat in purpose. In some cases they address debates surrounding the text under consideration (e.g. "A contradiction between 9:6-13 and 11:25-32?") or explain more fully interpretive roads not taken in the exegesis ("The identity of the 'I' in 7:7-25"). Some relate terms in a passage to the letter as a whole (e.g. "The meaning of salvation in Romans"), and others have Paul's whole body of work in view (e.g. "Eternal life in the Pauline corpus"). The result is a series of useful dictionary length articles interspersed throughout the commentary, located to answer questions as they arise.

² This emphasis on the 'cosmic' significance of the gospel could prove significant. In what is emerging as the 'post New Perspective perspective' it is argued that Paul's gospel is basically concerned with the defeat of Sin and Death seen as 'cosmic' powers and not with atonement for sinners, and this is increasingly being argued on the basis of Rom 5-8; see e.g. Douglas Campbell's essay in Michael F. Bird, ed., *Four Views on the Apostle Paul* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2012). Although Kruse does not engage with advocates of this view, the commentary helpfully blunts the force of their argument by showing that Paul roots the 'cosmic' reach of the gospel in the atoning death of Jesus.

Beyond those notes, the size and format of Kruse is very similar to that of Morris. They both weigh in at about 600 pages. Original languages are transliterated in the main text and (in Kruse) in the footnotes as well. The page layout, with the verse numbers in bold as the exegesis proceeds verse by verse is easy to navigate. The only downside is that, although the major sections receive some introduction, it is possible to lose sight of the epistolary forest once you are in the thick of the exegetical trees.³

The content, although theologically very close to Morris, clearly reflects how much has changed in the intervening 25 years. N. T. Wright was not the ubiquitous figure he now is (in Morris' index he is listed with just four references as T. W. Wright!). In addition to the gracious critique of the New Perspective, Kruse reflects or addresses a number of other trends. He detects five aspects to "the righteousness of God" when all the instances of the phrase across Romans are taken into account, namely God's distributive justice, his covenant faithfulness, his saving action, his gift of righteousness and the righteousness of life he requires from believers (26, 79-81). He takes the much disputed phrase "faith of Jesus Christ" to mean our faith in Christ rather than God's faithfulness in Christ, or the faithfulness of Christ.⁴ The only surprise here is that he does not allocate an "additional note" to the question, given its current prominence.

Kruse also reflects a greater willingness since Morris to reference extra biblical material (without going overboard) and ancient Christian interpretations of Scripture, (without neglecting either the Reformers or contemporary writers).⁵ As with the additional notes, and rather impressively, Kruse manages to incorporate a great deal without cluttering his text.

That said, the question still remains: many of these strengths are shared by Moo and Schreiner, so is there a good reason to prefer Kruse or too add him to the shelf alongside them?

³ In this respect, Kruse is the mirror image of Schreiner who proceeds paragraph by paragraph. This helps keep context in view but makes it hard to locate comment on a particular verse. The innovative *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary* series offers the most help in locating a verse within the syntactical and literary flow of the book, and Frank Thielman's volume on Romans is due to be published soon, but no date has been confirmed.

⁴ On exactly the same page of their respective commentaries Kruse and Schreiner award the debate to different sides: Having argued for the 'faith in Christ' reading, Kruse says that "a growing number of scholars support this interpretation" (181); Schreiner takes the same position but believes that "more and more scholars dispute the idea" (181). In truth, the sides are quite evenly balanced, at least in the size of their armies, if not in the strength of their arguments. For a recent collection of essays debating the question see Michael F. Bird and Preston M. Sprinkle, eds., *The Faith of Jesus Christ: Exegetical, Biblical, and Theological Studies* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009).

⁵ John Chrysostom and Ambrosiaster are often helpfully cited, although Kruse wrongly ascribes Chrysostom's comments about Junia in Rom 16:7 to Origen (561 n13).

It will be no surprise that there is little theological difference between them. They all defend the view that Jesus' death in Rom 3:21-26 has a propitiatory significance; they all take the view that Rom 7 basically describes the experience of Israel under the old covenant, even if that does not exclude either some sense in which it is Paul's own autobiography before conversion, or some sense in which the chapter's frustration might be experienced by a Christian; and they are united in the view that Rom 9 teaches individual election.

On the other hand there are four features of Kruse's commentary that make it a worthwhile purchase. First, there are places where Kruse agrees with Moo and Schreiner but is better able to defend their conclusions. For example, all three argue that Junia in Rom 16:7 was female and "prominent among the apostles", rather than well-known to them. Kruse, however, in two separate additional notes (a rare case of overkill!) cites research published more recently than Moo and Schreiner which buttresses that argument.

Second, since Kruse comes 15 years after Moo and Schreiner, he has also culled the best of other works on Romans published in the interim, including a host of monographs which inform many of the additional notes. Perhaps most notably Kruse plunders the best of Robert Jewett's 2007 *Hermeneia* commentary and N. T. Wright's 2002 *NIB* volume, saving his readers time and considerable money, given their combined price tag (£106.98)!

Third, there are of course places where Kruse differs with Moo and Schreiner. Three examples must suffice: 1. He takes 2:14-16 to refer to Gentile Christians who, by virtue of their inclusion in the new covenant, have the law written on their hearts. 2. He is more open to translating 4:1 in line with Richard Hays' suggestion: "What then shall we say? Have we found that Abraham is our forefather according to the flesh?" instead of the NIV's "What then shall we say that Abraham our forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter?" 3. Kruse argues that "all Israel" in Rom 11:26 refers to the elect from Israel throughout history rather than to a future ingathering of Jews at the end of the age (Moo, Schreiner), or to all the elect from Jews and Gentiles, now seen as the new Israel (Calvin, N. T. Wright).

Fourth, as we have noted along the way, he is impressively concise and clear. Whereas Moo and Schreiner are both around the 1,000-page mark, Kruse is just over 600 pages and yet still manages to expound the text and situate his exegesis in the broader contexts of both Pauline theology and current debates.

In conclusion therefore, Kruse's commentary is an excellent addition to the *Pillar* series and commends itself in two particular contexts. 1. As an up-to-date, evangelical and well-researched-but-not-too-technical commentary it makes a great first purchase on Romans for a student or pastor. 2. Because it summarises the major interpretive questions and highlights the most

significant recent literature it is an ideal first commentary to pull down off the shelf for any serious study of Romans, even if one might then want to turn to one of more technical commentaries for the intricacies of the debates.

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1 Corinthians (IVP New Testament Commentary Series)

Alan F. Johnson, IVP, 2004, 352pp, £11.99

This volume belongs to a commentary series designed for use by pastors, bible study leaders and teachers. Each author is a scholar with pastoral experience. The author of this commentary on 1 Corinthians was, at the time of writing, emeritus professor of New Testament and Christian Ethics at Wheaton College and Graduate School, and the combination mentioned in his title indicates that he will be competent to explain and apply this Pauline letter for living in the contemporary world. He has also written commentaries on Romans and on the Book of Revelation.

Of course, there already are fine commentaries and works on 1 Corinthians and a glance at the bibliography informs us that the author of this commentary has consulted many of them. Yet because the commentary was published almost a decade ago, there is a sense in which some of his comments may seem a bit dated. Also his constant use of American examples to illustrate his points may not always make them clear to those who do not live there.

There are several ways in which the modern church is similar to the church in Corinth at the time when Paul wrote First Corinthians. The pre-occupation with following gifted church leaders, the abuse of spiritual gifts, difficulties connected to social issues (even to the extent of despising the poorer members at the Lord's Supper), departure from what is regarded as essential doctrines (in their case the resurrection of Christ), toleration of immoral practices to an almost unbelievable extent, and the connections between the church and the surrounding culture are some of those ways. So it is not difficult to see how the message of 1 Corinthians is very relevant to the contemporary church in our society.

The introduction to the commentary details several interesting aspects of life in first-century Corinth, including the benefits of being a Roman city, a commercial centre, full of tourist attractions (the Isthmian games with musical performances and public debating as well as regular gladiatorial contests) and with a very diverse range of religious devotees. There is also a useful discussion outlining Paul's involvement with the

church in Corinth, the style of writing used in this letter (was it rhetorical?), and its main theological emphases. The author suggests that each of the problems dealt with by Paul can be connected to a failure to practise authentic love.

Johnson divides the letter into ten sections. The first is Paul's introduction and prayer. This is followed by a long section in which Paul deals with the problem of factions in the Corinthian church. As is commonly known, the practice of identifying with a prominent speaker and stressing his oratorical abilities was common in the ancient world and had been engaged in by many in the congregation. Johnson explains that Paul's solution to such a worldly attitude was to focus on the cross of Christ and its implications. When that happens, believers will have a proper attitude to their leaders. Yet at times Johnson fails to stress that other criteria need to be included. Regarding all leaders as Christ's servants is important, but does it mean that we should regard all so-called church leaders as his servants? Otherwise we will include those who are doctrinally suspect, which Johnson does in a list of such persons (does Benny Hinn fall into the category of church leaders we should listen to?). Nevertheless I found Johnson's discussion of church leaders helpful, including his references to Greek customs and terminology.

The next sections deal with (1) Paul's response to moral issues in Corinth (incest, litigation and Christians and sex in chapters 5 and 6) and (2) Paul's comments on marriage, divorce and singleness in chapter 7. Johnson goes along with traditional interpretations of those matters. Sometimes he does not comment on issues on which I would have liked further discussion, such as the role of the church in the future judgement of humans and angels. Nor does he deal with one possible deduction from Paul's comments on litigation which is that the church is competent, and indeed required, to deal with offences rather than allow them to go before the world. I have never heard of a church in Britain doing this, but I would have liked some discussion on it.

The section dealing with the problems connected to offering food to idols (8:1-11:1) has much to teach us about how far we can go as Christians in engaging in cultural practices, particularly in the areas of rights and Christian liberty. As Johnson points out, our priority must always be the progress of the gospel and the maintaining of a servant heart.

Johnson explains the section on gender roles (11:2-16) from the viewpoint that accepts that the Bible allows leadership roles to men and women. This was not always his personal view and indeed he once refused to attend a church where a woman taught the adult Sunday School class. Later, however, he changed his mind. His explanation of this controversial passage assumes that the problem in Corinth with regard to headship and to hairstyles was connected to the shame-honour culture of the time, the ignoring of which had consequences both within the church at its worship

services and outside the church in evangelism. He suggests that Paul wanted the church to be mindful of cultural expectations and not cause unnecessary offence. While this may have been the background, and the author admits we cannot know with certainty what it was, his attempt to deduce equality of leadership roles from this passage are not persuasive, at least to this reviewer.

There then follows a brief section on the Lord's Supper and the way it was abused in Corinth, after which the author considers Paul's teaching on spiritual gifts and their contribution to body life (chapters 12–14). With regard to the latter, he again argues for full participation by both genders, but he does not explain satisfactorily Paul's requirement that in some situations women have to be silent.

The ninth section concerns Paul's teaching on the future resurrection (1 Corinthians 15). The author mentions various possible reasons for its denial in Corinth and provides a helpful explanation of Paul's description of the order of events and nature of the resurrection state. He suggests that it is hard to fit a premillennial scheme into Paul's order of events and also indicates that the Son's voluntary submission to the Father at the resurrection should not be taken to imply that there is inferiority between the persons of the Trinity, but is instead connected to the Son's role as the "second man". The author concludes his commentary with a brief section on the various practical issues mentioned by Paul in his final chapter.

This commentary is certainly easy to read and in this matter the author is a model for those who venture to compose one. His range of background reading extends from the church fathers to authors from the late-twentieth century and I appreciated the occasions when he provided summaries of different views and who held them. As well as being explanatory, he also writes with a warm devotional style and in doing so helped maintain the interest of this reviewer. There were occasions, as I have indicated, when I disagreed with his interpretation, although as far as I could see he was fair to all viewpoints when dealing with a controversial matter.

Should one purchase this commentary? It all depends how many commentaries one wants on First Corinthians. I would be reluctant to suggest to Bible Study leaders and adult Sunday School classes that they use this book unless I was sure they would understand that others have disagreed convincingly with the views on gender roles that he advocates. But pastors would find many of his comments helpful.

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The Good God: Enjoying Father, Son and Spirit

Michael Reeves, Paternoster, 2012, 112pp, £9.99

Michael Reeves, Head of Theology for UCCF, presents here a highly accessible introductory guide to the doctrine of the Trinity. His aim, to present the biblical teaching on the Trinity as central to the faith, vital and essential to the Christian life, and revolutionary in its scope, is admirably and abundantly realised.

In the first chapter – What was God doing before creation? – Reeves argues that God is inherently, eternally, and pre-eminently love. Moreover, this can only be so if he is Trinitarian – “God is love *because* God is a Trinity” (p.vii). The doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son is indicative of the eternal love, communion and union between the Father and the Son. In this, and throughout the book, Reeves contrasts the Trinity with all other proposed deities. The latter are either solitary, since they are unitary and undifferentiated, or else matter co-exists and so they are not in control. Because God is love and triune, common perceptions of “God” are rendered irrelevant, erroneous and misleading. Reeves also exposes as inadequate, superfluous and laughable common attempts to illustrate the Trinity by clover leaves, the temperature of water or a Trinitarian shield.

Following this, there are chapters considering the three persons in turn. Reeves relates the self-giving love of the Trinity to the incarnation and the cross. He stresses that the vibrancy of God’s overflowing life – seen in the generation of the Son by the Father from eternity – is expressed in creation and redemption. From our perspective, salvation is more than a moral code or a transformed lifestyle; it is participation in the vibrant life of God, communicated to us in the Holy Spirit. The consequence is that the claims of militant atheism are themselves demonstrably irrelevant, for the idea of “god” against which they are levelled is that of a cold, remote, supreme ruler, rather than the loving and life-giving Trinity.

Throughout, the lively text is laced with judicious humour. There are sidebars on related themes, likenesses of such as Aristotle, Augustine, the “god” Marduk, Luther and John Owen (“with as much powder in his hair as would discharge eight cannons”). Picture and line-drawings entertain. The text itself is racy but serious, by no means superficial. Clearly and vividly it expresses profound doctrine. The book is ideal for readers for whom the Trinity appears remote, boring, or irrelevant.

I have only one minor criticism. The expression “Father, Son, Spirit,” is commonly used for the three and is prevalent here. These are personal names but used anarthrously they convey the possibility that they are merely adjectival, attributes akin to “love, goodness, holiness.” This is clearly something Reeves does not accept; naming them properly as “the Father”, “the Son”, and “the Holy Spirit” would convey his intention better.

All told, this is a splendid book, far and away the best of its kind that I have read. It should be put into the hands of as many church members as possible, besides not a few ministers.

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Baptist Theology

Stephen Holmes, T & T Clark, 2012, 192pp, £14.99

Stephen Holmes was trained and later taught at Spurgeon's College, London, and now teaches theology at the University of St Andrews. His goal, as the title suggests, is to set out a distinctive Baptist theology.

He begins in chapter 1 by providing us with an introduction to the English Baptists. After beginning in the early seventeenth century with both Arminian and Calvinist streams, the Civil War and the influence of the Model Army ensured the spread of Baptist principles, until religious liberty was finally secured in 1689. The eighteenth century was marked by divisions between Arminians, Calvinists and Hyper-Calvinists, until a robust movement of Calvinistic Baptists emerged under the leadership of Andrew Fuller.

In chapter 2 we see the emergence of the Baptists in America. They struggled under religious persecution by the Congregational establishment, and became pioneers in their campaigns for religious liberty. It was not until 1833 that they gained the freedom to worship in every state without penalty or restriction. Their numbers then grew rapidly, from 100,000 in 1800 to over three million in 1900. Much of this numerical growth was in the latter part of the century through the adoption of the "New Measures" of Charles Finney, and the organisation of local "revivals" with their associated religious excitement. However, this century also saw the emergence of a growing group of Calvinistic Baptists who adhered to the 1689 Confession of Faith. There were other divisions too, over Landmarkism, and along ethnic lines.

The second half of the nineteenth century saw the increasing influence of Modernist theology, and the social gospel. Holmes describes the emerging reaction of Fundamentalism, and then the New Evangelicalism led by Billy Graham and Carl Henry. Holmes notes the later movement of the SBC towards historic Calvinistic Baptist roots, but it is clear that he does not approve of what he regards as a new and narrow separatism, led by the likes of Mark Dever and Al Mohler.

Chapter 3 picks up the story of the English Baptists once more, noting that the nineteenth century was marked by rapid growth, and a new spirit of

evangelical unity in the development of the Baptist Union. The major figure of this period was, of course, Charles Spurgeon. He issued scathing attacks against baptismal regeneration, and theological liberalism. Holmes dismisses him as “no theologian”, states that he “...did not understand the twists and turns that had taken place in Reformed theology....” and that he “...read widely in contemporary theology, but failed to understand the subtleties of what he read...” (55). There is then brief mention of developments in Europe and beyond.

In chapter 4, Holmes engages more directly with his task of identifying distinctive Baptist theology. He notes that there is little which is distinctive about the Baptists on the major doctrines of ecumenical theology. The 1689 Confession has much in common with the Westminster and Savoy standards.

There is more to be said about Baptist distinctives in the doctrine of the church. Baptism is obviously considered first; Baptist churches in America and elsewhere would normally exclude from the Lord's Table and membership those not immersed as believers. However, in Britain the picture is different; Baptists historically stood alongside other Dissenters in facing persecution, and latterly wanted to emphasise evangelical solidarity with other believers. So, while some retain a “closed” table, many British Baptists in the tradition of Bunyan and Robert Hall do not. While many Baptists view the ordinance as a mere symbol (an enacted sermon), some see it as a “means of grace” in which the Holy Spirit is at work through the act. The emphasis on Baptism goes hand in hand with personal conversion, commitment to holiness and to mission.

On baptism, the believer is received into membership of the church. All members profess faith and are committed to following Christ; church discipline excludes the unrepentant. Baptists believe in the independency and primacy of the local church; while belonging to a variety of associations and groupings, none of these has jurisdiction over the local assembly which can withdraw at will. Churches are apostolic in the sense of holding to the apostolic teaching, and the apostolic mission of making disciples. This has nothing to do with “bishops” or ecclesiastical structures. The catholicity of the church is about unity with all true churches and believers wherever they might be, and the primary loyalty of the Baptist is not to nation or culture but to the Lord and the gospel.

The church as the body of believers is reflected in congregational church government. The body of believers is corporately responsible for discerning the mind of Christ who is the head of the local church. While sometimes accused of aping worldly “democracy”, this Baptist commitment predates modern political structures. Furthermore, it is not democracy in the sense of each one expressing his or her own will, but together by consensus discerning the will of Christ.

Associations have been a rich feature of Baptist life over the centuries, whether for sharing insights and wisdom, or for joint enterprise in training establishments and missions. Associations are built on mutual understanding and trust, and a common commitment to the gospel and to mission.

Holmes looks briefly at belief and practice regarding ordination. He clearly has little time for restricting eldership and teaching roles to men and describes this practice as completely inconsistent with Baptist principles, where all members share the same authority.

Chapter 6 is important in highlighting Baptist convictions on the liberty of conscience. Thomas Helwys' *Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity* published in 1612 acknowledged that kings have authority to rule their realms, but in matters of religion they must not interfere, and priests and bishops must not compel. Roger Williams took up the same themes in America later in that century. Isaac Backus maintained that God had established separate spheres for civil and ecclesiastical government, and Backus had a particular objection to the imposition of church taxes. The issue of personal responsibility before God was highlighted in the case of Roger Williams who exiled Joshua Verdin from Providence, for compelling his wife not to attend worship. The wife has the right and duty to disobey her husband in obedience to Christ. Edgar Mullins took up this theme of "soul competency" (an unfortunate term to describe an important principle) in 1908 in his book *The Axioms of Religion*, maintaining the soul's direct access to God without human mediation.

In the final chapter, on making disciples, Holmes acknowledges the extraordinary ministry of Johann Oncken in continental Europe in the nineteenth century. His famous motto was "Every Baptist a missionary" and he emphasised the primary role of the local church. The ordinance of baptism speaks of mission, as it is characterised by the personal testimony of the baptismal candidate and public declaration of the gospel. The heritage of Andrew Fuller and William Carey speaks of the missionary God who sent his son, and now sends his people in his name.

The work of discipleship does not end, of course, with conversion. Baptist churches are covenanted communities, where each member is committed to the other in mutual accountability as they seek individually and together to serve Christ.

In summary, the distinctive Baptist theology identified by the author is an emphasis on the personal accountability of every soul before God. This leads directly to a distinctive emphasis on religious liberty which has made an impact well beyond Baptist circles.

This sense of personal accountability is not mere individualism; it is accountability first to the Lord and then to others in obedience to him. This leads to a healthy emphasis on the local church as the focus of God's work in the world, and a positive vision of the church as a covenanted group of

believers who are responsible together (both by mutual accountability and corporately) to order their affairs according to the revealed will of Christ, the head of the church. It is refreshing to be reminded that Christian unity does not rest in organisational structures, but a common confession of the Gospel. And there is a strong sense of the imperative of mission to the world.

Baptist distinctives are also prone to abuse, however. Congregational church government can degenerate into mere democracy, and the church meeting an opportunity to air personal views and agendas. An emphasis on the local church can lead to a proud sense of autonomy and independence from the wider church, which is debilitating (we need to be reminded of the history of Baptist associations, especially amongst the early Particular Baptists). The emphasis on baptism of believers alone can lead to the unchurched of those with different convictions. All of these themes deserve further attention; the errors are best corrected by a reminder of the biblical principles which underpin Baptist practice, and how these have been worked out historically. As the author himself states, he has only made a beginning. It would be refreshing to see more work along these lines from within the conservative evangelical constituency.

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Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony

Richard Bauckham, Eerdmans, 2008, 552pp, £17.99

This book, which the formidable Bauckham himself regards as perhaps his most important work, has justifiably attracted a great deal of attention. The central aim of the book is to establish the crucial place of eyewitness testimony in the formation of the canonical Gospels. In this way, “theology and history may meet in the historical Jesus instead of parting company there”(5) – as they have done so often and so disastrously in the annals of critical scholarship. It is a substantial and scholarly work, which covers a great deal of ground in considerable depth; Bauckham’s mastery of a wide range of disciplines is evident and verges on the intimidating!

Bauckham really has two key arguments in this work: that the Gospels are based directly on eyewitness testimony; and that eyewitness testimony can, under the right conditions, be extremely reliable and consistent. These arguments are applied extensively to specific Gospels, especially the Gospel of John.

To establish his first argument, he draws heavily – even exhaustively – on Papias, returning repeatedly to the fragments quoted by Eusebius and

making us wish that the latter had allowed more material through his critical filter. What Bauckham does with these few paragraphs is impressive and for the most part very convincing. This allows him to do a thorough demolition job on the persistent legacy of form criticism and the whole idea that the Gospels emerged from an extended period of anonymous transmission and reshaping in the various communities that gave rise to them. (I did find myself wondering whether James Dunn had actually read the rather stern rebuke he receives on page 291 before writing his enthusiastic cover blurb!) He then proceeds, in a series of absorbing chapters, to find evidence for the role of eyewitnesses in the text of the Gospels, especially Mark (supporting the traditional role of Peter in its composition) and John. If the arguments here occasionally seem to press a little too far and become convoluted especially in chapter 7, this is a minor criticism only. The discussion of protective anonymity in chapter 8 is fascinating and again convincing.

Bauckham's second key argument is about the reliability of eyewitness testimony. Here he critiques several models of oral tradition and lays the foundations for what follows – putting the eyewitnesses in their “proper place” in the model of transmission. It is here that the breadth of Bauckham's interaction with other fields is at its most impressive. Before addressing specific accounts, he next makes a more general approach to the New Testament documents. He discusses possible explanations for differences between the Gospel accounts. Of the five reasons he cites (in addition to failures of memory and mistakes (286-87), three are at least potentially in conflict with a doctrine of verbal inspiration. Some attention to this issue would have been very welcome, but this, it seems, is methodologically excluded from consideration.

This treatment of transmission is followed by an extended discussion of the reliability of eyewitness memory as it relates to the Gospel traditions. There is much of interest here in terms of bolstering the reasonableness of trusting the Gospel accounts, but again and unsurprisingly, no mention of the Spirit's role in safeguarding the witnesses' memories or overruling the production of the subsequent records. Most of the rest of the book is devoted to the authorship of John's Gospel and related issues (see below) and Bauckham closes with a general argument for the value of personal testimony in historiography, especially in extraordinary and unique events. Here he draws a striking parallel, which will probably cause offence in some quarters despite the care with which he does it, between the eyewitness testimonies of Jesus and the testimonies of Holocaust survivors.

The book has many great strengths and will prove of considerable help in evangelical apologetics. Tim Keller refers to it several times in his *The Reason for God* and *King's Cross*. In summary, then, Bauckham takes us about as far as it is possible to go towards establishing the reliability of the Gospels on the basis of logic and reasonableness. To go further would require more –

invoking the doctrine of verbal inspiration of the Scriptures – and here, of course, Bauckham does not venture. In this book, he occupies the space between the sceptical liberal scholarship which approaches the New Testament documents with a bias to contempt, and a full evangelical doctrine of Scripture. What is impressive is how far he can go *without* invoking that doctrine.

There are at least two points at which Bauckham's confidence in his reasoning runs a little too far – or at any rate, these are the two which will immediately jar with readers of *Foundations*. These relate to his conclusions about the authorship of the gospels of Matthew and John. On Matthew, firstly, he concludes that Levi (in Mark 2:16 and Luke 5:27) cannot, in fact, be another name for the disciple Matthew (Matthew 9:9). His reasoning (108ff) is based on his analysis of the frequency of Semitic personal names. Essentially, because Levi and Matthew are both common names, they almost certainly cannot be borne by the same man. Consequently, the name of Levi must have been deliberately changed in Matthew's Gospel, presumably to provide a narrative of the calling of the disciple after whom the Gospel is named. From this it is deduced that Matthew the disciple cannot himself be the author of the Gospel, since if he were, he could have supplied the true account of his own calling.

Bauckham stands by this argument in spite of his own stated position: (a) that he takes Papias very seriously, and Papias clearly believes Matthew wrote the Gospel that bears his name; (b) that the Twelve (i.e. including Matthew) corporately preserved the Gospel traditions (not to mention the other controls on accurate transmission which Bauckham so carefully sets out); and (c) that the Gospels bore the names by which they are now known right from the outset. His statement elsewhere that Matthew the disciple was a major *source* for this gospel does not really square this particular circle.

Secondly, on John's Gospel, Bauckham devotes several of his closing chapters – in fact it amounts to nearly a third of the book – to establishing the identification of four characters: the "beloved disciple" of John's Gospel; the author of John's Gospel; "John of Ephesus"; and Papias' "John the elder". Bauckham argues that these are all the same person and that, therefore, John the son of Zebedee was *not* the author of the Gospel. There is a great deal of very strong argumentation here. The idea that John 21:24 might envisage only a distant relationship between the beloved disciple and the writing of the text is rightly rubbished (361). The way in which this disciple's relationship to Peter is presented in the gospel is helpful and convincing, though the conclusion itself is not particularly new ("the point of the double story of the two disciples is to show how each, through his own, different way of following Jesus, relates to the church after the resurrection" (400).

The problems arise over the interpretation of the early writers on John. For a start, Bauckham's argument from Papias depends on the assumption

that his “John the elder” is a different person from the John he lists among the apostles. What if “John the elder” (along with Aristion) is listed separately only because, unlike the others, he was still alive at the time Papias is describing? (This is the possibility that Carson argues, for example.) The discussion of Polycrates is complex – it involves his description of John wearing the high-priestly *petalon* – but here Bauckham’s argument rests on Polycrates’ supposed identification of the beloved disciple and John the author of the Gospel (an identification Polycrates certainly does make) with the priestly John of Acts 4:6. But the evidence is not strong enough. How could a second century bishop, with very strong connections to the heroes of the first century, possibly believe that a disciple of Jesus could have become high priest? Bauckham’s assertion that Irenaeus makes no clear identification of John the son of Zebedee with the Gospel writer is surely also questionable.

As with the authorship of Matthew, Bauckham’s conclusion here simply raises further questions. If he is right, why is John the son of Zebedee never individually mentioned in John’s Gospel? And where is the historical room for this beloved disciple, this second John who is not one of the Twelve, whose eyewitness access to Jesus is intermittent, and yet takes the place of greatest intimacy at the Last Supper? And again, given the argument that the Gospels must have been identified by name very early, is it at all credible, *particularly* in view of the commonness of the name John, that the recipient churches would not make certain which John was the true author? In both these arguments over authorship, I think the problem originates from extended chains of reasoning, probability based on probability. As any student of statistics knows, a succession of conditional probabilities swiftly leads to extreme unlikelihood.

So much for the caveats. Much more could be said, but overall, this is a great book. I highly recommend it to anyone who is interested in defending the integrity of the Gospel accounts or in the evidence for the way they came to be written. It is not a quick read, but it is an absorbing one. It is a book that any future authors in this field will need to interact with, which is probably the appropriate criterion for defining it as “important”. And the cover blurbs are fully justified in saying so.

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