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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

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EDITORIAL

Much ink has been spilt on the relationship between God's sovereignty and human responsibility. Back in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, Pelagius (a British-born monk) caused great controversy by his denial of predestination and insistence upon man's moral ability not to sin. He was refuted (indirectly) by Augustine of Hippo and his doctrines were eventually condemned at the Council of Carthage in AD 418. Many centuries later, the debate was re-ignited by the writings of Dutch theologian, Jacob Arminius (AD 1560-1609) and his followers, who taught that election was on the basis of foreseen faith, a universal atonement, grace that could be resisted and from which lapse was possible. These teachings were enshrined in the Five Articles of Remonstrance (AD 1610) which were later rebutted by the Synod of Dort in AD 1618-19, from which we gained the classic mnemonic of Calvinism – TULIP. More recently, the concept of God's sovereignty over the events of human history has been challenged by proponents of open theism.

Debates on the relationship between God's sovereignty and human responsibility sometimes take place in the cool (and somewhat abstract) confines of university departments, seminaries or synods. But in regular church life the question is rarely asked from a merely academic standpoint. More often than not the backdrop to the question is an experience of intense suffering, either for the questioner themselves or for one of their friends. This is a topic with which we should engage with great seriousness, pastoral sensitivity and Berean-like humility (Acts 17:11).

Over the past two editorials we have been looking at how the maxim "distinct but inseparable" assists in our understanding of the relationship between the three persons of the Trinity and the two natures of Christ. It is also a great explanatory aid when considering the relationship between God's sovereignty and responsibility. Scripture leaves us in no doubt that God is absolutely sovereign over his creation. "Why should the nations say, 'Where is their God?' Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases" (Psa 115:2-3). The apostle Paul reminds his readers in Eph 1:11 that God "works all things according to the counsel of his will". Yet Scripture is equally clear that God's sovereignty in no way functions to exclude or diminish human responsibility. As D. A. Carson notes: "There are countless passages where human beings are commanded to obey, choose, believe, and are held accountable if they fail to do so" (*A Call to Spiritual Reformation* (Nottingham: IVP, 1992), 149). Jesus' call as he began his earthly ministry "[T]he kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the gospel" (Mark 1:15) presupposes that we are sentient moral beings who are responsible for our actions. The same presupposition underlies the call of Peter at Pentecost: "Repent and be

baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38).

The complex interaction of God's sovereignty and human responsibility is seen with particular prominence in Joseph's recounting of the causal factors leading to his sale into slavery and eventual elevation to the rank of first minister of Egypt. In Gen 50:20, Joseph addresses his brothers: "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today." We notice that there are parallel intentions running throughout the whole course of events. It is not that the brothers intended an evil outcome for Joseph but that God turned it around for good at the last minute. Nor is it that God's plans for good were somehow frustrated by the brothers' evil intention. Rather, in the same course of events (Joseph being sold into slavery) God had good purposes (the salvation of his people) and the brothers had evil (a desire to be rid of their brother). In no way was God contingent on human actions or implicated in the brother's guilt.

The same parallel intentions are seen in the greatest event in human history – the cross and resurrection of Christ. Following their release from prison in Acts 4, Peter and John return to their people and the church begins to pray. The prayer opens with an acknowledgment of God's sovereignty over the whole sway of human history (recalling Psa 2:1-2) and then provides this commentary on the cross: "for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place" (Acts 4:27-28). The church is not slow to ascribe guilt to Herod, Pontius Pilate, the Gentiles and the Jews. The cross was the ultimate act of culpable rebellion as humanity united to murder God's anointed king. And yet the prayer also attributes the events to God's good, predestining will. Again there are parallel intentions with God's will in no way being contingent upon the actions of humanity, nor his character impugned by their evil motives. Likewise, the conspirators' guilt is not lessened or excused in any way by the events unfolding according to God's predestining plan.

In explaining the relationship between God's sovereignty and human responsibility it is important to emphasise their distinct, yet inseparable, relationship. If we separate God's sovereignty from human responsibility we end up truncating God's sovereignty and making him contingent upon human agents – turning the creator of the universe into a divine Garry Kasparov. If we fail to distinguish sovereignty from human responsibility we end up implicating God in the evil intentions of mankind. Instead we must recognise that God stands behind good and evil asymmetrically. As Carson rightly observes: "God stands behind evil in such a way that not even evil takes place outside the bounds of his sovereignty, yet the evil is not morally chargeable to him: it

is always chargeable to secondary agents, to secondary causes" (*How Long O Lord* (Leicester: IVP, 1990), 213). The maxim "distinct but inseparable" does not resolve all the mysteries and complexities of God's sovereignty and human responsibility. These are ultimately tied up with the simultaneous transcendence and immanence of God. However, the maxim does guide our feet as we walk the narrow path of biblical orthodoxy in this crucial and pastorally sensitive area.

Having focussed upon the growth and development of gospel partnerships in the previous issue of Foundations, this issue contains articles covering a broader range of theological topics. Cornelis Bennema, a lecturer in New Testament at WEST and speaker at next year's Theological Study Conference, examines the historical reliability of John's Gospel. He engages with some of his previous work, noting where his position has since developed, been refined and clarified. Bennema concludes that the Gospel of John provides the accurate and reliable eyewitness account of John of Zebedee about the life and ministry of Jesus.

Chris Richards, a consultant paediatrician in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, provides a stimulating and provocative evaluation of the ethics of IVF. Writing from a Reformed perspective, he challenges the prevailing view that IVF is permissible where only one or two embryos, derived from a married couple, are created and implanted at each attempt. Richards argues that, even under such conditions, artificial conception transgresses the Sixth and Seventh commandments. John James evaluates the account of conversion in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, considering to what extent Bunyan believed it to be paradigmatic. James traces out a number of theological and pastoral considerations that may be significant for contemporary evangelicalism. He concludes that, while conversion is tortuous, complicated and varied, it is right to recognise the place of despondency and perseverance which in turn will guard us against easy-believism.

Paul Davies, writing from a missional perspective, proposes that Luke / Acts is structured around the concept of "the advance of the way of the Lord". He draws out a number of missiological observations from this reading and then considers what applications they might have for the Latin-American Church's mission. Also included in this issue are review articles of Copan and Litwak's recent work on apologetics, Dan Strange's monograph on the theology of religions, and Ray Evans' book on church growth dynamics.

As ever, I trust that you enjoy reading this issue of Foundations. Contact details for correspondence and the submission of articles are available on the Affinity website – www.affinity.org.uk

Ralph Cunningham
November 2014

THE HISTORICAL RELIABILITY OF THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

Cornelis Bennema^{*}

A majority of biblical scholars are sceptical about the historical reliability of the Gospel of John. After delineating the problem and defining key terms, this article presents a cumulative case to the contrary by looking at issues such as ancient history writing, oral tradition, authorship, genre, the historical quality of John's Gospel, social memory, chronology, archaeology and names. The argument is that the Gospel of John is the accurate and reliable eyewitness account of John of Zebedee about the life and ministry of Jesus.

I. Introduction

Many Christians, mostly Evangelicals (though this term means different things to different people), regard the Bible as the inspired, inerrant and infallible Word of God (though these terms need clarification too). They may therefore not question or probe the issue of the historical reliability of the Gospel of John. The majority of scholars, however, do wrestle with this issue and are sceptical about the historical value of John's account of Jesus. This article does not present a new case. Instead, I draw on existing arguments in order to present a cumulative case in defence of the historical reliability of the Gospel of John. Specifically, I seek to argue that the Gospel of John is the accurate and reliable eyewitness account of the Beloved Disciple about the life and ministry of Jesus. The Beloved Disciple is most probably John of Zebedee and claims that his eyewitness account is a trustworthy basis for a life-giving belief in Jesus.

II. An Elaboration of the Problem

Since the rise of historical criticism, a majority of biblical scholars have been sceptical to varying degrees about the historical reliability of the Gospel of John. This is due to the many differences between the Gospel of John and the Synoptics, coupled with the presupposition that the Synoptics are more historically reliable than the Gospel of John. Among the most sceptical, we

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find scholars such as Maurice Casey and Louis Ruprecht. Casey argues that John's Gospel is profoundly untrue, both historically and theologically, because it provides an inaccurate account of the life and ministry of Jesus, and adopts an anti-Jewish stance.¹ Differently, Ruprecht proposes that John intentionally and radically reinterpreted the story of Jesus' life in order to subvert and replace Mark's Gospel (and the other Synoptics) – and his Gospel won out in later Christianity.² Ruprecht seems to have an ideological axe to grind because he holds that John's Gospel has (negatively) fuelled the fundamentalist evangelical movement in the United States today.³

While Casey and Ruprecht are perhaps on the most sceptical end of the spectrum, others are not far removed. Louis Martyn, for example, sees two historical stages in the Gospel of John, in which the later history of the so-called "Johannine community" takes priority over the earlier history of Jesus' life and ministry.⁴ His case in point is John 9, where the story of the blind man being thrown out by the Pharisees is used to accommodate the story of Johannine Christians being expelled from the Jewish synagogue. While Martyn does not deny the historicity of the blind man's story in itself, the fusion of two time periods leads to historical distortions. So, according to Martyn, the term *aposynagōgos* ("expelled from the synagogue") in 9:22 is used anachronistically in the story since it reflects the historical reality of the Johannine community in the late first century rather than the time of Jesus.⁵ Similarly, according to Martyn, the alignment of chief priests and Pharisees in 7:32 and 11:47 is historically awkward and reflects either the setting of the Jewish war (AD 66–70) or the post-war situation.⁶ While scholars have always had difficulties with the specifics of Martyn's case, the majority have accepted the general thrust of his argument. However, we will see that reading the Gospel of John as the story of the Johannine church rather than the story of Jesus defies the Gospel's genre.

¹ Maurice Casey, *Is John's Gospel True?* (London: Routledge, 1996).

² Louis A. Ruprecht, *This Tragic Gospel: How John Corrupted the Heart of Christianity* (San Francisco: Wiley, 2008).

³ *Ibid.*, 187.

⁴ James Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (3rd edn.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003 [orig. 1968]).

⁵ For a critique, see Edward W. Klink III, 'Expulsion from the Synagogue? Rethinking a Johannine Anachronism', *TynB* 59 (2008): 99–118.

⁶ Martyn, *History*, 86. However, Urban C. von Wahlde provides an excellent case for the historical reliability of the alliance of the chief priests and Pharisees, suggesting that the two recorded meetings of the Sanhedrin in John occurred in the context of an *impending national crisis* ('The Relationships between Pharisees and Chief Priests: Some Observations on the Texts in Matthew, John and Josephus', *NTS* 42 [1996]: 518 n. 34, 522 n. 43). Besides, Matthew mentions the combination of chief priests and Pharisees twice in a pre-war context (21:45; 27:62), and there is also evidence that Pharisees aligned with other authorities prior to the Jewish war, such as the Sadducees (Matt. 3:7; 16:1–12), the Herodians (Mark 3:6; 12:13), and the Sadducees/chief priests of the Sanhedrin (Acts 5:17–42; 23:6–9).

More recently, Bart Ehrman argues that “faith documents” such as the Gospels are not reliable historical sources because the Gospel writers were “not interested in providing the brute facts of history for impartial observers” but in promoting faith in Jesus.⁷ In his historical study of the origins of Christianity, Dale Martin asserts that “the New Testament is simply not a reliable source for the history of Jesus or early Christianity when taken at face value”.⁸ Ehrman and Martin seem to arrive at these conclusions because they use modern standards of history to assess a first-century document rather than considering how history-writing occurred in antiquity. In addition, Martin, but also Ehrman to an extent, play off theology and history. From the outset, Martin clarifies that he approaches the New Testament as a historical rather than a theological text.⁹ I will say more about this later, but for now I suggest that faith/theology and history are not necessarily incompatible. All stories, including historical accounts, have an inbuilt bias or point of view in that every author seeks to communicate a particular message to their audiences through their written accounts. The author of the Gospel of John is observably biased – he states explicitly that he writes in order to promote a life-giving faith in Jesus among his audience (20:31) – but this does not necessarily negate the historical accuracy of his account of Jesus.

Notwithstanding my critique of these sceptical scholars, we cannot naïvely assume that the Gospel of John is a straightforward factual record of historical events. It is, to some extent, understandable why many scholars question the historical reliability of John’s Gospel. When we read the canonical Gospels, we soon realise that while they are all accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, the Gospel of John is very different from the three so-called Synoptic Gospels. For one, many accounts in the Gospel of John have no counterpart in the Synoptic Gospels. Jesus’ encounters with Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, the royal official, the invalid at the pool of Bethesda, the man born blind, and the Lazarus family are not found anywhere else. Since these encounters constitute the bulk of John’s record of Jesus’ public ministry, we could ask whether these events ever happened or whether John “invented” them in order to communicate theological truth.

Let us be clear, invention or fiction need not have connotations of being untrue or erroneous. Fictional stories such as parables, for example, can be vehicles for truth. While no serious scholar would argue that the parable of the good Samaritan describes actual events (it is a fictional story), neither would they deny its truth dimension (it is a moral story). In analogy, just as Jesus told the parable of the good Samaritan to teach about the need to be a

⁷ Bart Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (5th edn; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 243.

⁸ Dale Martin, *New Testament History and Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 180.

⁹ Martin, *New Testament History and Literature*, 1-2. Cf. Ehrman, *New Testament*, 12-14.

good neighbour, John could have told the parable of Jesus and Nicodemus to explain the theological truth that a person needs a spiritual birth in order to enter the kingdom of God. Perhaps Jesus taught such truth on a particular occasion and John couched it in a fictitious story. After all, a fictitious Nicodemus does not negate the truth of Jesus' teaching. The fact that Nicodemus features elsewhere in the narrative (7:52; 19:39) does not "prove" the historicity of Nicodemus. On the contrary, while John has Nicodemus accompany Joseph of Arimathea in the burial of Jesus, the Synoptic Gospels only mention Joseph, which appears to be an argument for Nicodemus being a fictitious character. According to John, Nicodemus was a wealthy, leading Pharisaic scholar and a member of the Sanhedrin, so it is unlikely that the Synoptic writers would have "forgotten" to mention him if he had existed. Something similar occurs in the Lazarus story. While Luke mentions Martha and Mary in 10:38-42, there is no mention of Lazarus. It is very unlike Luke, who claims to have investigated everything carefully, to have left out an extraordinary event like the death and raising of a close friend of Jesus. And who witnessed the dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman (for the disciples had gone to the village)? Should we assume that Jesus verbally repeated the conversation later to his disciples? Is it possible that John has presented Jesus' teaching on "living water" in an imaginative story form? If so, would this negate its theological thrust that Jesus is the life-giver who can quench people's spiritual thirst?

In addition to accounts not found in the Synoptics, John's Gospel also appears to be at odds with the Synoptics on significant occasions. Take for example Jesus' so-called "cleansing" of the temple. Most scholars agree that Jesus did this only once, towards the end of his ministry, as the Synoptics have recorded, and John brought it forward to 2:13-22, presumably for theological reasons.¹⁰ But is this violation of chronology not deceptive or at least "fictitious" in that it most likely did not happen early on in Jesus' ministry? More importantly, while the cleansing of the temple in the Synoptics precipitates Jesus' arrest and execution, in John's Gospel it is Jesus' raising of Lazarus (an account absent from the Synoptics) that triggers the plot to kill Jesus.

Finally, there are the so-called Johannine aporias or "bumps in the text", which may indicate the insertion of other material by a later editor. Let me provide a few examples. According to the textual evidence, the account of the woman caught in adultery (7:53-8:11) is almost certainly not part of the original Gospel. Jesus' first farewell speech to the disciples ends abruptly, "Get up, let us go from here" (14:31), and it seems that the narrative logically resumes in 18:1, "After Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his

¹⁰ For a defence of two cleansings of the temple, see D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1991), 177-178.

disciples across the Kidron valley to a place where there was a garden.” As a result, many scholars view John 15–17 as later material, inserted into the story by another author/editor. Most also consider John 21 a later addition because John 20 describes Jesus’ resurrection appearances, his imparting the Spirit to the disciples and the reminder of their future mission. What more is there to tell? In fact, stating the purpose of the Gospel in 20:30–31 seems a very appropriate way to finish this Gospel.

These examples underscore the obvious questions about the historical reliability of the Gospel of John. Unless we want to put our minds in the dogmatic sand, we must face these issues with integrity and courage. I suggest we must navigate between the Scylla of being naïvely or rigidly dogmatic and the Charybdis of yielding too easily to the pressure of relinquishing the historical reliability of John’s Gospel.¹¹ In 2002, in an excursus that was swiftly formulated to prepare my doctoral dissertation for publication, I stated that “the Fourth Gospel moves along a spectrum of a mixture of (what we would call) ‘history’ and ‘fiction’”.¹² What I meant was that the author did not produce a strict historical record of the bare facts but employed a legitimate degree of freedom to select, arrange and present his material in order to bring out the theological significance of Jesus’ life and ministry – and this literary creativity I called “fiction”. I intentionally used “fiction” as the opposite of “history” in order to position John’s Gospel somewhere on that spectrum. If we faithfully retell a sermon heard earlier, in our own words rather than verbatim, would there not arguably be a fictitious element to it? If we accurately summarise three teaching sessions by the same person held on different occasions, would this not contain a fictitious dimension? My dissertation was not a historical-critical study of John’s Gospel but a *theological* interpretation of the role of the Spirit in salvation in John’s Gospel, and hence historical issues were not immediately pertinent to my argument. Nevertheless, I ended the excursus saying that I shall “attempt to reconstruct what, according to the Evangelist, ‘happened’ during Jesus’ earthly ministry”, which implicitly affirmed my commitment to the

¹¹ The Synoptic Gospels do have their own issues of historical reliability. For example, did Jesus teach all the material recorded in Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount in one sitting and Luke dispersed this teaching over various chapters to suit his own purposes, or did Matthew collect various teachings of Jesus over time and arrange them in one stylish sermon? So, who was historically accurate and who used “creative freedom”? Or, regarding the healing of blind Bartimaeus (Matt. 20:29–34; Mark 10:46–52; Luke 18:35–43), one must ask which account is historically accurate because did Jesus heal the blind man/men when he left Jericho (Matt., Mark) or came to Jericho (Luke)? Did Jesus heal one blind man (Mark, Luke) or two (Matt.)? Did Jesus heal the blind man/men by a word (Mark, Luke) or also by touching (Matt.)?

¹² Cornelis Bennema, *The Power of Saving Wisdom: An Investigation of Spirit and Wisdom in Relation to the Soteriology of the Fourth Gospel* (WUNT II/148; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 16 (cf. p. 106).

historicity of the Johannine narrative.¹³ Even so, my understanding has since developed and, in hindsight, I now consider the terms “fiction” and “fictitious” unhelpful.¹⁴ I concede that back in 2002 I sailed, unintentionally, too closely to the Charybdis of the argument. Hence, in this article I seek to adjust my argument in order to navigate a better course.

III. Defining the Terms “History” and “Historical Reliability”

It is crucial to clarify my understanding of the key terms “history” and “historical reliability.” While “history” may refer to the bare account of events of the past, the result would merely be a timeline of unrelated events. I suggest that “history” is more than this and includes the *interpretation* of these past events. That is, history includes the description of past events in terms of their causes, effects and correlations. This implies that when a historian interprets the events of the past, the historical account will have an inbuilt bias or point of view. One only needs to read, for example, a historical account of colonial India by a British historian and one by an Indian historian to realise this.

“Historical reliability” does not necessarily imply an objective factual recording of the events as they really happened but has to do with whether a historical account is trustworthy, and presents a faithful, reliable and accurate interpretation of the significance and correlation of past events. Historical reliability has more to do with the *ipsissima vox* (“the exact voice”) than the *ipsissima verba* (“the exact words”) of the protagonist. Hence, the Gospel of John is historically reliable to the extent that it faithfully testifies to the things Jesus said and did, *and* their significance. We must bear in mind, as Tom Thatcher explains, that John did not write his Gospel for recording or archiving purposes but for rhetorical purposes, namely to persuade his audience to believe (i.e. to accept as true) certain things about Jesus and to commit themselves in relationship to him in order to partake in the divine

¹³ Bennema, *Power of Saving Wisdom*, 17.

¹⁴ Let me provide a few examples of such developments. In my 2005 commentary on John’s Gospel, I wrote, “I contend that Nicodemus was a historical person who actually had a conversation with Jesus. As such, the burden of proof is on those who believe that John wove a story around an imaginary character, Nicodemus.” (*Excavating John’s Gospel: A Commentary for Today* [Delhi: ISPCK, 2005; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008], 8). In my 2009 book on Johannine characters, I wrote, “the Gospel of John is a non-fictional narrative whose author is a reliable eyewitness to the events recorded (19:35; 21:24)” and “the Johannine characters have historical referents and must be interpreted within the socio-historical first-century Jewish context.” (*Encountering Jesus: Character Studies in the Gospel of John* [Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009], 13). Then, on p. 78 of the same book I presented an argument for the historicity of Nicodemus, and on pp. 178-181 I argued extensively for John the son of Zebedee as the author of this Gospel.

life.¹⁵ A “loose” understanding of historical reliability, as Stephen Evans suggests, may simply mean that any statement attributed to Jesus should not lead to a false belief about the character and identity of Jesus.¹⁶ Besides, rather than employing modern standards of historiography, “first-century understandings of what counts as a truthful historical account provide the relevant standards” for assessing the Johannine text.¹⁷

IV. Ancient History Writing

In order to gauge the historical reliability of John’s Gospel, we must consider how history writing occurred in the first century. Joel Green explains that the aim of history writing in antiquity was to persuade readers to a particular reading of the past. In addition, “all history writing (whether by the NT evangelists or modern historians) is partial – that is, incomplete and perspectival” because (i) historians make choices about what to include and exclude, and (ii) they order the past events in a causal sequence that draws out the significance of the past.¹⁸ Craig Keener states that writing history in antiquity was a serious issue – history was supposed to be truthful and based on proper research. However, redacting or paraphrasing the words of characters was a normal rhetorical practice. While good historians would not fabricate historical events, they could enhance their narratives for literary, moralistic and political purposes, or alter or add explanatory details. Good historians also tried to distinguish between accurate and inaccurate sources, and eyewitness accounts were the best.¹⁹

Based on Samuel Byrskog’s work, Richard Bauckham explains that ancient historians were convinced that true history could only be written while events were still within living memory, based on the oral reports of eyewitnesses (preferably including themselves). Ancient historiography ideally required eyewitness testimony, that is, oral testimony was preferable to written sources. Besides, the ideal eyewitness was not a dispassionate observer but an active participant in the events, who was able to understand and interpret the significance of what he had witnessed, i.e., the eyewitness was able to provide an insider perspective. Instead of cold, objective truth, ancient historians

¹⁵ Tom Thatcher, “Why John Wrote a Gospel: Memory and History in an Early Christian Community”, in Alan Kirk and Tom Thatcher (eds.), *Memory, Tradition, and Text: Uses of the Past in Early Christianity* (Semeia Studies 52; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 79-97.

¹⁶ C. Stephen Evans, “The Historical Reliability of John’s Gospel: From What Perspective Should It Be Assessed?”, in Richard Bauckham and Carl Mosser (eds.), *The Gospel of John and Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 98.

¹⁷ Evans, “Historical Reliability”, 95.

¹⁸ Joel B. Green, “Historicisms and Historiography”, in Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown and Nicholas Perrin (eds.), *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (2nd edn; Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2013), 385.

¹⁹ Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003), 18-22.

preferred firsthand insider testimony for the sake of unique access to the truth of the events, although this did not mean that they were uncritical.²⁰

V. From Jesus to the Gospel of John

In this section, I will examine how we got from Jesus to the Gospel of John. How were Jesus' oral teachings transmitted to the Johannine text? There are four major models of how the oral tradition worked.²¹ The prevalent model, the "informal, uncontrolled tradition", is the legacy of traditional form criticism advocated by Rudolf Bultmann. According to this view, "a long period of oral transmission in the churches intervened between whatever the eyewitnesses said and the Jesus traditions as they reached the Evangelists. No doubt the eyewitnesses started the process of oral tradition, but it passed through many retellings, reformulations, and expansions before the Evangelists themselves did their own editorial work on it."²² Ehrman and Martin, perhaps unsurprisingly, represent this position.²³

The second model, the "formal, teacher-controlled tradition", was first proposed by Harald Riesenfeld, developed by his pupil Birger Gerhardsson and finds contemporary support from Paul Barnett.²⁴ According to this view, the early Christian oral tradition, like the transmission of Jewish rabbinic tradition, was a rigidly controlled transmission where the disciples memorised Jesus' words and deeds.

The third model is the "informal, community-controlled tradition", developed by Kenneth Bailey and expanded by James Dunn.²⁵ In this model, the community exercises control to ensure that the traditions are preserved faithfully, and the degree of flexibility depends on the type of tradition. Dunn argues that Bultmann's model of a Jesus tradition composed of a series of layers is wrong because an oral retelling of a tradition is not like a new literary edition. In oral transmission a tradition is performed, not edited. Each oral retelling "performs" the original, and includes both stability (of subject, theme and key details) and variability (in supporting details and

²⁰ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 8-11.

²¹ For a detailed treatment of these models of oral tradition, see James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 192-210, 238-254; Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, chs. 10-12.

²² Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 240.

²³ Ehrman, *New Testament*, 70-79; Martin, *New Testament History and Literature*, 17-20.

²⁴ Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998 [orig. 1961]); idem, "The Secret of the Transmission of the Unwritten Jesus Tradition", *NTS* 51 (2005): 1-18; Paul Barnett, *The Birth of Christianity: The First Twenty Years* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), ch. 11.

²⁵ Kenneth E. Bailey, "Informal Controlled Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels", *Themelios* 20 (1995): 4-11; Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 205-210, 238-254.

particular emphases to be drawn out). The variabilities of the retellings were subject to sufficient control for the substance of the tradition.²⁶

The final model of oral transmission, the “formal, eyewitness-controlled tradition”, is rooted in the work of Samuel Byrskog (a pupil of Gerhardsson) and developed by Richard Bauckham.²⁷ Bauckham’s thesis is that:

the Gospel texts are much closer to the form in which the eyewitnesses told their stories or passed on their traditions than is commonly envisaged in current scholarship... They [the Gospels] embody the testimony of the eyewitnesses, not of course without editing and interpretation, but in a way that is substantially faithful to how the eyewitnesses themselves told it, since the Evangelists were in more or less direct contact with eyewitnesses, not removed from them by a long process of anonymous transmission of the traditions.²⁸

Even though form criticism has faded out, its legacy is still influential in that many scholars assume that the Jesus traditions passed through a long process of anonymous oral tradition in the early Christian communities and reached the Evangelists only at a late stage in this process. Some even propose that the Evangelists augmented the traditions in such a way that they reflect the *Sitz im Leben* of the communities they lived in (e.g. Louis Martyn).²⁹ Bauckham points out that this scenario is unlikely, not least because the original disciples or eyewitnesses were around for at least a generation among the earliest churches in Palestine so that the Gospels were written within living memory of the events they recount. The oral traditions reached the Evangelists much earlier than form criticism has us believe. Bauckham argues that “the period between the ‘historical’ Jesus and the Gospels was actually spanned, not by anonymous community transmission, but by the presence and testimony of the eyewitnesses, who remained the authoritative sources of their traditions until their deaths”. Thus, *eyewitness testimony*, not oral tradition, should be our principal model to discover how the Jesus traditions reached the Gospel writers.³⁰ This would make sense of the claim of John’s Gospel that it is a testimony of Jesus written by an eyewitness (19:35; 20:31; 21:24). We now turn to the issue of authorship.

VI. Authorship

Many scholars contend that this Gospel came to us anonymously because the Greek text originally did not have the inscription [*euangelion*] *kata Iōannēn*

²⁶ Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 248-249.

²⁷ Samuel Byrskog, *Story as History – History as Story* (WUNT 123; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000); Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, chs. 10–12.

²⁸ Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 6.

²⁹ For a critique of this position, see Richard Bauckham (ed.), *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

³⁰ Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 6-8 (quotation from p. 8).

("[the gospel] according to John") and there is no indication in the Gospel who the author is. Since there is no space for the whole argument, I will summarize the case made elsewhere that the Beloved Disciple was John of Zebedee.³¹ Contra Andrew Lincoln's argument that the Beloved Disciple is simply the authoritative *source* for this Gospel, I contend that Richard Bauckham has the better argument that the Beloved Disciple is the real *author* of this Gospel.³² After all, it is difficult to ignore the thrust of 21:24 that this disciple – the Beloved Disciple mentioned in 21:20-23 – has *written* his truthful eyewitness testimony of Jesus.

The Beloved Disciple is an ideal eyewitness because he is present at key moments in Jesus' ministry. Although "the disciple whom Jesus loved" is introduced only in 13:23, a good case can be made that he is the unnamed disciple in 1:35-40 and hence present at the start of Jesus' ministry.³³ Having been a follower of John (the Baptist), the Beloved Disciple becomes one of the first followers of Jesus (at least in the Johannine narrative) and remains with him (1:37, 39). Indeed, he is present at the final meal and hence a recipient of Jesus' private instructions in John 14–17; he witnesses Jesus' arrest, trial and crucifixion (18:15-16; 19:26-27, 19:35);³⁴ is the first to arrive at Jesus' tomb on resurrection day (20:2-10) and receives the Spirit later that day (20:22); and he witnesses the miraculous catch of fish, Peter's restoration and commission, and continues to remain with Jesus (21:7, 15, 20-22). In sum, the Beloved Disciple is a unique eyewitness to Jesus' ministry because he remains with Jesus from the start in 1:29 to the end in 21:22.³⁵

If we can accept that the Beloved Disciple is the author of this Gospel, the next issue is to decide on his identity. The variety of candidates that scholars have proposed for his identity (e.g., John of Zebedee, John the Elder, Lazarus, Thomas, Nathanael) should warn us to tread carefully and modestly. It seems that "the disciple whom Jesus loved" is deliberately kept anonymous in the Gospel, which implies that he cannot be one of the named disciples in the Gospel and hence we can rule out the identification with Lazarus, Thomas or Nathanael. Nonetheless, Bauckham argues that while the Gospel uses the literary device of anonymity, it does not want to conceal the identity of the Beloved Disciple and it is highly likely that the original readers knew who

³¹ Cornelis Bennema, *Encountering Jesus: Character Studies in the Gospel of John* (2nd edn; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), ch. 22.

³² Andrew T. Lincoln, "The Beloved Disciple as Eyewitness and the Fourth Gospel as Witness", *JSNT* 85 (2002): 3-26; Richard Bauckham, "The Beloved Disciple as Ideal Author", *JSNT* 49 (1993): 28-32; idem, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 390-393.

³³ Bauckham, "Beloved Disciple," 36; Lincoln, "Beloved Disciple," 15.

³⁴ Most scholars contend that the eyewitness in 19:35 is the Beloved Disciple rather than, for instance, the soldier who pierced Jesus' side (Bauckham, "Beloved Disciple," 39-40; Lincoln, "Beloved Disciple," 12-14).

³⁵ Cf. Bauckham, "Beloved Disciple," 28-32; idem, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 390-393; Lincoln, "Beloved Disciple," 15-16.

the Beloved Disciple was. Besides, the title “according to John” was probably included in the Gospel from the outset, thus strengthening the argument that some of the first audience knew this John.³⁶ We must therefore probe further by looking at the internal and external evidence.

From the internal evidence, the appearance of the Beloved Disciple in 21:7 strongly suggests that he is one of the disciples mentioned in 21:2. Therefore, he must be either one of the two unnamed disciples or one of the sons of Zebedee. I suggested elsewhere that the two unnamed disciples are Andrew and Philip,³⁷ which means that the Beloved Disciple could well be John of Zebedee. Alternatively, Richard Bauckham supports Martin Hengel’s case that the Beloved Disciple is John the Elder, a Jerusalem disciple of Jesus but not one of the Twelve.³⁸ Bauckham’s case is attractive because it would clarify the author’s extensive knowledge of Jerusalem and the assertion in 18:15 that the “other disciple” (most likely the Beloved Disciple, as the same phrase is used in 20:2) had a connection with the high priest. It is difficult to imagine that the Galilean fisherman John of Zebedee had such connections in Jerusalem (unless he had a retail outlet in Jerusalem that supplied fish to the high priest). However, it is equally difficult to imagine that John the Elder was present at the private Farewell Discourses and even had a closer relationship with Jesus than any of the Twelve (13:23).

Although external evidence of the second century identifies John, a disciple of Jesus, as the author of the Gospel, it is unclear which John is in view – John of Zebedee or John the Elder. The apostolic father Papias (AD 70–155) refers to two Johns – John (of Zebedee) and John the Elder – both of whom were the Lord’s disciples (*Fragments of Papias* 1 and 6; cf. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.4), leading to some confusion.³⁹ Although Papias’s first John – the son of Zebedee – could be the Beloved Disciple, as Eusebius himself claims (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.5-7), this view has not won much support. Nevertheless, when Irenaeus (e.g., *Against Heresies* 3.1.1) and Eusebius speak of John the disciple/apostle of the Lord, often in a context where others from among the Twelve are mentioned, it seems natural to think of John son of Zebedee. In addition, Paul Anderson suggests that there may even be a *first-century clue* to the author being John of Zebedee – in Acts 4:19-20. While the assertion in v. 19 that they should obey God rather than humans seems to have come from Peter’s lips (cf. Acts 5:29; 11:17), the saying in v. 20 that they cannot help but speak about “what we have seen and

³⁶ Richard Bauckham, “Papias and Polycrates on the Origin of the Fourth Gospel” *JTS* 44 (1993): 65; idem, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 300-305, 415. Cf. Martin Hengel, *The Johannine Question* (London: SCM, 1989), 74-76.

³⁷ Bennema, *Encountering Jesus*, ch. 15.

³⁸ Hengel, *Johannine Question*, 124-126; Bauckham, “Beloved Disciple”, 24; idem, “Papias and Polycrates,” 24–69; idem, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, chs. 16–17.

³⁹ Cf. Bauckham’s extensive discussion of this passage (*Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 15-21).

heard" is Johannine (cf. John 3:32; 1 John 1:3). Hence, it is perhaps Luke, rather than Irenaeus, who first connected the apostle John with the Johannine tradition.⁴⁰

In conclusion, the identity of the Beloved Disciple remains a debatable (and perhaps irresolvable) issue. Yet, even if we cannot ascertain beyond doubt the identity of the Beloved Disciple, what is relevant is that he was an eyewitness from the earliest days of Jesus' ministry to the end and present at key moments. John's Gospel emphasises the *function* of the Beloved Disciple within the Johannine narrative (as the reliable eyewitness to Jesus) rather than his identity. The most important contribution of the Beloved Disciple has been the writing of this Gospel where his testimony has been carefully preserved.⁴¹ Although the Beloved Disciple was not necessarily one of the Twelve, if we consider his privileged and intimate relationship with Jesus (13:23) and his "rivalry" with Peter, it seems likely that he was. Though John's Gospel reveals a circle of disciples beyond the Twelve (cf. 6:60-67), in John 13-17 only the Twelve seem to be present as there is no indication that other disciples are included.⁴² All things considered, I propose that John of Zebedee is the most likely candidate, but John the Elder is a serious contender.⁴³ Yet, we should not exaggerate the issue of authorship with regard to the historical reliability of the Gospel of John because an account from John of Zebedee is not necessarily more reliable than one from John the Elder. Nor is an account written by an eyewitness (e.g., John's Gospel) necessarily more reliable than one written by someone else but based on an eyewitness account (e.g., Luke's Gospel).⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Paul N. Anderson, "Aspects of Historicity in the Gospel of John: Implications for Investigations of Jesus and Archaeology", in James H. Charlesworth (ed.), *Jesus and Archaeology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 598-599.

⁴¹ Cf. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 367-368, 388.

⁴² Cf. the Synoptics, which only present the twelve disciples at the final meal (Matt. 26:20; Mark 14:17; Luke 22:14), and there is no indication that John deviated from this tradition.

⁴³ Cf. Carson, *Gospel according to John*, 68-81; Keener, *Gospel of John*, 82-104; Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 6-8.

⁴⁴ Although an investigation of the sources of John's Gospel is interesting, this has no direct bearing on the Gospel's historical reliability. Briefly, I contend that the primary source of John's Gospel is John's own testimony about Jesus, but he may also have known Mark's Gospel (cf. Richard Bauckham, "John for Readers of Mark," in idem [ed.], *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 147-171; Paul N. Anderson, *The Riddles of the Fourth Gospel: An Introduction to John* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011], 126-129). In that case, John's personal experience of Jesus and Mark's Gospel are the main sources for this Gospel rather than the Johannine community's experience (contra the majority of scholars) and/or a so-called "signs source" (Rudolf Bultmann first suggested a signs source and Robert T. Fortna developed this notion [*The Gospel of Signs: A Reconstruction of the Narrative Source Underlying the Fourth Gospel* (SNTSMS 11; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970)]).

VII. Genre

When picking up a book, we would like to know what kind of book it is as this shapes our expectation and determines how we read it. For example, a dictionary provides commonly agreed definitions of words; a novel is a fictional story to enjoy; a book on history recounts past events and their correlations; and a book of poetry has figurative language to evoke the imagination. We read these books differently – each according to its genre. It is crucial to identify the literary genre of a text because each genre has rules of interpretation and misunderstanding the genre often leads to odd results. Imagine trying to read poetry literalistically or a phonebook like a novel. So, how do we read the Gospel of John? Does this Gospel belong to a particular kind of literature of its time?

Richard Burridge has made a compelling case for viewing the Gospels as ancient biographies or *bioi* (“lives”). Examining ten Graeco-Roman biographies written before the four Gospels and ten after the Gospels, he concludes that the Gospels fit the pattern of the Graeco-Roman *bios*.⁴⁵ Dale Martin claims that the Gospels are *not* biographies (there is nothing about Jesus’ childhood, psychological development, and so on) but historical narratives and hence we should approach the Gospels as modern historians.⁴⁶ While Martin correctly claims that the Gospels are not *modern* biographies, he has not considered that they might be *ancient* biographies. Unlike modern biographies, ancient biographies do not focus on the psychological and personal development of the protagonist or chronicle life events from cradle to grave. Instead, the ancient biography focuses on the most significant actions and words of the protagonist, especially his death. There is, in fact, a growing consensus amongst scholars that the Gospels belong to the genre of the ancient Graeco-Roman biography.

By viewing the Gospels as ancient biography, we are saying that their subject matter is Jesus. Thus, the Gospel of John primarily tells the story of Jesus rather than the story of the Johannine community (contra Louis Martyn and the majority of scholarship). In addition, the main aim of the ancient biography was that its account of the protagonist be convincing/believable. Its purpose was to draw out the significance and interpretation of certain historical events rather than to give an objective, factual historical account. Hence, words of characters would often be paraphrases rather than the literal words, and even some embellishment or “literary creativity” was allowed. To put it differently, an ancient biography would be expected to

⁴⁵ Richard Burridge, *What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (2nd edn; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

⁴⁶ Martin, *New Testament History and Literature*, 79-80.

represent accurately the *ipsissima vox* ("the exact voice") of the protagonist, but not always the *ipsissima verba* ("the exact words").

Ancient biographies were a flexible and relatively broad genre when it comes to historical accuracy.⁴⁷ Seeking to hone Burridge's proposal, Richard Bauckham argues that the Gospels belong to a particular subset of the ancient biography – the historiography, which contains a greater amount of history.⁴⁸ Ancient biography and historiography are related genres, Bauckham explains, since some historiographies developed a biographical interest and some biographies had historiographical features. Bauckham makes a convincing case that as an ancient biography, the Gospel of John closely resembles a historiography – more so than even the Synoptics. In essence, therefore, the Gospel of John is an ancient Graeco-Roman biography with strong historiographical features.

How then does the genre of John's Gospel have a bearing on its historical reliability? Ancient biographers and historians would not invent events or characters if they wished to remain credible, but they were allowed varying degrees of literary freedom.⁴⁹ If Bauckham is correct that the Gospel of John is a historiographical biography, it would be on the higher end of the historical reliability spectrum. Besides, as Bauckham points out, the historiographical ideal is to record history that was still within living memory, so that the historian's account is based on eyewitness testimony – his own and/or that of others to whom he had access.⁵⁰ This coheres with the claim of the Gospel of John that it is based on the eyewitness testimony of the Beloved Disciple, the real author of this Gospel. Craig Blomberg, who has extensively argued for the historical reliability of John's Gospel,⁵¹ is worth quoting at length:

Ancient biographers and historians did not feel constrained to write from detached and so-called objective viewpoints. They did not give equal treatment to all periods of an individual's life. They felt free to write in topical as well as chronological sequence. They were highly selective in the material they included, choosing that which reinforced the morals they wished to inculcate. In an era which knew neither quotation marks nor plagiarism, speakers' words

⁴⁷ For example, while Tacitus put his own slant on facts in his *Annals*, Suetonius achieved a much higher degree of objectivity (though not without bias) in his *The Twelve Caesars*. I am indebted to the reviewer of my article for this insight.

⁴⁸ Richard Bauckham, "Historiographical Characteristics of the Gospel of John", *NTS* 53 (2007): 17-36.

⁴⁹ Craig S. Keener, "Genre, Sources, and History", in Tom Thatcher (ed.), *What We Have Heard from the Beginning: The Past, Present, and Future of Johannine Studies* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007), 321-322; idem, *Gospel of John*, 12-34; Bauckham, "Historiographical Characteristics", 17-36; idem, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 384-411.

⁵⁰ Bauckham, "Historiographical Characteristics", 29-30.

⁵¹ Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel* (Leicester: Apollos, 2001). See also Craig L. Blomberg, *Can We Still Believe the Bible?: An Evangelical Engagement with Contemporary Questions* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2014).

were abbreviated, explained, paraphrased and contemporized in whatever ways individual authors deemed beneficial for their audiences. All of these features occur in the Gospels, and none of them detracts from the Evangelists' integrity. At the same time, little if any material was recorded solely out of historical interest; interpreters must recognize theological motives as central to each text.⁵²

VIII. The Historical Quality of John's Eyewitness Testimony

If the Gospel of John is a historiographical biography based on John's eyewitness testimony, we must inquire about the quality of this testimony because any testimony can be accurate or inaccurate, true or false, reliable or unreliable. John himself claims that his eyewitness testimony is trustworthy in that it provides a reliable account of the life and ministry of Jesus that can function as a basis for an informed belief about the identity of Jesus, which, in turn, gives access to divine life. But how trustworthy is that self-attestation? We can pursue two lines of reasoning. First, a non-evidentialist approach to the historical reliability of the Gospel of John as eyewitness testimony. Stephen Evans explains that, epistemologically, testimony is one of the basic sources of human knowledge, and it is reasonable to form a basic belief on the basis of testimony.⁵³ John does precisely that. John claims that his testimony is true and can be believed, urging his readers to accept his testimony about Jesus and develop a saving belief about Jesus. We do not necessarily need conclusive evidence in order to be able to form beliefs about Jesus based on John's testimony. Nevertheless, where there is evidence, we must consider it and test our beliefs.

Hence, a second line of reasoning is an evidentialist approach to the historical reliability of the Gospel of John as testimony. Regarding this approach, Richard Bauckham concludes, "In all four Gospels we have the history of Jesus only in the form of testimony, the testimony of involved participants who responded in faith to the disclosure of God in these events... As with all testimony, even that of the law court, there is a point beyond which corroboration cannot go, and only the witness can vouch for the truth of his own witness."⁵⁴ This line of reasoning coincides with Blomberg's question on where we should place the burden of proof:

Notwithstanding all of the evidence in favor of the general trustworthiness of the Gospels, many critics find little they can confidently endorse because they adopt a skeptical stance on the issue of the burden of proof. That is to say, they assume that each portion of the Gospels is suspect,

⁵² Craig L. Blomberg, "Gospels (Historical Reliability)", in Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight (eds.), *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992), 294.

⁵³ Evans, "Historical Reliability of John's Gospel", 105-106.

⁵⁴ Richard Bauckham, "The Fourth Gospel as the Testimony of the Beloved Disciples", in Richard Bauckham and Carl Mosser (eds.), *The Gospel of John and Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 139.

and reverse that verdict only when overwhelming evidence points to historical reliability. But this method inverts standard procedures of historical investigation; it applies more rigorous criteria to the biblical material than students of ancient history ever apply elsewhere. Once a historian has proved reliable where verifiable, once apparent errors or contradictions receive plausible solutions, the appropriate approach is to give that writer the benefit of the doubt in areas where verification is not possible. Neither external nor internal testimony can prove the accuracy of most of the details of the Gospels; the necessary comparative data simply are lacking. But the coherence and consistency of material which cannot be tested with that which can be tested goes a long way toward inspiring confidence in the remaining portions of the texts.⁵⁵

To put it differently, we must decide to adopt either a “hermeneutic of suspicion” or a “hermeneutic of faith/trust”. Dale Martin, for example, appears a “minimalist” historian operating with a hermeneutic of suspicion (he seeks to determine what happened by what can be verifiably determined through historical criticism), whereas I consider myself a historical-theological interpreter of the New Testament operating with a hermeneutic of trust (I seek to determine not only what happened but also how early Christians understood the theological significance of the Christ event – both past event and past interpretation of the events belong to history proper). Martin gives the impression that the historical-critical approach is a critical-realist and objective one, over against a more naïve or subjective theological reading. The problem is that Martin approaches the New Testament as a historical rather than a theological text. But there is no need to dichotomise or oppose history and theology since they are not mutually exclusive categories. The Gospel of John is both a historical and theological document, in which theology is rooted in history, and history informs and serves theology. The task of a reputable historian is not simply to assess the historical accuracy of John’s account of Jesus’ life and ministry but also to uncover John’s theology, that is, his interpretation of the significance of the life and ministry of Jesus. The claim that history is all too often sacrificed on the altar of theology is a misconception. Yet, trust need not be naïve; we must use critical tools such as historical criticism to arrive at an informed understanding of the New Testament.

Having considered all this, what can we now say about the historical quality of John’s Gospel? It claims to be a non-fictional narrative by a reliable eyewitness to the events recorded (19:35; 21:24). By implication, the *dramatis personae* are composites of historical people and must be viewed within the socio-historical context of first-century Judaism and not just on the basis of the text itself. In comparing fictional and non-fictional narratives, Petri Merenlahti and Raimo Hakola state that in case of the latter, (i) the author vouches for the veracity of the narrative and assumes that the reader believes it; and (ii) the narrator represents the author and his point of view

⁵⁵ Blomberg, “Gospels (Historical Reliability)”, 297.

and therefore there is continuity between “reality” and the narrative world.⁵⁶ Indeed, John explicitly states that his story is true and therefore can be believed (19:35; 21:24). At the same time, in presenting his characters, John may have left out, changed, or added certain details from his sources – as historians and biographers often do. For example, John (the Baptist) appears in this Gospel as an eloquent witness to Jesus while the Synoptics present him as a rough-hewn figure preaching a baptism of repentance. The Beloved Disciple could well have been as perfect as this Gospel portrays him or may have been somewhat “idealised.” If the Gospels belong to the genre of the ancient Graeco-Roman biography, as many scholars would contend, they need not be viewed as “objective, factual” accounts akin to courtroom transcripts.

The Gospels would be expected to represent accurately the *ipsissima vox Jesu* rather than the *ipsissima verba Jesu*, and the speech of characters would often be paraphrases rather than the literal words.⁵⁷ While the Gospel authors may have exercised this literary freedom, what matters is that the reader need not doubt their credibility; they would not have created fictitious characters.⁵⁸ As Merenlahti and Hakola explain, while not everything in non-fictional narratives is necessarily historical, it does not make them fictional narratives since they do claim to describe the real world; what matters is that the reader not doubt the author’s explicit or implicit truth claims.⁵⁹ Thus, the historicity of the characters in John’s Gospel is not compromised because John may have used a legitimate degree of artistic freedom to portray them. Besides, the Gospel authors were theologians (rather than historians in a strict sense of the word). They wrote from a post-Easter perspective and interpreted the pre-Easter events through that lens, that is, they reflected on the Christ event and articulated its significance and implications for the early church. John’s primary concern is to assure his readers that his account of Jesus is a true and reliable testimony (cf. 19:35; 21:24).

I return to some of the issues I raised in section 2. The possibility of John 3 being a parable of Jesus and Nicodemus is highly unlikely because there is no parable formula or other linguistic indicators that a fictional story or figurative speech is to follow. Besides, if this were viewed as a parable then

⁵⁶ Petri Merenlahti and Raimo Hakola, “Reconceiving Narrative Criticism”, in David Rhoads and Kari Syreeni (eds.), *Characterization in the Gospels: Reconceiving Narrative Criticism* (JSNTS 184; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 35-38.

⁵⁷ See esp. Peter W. Ensor, “The Johannine Sayings of Jesus and the Question of Authenticity”, in John Lierman (ed.), *Challenging Perspectives on the Gospel of John* (WUNT II/219; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 14-33. Ensor uses a threefold distinction – the *ipsissima verba Jesu* (the literal, original sayings of Jesus), the *ipsissima dicta Jesu* (sayings that closely represent the original sayings of Jesus), and the *ipsissima sententiae Jesu* (faithful expressions of Jesus).

⁵⁸ Cf. Keener, *Gospel of John*, 12-34; Bauckham, “Historiographical Characteristics”, 17-36; idem, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 384-411.

⁵⁹ Merenlahti and Hakola, “Narrative Criticism”, 38.

so could Jesus' dialogues with the Samaritan woman, the invalid, the blind man, and so on, and a large portion of John's Gospel would hence be fictitious. This is an unlikely scenario given the fact that an ancient biography/historiography would not invent events or characters lest its credibility be put in jeopardy. Besides, there is evidence for the historicity of Nicodemus. Some rabbinic sources mention a wealthy Jerusalem aristocrat called Naqdimon ben Gurion who was around during the Jewish War in AD 66-70, and while he cannot have been the Nicodemus in Jesus' time (cf. the information in 3:4), Bauckham presents a convincing case that Nicodemus may have been his uncle.⁶⁰

Regarding the omission of Lazarus's death and raising in Luke, Bauckham suggests that when Luke wrote his Gospel, Lazarus would still have needed "protective anonymity", whereas this was no longer needed when John wrote his account towards the end of the first century.⁶¹ Regarding the issue of how the dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman came to be recorded when there were no witnesses around, a simple and plausible explanation is that while Jesus stayed in Sychar for two days (4:40), the disciples heard the whole story. Regarding the positioning of the cleansing of the temple in the John 2, I contend that, historically, this event occurred at the end of Jesus' ministry (as the Synoptics have recorded it), but that John brought it forward for theological purposes. I would consider this a legitimate degree of freedom. John did not claim to have organised his account in chronological order.⁶² Regarding the insertion of John 15-17 between 14:31 and 18:1, it seems rather clumsy that a later editor would choose to leave in the three Greek words that translate "Get up, let us go from here." I would have expected the editor to create a smooth transition to 15:1. Instead, I suggest an alternative explanation, that Jesus and his disciples left the house after 14:31, and *on the way* Jesus taught his disciples the material that is recorded in chapters 15-16 and prayed the prayer that is recorded in chapter 17, before his arrest in chapter 18.

IX. Social Memory

The postmodern exposure of the assumption that historical criticism has objective access to the past has caused scholars to examine how past events are stored in and recalled from memory. Joel Green writes, "the central claim

⁶⁰ Richard Bauckham, "Nicodemus and the Gurion Family", *JTS* 47 (1996): 1-37.

⁶¹ Richard Bauckham, "The Bethany Family in John 11-12: History or Fiction?", in idem, *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History, and Theology in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 173-189.

⁶² Even in the Synoptics such things take place, for either Jesus preached Matthew 5-7 in one sitting and Luke dispersed this sermon throughout his account, or Matthew collected various teachings of Jesus on different occasions in one orderly sermon.

of social memory studies is that memory is never a simple act of recall, but rather a complex process whereby the past is reconstructed in light of present interests that are defined and shaped socially” and “all memory is an indissoluble mixture of past and present, of ‘event’ and ‘interpretation’”.⁶³ Using social memory theory to explain the existence of John’s Gospel, Tom Thatcher argues similarly: “For John, the memory of Jesus is not a simple act of recall, but rather a complex reconfiguration of past experience”, that is, “a complex and dynamic entity that combines information about the past with reflection on the ultimate significance of Jesus’ death”.⁶⁴ This implies, as Richard Bauckham explains, that recollective memories (i) are both selective and interpretative, and (ii) contain both stable and variable elements.⁶⁵ Regarding the reliability of recollective memory, Bauckham draws on various psychological studies and concludes that “the memories of eyewitnesses of the history of Jesus score highly by the criteria for likely reliability that have been established by the psychological study of recollective memory.”⁶⁶

Recollective memory also plays a significant role in the formation of the Gospel of John and its historical reliability. In the light of his imminent departure from this world, Jesus promises his disciples the Spirit, who would, *inter alia*, remind the disciples of all the things he had said (14:26). It is clear from the Spirit’s teaching function in 14:26 and 16:12-15 that the Spirit’s anamnesis is less about recalling the literal words of Jesus and more about drawing out the meaning and significance of this revelation. In fact, John records a few instances where the disciples are brought to an understanding of Jesus’ revelation after the resurrection through remembrance (2:17, 22; 12:26; 16:4). This remembrance is most likely the result of the Spirit’s work because in 2:17, 22 and 12:16 the Greek uses the passive form ‘to be reminded’ rather than the active ‘to remember’, which implies that an *agent* is involved in the reminding. The Johannine concept of remembrance involves both recall and understanding under the supervision of the Spirit, which Thatcher appropriately calls “pneumatic memory”.⁶⁷ It would probably not be too wide of the mark to suggest that John’s written eyewitness testimony of Jesus’ life and ministry is also the result of a Spirit-enabled remembrance of past events and their significance. The Spirit’s aid

⁶³ Green, “Historicisms and Historiography”, 386.

⁶⁴ Thatcher, “Why John Wrote a Gospel”, 84-85.

⁶⁵ Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 326. Cf. Anthony Le Donne, *Historical Jesus: What Can We Know and How Can We Know It?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 69.

⁶⁶ Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 346. While Judith C. S. Redman disputes Bauckham’s findings (“How Accurate Are Eyewitnesses? Bauckham and the Eyewitnesses in the Light of Psychological Research”, *JBL* 129 [2010]: 177-197), Robert K. McIver supports them (“Eyewitnesses as Guarantors of the Accuracy of the Gospel Traditions in the Light of Psychological Research”, *JBL* 131 [2012]: 529-546). See also Robert K. McIver, *Memory, Jesus, and the Synoptic Gospels* (Resources for Biblical Study 59; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011).

⁶⁷ Thatcher, “Why John Wrote a Gospel”, 85.

in John's task of writing sacred history arguably contributes to (perhaps even vouches for) the historical reliability of the text.

X. Chronology, Archaeology, Names

It is impossible to be exhaustive in an article like this, but I end by mentioning briefly a few more aspects that contribute to the historical reliability of the Gospel of John – in the areas of chronology, archaeology and names.

Chronology. While John has been accused of anachronism on various occasions (the use of *apostynagōgos*, the alignment of the chief priests and Pharisees, the cleansing of the temple), ironically the chronology of the Johannine narrative has actually supported the view that Jesus' ministry lasted about three years, whereas if we have to go by the Synoptics we would have to conclude that Jesus' ministry lasted about a year. John's chronology is based on the mentioned festivals in the Jewish calendar. The Passover is mentioned a few times, the Feast of Tabernacles forms the background for John 7–8, the Feast of Dedication of the Temple is referred to in 10:22, and 5:1 records an unnamed festival. John mentions three Passover celebrations (2:23; 6:4; 11:55 [12:1; 13:1; 18:28, 39; 19:14 refer to the same Passover as 11:55]). Since I assume that John deliberately brought Jesus' action in the temple in 2:13–22 forward for theological reasons, 2:13 and 11:55 refer to the same Passover and 2:23 thus records the first Passover in Jesus' ministry. Since John does not record many events of Jesus' life before the first Passover in 2:23, and given that Jesus' passion coincides with the third Passover recorded by John, Jesus' ministry may, at first sight, have lasted just over two years. However, this is not the complete picture. If the Passover occurred in March/April, and if 5:1 refers to the Feast of Weeks (around May/June), then the period between 2:23 and 5:1 is only two months. But this calculation does not correspond to what Jesus says in 4:35. This verse mentions that there are four more months till the summer harvest, celebrated at the Feast of Weeks, which then puts the context of 4:35 around January/February. Therefore, there must have been another, unrecorded Passover between 4:35 and 5:1, and we must add one year to our first estimation. Thus, I conclude that Jesus' ministry covered just over three years.

Archaeology. In an extensive study, Paul Anderson not only demonstrates that the Gospel of John contains more archaeological, topographical, spatial and chronological data than the Synoptic Gospels but also suggests that much of John's tradition appears authentic and even superior to the Jesus tradition in the Synoptics.⁶⁸ Anderson concludes:

⁶⁸ Anderson, "Aspects of Historicity in the Gospel of John", 587–618.

the Johannine narrator draws on knowledge of Galilean and Judean topography in ways that could not possibly have been concocted without some degree of familiarity. It is also true that familiarity could have originated from other sources or reports, but as the evidence for such hypotheses is lacking, a more plausible inference is that the Johannine tradition did have a considerable degree of origination in at least some sort of firsthand Palestinian experience.⁶⁹

Names. In a public lecture titled “New Evidences the Gospels Were Based on Eyewitness Accounts”, Peter Williams argues that although the Gospels were written probably outside Palestine, they accurately reflect the naming patterns in Palestine, which suggests that the Gospels were based on high-quality eyewitness accounts because it is not only difficult to get the names of people in another country right but also to get them in the right frequency.⁷⁰ Williams concludes that the Gospels have the pattern of names we would expect them to have if they are reporting what real people actually said and did. The pattern would be too complex for an ancient forger to produce. Similarly, the four canonical Gospels mention about 12-14 towns each (including obscure places such as Aenon, Arimathea, Bethpage, Chorazin, Nain and Sychar), whereas sixteen apocryphal Gospels only mention 0-2 towns each, suggesting that the Evangelists had first-hand knowledge of the geography in Palestine. Williams provide an example from the feeding of the 5,000 in John 6. While John does not explain why Jesus asks Philip where they can buy bread for the multitude and why Andrew also gets involved, Luke mentions that this event took place near Bethsaida (9:10). We know from 1:44 that Philip and Andrew are from Bethsaida and suddenly it makes sense why Jesus poses the question to these disciples – they have local knowledge. In addition, the information in 6:4 that it was around Passover fits the information in 6:9 about the barley loaves because the barley harvest has just happened, and in 6:10 about the abundance of grass in that place because at that time the region would have had about six months of the greatest precipitation of the year. The point is that all these details are not only correct and contribute towards a credible story but they seem to suggest that John has actually been there.

XI. Conclusion

In this article, I have presented a cumulative argument for the historical reliability of the Gospel of John. While my case may not win over any sceptics, I suggest it is fair to say that a good case can be made that the Gospel of John is trustworthy account of Jesus’ life and ministry according to

⁶⁹ Anderson, “Aspects of Historicity in the Gospel of John”, 604.

⁷⁰ For the recorded version of this public lecture, see <http://vimeo.com/21393890> or <http://www.tyndale.cam.ac.uk/index.php?page=Resources2>. (given in the Lanier Theological Library (Houston, Texas) on 5 March 2011).

the literary conventions of that time. The Beloved Disciple was a unique eyewitness to the life and ministry of Jesus, who monitored the oral tradition and at one point decided to write down his eyewitness testimony in the form of the Gospel, more or less as we have it today. The most likely candidate for the identity of the Beloved Disciple is John of Zebedee, who claims that his eyewitness account is a trustworthy basis for a life-giving belief in Jesus. The Gospel of John is therefore not an anonymous creative account of various oral traditions passed on over a long time (the prevalent view) but the eyewitness account of John of Zebedee recorded within his lifetime.

THE ETHICS OF IVF

*Chris Richards**

Many contemporary Christian ethicists acknowledge the threat of artificial conception to the moral law but conclude that it may be used legitimately for a married couple where only one or two embryos, derived from them, are created and implanted at each attempt. This paper challenges such conclusions by highlighting several threats to the moral law even in such an “acceptable” context. These include transgression of the Sixth and Seventh Commandments in the threat posed respectively to the early life of the embryo, and to the integrity of one aspect (procreative union) of the “one fleshness” of marriage.

Introduction

The cover of the November 1982 issue of *Life* magazine showed a photograph of one Elizabeth Jordan Carr sitting on the laboratory bench on which she began her life, in front of the microscope under which her conception was supervised and holding the petri dish in which she was conceived.¹ Elizabeth was the first child in the US to result from the technique of In Vitro Fertilisation (IVF), born three years after the world’s first IVF child, Louise Brown, in England.

We have since become accustomed to the consequences of this technological feat. There are now an estimated 5 million IVF babies in the world. Yet such an image may help to shock us into realising the enormity of the revolution that has occurred. For the first time in the history of mankind, fertilisation can take place outside the mother’s womb. To this point in history, with the exception of Adam, Eve and the Lord Jesus Christ,² there had only been one route to the creation of life – through sexual intimacy. In developing IVF, man has departed from God’s original design by inventing a

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¹ Described in G. Lamming, “All thy works shall praise thee”, *The Standard Bearer* 1 Nov 2002. accessible on PRCA website.

² If, as seems likely, the sign to King Ahaz was fulfilled in his lifetime as well as through the birth of Jesus Christ, then we must add to this list the Old Testament “Immanuel” of Isaiah 7:14.

new means that requires neither sexual intimacy nor even the presence of the mother and father for the formation of new life.

The science of artificial conception³

A woman is given hormone stimulation so that she produces several eggs (rather than the usual solitary egg each menstrual cycle), which are then collected by a laparoscope (a slim microscope inserted into the abdomen). In the laboratory the eggs are then incubated with sperm in a special biochemical environment and fertilisation occurs after some hours, with the formation of one or more embryos. This process is monitored by technicians through a microscope. Over the next three to five days the embryo(s) divide(s) into a bundle of over 50 cells. One or more of these are selected for insertion into the carrying mother's womb, where they subsequently implant if pregnancy is to proceed.

Another technique of intracytoplasmic sperm transfer (ICST) permits the injection of the genetic material of a sperm into the egg, enabling fertilisation in circumstances where the usual process of sperm/egg union in fertilisation is not possible.

Not all attempts at IVF are successful. Currently, success rates vary between 15-40% per cycle, depending on the age of the woman and the cause of infertility.⁴ Various approaches have been used to increase success, since the emotional and financial pressures to maximise the success rate are considerable. One approach is to fertilise several embryos and select, using various physical qualities, the most "healthy" embryo for implantation. Another approach is to implant several embryos at a time, assuming that not all will survive. Whilst the latter procedure has increased success rates, it has also increased the number of multiple pregnancies, which themselves pose a health risk to fetuses. Because of the risk of multiple pregnancies, current UK guidance recommends that a maximum of only two embryos are inserted into the mother's womb in any one cycle.

It is now possible to store embryos (as well as sperm and eggs) in sub-zero conditions either by freezing, or by means of the newer technique of vitrification.⁵ Such storage techniques, however, pose a risk to the survival of the embryo.

³ The term "artificial conception" rather than "assisted conception" is used in this paper, when describing conception achieved through laboratory-based technology, in order to make the contrast with "natural" conception. "Artificial" is not used to refer to non-laboratory techniques such as artificial insemination by donor, unless mentioned specifically.

⁴ B. Luke et al, "Cumulative birth rates with linked assisted reproductive technology cycles", *N Engl J Med* 2012; 366(26): 2483-2491.

⁵ A technique involving the rapid cooling of the embryo without ice crystal formation.

This paper primarily focuses on the ethical issues related to IVF and ICST, although many of these issues are also relevant to other applications of these technologies.

Current legal regulation in the UK

In the UK an “independent” organisation called the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA) is responsible for regulating and supervising the use of reproductive technologies in all fertility clinics and research laboratories. It regulates the terms under which artificial conception may be offered, including to whom and the nature of consent that is required. The law places limitations on what procedures may be performed on the embryo that is to be implanted, although several of these limitations have been eased during the last two decades.

Current UK law allows research on human embryos, with consent of the egg and sperm donor, up to the age of fourteen days, at which time the embryo must be destroyed. It is, therefore, legal to create embryos purely for the purposes of research. Since 2008 it has also been legal to form human/animal hybrid “embryos” for experimental use.

A review of the HFEA website (www.hfea.gov.uk) shows the extraordinary diversity and complexity of the regulations that have been drawn up in response to this new technology.

The provision and outworking of artificial conception

The most obvious demand for artificial conception has come from infertile couples. Rates of infertility have been rising in recent years and this has coincided with increasing demand.⁶ Perhaps chief among the reasons for these changes has been the later age at which couples are seeking to have children.⁷ This delay has been described as “the compression of reproductive careers”.⁸ The terminology is revealing – women are tending to spend the early part of their adult lives, when they are most fertile, in higher education and in advancing their career in the workplace. When they subsequently wish to start a family, they may discover that they are unable to. Another contribution to infertility is the rising levels of blockage of the female reproductive tract following a sexually-transmitted disease.

⁶ Royal College of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, “Fertility: assessment and treatment for people with fertility problems” NICE Clinical Guidance 156, February 2013; 47.

⁷ National Collaborating Centre for Women’s and Children’s Health, “Fertility: assessment and treatment for people with fertility problems” Clinical Guidance, 2004; 33.

⁸ M. J. Davies, “Infertility treatment on the edge: discovery and risk converge at the limits of knowledge”, *Arch Dis Child* 2013; 98(2): 89-90.

Over the years, the uses of artificial conception have steadily widened from the initial remit of providing a child for an infertile heterosexual couple to include the following: to allow homosexual couples to raise children; to have a child, by embryo selection, free of certain genetic conditions; and to have a child with the primary intention of having him/her donate tissues to treat a sibling with a genetic abnormality (known colloquially as creating a “saviour” sibling).

In the UK over 200,000 children have been born following artificial conception. This has been accompanied by a profligate use of human embryos;⁹ on average, for every baby born by IVF in the UK, over 17 embryos have been created.¹⁰ In more detail, there have been a total of over 3.5 million embryos created, of which 1.4 million have been implanted and 1.7 million have been disposed of unused. Nearly 840,000 have been stored for future implantation, with nearly 5,900 set aside for scientific research and more than 2,000 for donation.¹¹

Ethical assumptions of this paper

Scope of Sixth Commandment – life to be protected from conception

Scripture repeatedly declares the creative activity of God from the moment of conception and recognises that life in the womb is a precious gift from God. Psalm 51:5 (“Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me”) describes both David’s life and his sinful nature from conception (and, of course, David had to be alive to possess a sinful nature). Psalm 139:13-16 beautifully and movingly describes God’s involvement in the growth and development of the unborn child from his earliest days. Though small and vulnerable, each human embryo is made in God’s image and is of inestimable value. The Sixth Commandment “requires all lawful endeavours to preserve our own life, and the life of others”.¹² Those to whom these microscopic lives are entrusted ought to carry out their role with fear and trembling, especially when considering the embryo’s vulnerability. Each of their charges is precious in the sight of God, who will demand an account of their care.

⁹ Such wastage is often justified by comparison with the early embryo loss of natural human conception. The extent of loss from fertilisation to implantation remains unknown because there is no means of detecting an early embryo during this phase. There appears to be a loss of about 25% within 6 weeks of implantation (see A. J. Wilcox et al. *N Engl J Med* 1999; 340(23): 1796-1799). However, whatever the natural loss, this is no argument for justifying artificial loss. What God allows in his permissive will, man is not permitted to copy in disregard of God’s moral will. Otherwise, any murder might be justified by the tally of deaths from road traffic accidents.

¹⁰ Lord’s Hansard text 20 July 2011 under “Questions asked by Lord Alton”.

¹¹ Andrew Hough, *Daily Telegraph*, Health News, 31 December 2012.

¹² *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, A. to Q. 68.

The value of life is in no way affected by the context of conception – even when it involves the most blatant sin. God is more than able to bring good out of our errors. It is notable that several of Christ’s ancestors, including Perez and Solomon, would not have been conceived without a clear transgression of God’s laws. Yet God chose to bless their family line and, in so doing, has shown his willingness to use the sins of man for the glorious service of his kingdom.

Scope of Seventh Commandment – sexual union limited to (heterosexual) marriage

The Bible applies the requirements of the Seventh Commandment beyond the strict definition of adultery to include the forbidding of all pre-marital and homosexual relations (1 Cor 6:9) as well as adultery of the heart (Matt 5:27). Thus the commandment forbids many family contexts in which artificial conception is currently offered.

In various ways, reproductive technologies (as well as artificial insemination by donor) facilitate the bearing of progeny who are biologically unrelated to a husband or wife. A married couple “become one flesh” (Gen 2:24), not only in sexual union but also in the consequent genetic or procreative union enacted in the formation of their progeny. The Seventh Commandment has been given to man to protect the integrity, both sexual and procreative, of a marriage. From this we may conclude that the Seventh Commandment proscribes the use of non-spouse sperm or egg, because it constitutes a breach of the marriage’s procreative integrity.

Further discussion on the extent of the Seventh Commandment occurs later in the paper.

Authority and sufficiency of scripture to solve new ethical questions

Christians can be confident that, though technology has raised many new moral questions, “all scripture is given... for instruction in righteousness that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16-17). God knows every fresh ethical dilemma “from everlasting to everlasting” (Ps 90:2). He also knows the direction of the heart of natural man in opposing his commandments. God grants progressive revelation to his church as they “search the scriptures” (Acts 17:11) to discover his will even when the circumstances seem intimidatingly novel and complex.

God’s wisdom in natural conception

God’s original design for conception reflects his character. As with all that he has created, the design is good (Ps 104:28), great and wise (Ps 111:2). It is also holy, being designed and given by God and defined by his holy laws.

The design of natural conception is full of his wisdom in both its process and purpose. Though beyond our full comprehension (Ps 145:3), God has allowed us to glimpse the “fringes of his ways” (Job 26:4). Over the last few decades science has revealed many wonders of the secret place of the mother’s womb (Ps 139:15), which were formerly as inaccessible as “the lowest parts of the earth” (Ps 139:15). What we have learnt should fill us with grateful awe, as we discover how life forms from the husband and wife and then grows after fertilisation from the first single cell to maturity. The process is expertly governed by God’s biological laws¹³ in such an orderly and effective way, out of sight and beyond our control. This process is neither haphazard, unconnected, isolated nor transient, but rather purposeful, integrated, relational and enduring.

To effect his perfect will, God has hedged in the perfections of his biological laws of conception (part of general revelation) with his moral laws (part of special revelation), which protect life (Sixth Commandment) and require sexual intimacy to occur within, and only within, the committed and secure relationship of marriage (Seventh Commandment). The jewel of his design of procreation has been placed firmly in the clasp of his moral law. And just as a jewel and clasp fit perfectly, we must note how closely the biological and moral laws relate to each other.

There are at least two reasons why we should anticipate such a close connection. First, both biological and moral laws have their origin in the same all-wise God, who created them to be enacted as a unit. Their interdependence will be clearly seen as we examine the ethics of reproductive technology. Secondly, God cares about the means as well as the end results. The moral law, as presented in the Decalogue, encompasses not only *what* we ought to do, but also *how* we ought to do it. For example, the Eighth Commandment, “You shall not steal”, defines how we should accumulate wealth rather than prohibiting its general acquisition. I shall examine the relevance of the *how* of the Seventh Commandment to artificial conception later.

When we consider the two interrelated expressions of God’s goodness in his biological and moral laws, we may expect blessing to ensue when both are respected. As a doctor, I am particularly aware of the goodness of his biological laws. When bodily function is enabled to work as God originally intended, without the interference of disease and decay, it cannot be improved upon. We can, likewise, expect blessing for a couple who subject their plans for conception to *both* aspects of his design, i.e. natural conception within a married relationship. Calvin reminds us that “our use of God’s gifts is never immoderate when it respects the purpose for which God made and

¹³ *biological laws* is used in this context to mean the biological events around conception and the physical and biochemical processes that govern them.

intended them, since he made them to do us good, not harm".¹⁴ God has given the jewel its clasp in order to maintain and radiate its glory.

The central question of this paper is whether it is possible to deliberately turn our back on the wisdom of God manifest in natural procreation and still expect to receive God's blessing. Since God's blessing always and only accompanies obedience to his laws, we might more specifically ask whether it is possible to "re-master" the biological events ("laws") of conception without breaking the moral law that define its use? Put another way, can the jewel of conception be modified without damaging the clasp of the moral law that holds it in place?

Is infertility a disease?

Though married couples may expect to receive God's blessing through natural conception, what of those who are unable to do so? Specifically, does being unable to conceive according to God's biological laws (i.e. suffering from infertility) justify the use of artificial conception? A doctor's role is to restore a patient's functioning to mimic as nearly as possible that which would have occurred had disease not intervened. The Christian paediatrician Dr John Wyatt helpfully likens the role of medicine to the attempts of a painting restorer who seeks to return a masterpiece to the painter's original work.¹⁵ If infertility is a disease, then is it legitimate to attempt to restore normality through medical intervention as is attempted in the management of other diseases? I will try to answer this question in two steps.

First, is infertility a disease? Infertility, like other physical disabilities, is not itself a specific disease but may be caused by a range of diseases including, for example, Fallopian tubes blocked from infection (obstructing access of the sperm to the egg) or damage to the ovaries from radiation. For some couples there is no obvious cause – but the medical assumption is that something is malfunctioning and doctors simply do not understand why. The Bible describes infertility, alongside disease, as an expression of his judgment on sin (e.g. Exodus 23:25-26), though its experience, as with disease, is not necessarily directly related to an individual's spiritual state. Many godly couples in the Bible suffered the pain and disappointment of infertility, e.g. Abraham and Sarah, and Zacharias and Elizabeth. Infertility is, therefore, a manifestation of the fallen world. It would seem legitimate and compassionate to seek and provide traditional medical interventions for its relief, such as hormone support or opening up blocked tubes.

Second, is management of fertility by attempts at artificial conception a legitimate medical intervention? The treatment of disease can sometimes

¹⁴ John Calvin, *A guide to Christian living* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), 113.

¹⁵ John Wyatt, *Matters of life and death* (Nottingham: IVP, 2009), 99-103.

justify actions that could, with other motives, be sinful. A surgeon is, for example, allowed to cut a patient open, with his permission, to remove an inflamed appendix. The overall aim is to save life by restoring the body to as near normal function as possible. Sometimes a substitute for loss, for example an artificial limb or tooth filling, may be used with benefit. In achieving fertility for an infertile couple, could artificial conception be justified as a means of attaining as near-normal function as possible? If making love does not, for some, make babies, is it acceptable to use medical technology to enable an alternative means of conception? We must note, however, that this approach involves the creation of a person, not a lifeless material substitute. In doing so, we are no longer restoring a masterpiece but creating another in order to fulfil a couple's desires. For this reason the process has entirely different ethical implications which need testing against the moral law, especially those aspects of the law concerning the protection of life, marriage and procreative unity.

Taking conception into our own hands

In our assessment of the legitimacy of artificial conception, we may learn from the response to infertility by Abraham and Sarah (Gen 16-21). The parallel to a contemporary infertile couple is limited but the account does help to establish certain principles. In the context of God's promise of an heir, Abraham, in the face of advancing age, loses his trust in God's power and providence. Rather than trusting that God's promise would be fulfilled by legitimate means through this wife, Sarah, Abraham listens to his wife's unwise solution by taking her servant Hagar as his wife, who bears him Ishmael. God then appears to Abraham and makes it clear that Abraham's untrusting solution to the problem was not God's, who subsequently provides a heir through Sarah. Though Abraham is charged with caring for both Hagar and Ishmael as family members, the means of Ishmael's conception was clearly against God's moral (though within his permissive) will.

From this we learn that:

- God may permit man to go against his moral will in the matter of conception.
- God expects man to be patient and trusting in the matter of fertility and to be wary of rushing into a human solution as a response. However, it would be false to conclude from this passage alone that pursuing an artificial means of conception is necessarily wrong in certain circumstances.
- Nevertheless, the resulting child is to be fully respected as one made in God's image.

We should also note that, unlike Abraham and Sarah, most infertile couples are not blessed with God's promise of future offspring and that many faithful couples have not been so rewarded.

The question is whether artificial conception, even for a married couple, might fall, as that of Ishmael's, outside "the counsel of the Lord" (Ps 33:11).

The ethical stance of practitioners and legislators

It is informative to look briefly at the ethical perspectives of those involved in establishing the techniques and overseeing their application in society.

Robert Edwards, who, together with Patrick Steptoe, was responsible for the first IVF baby, experimented with human embryos for ten years before this landmark event. Sadly, therefore, he seems to have been no respecter of early life nor of God's commandments, being dismissive of any impediment to his work "for vague religious or political reasons".¹⁶ Many contemporary practitioners of reproductive technologies would share his liberal attitude to experimentation with, and wastage of, human embryos.

Those appointed by Government to establish the legal boundaries under which such technologies would be practised expressed only muted concern about the potential for such activities to break God's laws. The chair of the government committee, Dame Mary Warnock, wrote, "An absolute central consideration in the work of the committee... was the difference between what one might personally think was sensible, or even morally right, and what was most likely to be acceptable as a matter of public policy. Time and again, we found ourselves distinguishing, not between what would be right or wrong, but what would be acceptable or unacceptable."¹⁷ Clearly the unity of God's laws in both public and private, and the remit of Government to legislate according to these laws was far from the mind of the committee, who were apparently willing to permit in law what they knew to be wrong. Fear of conflict was no doubt one consideration as Warnock explained, "The language of right and wrong was inflammatory... it sounded arrogant and provoked conflict."¹⁸

The HFEA arose out of the work of the committee chaired by Dame Mary Warnock. The committee recognised that the techniques of artificial conception raised a plethora of ethical questions and challenges which never previously existed. In response the HFEA has drawn up a vast array of rules that seem to be based on pragmatism, perceived needs, a hunger for scientific progress and the "popular view". These rules may be viewed on the

¹⁶ R. G. Edwards, "The bumpy road to human in vitro fertilisation", *Nature Medicine* 2001; 7(10): 1091-1094.

¹⁷ Mary Warnock, *Nature and Morality: Reflections of a philosopher in public life*, (Continuum, 2003), 98-99.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 99.

HFEA website.¹⁹ The complexity of the ethical challenges and the resultant rules is striking. Is such complexity perhaps a manifestation of a departure from the givens of the biological and moral laws that should govern normal conception?

Whilst acknowledging that such technologies have been practised by many scientists and doctors with a sincere desire to help infertile couples, it seems that the heady mixture of science and procreation has tempted man to burst God's bonds of moral restraint (Ps 2:3). If normal conception ennobles man, might not artificial conception have tempted man to delusions of grandeur about his power and self-worth? How quickly man forgets that "It is he who made us and not we ourselves" when he denies that "the Lord, he is God" (Ps 100:3). Rather he is tempted to take on a God-like status as he starts to think that he has made others.

A common evangelical analysis

In contrast to government legislators and many practitioners in this field, evangelical ethicists have generally expressed wide-ranging concerns about aspects of artificial conception, which are discussed in some detail below. Their general conclusion is that, provided certain conditions are met, it is possible to provide IVF to a couple without breaking the moral law.^{20 21 22}

The conditions deemed "acceptable" can be summarised as follows: the process should be limited to the fertilisation and implantation of one or two embryos so that there is no (or limited) threat to life through excess of embryos or multiple pregnancies, and the technique should only be offered to a married (heterosexual) couple who alone donate the egg and sperm from which the embryo is formed. Under such conditions, when new life is

¹⁹ www.hfea.gov.uk.

²⁰ John Frame, *The doctrine of the Christian life* (Phillipsburg, PA: P&R, 2008), 788: "There is no scriptural reason why a human egg should not be fertilised outside the mother's body and later implanted in her womb, or even grown entirely outside the womb when and if that becomes technologically feasible." He goes on to draw the line at deliberate destruction of an embryo and is cautious about multiple embryos being implanted.

²¹ John Wyatt, *Matters of life and death* (Nottingham: IVP, 2009), 103. He deems artificial conception acceptable in such limited circumstances, whilst acknowledging "very real anxieties about whether IVF is an appropriate use of technology" due to the intrusive nature of the technology, the commodification of the child, the risks to the life of mother and child, and the dilemma of spare embryos.

²² David VanDrunen, *Bioethics and the Christian life*. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 138: "In my judgement, there is nothing inherently immoral in a married couple's pursuing husband-only assisted reproduction, so long as this link between sex and procreation is honoured" (he explains "this link" to be the retaining of sexual intimacy in marriage whilst seeking fertility options). Elsewhere (141) he outlines some other limitations: that a couple should have only as many eggs fertilised as they are committed to using immediately and allow no more than two embryos to be fertilised and implanted.

formed and marriage is blessed with children, IVF is seen to be positively upholding the Sixth and Seventh Commandments by affirming both the sanctity of life and the sanctity of marriage.

It is my contention that such conclusions mistakenly minimise the scope of the moral law. I will now analyse the practice of artificial conception in respect of the Third, Sixth and Seventh Commandments both when the technology is being used in a less restricted context (marked “*liberal*”), as is usual in most UK fertility clinics, and when it is being used in the more restricted context recommended by many Christian ethicists (marked “*acceptable*”).

The Sixth Commandment

(i) Research techniques (“liberal” and “acceptable” contexts)

The development of reproductive technology has required the use of experiments involving the intentional and routine destruction of the embryo. In this way, such a service today stands on the shoulders of those who have determinedly disobeyed God’s laws. IVF clinics continue to depend upon such experiments for refining their techniques.

Because of the need to break God’s laws in order to acquire this knowledge, we can be sure that the science of artificial conception involves man acquiring a “forbidden knowledge” – information concerning the growth and needs of the early embryo, which God intends that only he should know, and which has been wisely and kindly hidden from man until the development of IVF. In this regard, might not man be guilty of lifting up his heart in pride by concerning himself “with great matters” whose moral implications are “too profound” (Psalm 131:1,2)? If this be so, we cannot expect blessing to result from the continuing use of such knowledge to achieve similar ends.²³

(ii) Current practice (“liberal” context only)

The natural process of conception frees the parents from the responsibility of selecting qualities in an embryo after conception. This reflects the

²³ God may graciously turn such forbidden knowledge to his glory and our good. For example, a deeper understanding of the processes of early human life may lead us to magnify him. But we may anticipate that such blessing is likely to arise only when there is thorough repentance concerning the abusive context of the acquisition of such knowledge. Another example of the failure of forbidden knowledge to bless is seen in the attempt to use embryonic stem cells to cure degenerative and genetic conditions. This technique, involving the creation and destruction of embryos has, despite media hype, yet to bring about any definable clinical benefits; more promising seems to be the ethically acceptable alternative of “induced pluripotent” stem cells, which can be made from a programmed adult cell without the need to destroy embryos.

principle of unconditional love of parents for their child, regardless of qualities and abilities. In contrast, most laboratories employ the technique of fertilising several embryos, selecting those to be implanted or stored and then destroying the remainder, in a process which seeks to favour the implantation of “healthy” embryos deemed to be more likely to progress successfully. Selective embryo destruction is also used in the process of “pre-implantation genetic diagnosis” (PGD) in which parents carrying a genetic abnormality seek to conceive a healthy child. Similar embryo selection based on genetics is employed in attempts to create a so-called “saviour” sibling, in which any embryo whose genetic material is of no help to his sibling is destroyed.

(iii) Current practice (“liberal” and “acceptable” contexts)

The natural method of conception helps to ensure that the mother’s body nurtures and protects the embryo between fertilisation and implantation. Though this protection can be breached due to abuse, disease or by deliberate violation (abortion), in normal circumstances this protection is effective.²⁴ In contrast, artificial conception allows man to take on a role previously undertaken by the God-controlled processes of the natural world. Just as, from the moment that man might gain control of the weather, he would have a moral responsibility for all famines and floods, so too, when man starts to feed, select, store and transport early life, he saddles himself with the new ethical burden of the embryo’s wellbeing.

All the routine laboratory procedures carry a definable risk to the embryo. The longer that the embryo is permitted to develop in the petri dish, the more likely the embryo is to die.²⁵ Survival rates after freezing and after the newer technique of vitrification vary between 52-95% and 53-98% respectively.²⁶ And we have much to learn about the potential hazards to early life in such an unnatural environment. For example, since fertilisation naturally occurs in the dark of the woman’s reproductive tract, there is a debate among scientists about whether visible light might harm the embryo. Even when no deliberate selective destruction is planned, artificial conception constantly exposes the embryo to the vulnerability of existence outside the womb. The most competent laboratories are not immune to errors in technique, accidental spills, mislabelling and power failures. There

²⁴ See statistics of embryo survival under reference 9.

²⁵ Much work has gone into the development of the best medium for culturing of embryos, which is assumed by scientists to be one most like the natural conditions of the female reproductive tract. This serves as a helpful reminder that even secular scientists respect the perfections of God’s natural designs – sadly without giving him the credit.

²⁶ D. H. Edgar and D. A. Gook. “A critical appraisal of cryopreservation (slow cooling versus vitrification) of human oocytes and embryos”, *Hum. Reprod. Update* 2012; 18(5): 536-554.

is no guarantee to the outcome of any stage of the process from fertilisation to implantation. Every attempt at artificial conception must, therefore, be considered as a trial of life for the embryo. Both parents and laboratory staff (to whom they delegate the duty of care) must jointly share in moral responsibility for the preservation of new life.

All of us take risks with our lives and those of others every day – e.g. each time we venture onto the roads. Yet even in relatively low risk circumstances, we must remember that we are required to make “all careful studies, and lawful endeavours, to preserve the life of ourselves and others”.²⁷ Therefore, it is right to minimise risks by driving carefully and wearing safety belts. There are circumstances when actions with a higher risk to life may be justified – e.g. when a doctor prescribes a medication with dangerous side effects in order to treat a patient with a life-threatening cancer. Here the high risk is justified because the outcome is *likely* to be life-saving rather than life-destroying. The overall motivation is, therefore, life-honouring. But the situation with IVF is quite different since there is no moral necessity to form life in the first instance.

And we now know that the risks to the life and health of the artificially conceived embryo continue long after implantation. They are at greater risk of intra-uterine death and long-term abnormality than those conceived by normal means.²⁸ There are several reasons for this: Multiple pregnancies, which pose a significant threat to the life and health of the offspring, are more likely to result from IVF, even though in recent years guidance encourages the placement of a maximum of two embryos in the womb. Another reason may be the less favourable uterine environment provided by some infertile women. In addition, those conceived artificially are more vulnerable to certain epigenetic conditions (caused by changes to gene function that cannot be accounted for simply by the DNA sequence). The reason for this is not clear, though the effects of the artificial embryo environment of the laboratory may contribute.

(iv) Young life as a commodity (“liberal” and “acceptable” contexts)

In contrast to the natural means of conception, the process of IVF, even in an “acceptable” context, places man in the deciding role at each step of the process – in choosing, for example, which clinic to use, when and how to proceed, how many cycle attempts to undergo and whether, if any, embryos might be stored for future use. This leads to the burden of numerous and weighty decisions. It also leads to the perception of the embryo as a

²⁷ *Westminster Larger Catechism*, A. to Q. 135.

²⁸ A. G. Sutcliffe and M. Ludwig, “Outcomes of assisted reproduction”, *Lancet* 2007; 370: 351-359.

commodity and a plan, rather than as a person and a heavenly gift. As O'Donovan points out, how easily we forget that, like the Lord Jesus, a child is "begotten not made".²⁹ Such an attitude to conception tempts us to diminish the value of early life and so to break the Sixth Commandment.

The Seventh Commandment ("liberal" context only)

The most common transgression of this commandment is in "aiding and abetting" an immoral relationship when this technology is used to enable cohabiting couples to conceive. However, the offer of artificial conception is not restricted to heterosexual couples. Whereas natural processes ensure that a homosexual couple is infertile, artificial conception allows them to acquire a child through sperm donation and/or surrogacy. Whereas natural conception allows a woman to be sure that she conceives only from her husband's sperm, artificial conception permits another man to be the sperm donor. There have been several well-publicised mix-ups with embryos, for example, when black twins were born to a white couple.³⁰ Whereas the natural method ensures that a child is carried by the same woman who conceived the child, reproductive technology allows up to three biological mothers – cellular, genetic, carrier – to which a fourth, the adoptive mother, may be added.³¹

The natural method of conception ensures a tight temporal and spacial association between intercourse, fertilisation and implantation. Artificial conception allows the long-term storage of sperm, eggs and embryos for future use or research, thereby loosening these associations. This raises a range of important ethical issues, including whether it is ever right to suspend an embryo's life in storage with no guarantee of progress to maturity. Such storage also allows implantation to occur at a time when the mother has subsequently divorced and remarried or separated from the father. This has given rise to several legal cases where women have demanded the use of "their" embryos following the demise of a relationship with the embryo's father.³²

The Third and Seventh Commandments ("liberal" and "acceptable" contexts)

²⁹ Oliver O'Donovan, *Begotten or made?* (Oxford: OUP, 1984).

³⁰ See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/2115522.stm> BBC news website, 8 July 2002, "IVF mix-up heads for court".

³¹ <http://www.cmf.org.uk/publications/content.asp?context=article&id=26082> *Three parent embryos for mitochondrial disorders*, CMF Fact File 51.

³² For example, "Women demand use of embryo without former partner's consent", *BMJ* 2002; 325: 617.

The most fundamental objection to artificial conception arises from the fact that any attempt to “remaster” the natural means of conception interacts with one of God’s holy ordinances (marriage) and one of God’s holy works (sexual union). God created them both and has bound them together with his holy laws. The Westminster Shorter Catechism describes the requirement of the Third Commandment as “the holy and reverend use of God’s names, titles, attributes, *ordinances*, word, and *works*” (italics added). Might we be guilty of offending God’s holiness by replacing his design of procreation with ours?

We may consider this possibility further by examining artificial conception in the light of the Seventh Commandment, which protects God’s holy ordinance of marriage by delineating the use of his holy “work” or design of sexual union. I have previously noted that God is concerned with *how* his moral law is applied. Both the *how* as well as *with whom* of “becoming one flesh” needs to be considered. It is my contention that the breadth of this commandment includes both the sexual and procreative (genetic) dimensions of “one fleshness” in prescribing the *how* of both sexual intimacy and procreation.

This view is consistent with two other moral considerations of the Seventh Commandment. First, I have already argued that the *with whom*, as defined by this commandment, may be threatened even when sexual union has not occurred. This may happen when conception by a married woman results from non-husband sperm; the commandment is still breached, even in circumstances in which the need for sexual intercourse has been circumvented by the use of artificial insemination or *in vitro* fertilisation. Secondly, we need to recognise that theologians have long considered the *how* of sexual union to be defined by this commandment, for example, in the proscribing of anal intercourse, in both heterosexual or homosexual union. In the words of Augustine in the heterosexual context this constitutes the “use of a member of a woman not granted for this”.³³

Might we then correctly apply the Seventh Commandment to define the *how* of procreative union, regardless of whether it has originated from sexual union? In many ways artificial conception rejects God’s wise design of procreative union, occurring distant from the mother in alien surroundings and achieved as a result of the actions of a team of individuals rather than by a husband with his wife. If such a conclusion be correct, there are profound implications for this area of applied science. *All* artificial conception would then be proscribed on this basis alone, regardless of any other consideration such as its threat to early life. (Such a conclusion would still leave open the possibility of other medical interventions to treat infertility such as hormone support or opening up blocked tubes.)

³³ J. T. Noonan, *Contraception* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), 225.

To conclude that only the natural means of conception is permissible would seem to conflict with the Dominion Mandate, which allows the application of technology for the good of man in line with an increase in his knowledge. Historically, an unbridled devotion to natural things, whether materials or processes, at the expense of technological progress, has been seen in the unbiblical perspective of the Romantic Movement. In this paper, however, the natural means of conception are not held up through any misplaced loyalty to the supremacy of natural events, but rather in the recognition that only in natural reproduction are God's laws faithfully upheld. The freedom to use modern technology as an expression of the Dominion Mandate is never absolute. Man as vice-regent always needs to consider the will of his master. All technological progress needs to be tested against the moral law.

Conclusion: Artificial conception not legitimate

A desire to apply science to fulfil the longings of infertile couples to have children is a laudable aim. Yet we must be on guard lest strong and unfulfilled desires, or happy outcomes, lure us to pragmatic conclusions, in which due regard is not given to God's moral law and in which the end may seem to justify the means. The Bible provides many examples of godly men who have fallen into this error, including the decidedly human initiative of Abraham with Hagar. Not everything that is possible is right to pursue, even when it seems quite able to fulfil our felt needs. It is for this reason that this paper has focussed neither on the suffering of infertility nor on the joy granted to those who have conceived through artificial means.

Many contemporary Christian ethicists acknowledge the threat of artificial conception to the moral law but conclude that it may be used legitimately for a married couple where only one or two embryos, derived from them, are created and implanted at each attempt. This paper challenges such conclusions by highlighting several threats to God's commandments even in such an "acceptable" context, as follows:

- The development as well as the on-going refinement and provision of artificial conception has been and continues to be dependent upon the routine and deliberate destruction of early life and the application of forbidden knowledge gained by the development of reproductive techniques. In this way, artificial conception transgresses the Sixth Commandment.
- All attempts at artificial conception must be considered as a deliberate trial of life for the embryo. The moral responsibility for the survival of the embryo lies with both parents and clinic staff. The legitimacy of such

a trial must be questioned because there is no absolute moral necessity for the embryo's formation. The risks of such a trial include those associated with routine methods for enabling fertilisation, growth, implantation and, if attempted, long term storage of the embryo. In this way also, artificial conception transgresses the Sixth Commandment.

- Artificial conception threatens the integrity of one of God's holy ordinances (marriage) and one of God's holy works (sexual union). In disrupting the natural means of conception, it threatens procreative union, which is one aspect of the "one fleshness" of marriage; for this reason, artificial conception may be considered to transgress both the Third and Seventh Commandments.

For these reasons, I conclude that it is not possible to "re-master" the biological events of conception without breaking the moral law and, therefore, artificial conception cannot be recommended as a legitimate practice.

TORTUOUS AND COMPLICATED: AN ANALYSIS OF CONVERSION IN JOHN BUNYAN'S PILGRIM'S PROGRESS

John James^{*}

Central to the mission of the church is making disciples of all nations, and discipleship begins with conversion. This paper explores the characteristics that should be present in the process of turning to God, by evaluating the account of conversion in Pilgrim's Progress and establishing the extent to which John Bunyan regarded this account as paradigmatic. It then evaluates biblically a number of important theological and pastoral considerations that are pertinent for the contemporary church. Recognising that conversion is tortuous, complicated and varied guards against us being overly prescriptive in our evaluation of conversions and too rigid in our expectation of how conversions are manifest, whilst recognising the place of despondency and perseverance should guard us against easy-believism.

Conversion is the essential beginning of discipleship for all Christians. The apostle Paul is convinced that God has chosen the Thessalonian Christians precisely because of their conversion. They turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God (1 Thess 1:9). As David Wells writes, "Christianity without conversion is no longer Christian, because conversion means turning to God."¹

But what are the necessary components that make up a conversion? And what will they look like in a convert? Such questions are important because, for those involved in the pastoral care of new believers, there is both the danger that we require elements within a conversion that are not necessary, and the danger that we disregard elements that are. A recent article in *Evangelicals Now* bemoans the abandoning of "Crisis Repentance" by those who would adhere to a progressive "journey" into the faith.² It is clear that the author is convinced that genuine repentance requires a specific "crisis event".³ We must call people to repentance and faith as we preach the gospel, but to what extent can we actually prescribe such a crisis event? And what would be necessary characteristics of such an event?

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¹ David F. Wells, *Turning to God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1989), 27.

² William Wade, *Abandoning Crisis Repentance?* (*Evangelicals Now*, 2014), <https://www.e-n.org.uk/2014/10/features/abandoning-crisis-repentance/>

³ Wade, *Abandoning Crisis Repentance?*

These questions are not abstract. By way of an example, as the pastor of a local church that has seen a number of conversions over the past few years, and has had the privilege of baptising a number of new believers, it is my responsibility (as far as one is able) neither to give false assurance to those who have not truly converted, nor to deny entrance into the church to those who have. What "counts" as a credible profession of faith is fundamental to whether or not we then offer to baptise them. What elements must their profession of faith contain? What evidences of sanctification we would like to see before they are baptised? Although it is a real danger that we might baptise people prematurely, as conservative evangelicals it is far more likely that we are over cautious, delay baptism, and give the impression that it is on the basis of a sanctified life rather than a profession of faith.

In order to think this through well, it may be helpful to consider the clearly articulated "journey" of a pilgrim depicted in a different age. It is often when we drink deeply from history that we find our own blind spots identified and necessary correctives offered. This paper will attempt to *first* summarise John Bunyan's depiction of conversion in Pilgrim's Progress. Bunyan's intention was to write a book that would edify normal believers. His audience was not the literati, but humble, Bedfordshire country folk. As a result, in Pilgrim's Progress we have a popularist glimpse into puritan thought concerning conversion. For a theological critique to be fair it must establish whether or not Bunyan believed his conversion accounts were paradigmatic so, it shall *second* attempt to establish whether or not Bunyan intended his depiction to be regarded as normative. *Finally*, a theological critique will be offered, and evaluated in relation to our context today.

Conversion in Pilgrim's Progress

Christian's conversion is central to the narrative. There are eight distinct stages before his burden is removed. The first is *Recognition of the Plight*.

1. Recognition of the Plight

A burdened man reads a book, weeping and crying out, "What shall I do?"⁴ He learns that he inhabits a city destined for destruction, and that he himself is condemned to die and be judged.⁵ He recognises his sin. Though he does not speak specifically of sin in his conversation with Evangelist, he

⁴ John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (London: SCM, 1947), 23.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 24. Note that this is his explanation to Worldly Wiseman as to how he came about his burden: "'How camest thou by thy burden at first?' asked Worldly Wiseman. 'By reading this book in my hand.'" (*Ibid.*, 33).

recognises that he is not able to stand at judgment.⁶ He is burdened by it, and desperate.⁷ It might appear that “sin” equals “burden”, but strictly speaking it is “recognition of sin” that equals “burden”. Not everyone carries a burden, but all are sinful. It is only on reading the book that one becomes aware of one’s sinfulness and it becomes a burden.

2. *Being Directed to Christ*

The second stage is *Being Directed to Christ*. The burdened man is aimless until Evangelist gives him a parchment roll declaring, “fly from the wrath to come”.⁸ Evangelist directs him towards a wicket-gate and a shining light:⁹ Christ, the door upon whom one must knock,¹⁰ and the light of the world.¹¹ The man is to “keep that light in [his] eye”.¹²

3. *Turning Away from the World*

The third stage is *Turning Away from the World*. He runs, fleeing the city of destruction.¹³ At this point we are told that his name is Christian.¹⁴ He was previously called Graceless.¹⁵ The action of fleeing from the world changes his name. Christian’s turning away from the world is also his turning towards heaven.¹⁶

4. *Despondency*

The fourth stage is *Despondency*. On his way to the wicket-gate Christian falls into the Slough of Despond.¹⁷ He cannot escape because of his burden. As he

⁶ Ibid., 24.

⁷ Ibid., 24-25.

⁸ Ibid., 25.

⁹ Ibid., 25.

¹⁰ Matthew 7:7.

¹¹ John 8:12.

¹² Bunyan, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, 25.

¹³ Ibid., 25. See also 32.

¹⁴ Ibid., 25.

¹⁵ Ibid., 58.

¹⁶ It is at this point that Christian begins to consider in depth the hope of the world to come. Christian tells Obstinate and Pliable that he seeks “an inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, and that fadeth not away; and it is laid up in heaven” (Bunyan, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, 27). He goes on to describe it as “an endless kingdom to be inhabited, and everlasting life to be given us” where “there are crowns of glory to be given us; and garments that will make us shine like the sun in the firmament of heaven”, where “there shall be no more crying, nor sorrow: for He that is owner of that place will wipe all tears from our eyes”. And so it continues (Bunyan, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, 28-29).

¹⁷ Bunyan, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, 29.

is helped out he is told that there are steps,¹⁸ by which the slough could have been avoided. This might suggest that the slough is not necessarily normative but occurs when there is conviction of sin, but without sight of God's grace. It is not certain though, because, as Help explains, "as the sinner is awakened about his lost condition, there arise in his soul many fears and doubts, and discouraging apprehensions, which all of them get together, and settle in this place". It is a place that "cannot be mended",¹⁹ suggesting that it is perhaps normal following conviction of sin after all. It is also certainly a test: Christian perseveres; Pliable gives up.

5. *Repentance from Morality*

The fifth stage is *Repentance from Morality*. Worldly Wiseman suggests that Morality is an easier way for Christian to relieve his burden.²⁰ He must take his eyes off "yonder shining light",²¹ and fix them upon "yonder high hill":²² off Christ, and onto the Mosaic Law. The walk becomes harder, his burden heavier, with a new threat of burning.²³ As he begins to regret Wiseman's advice, Evangelist reappears and shows him God's word again.²⁴ Christian is ashamed, and repentant, asking if he may still go to the gate.²⁵ Evangelist comforts him by assuring him that Christ will receive him, but he must be careful en route.²⁶

6. *Approaching Christ, Confession of Sin, and Entrance to the Narrow Way*

The sixth stage is *Approaching Christ, Confession of Sin, and Entrance to the Narrow Way*. Perseverance is required at the gate, and eventually Goodwill appears.²⁷ Christian knocks more than once or twice. It is worth noting that even greater perseverance is required when Christian's wife, Christiana, makes the same journey later on, in the second part of Pilgrim's Progress.²⁸

¹⁸ Ibid., 30.

¹⁹ Ibid., 30.

²⁰ Ibid., 34.

²¹ Ibid., 25.

²² Ibid., 34.

²³ Ibid., 34-35.

²⁴ Ibid., 35-36.

²⁵ Ibid., 38.

²⁶ Ibid., 38.

²⁷ Ibid., 39.

²⁸ Bunyan notes, "Christiana began to knock, and, as her poor husband did, she knocked and knocked again. But instead of any that answered, they all thought that they heard as if a dog came barking upon them; - a dog, and a great one too: and this made the women and children afraid... Knock they durst not, for fear of the dog; go back they durst not, for fear that the Keeper of the gate should espy them as they so went, and should be offended with them; at last they thought of knocking again, and knocked more vehemently than they did at first. Then said the

Christian confesses his sin, and asks to be delivered from the coming wrath.²⁹ Goodwill pulls Christian in and tells him “an open door is set before thee, and no man can shut it”.³⁰ Entrance is by grace alone, with no objections made against any who come, whatever their history.³¹ However, Christian is not yet able to remove his burden. Goodwill says, “be content to bear it, until thou comest to the place of deliverance; for there it will fall from thy back of itself”.³²

7. *Instruction by the Spirit*

The seventh stage is *Instruction by the Spirit*. By girding up his loins and going some distance,³³ he arrives at the Interpreter’s house. After much knocking (again) someone eventually answers the door.³⁴ The master takes time in coming.³⁵ When he does he teaches Christian much about the Christian life.³⁶ As the Interpreter, the Spirit teaches Christian “things to make [him] stable” on his journey ahead.³⁷

8. *Assurance of Salvation at the Cross*

The eighth stage is *Assurance of Salvation at the Cross*. From there, Christian runs up a walled highway called Salvation, “but not without great difficulty, because of the load on his back”.³⁸ He arrives at a cross, where at last his burden slides off into a tomb, never to be seen again.³⁹ Christian is relieved,

Keeper of the gate, ‘Who is there?’ So the dog left off to bark, and He opened unto them.” (Bunyan, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, 195-196).

²⁹ Ibid., 39.

³⁰ Ibid., 39.

³¹ Ibid., 41.

³² Ibid., 41.

³³ Ibid., 41.

³⁴ Ibid., 42.

³⁵ Ibid., 42.

³⁶ There is not space to explore the various pictures Christian and Christiana see at the Interpreter’s house, but it is clear from their descriptions that they are being prepared and equipped by the Holy Spirit to complete the journey safely. Christian is shown the image of a godly preacher and encouraged to hold firmly to God’s word; he is shown the human heart and the power of the gospel to change lives; he is shown the need for patience as he waits for the coming of God’s kingdom, and that God will keep him faithful against Satan’s attack. He is also shown that the Christian life is a constant battle, in which he must stand firm and remain faithful to the end.

³⁷ Bunyan, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, 50.

³⁸ Ibid., 50.

³⁹ Ibid., 50.

declaring, "He hath given me rest by His sorrow, and life by His death."⁴⁰ It is at this point that Christiana will learn the truth about justification by faith through Christ's death and His gift of righteousness.⁴¹

Christian stays to gaze on the cross, "even till the springs that were in his head sent the waters down his cheeks".⁴² When his affections have been moved he is told that he is at peace and his sins are forgiven. He is given new clothes, a scroll, and is marked on his forehead.⁴³ At this Christian continues on his journey singing,

"Blessed cross! Blessed sepulchre! Blessed rather be
The Man that there was put to shame for me."⁴⁴

His journey continues up hill Difficulty,⁴⁵ to the Palace Beautiful.⁴⁶ This is the church, the place of edification.⁴⁷

As a tentative summary then, for Christian, conversion is a process of:

- i. Becoming aware of sin and judgement with resulting despair
- ii. Hearing that Jesus Christ is the way to flee from God's wrath
- iii. Desiring to turn from the world to Christ and His salvation
- iv. Experiencing unworthiness and despondency
- v. Recognising the deception of works righteousness
- vi. Confessing sin and pleading to Jesus for salvation
- vii. Being graciously accepted by Jesus without experiencing assurance of salvation

This is then followed by:

- viii. Having God's word illuminated by the Holy Spirit
- ix. Understanding justification by faith, and receiving assurance of both sins forgiven and the positive righteousness of Christ
- x. Having affections moved
- xi. Entrance into the church

⁴⁰ Ibid., 50.

⁴¹ Ibid., 218-219.

⁴² Ibid., 51.

⁴³ Ibid., 51. The three Shining Ones are most probably angels delivering God's message, but their number could be suggestive of the Persons of the Trinity.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 51.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 54-57.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 57-68.

⁴⁷ Here Christian is encouraged to share his testimony, he is asked a number of questions, he sits down to eat with his companions, sleeps well, hears more of the acts of the Lord, and is provided with armour. It is also the place where Christian's children will be catechised (Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*, 232-234).

Once we establish the extent to which Christian's conversion is paradigmatic, the theological and pastoral questions this summary raises will become clear.

Is Christian's Conversion Paradigmatic?

First, we must consider the extent to which Christian's conversion is Bunyan's own conversion experience. Martin suggests, "'Pilgrim's Progress' is 'Grace Abounding' dramatised."⁴⁸ "Grace Abounding To The Chief of Sinners" is Bunyan's own account of his conversion. His sub-heading to the title describes it as, "a brief relation of the exceeding mercy of God in Christ, to his poor servant John Bunyan". Bunyan recounts his burden of sin, his misery and despair.⁴⁹ He attempts to reform his life with religious activity. He writes,

I fell to some outward reformation, both in my words and life, and did set the commandments before me for my way to heaven; which commandments I also did strive to keep, and, as I thought, did keep them pretty well sometimes, and then I should have comfort; yet now and then should break one, and so afflict my conscience; but then I should repent, and say I was sorry for it, and promise God to do better next time.⁵⁰

Note particularly the way Christian turned his eyes to Sinai as the way to the celestial city, and the way Bunyan sets the commandments before him for the way to heaven. He is made aware of his mistake through the witness of four poor women, who redirect him to Christ.⁵¹ After going through a period in which he is "tossed between the devil and [his] own ignorance",⁵² he is faced with the way of salvation. The entrance to salvation in *Pilgrim's Progress* mirrors Bunyan's own dream about the way, where with great perseverance, he enters through the narrow door. He describes it by saying,

I saw, as if they were [the poor women] set on the sunny side of some high mountain... I saw a wall that did compass about this mountain... at the last, I saw, as it were, a narrow gap, like a little doorway in the wall, through which I attempted to pass; but the passage being very strait and narrow, I made many efforts to get in, but all in vain, even until I was well-nigh quite beat out, by striving to get in; at last, with great striving, methought I at first did get in my head, and after that, by a sidling striving, my shoulders, and my whole body; then I was exceedingly glad, and went and sat down in the midst of them [the poor women].⁵³

⁴⁸ Hugh Martin, "Introduction," in John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (London: SCM, 1947), 9.

⁴⁹ John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (London: SCM, 1955), 23-24.

⁵⁰ Bunyan, *Grace Abounding*, 26-27.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 35.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 35-36.

This is followed by a long search for assurance. That finally begins to change under the ministry of Mr. Gifford,⁵⁴ culminating in Bunyan grasping Christ as his righteousness, whereupon he is finally "loosed from [his] afflictions and irons".⁵⁵

All ten points of Christian's conversion can be traced onto Bunyan's own conversion. Christian's conversion is clearly an allegory of Bunyan's. However, though that confirms the *descriptive* nature of the account, it does not prove an intention of *prescription* by Bunyan. The case might become clearer if other conversion narratives in Pilgrim's Progress follow a similar pattern. Let us look briefly at Hopeful, whose conversion is clearly depicted in the book.

Hopeful lives disobediently, without guilt.⁵⁶ He is then convicted of sin.⁵⁷ When the torment is too great he reforms his life,⁵⁸ but his burden remains. He acknowledges the folly of works righteousness.⁵⁹ He meets Faithful who directs him to Christ, and explains justification to him.⁶⁰ Hopeful thinks that Christ will not be willing to save him.⁶¹ Eventually Hopeful asks God to make Jesus known to him. He perseveres, asking more than six times.⁶² In a moment of great despondency, he finally sees Jesus. He is assured of his forgiveness and righteousness in Christ, and his affections are moved.⁶³

The correlation between Hopeful and Christian's conversions suggests that there are characteristics that should be considered paradigmatic. However, one key difference is noted. Assurance, though still linked to justification occurs at the point of conversion. Bunyan did not regard steps viii-x as necessarily incremental. That they are in some cases, Horner suggests, may represent "a failing, rather than a biblical norm".⁶⁴ Horner goes on to explain,

The experience of Christian in the sequence of the three events, as he passes from the Wicket-gate, first to the Interpreter's house and then on to the Place of Deliverance, clearly reflects Bunyan's own early struggles as a believer. It is not intended to be seen as the biblical norm, as his confession cited above readily proves. However, it is evident that upon his entrance into authentic Christian life, Bunyan initially lacked sufficient assurance to produce steadiness in his soul. Only after prolonged struggle and exposure to faithful instruction did he reach a point of stability and confidence in Christ's substitutionary atonement.⁶⁵

⁵⁴ Ibid., 59.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 106.

⁵⁶ Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*, 143-144.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 144.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 145.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 145-147.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 147.

⁶¹ Ibid., 148.

⁶² Ibid., 148.

⁶³ Ibid., 149.

⁶⁴ Barry Horner, *Themes and Issues from Pilgrim's Progress* (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 2003), 138.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 140.

Before finally establishing the extent to which Bunyan's depiction of conversion was intended as paradigmatic, a brief comparison with wider Puritan thought will be valuable.

First, Bunyan seems to follow William Perkins' outline of the normative steps of conversion closely. Perkins was an English Puritan who belonged to the previous generation to Bunyan, with many of his widely-read works published after his death. Joel Beeke helpfully works through Perkins' steps, which can be summarised as follows:

1. Humiliation: actions of grace, preceding the work of grace
 - a) Attentiveness to the Word
 - b) Awareness of God's law
 - c) Conviction of sin
 - d) Despair of salvation
2. Faith in Christ: stages of grace separating the elect from the reprobate
 - a) Being caused to seriously consider the promise of salvation in the gospel
 - b) The kindling in the heart of faith, a will and desire to believe, and grace to strive
 - c) A combat against doubt despair and distrust
 - d) A settling of the conscience as it rests in the promise of life

This progression can also be considered in relation to receiving Christ, in five steps:

1. Knowledge of the gospel by the illumination of God's Spirit
2. Hope of pardon, where a sinner knows his sins are not pardoned but believes they can be
3. Hungering and thirsting after the grace that is offered in Jesus
4. A humble confession of sin before God and a crying out for pardon
5. The Spirit's persuasion that the promise of the gospel has been applied personally.⁶⁶

Conviction of sin and despair, the need for perseverance, confession of sin and a crying out for forgiveness, are all central features, as is the end goal of personal assurance.

Secondly, the Puritan prayer "The Great Discovery",⁶⁷ describes conversion as follows:

⁶⁶ Joel R. Beeke, *The Quest for Full Assurance* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1999), 89-90.

- Ignorance in the world
- The sovereign, gracious call of God
- Awareness of God's ability to save
- Despair at sin
- Vision of Jesus and his substitutionary atonement
- Peace and new life
- Moved affections

Thirdly, The Westminster Confession states: God calls people out of sin and death to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ.⁶⁸ He changes their minds, hearts and wills, so that they are effectually drawn to Jesus, and come freely and willingly.⁶⁹ Those God calls he justifies, pardoning sin and imputing Christ's obedience and satisfaction to them,⁷⁰ as the Holy Spirit, in due time, applies Christ to them.⁷¹ A justified status cannot be undone. However, in sin, God's fatherly displeasure may be felt until further repentance and faith occurs.⁷²

In conclusion of this section, Bunyan's depiction of the characteristics of conversion should be viewed as paradigmatic in part. They reflect his own conversion, other conversion narratives, and Puritan theology. However, they are mostly characteristics, not rigid sequential steps.⁷³ Hill makes the point more generally when he writes,

the events [in *Pilgrim's Progress*] are not necessarily sequential, nor is there a steady advance across country. Drawing a map of the pilgrim's route, as eighteenth- and nineteenth-century illustrators tried to do, is as difficult and elusive as producing a time-chart for *Grace Abounding*. The pilgrims travel a long way before reaching Vanity Fair, though it turns out to be identical with the City of Destruction from which they had started; but now it is utterly alien to them. The "progress" is psychological, not geographical; the landscape reflects the inner state of the pilgrims.

Steps 1-6 are different facets of the same reality: turning from the world to Christ. They are not to be viewed as a *chronology* for every Christian, although it does appear that despondency really is an important first stage.

⁶⁷ Arthur Bennett, *The Valley of Vision* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), 62.

⁶⁸ "The Westminster Confession of Faith, A.D. 1647," in *The Creeds of Christendom Volume III* (ed. Philip Schaff; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1931), X.I, 624.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 624.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, XI.I, 626.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, XI.IV, 627.

⁷² *Ibid.*, XI.V, 627-628.

⁷³ Christopher Hill, *A Turbulent, Seditious, and Factious People: John Bunyan and his Church* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 222.

Also it seems that steps viii-x are elements that will be, at times, and perhaps ideally, contained in step vii.

Bunyan's depiction of conversion raises four questions for theological consideration:

1. Is despondency a necessary preparatory step in conversion?
2. Does conversion require an explicit repentance from works righteousness?
3. Is perseverance required in relation to conversion?
4. Is an understanding of justification necessary for conversion and how does that relate to assurance?

Theological and Pastoral Considerations of Bunyan's Depiction of Conversion

1. Is despondency a necessary preparatory step in conversion?

For Bunyan, conversion requires a stage of humility, fear, and despondency. The Bible describes grief over sin as integral to conversion. The prodigal son regards himself as unworthy because of his sin.⁷⁴ The tax collector cries out for mercy because of his sin.⁷⁵ At Pentecost the hearers are cut to the heart and ask, "what shall we do?"⁷⁶ The Philippian jailer, full of fear, asks "what must I do to be saved?"⁷⁷ And Paul teaches, "godly grief produces repentance that leads to salvation".⁷⁸

Bunyan may simply be finding a way to narrate that reality. However, there does seem to be a particular stage of humiliation outlined by Bunyan that may be more prescriptive than the biblical data.⁷⁹ It happens first, and is extensive.⁸⁰ This is, in part, why the Puritans are sometimes charged with

⁷⁴ Luke 15:18-19.

⁷⁵ Luke 18:13.

⁷⁶ Acts 2:37-38.

⁷⁷ Acts 16:30.

⁷⁸ 2 Corinthians 7:10.

⁷⁹ Beougher shows that Baxter had a similar understanding of the role of consideration and humiliation in conversion. Timothy K Beougher, *Richard Baxter and Conversion* (Fearn: Mentor, 2007), 82-89.

⁸⁰ Brooks, who wrote "Heaven on Earth" only 11 years before Bunyan wrote *Pilgrim's Progress* explains precisely the understanding Bunyan is trying to convey in his narrative: "When the soul hath been long under guilt and wrath, when the soul hath been long under the frowns and displeasure of God, and hath long seen the gates of heaven barred against him, and the mouth of hell open to receive him; when the soul hath said, Surely there is no hope, there is no help, surely I shall lose God, Christ and heaven for ever, *then* God comes in and speaks peace to the soul." Thomas Brooks, *Heaven on Earth* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1961), 54. My italics.

"preparationism".⁸¹ This is the demand that only once one has gone through a long period of heavy contrition is one qualified to come to faith in Jesus.

Wells helpfully defends the Puritans from the charge:

The legalistic "preparationism" that was allegedly taught by the Puritans and others who supposedly stressed the need for deep conviction of sin and laboured to induce it is, in truth, a figment of the critics' imagination. The Puritans (and their admirers, past and present) actually maintained that only one who has come thoroughly to hate sin can turn wholeheartedly from it to Christ. Contrition is necessitated not by the terms of the gospel, which calls us to Christ directly, but by the state of the fallen human heart.⁸²

However, the charge against Bunyan is, at the very least, a lack of clarity about whether despondency is a biblical *element* in conversion, or a distinct *stage*. Bavinck concludes that the Bible says nothing "about the depth and duration of [the] grief, nor about the time in which it should appear".⁸³ Helm notes that the importance of conviction of sin "does not lie in its being a distinct and separable stage. Rather it is an *element* in conversion in the sense that it is part of what 'being converted' means. No one is converted whose experience does not include conviction of sin."⁸⁴

As we think about the nature of crisis repentance, it is very important that we see that "decisions for Jesus" are not what counts, but "that there are men and women who, knowing themselves to be rebels and alienated from God, have sought in his Christ forgiveness and acceptance".⁸⁵ At the same time to demand such a crisis as a distinct stage or "event" may be in dangerously close to legalism. It may reassure the evangelist to have measurable visible events, but to make them mandatory demands more than the Bible.

2. Does conversion require an explicit repentance from works righteousness?

For Bunyan, repentance is not only about turning from the world to Christ, but also about turning from works righteousness, to a righteousness that comes by faith alone. Considered systematically, this is incredibly helpful. Augustine defines the fundamental human problem as a distortion of our

⁸¹ So Pettit charges the Puritans with God converting man by degree in a way that required man to look to his heart before deciding to unite to Christ. Norman Pettit, *The Heart Prepared* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1966), 217-218. However, this is almost certainly a misinterpretation of the Puritan position. See Timothy K. Beougher, *Richard Baxter and Conversion* (Fearn: Mentor, 2007), 147.

⁸² Wells, *Turning to God*, 87.

⁸³ Herman Bavinck, *Holy Spirit, Church and New Creation* (vol. 4 of *Reformed Dogmatics*; trans. John Vriend; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 162.

⁸⁴ Paul Helm, *The Beginnings: Word and Spirit in Conversion* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1986), 45. Author's italics.

⁸⁵ Wells, *Turning to God*, 90.

creation purpose. We have degraded from love of God and others to self-love,⁸⁶ and thus the beginning of all sin is pride.⁸⁷ Pride is when “our partial standards and relative attainments are explicitly related to the unconditioned good, and claim divine sanction”.⁸⁸ As a result, to think of *all* sin as a form of prideful works righteousness, is sobering.

That Bunyan speaks so directly of the need to repent of works righteousness is helpful, and is clearly part of his need to define the gospel and true discipleship against the backdrop of the Roman Catholic Church. The Bible shows that unlike the self-righteous Pharisee, only the humble will be justified.⁸⁹ Paul shows that Abraham, as the paradigm for what it means to be ungodly, was not justified by his works, but by faith.⁹⁰ Paul’s own conversion is one of turning from placing his confidence in works, to placing it in Christ.⁹¹ In fact Paul *must* count works as rubbish, *in order that* he may gain Christ.⁹²

Keller has spoken and written widely on “three ways to live”. He writes, that in stark contrast to the gospel,

Legalism says that we have to live a holy, good life in order to be saved. Antinomianism says that because we are saved, we don’t have to live a holy, good life. This is the location of the “tip of the spear” of the gospel. A very clear and sharp distinction between legalism, antinomianism, and the gospel is often crucial for the life-changing power of the Holy Spirit to work.⁹³

As we call people to repentance and faith it is essential that we call them to a gospel of grace. Actually, the danger of becoming too prescriptive in the demands required for genuine conversion is that instead of an explicit turning from works righteousness, we make it a turning *to* works righteousness!

3. Is perseverance required in relation to conversion?

For Bunyan, from a human perspective, coming to Christ requires determination and perseverance. Again, this is insightful. At no point does Bunyan undermine God’s promise to persevere us to the end.⁹⁴ The biblical data for such assurance is clear: The Father chooses before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:4), ordains to eternal life (Acts 13:48), election stands

⁸⁶ Augustine, *City of God*, (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1952), XIV.28, 410-411.

⁸⁷ Ibid., XII.6, 255-257.

⁸⁸ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Human Nature* (Vol. 1 of *The Nature and Destiny of Man*; London: Nisbet & Co. Ltd., 1941), 213.

⁸⁹ Luke 18:9-14.

⁹⁰ Romans 4:1-5.

⁹¹ Philippians 3:2-11.

⁹² Philippians 3:8.

⁹³ Timothy Keller, *Center Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 31.

⁹⁴ One could go on! See Bavinck, *Holy Spirit, Church and New Creation*, 269-270.

(Rom 9:11) and carries with it calling, justification and glorification (Rom 8:30). Christ, in whom all the promises of God are Yes and Amen (2 Cor 1:20), died for those who were given him by the Father (John 17:6, 12) to give them eternal life and not lose a single one (John 6:40; 17:2). No one will snatch them from his hand (John 6:39; 10:28). However, as the Westminster Confession makes clear, God changes minds, hearts and wills, so that though people are effectually drawn, "yet so they come most freely, being made willing by his grace".⁹⁵ Because our will is engaged, conversion has the appearance of hard work and perseverance from the very first moment. That requirement of persistence in conversion is made clear in the parable of the widow who cries day and night for justice.⁹⁶

Hill observes, "Christian is revealed as one of the predestined elect the moment he enters the wicket-gate... nevertheless one feels like Pilgrim is making free choices all the time, deciding for himself... Christian has to do a great deal of knocking at both the wicket-gate and the Interpreter's house before either is opened".⁹⁷ Again, this reflects the biblical data whereby God's power and human effort are often paired. Turretin lists the pairing of "running" with "drawing" (Songs 1:4), "yoke and burden" with "easiness and lightness" (Matt 11:30), "being drawn" with "being taught" (John 6:44-45), "persuasion" with "demonstration" (1 Cor 2:4), and "conversion" with "illumination" (Eph 1:8-19).⁹⁸

Bunyan's emphasis on the hardship and struggle of the Christian life, where even in conversion "there are temptations that threaten to steal away Christian's joy and divert him from his goal"⁹⁹ is a great corrective for our contemporary easy-believism. For those of us with a reformed soteriology, does our doctrine of election interfere with the clear call of the gospel that we might choose Christ, repent, turn and believe, and persevere in that action and not give up? Do we, as those called to evangelise, persevere with people in the act of conversion? It is tempting to want to remove perceived barriers to the Christian faith in order to help people believe. However, the difficulties to believing may be the very things needed in order to draw out the kind of perseverance that make a conversion a genuine spiritual reality.

⁹⁵ "Westminster Confession," X.I, 624. See Psalm 110:3, Matt 11:28, Rev 22:17, Rom 6:16-18, Eph 2:8, Phil 1:29.

⁹⁶ Luke 18:1-8.

⁹⁷ Hill, *A Turbulent, Seditious, and Factious People*, 209.

⁹⁸ See Francis Turretin, *Eleventh Through Seventeenth Topics* (vol. 2 of *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*; trans. George Musgrave Giger; Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1994), 525.

⁹⁹ Tony Jones, "Introduction," in *The Most Difficult Journey You'll Ever Make: The Pilgrim's Progress by John Bunyan, (modernized by Robert J Edmonson)* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2006), v-vi.

4. *Is an understanding of justification necessary for conversion and how does that relate to assurance?*

Bunyan makes a distinction between knowledge of the gospel that is necessary for entrance into the way of salvation, and knowledge of justification bringing assurance.

Caution must be taken here not to read Bunyan anachronistically and import contemporary debates into the 17th Century. However, Tom Wright warns against a perceived historical tendency to use the terms “justification” and “salvation” synonymously.¹⁰⁰ Piper concurs; “it is *Jesus* who saves, not the doctrine [of justification by faith]. And so our faith rests decisively on Jesus.”¹⁰¹ However, Piper continues, warning, “the doctrine tells us what sort of Jesus we are resting on and what we are resting on him for. Without this, the word *Jesus* has no content that could be good news.”¹⁰²

Bunyan distinguishes well between what is necessary for entrance to the way of salvation, that is, a responding to Jesus Christ with repentance and faith, and an understanding of the doctrine of justification that provides assurance of forgiveness and a righteous status. At the same time, Bunyan depicts conversion as a process whereby, because of God’s sovereign call, every Christian should persevere to gain such assurance. In that sense, though a grasp of justification may not be necessary to be called “Christian” neither can it be regarded as optional.

This is evident from the different ways the gospel is presented in the New Testament. On some occasions it explicitly includes a doctrine of justification,¹⁰³ on other occasions justification is an implication,¹⁰⁴ on others it is hard to see evidence of the doctrine at all, but only the exhortation to repent and believe.¹⁰⁵ It is worth contrasting two definitions of the gospel given by Paul. In Romans 1:3-5 it is the proclamation that Jesus is the risen Lord of the world, and in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 it includes his death for our sins.¹⁰⁶

Bunyan helpfully depicts a Christ-centred entrance to the way of salvation, on the basis of repentance and faith, which will ultimately come to the place of assurance through an understanding of justification. A cognitive grasp of justification is not fundamental at the point of entrance, but neither is it optional for one’s burden of sin to be relieved. Assurance may not be

¹⁰⁰ Tom Wright, *Justification: God’s Plan and Paul’s Vision* (London: SPCK, 2009), 146. I say “perceived” because the criticism often levelled at Wright is that he does not represent the historic Reformed tradition fairly.

¹⁰¹ John Piper, *The Future of Justification* (Nottingham: IVP, 2008), 86.

¹⁰² Piper, *Justification*, 86.

¹⁰³ Acts 13:38-39.

¹⁰⁴ Acts 17:30-31.

¹⁰⁵ Acts 2:36-39.

¹⁰⁶ See Wright, *Justification*, 156.

granted the moment one believes, but it remains an achievable goal in the Christian life.

This balance is again helpful when we think of our contemporary situation. Our presentation of the gospel is not to be simply an explanation of justification by faith alone, but a presentation of Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath (to return to 1 Thessalonians, where we began this paper). However, assurance of faith by understanding all that Christ has done for us should never be seen as a status only acquired by the super-spiritual, but essential for our discipleship and spiritual growth.

Conclusion

Bunyan offers many helpful correctives to a contemporary understanding of conversion. Just grasping that conversion can be messy and drawn-out will help us to be patient as we seek to proclaim Christ to others. Bunyan's own conversion was "tortuous and complicated",¹⁰⁷ and his allegorical depiction does not sanitise that.¹⁰⁸

Bavinck reflects:

Conversion always consists in an internal change of mind that prompts persons to look at their sinful past in the light of God's face; [and] leads to sorrow, regret, humiliation, and confession of sin... But for all the similarity... there is also much diversity in the circumstances under which, the time and manner in which, and the occasion in terms of which the conversion takes place.¹⁰⁹

We would do well to heed that warning and avoid requiring stereotypical testimonies. And we *must* (as previously noted) persevere in our evangelism. In twenty-first century Britain conversions that are "tortuous and complicated" may well be the norm. It is easy to foster an unreasonable expectation that if we run a few guest services and a seven-week course we will see people come to faith. The testimony of many is that they are loved,

¹⁰⁷ Horner, *Themes and Issues*, 133.

¹⁰⁸ Packer writes, "Conversion is a complex, often long-drawn-out process that advances by stages from conviction of sin and need as its beginning to assurance of salvation as its climax. It involves learning the key gospel truths, internalizing them in a life-shaping way, and being so changed at heart that revulsion at sin, desire for God, love for Christ and eager hope of being with him in heaven become basic to one's being. This truth about the great change is taught by the story's initial sequences: first from the City of Destruction through the Slough of Despond to the wicket-gate, where the keeper, a Christ-figure, called Good Will in part one, encourages travelers to move forward along the narrow way; then from the wicket-gate via the House of the Interpreter, where lessons about the Christian life are learned, to the cross and tomb, where Christian's burden fell off, and where Christiana, who had found the reality of pardon and peace already in the House of the Interpreter, learned from Mr Great-heart the truth of justification by faith through Christ's substitutionary death and gift of righteousness." J. I. Packer, *The Pilgrim's Principles: John Bunyan Revisited* (St. Antholin's Lectureship Charity Lecture, 1999), 15-16.

¹⁰⁹ Bavinck, *Holy Spirit, Church and New Creation*, 139.

served, and preached to by patient believers over a sustained period of time as they grapple with the reality of turning to God.

Also, that conversion should be characterised by a measure of despondency and require perseverance is a great corrective to our easy-believism. Perhaps as a result of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century revivalism we tend to require the normative pattern of Christian conversion to be instant and mirror Paul's Damascus road experience. However, it should not surprise us that God may call us through a process, the start date of which we may be unable to recall. Such a conversion is no less God's powerful work.

Also, we should not be afraid of making clear the need for perseverance and the engagement of the will in the act of conversion. That in human terms the Christian life is a constant struggle does not mean God's promise to keep us to the end is any less real. Is our downplaying of the cost of believing a lack of faith in God's ability to call his people to himself?

However, perhaps one criticism may be allowed. It is possible that Bunyan was too rigid in his requirement of a sustained period of despondency as a preparatory step in conversion. Christian's, Hopeful's and Bunyan's own accounts of conversion all emphasise such a phase, and though it should be seen as an important characteristic of repentance, the necessity of a distinct step in conversion, particularly one devoid of any awareness of hope, is too prescriptive.

As we seek to minister faithfully, the question of what constitutes a genuine conversion is an important one. Some of us will have a tendency to neglect elements of conversion that are necessary for true repentance and faith. Others of us will have a tendency to require stages to conversion that go beyond what is biblically-warranted. My hope is that this paper has helped us to be better equipped to navigate that terrain; serving and loving those we are seeking to reach in a way that bears lasting fruit and brings God glory.

FOLLOWING THE WAY: MISSION IN LUKE'S GOSPEL AND THE BOOK OF ACTS FOR LATIN AMERICA

*Paul Davies**

This article proposes that Luke/Acts can be understood as a “progress of the Way of the LORD” so that “All flesh will see the salvation of the LORD”. Firstly in Jesus’ life and then in the life of the Church, the Way is carried forward, ending in the centre of the Empire. Luke 24:44-49 is proposed as a watershed where streams of teaching from the Gospel are united and thrust out into the book of Acts. These themes form the framework for the reflections upon the Latin American Church’s mission.

Introduction

“Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us” (Luke 1:1). As with the story of Jesus and the Church, so with Luke’s two-volume work, “many have undertaken to draw up an account” of the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. Missiologists in particular have considered the writings of Luke to be an important work.¹ According to David Bosch, there are several reasons for this interest. Firstly, some sectors of the church are using Luke 4:16-21 as its most important missionary text. In some traditions this has even replaced the Great

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¹ Donald Senior and Carroll Stuhlmueller, *The Biblical Foundations for Mission*, Orbis, Maryknoll, 1983 mention C. Talbert, “Shifting Sands: The Recent Study of the Gospel of Luke”, *Interpreting the Gospels*, J.L. Mays, ed., Fortress, Philadelphia, 1981, 197-213; R. Karris, *What are they saying about Luke Acts?*, Paulist, New York, 1979. Senior says that despite the interpretations of Luke in modern exegesis there is still little agreement about his theology. Also see Paul Hertig and Robert L. Gallagher, ‘Introduction: Background to Acts’ in Robert L. Gallagher and Paul Hertig (eds.) *Mission in Acts: Ancient Narratives in Contemporary Context* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004) p. 11 who propose 3 fold structure of Luke based in Acts 1:2 and a threefold structures of Acts based in Acts 1:8.

Commission. Bosch is clearly right about this in the Ecumenical world, although one may take him to task as to whether this is true for Evangelical or Roman Catholic missiology. Secondly, Bosch says that in Luke's writings the Gentile mission is clearly a central theme. This is also true of both of the other Synoptics and John. However, in Luke's case he not only wrote the story of Jesus but also of the beginnings of the church's mission to Gentiles in Acts. Finally, Luke was probably the only Gentile author of a New Testament book. This perspective is interesting in the light of the way he presents the struggles of the New Testament church in regard to what Gentile Christians have to do to be saved by a Jewish Messiah.² Although the Apostle Paul deals with the same issue, Luke's writings give us the perspective of a first generation Gentile Christian and the radical change the church needed to make in order to accommodate the Gentiles.

Some Preliminary Comments

Before launching into the subject matter before us, I would like to clarify a couple of things. Firstly, I am utilising what Christopher J. H. Wright calls "a Missional Hermeneutic".³ The New Testament was written not in the office of a professional theologian as a cold study of God and the church but within the context of the first fires of their mission. To read the New Testament through missional lenses is to read it as it was written. Secondly, I am assuming the priority of Mark and the existence of some sort of document or series of teachings that has been posited as the hypothetical source "Q".⁴ This enlightens the discussion upon what Luke as both theologian and historian wanted to communicate. This leads me to my final presupposition, which is that although I am convinced of the historical reliability of the Gospel, we will be examining Luke's two-volume work as a work of theology rather than simply a work of history.

We will begin by examining various missionary aspects of Luke's Gospel and Acts and then reflect upon some of the principle themes in the light of the Latin American reality.

² David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1992) 84-85. cf. Acts 15:1-34.

³ Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Leicester: IVP Academic, 2006).

⁴ For arguments for the existence of Q, see John S. Kloppenborg, *The formation of Q* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987). For a good argument against the existence of Q, see Mark Goodacre, *The Case against Q* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2002).

A missiology of Luke
The missiological structure of Luke/Acts
The advance of the way of the Lord

R. C. Tannehill believes that the structure of Luke/Acts is essential to an understanding of the whole book.⁵ We can consider this structure as the advance of the “way” (ὁ δόδος).

Isaiah 40:3-5	Isaiah 61:1-2	Joel 2:28-32	Isaiah 40:5
[Luke 3:4-6]	[Luke 4:18-19]	[Acts 2:17-21]	[Acts 28:28]
Luke 24:44-49			

R. E. Davies argues that Isaiah 40:3-5 can be viewed as “the text” of the whole book.⁶ He argues that although both Matthew and Mark also use this quote from Isaiah 40, it is only Luke who continues the quote up to the phrase, “all flesh will see God’s salvation” (Luke 3:6). This highlights, as Navone correctly points out, that Luke “underscores the way of the LORD to the Gentiles”⁷ and for this reason it can be understood as the key verse of the text that demonstrates the how the “way” of the Lord will progress.⁸

The understanding of the advance of the way and the mission of Jesus are expanded in the words of the sermon in Nazareth (Luke 4:18-19 [Isaiah 61:1-2]). Only Luke has this story in this form, which has been called a “programmatic discourse”.⁹ In it Jesus sets out the parameters of his mission. The “way” progresses in the power of the Holy Spirit and all kinds of people are included (Luke 3:6), such as the poor, the prisoners, the blind and the oppressed (Luke 4:18).

Some of the clear themes of this Nazareth Manifesto, such as the centrality of the poor and year of the Lord’s favour, are those which run throughout the Gospel. After the incident at Nazareth, the “way” moves on and Jesus is portrayed as going here and there to carry out this ministry. The pace is breathless (Luke 4:1, 14-31, 43-44; 5:1, 12; 6:12, 17; 7:1, 11). “The impression is strongly given of Jesus moving from place to place... bringing God’s salvation to his people.”¹⁰

⁵ R. C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, vol. 2: The Acts of the Apostles (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1990).

⁶ R. E. Davies, *All Flesh Shall See the Salvation of God: The Foundation of Luke’s Mission Theology*, Fuller SWM, Pasadena, unpublished, 1987, 5.

⁷ John Navone, *Themes of St. Luke* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1970), 188.

⁸ cf. Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 296.

⁹ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 89.

¹⁰ Davies, *All Flesh Shall See*, 10.

There is also a uniquely Lucan part of the Transfiguration story that shows how Jesus is "on the way". Jesus is talking with Moses and Elijah "about his departure", (ἐξοδος). Moses and Elijah, representing the Law and the Prophets, are the ones who make sense of Jesus' mission. Jesus explains his mission using "Moses and all the Prophets" to the Emmaus pair (cf. Luke 24:7). Before commissioning the disciples to their mission, Jesus again explains that his death and resurrection are fulfilling the Law of Moses and the Prophets (Luke 24:44). The Law and the Prophets point to the dynamic nature of the mission of Jesus and the importance of *The Way* in his ministry.

Immediately after the transfiguration, Jesus is shown to be on his "way" by the manner in which he "resolutely sets out for Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51). These words introduce the so-called "travel narrative" (9:51-19:44). Several times in this travel narrative Jesus repeats that "he must go" to Jerusalem (9:51; 10:22; 14:25; 17:11; 18:35; 19:28) to suffer and die, so fulfilling his ἐξοδος (Luke 19-24).

It is obvious from the Gospel, though, that Jesus' salvation did not reach "all flesh" in his lifetime; his ministry was mainly to the Jewish people. However, the comment of Acts 1:1 that the preceding book (the Gospel) dealt with "what Jesus *began* to do and teach" seems to suggest that Acts is going to deal with what he continued to do through his church.¹¹ Jesus fulfils his ἐξοδος by "being taken up to heaven" (Acts 1:2) after giving instructions to his disciples.

The third Old Testament quote after Isaiah 40 and 61 is Joel 2:28. This explains the way in which the work of Christ will be carried out (Acts 2:17) that is, through the agency of the Holy Spirit in the church. It is important to note that in addition to his missionary agency, the Spirit links the mission of the Church and of Jesus. The Spirit descended upon Jesus at the beginning of his ministry in Nazareth (Luke 3:22; 4:18 [Isaiah 61:1]) and now the Spirit is poured out on *all* his people (Acts 2:17 [Joel 2:28]).

The Spirit leads the "way" in taking salvation to the ends of the earth. The message is moving out in ever-increasing concentric circles. Jesus predicted that the disciples would be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria; carrying *the Way* (9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14,22) to the ends of the earth. Some scholars see this as an "agenda" for the story of Acts. The movement this time is *from* Jerusalem and going to the ends of the earth. At the end of each of the so called "panels" Luke sums up the movement of the gospel (Acts 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20 & 28:31). "The overall picture is: the word spread, the church grew, *the Way* of the LORD continued to make its triumphal progress."¹²

¹¹ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 88.

¹² Davies, *All Flesh Shall See*, 13.

The Joel reference ends with “And everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved” (Joel 2:32), which reminds us of the final phrase of Isaiah 40:5. In this way Luke underlines the universality of the gospel, but widens the argument: “All flesh will see the salvation of the Lord” but only those “who call on the name of the Lord shall be saved”.

Luke also uses the words “ὁ ὁδός” as a euphemism for the gospel. Examples of this would be how Luke tells us that Paul goes to Damascus to persecute those of the “Way” (Acts 9:2) and how Apollos had been “instructed in the way of the Lord” (18:25-26).

Additionally, Luke tells us that some of the synagogue of Ephesus “maligned the Way” (19:9) and how this led to a “disturbance about the Way” (19:23) engineered by Demetrius. Finally, we are told how, when speaking to Felix, Paul refers to the manner in which he serves the God of his ancestors is as a “follower of the Way” (24:14). He does this because Felix was “well acquainted with the Way” (24:22).

To finish this section on the importance of the concept of “way” in Luke/Acts Luke includes a Pauline “travel narrative”. Paul travels from Jerusalem to Rome (Acts 21-28) in a similar way in which Jesus travels from the Samaritan village to Jerusalem (Luke 9:52-19:41). This fragment of the story of the of the Lord culminates with the Apostle Paul preaching “boldly and without hindrance” (Acts 28:31) in the central city of the empire. This “way” which began its journey in Nazareth, has finished it in Rome. Paul insists that in spite of the stubbornness of the Jews, nothing will hold back the Way, because God’s salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen (Acts 28:28). In this manner Acts ends in the same way that the Gospel of Luke begins: “all flesh will see God’s salvation” (Luke 3:6).

Missiological Themes in Luke-Acts

If the four Old Testament quotes provide an overall framework to Luke’s mission theology, and Isaiah 40:3-5 is the key, then the commissioning story of Luke 24:44-49 can be said to be a watershed. It is the place where various strands come together from the Gospel and disseminate out into Acts. In this passage the nature of the mission is spelled out more fully and “synthesises Luke’s theology of the gospel and propels the reader into the follow-up account of Acts”.¹³ For this reason, then, this section is an excellent starting point for our study of the major emphases of the mission theology of Luke-Acts. Additionally, Bosch says that it reflects “...in a nutshell, Luke’s entire understanding of the Christian mission: it is the *fulfilment* of scriptural promises; it only becomes possible after the *death and resurrection of the Messiah* of Israel; its central thrust is the *message of repentance and*

¹³ Senior and Stuhlmuehler, *Biblical Foundations*, 256.

forgiveness; it is intended for '*all nations*'; it is to begin '*from Jerusalem*' it is to be executed by '*witnesses*'; and will be *accomplished in the power of the Holy Spirit*'.¹⁴

We will use Bosch's quote as a framework for the survey of the major themes of Luke's theology.

Fulfilment

For Luke, the *fulfilment* of scriptural promises is vital. The mission of Jesus and the church are rooted in the soil of the Hebrew Bible and provide a framework for it. The constant reference to the fulfilment of scripture is one of the ways Luke uses to emphasise the continuity between Israel and the church.¹⁵ The promises of Luke 24:46-49 regarding the Gentile mission are under the heading *this is what is written*, therefore the whole of the book of Acts is also portrayed as fulfilment of prophecy. Fulfilment runs through the whole two-volume work. As Darrell Bock rightly points out, "The theme of covenant and realized promise is fundamental to Luke-Acts."¹⁶

Luke begins the Gospel by stating that what he is about to write about are "things that have been fulfilled" (Luke 1:1). The birth narratives are directed towards showing that the babe of Bethlehem was the fulfilment of the hopes of Israel (1:54, 70). In Nazareth, Jesus proclaims that he is the fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah 61:1-2 (4:21). On the mount of transfiguration, Moses and Elijah are discussing what will be fulfilled at Jerusalem (9:31b) and Jesus presses on towards Jerusalem that prophecy may be fulfilled in his death (13:33).

Acts also has this prophetic atmosphere. Peter interprets the pouring out of the Spirit as fulfilment of prophecy (2:17ff); the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ was seen in the same way (2:25, 35; 3:13, 18; 4:11; 8:32). At the end of Acts, Paul reviews the journey of the Way and concludes that the spectacular turning of Gentiles to Christ (28:28 [Isaiah 40:6]) and the partial rejection by the Jews (28:26,27 [Isaiah 6:9,10]) are both fulfilment of prophecy. For Luke, the whole "Christ event" and the advance of the Way are a dramatic fulfilment of prophecy.

The missionary relevance of prophecy is not always appreciated. The prophetic message announces that God controls and acts in history. As Roger Hedlund says, the hope of the prophets was placed in the fact that in the end God would intervene in the life of his people and institute his reign of justice

¹⁴ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 91.

¹⁵ Senior and Stuhlmuehler, *Biblical Foundations*, 257.

¹⁶ Darrell Bock, "Scripture and the Realisation of God's Promises", Howard Marshall and David Peterson, *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 49.

and righteousness.¹⁷ Luke says that God has acted and is acting in the missions of Jesus and the Church.

Death and Resurrection of the Messiah

Luke emphasises that the mission of the church can only happen in the light of the death and resurrection of the Messiah of Israel. Luke is in harmony with the rest of the New Testament in seeing the central point of the gospel to be the death and resurrection of Jesus the carpenter. Jesus himself emphasises that he must go to Jerusalem to suffer (9:51; 13:32, 33; 18:31-33). The Greek word *dei* (must) has the idea of force. The angels seated on the tomb after the resurrection re-emphasise the necessity of Messianic suffering (24:7, 26). It is the "climactic event of Jesus' history" and the launching pad of the church's mission.¹⁸

In this context the general issue of the necessity of suffering in Luke/Acts arises. The suffering of the Messiah as much as the suffering of his servants is important. This again highlights the inextricable link between the mission of Christ and his servants. If Christ suffered then his servants will also suffer.

In the Gospel, Jesus faced opposition from the religious leaders which eventually results in his death. This suffering and opposition continues within the community of the Church. The gospel is spread through the suffering, persecution and martyrdom of the apostles and the believers in general. Some of the apostles were arrested (Acts 4:1ff; 5:1ff); in the case of Stephen, he was stoned (6:8-8:1). The church is consequently scattered when persecution arises again (8:1b-3). This persecution is also seen as the trigger for the church being planted in Antioch (12:19-21). Saul (later Paul) was told of the sufferings that he would face for Christ (9:16) and on his journeys he encounters innumerable episodes of opposition (13:8, 45, 50; 14:4f, 19; 16:16ff; 17:5f, 13, 32; 18:6; 19:23), and is eventually arrested (21:30) and imprisoned in Rome (28).

So Luke stresses that the message of salvation "will be brought to the nations in and through suffering"¹⁹ both of the Messiah and his followers.

Repentance and Forgiveness of Sins

Salvation is central to the message of Luke-Acts as well as its attendant ideas of *repentance and forgiveness of sins*. We will look at two aspects in regard to salvation. Firstly, *what does salvation mean to Luke?*

¹⁷ Roger E. Hedlund, *The Mission of the Church in the World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 129.

¹⁸ Senior and Stuhlmuehler, *Biblical Foundations*, 258.

¹⁹ Senior and Stuhlmuehler, *Biblical Foundations*, 258.

Jesus sums up the extent of his salvation in the words of Isaiah 61:1-2, the language of which is primarily that of jubilee. Jubilee was essentially the reversal of the fortunes of the poor and the cancellation of all debts (Lev 25; Deut 15). Jesus' mission was to have radical implications for the fortunes of many.

The poor receive salvation and have a special place in Luke's thinking. There are a number of exclusively Lucan stories regarding the poor (6:20, 24; 12:16-21; 16:19-31; 19:1-10). Especially significant is Luke's beatitude on the poor as compared with Matthew's. Matthew has "blessed are the poor in spirit" (Matt 5:3) whereas Luke only has "blessed are the poor" (Luke 6:20). Gustavo Gutiérrez says, "...the poor whom he blesses are the opposite of the rich whom he condemns; the poor would be those who lack what they need. In this case the poverty that he speaks of would be *material poverty*."²⁰ Gutiérrez is right here, but we would go further by saying that those who are *physically poor* are more likely to realise their *spiritual poverty* and turn to Christ. Because of this Jesus can also say that it is difficult for the rich to enter the kingdom of God (18:25) because of their propensity to rely on their riches instead of on Christ. Furthermore, the parables of the rich fool (Luke 12:13-21) and Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:19-31) – both uniquely Lucan parables – demonstrate Luke's interest in the poor. The poor are not so prominent in Acts but the community do continue to care for the poor and share their goods with one another (Acts 2:44-46; 4:32-35 cf. Deut 15:4).

Other marginalised people are also important to Luke. He emphasises the role of the Samaritans (9:51f; 10:25ff; 17:19) and seems to use them as a starting point for the Gentile mission.²¹ A crippled woman is healed by Jesus on the Sabbath (13:10-17) and Zacchaeus, the detestable tax collector, is singled out by Jesus for special visit (19:1-9). In Luke salvation reaches people with whom nobody would want to associate.

Healing and exorcism are also included in salvation in Luke. More than any other of the evangelists, Luke emphasises the healing ministry of Jesus, connecting it with the preaching of the kingdom of God (4:18, 19; 9:6). This is also true in Acts (3:1ff; 5:12-16; 8:7; 10:38; 28:8, 27).

Salvation, in Luke, also has political implications. This is especially true of the birth narratives. They are full of the concept of salvation drawn from the Old Testament: The exaltation of the humble (1:51-53), deliverance of God's people (1:71-74), light and peace (1:77-79) and revelation and glory (2:30-32) are also dealt with in the context of salvation. The message is that God has wrought salvation for Israel in the past by bringing down the great and raising up the humble and he is just about to do it again in Jesus.

²⁰ Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis), 170.

²¹ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 90.

Forgiveness of sin is a major outworking of salvation for Luke. This is often in the context of healing and always in the context of repentance (Luke 1:77; 3:3; 5:20-21; 5:23-24; 6:37; 7:47-49; 11:4; 12:10; 17:3-4; 23:34; 24:47). In Acts salvation is preached by the apostles and includes the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38; 5:32) physical healing (4:9, 10) and forgiveness of sins (2:38; 8:22; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18).

In conclusion therefore,, salvation, for Luke, is not simply the assurance for the soul of eternal bliss; it is broader and more holistic. "In Jesus' ministry, those in pain are to be liberated, the poor cared for, the outcasts and rejected brought home, and all sinners offered forgiveness and salvation."²²

Secondly, *what, according to Luke, are the qualifications for salvation?* Repentance and faith are the two requirements for salvation that appear all the way through, from beginning to end in the mission of Jesus.

John the Baptist preaches a baptism of repentance (Luke 3:3). Jesus emphasises that it is the spiritually sick whom he is calling to repentance (5:32). Repentance, though, demands action and Luke gives several examples of the fruits of repentance. For example, John commands fruits of repentance (3:8) Levi demonstrates it (5:27f), as does the centurion (7:9), and the sinful woman (7:36ff), and the lost son (15:21). It is important to note the economic emphasis of John the Baptist's exhortations to exhibit the "fruits of repentance". Luke is the only evangelist to include these fruits (cf. Mark 1:1-12; Matt 3:1-12). It is safe to say, therefore, that, for Luke, the proper use of wealth is portrayed as a fruit of repentance. Zacchaeus uses his wealth properly and so salvation comes to his house (19:8ff).

The rich are not to rely on their riches (note the juxtaposition of Luke 12:13-21 and 13:22-34) but to show their repentance by the correct use of their wealth. Some in Luke-Acts did use their money properly (Luke 7:5; 10:35; 19:8; 23:50-54; Acts 2:44; 4:32-37) and others did not (12:13-21; 16:19ff; 18:18ff; Acts 5:1-10; 8:18, 19). In Acts it seems that repentance and faith take on a new emphasis; the Jews must repent of the death of Jesus (Acts 2:23-38; 3:17-23; 13:28-39) and the Gentiles must repent of idol worship (14:15; 17:30, 31).

To conclude our discussion, salvation in Luke-Acts is an extensive term. It deals with "the marks of evil... found embedded in human life: the possessed, the sick, the blind, the lame, the oppressed"²³ and it "includes the total transformation of human life, forgiveness of sin, healing from infirmities and release from any kind of bondage".²⁴

²² Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 118.

²³ Senior and Stuhlmuehler, *Biblical Foundations*, 263.

²⁴ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 107.

All Nations

The universality of the gospel and its spread to *all nations* is also a significant subject for Luke. As we have already remarked, the key concept to understand Luke's framework was that *all flesh is going to see the salvation of the Lord*. This, as we have said, is rooted in prophecy and fulfilled in the mission of Jesus and the Church.

The mission of Jesus, though universal in intent, was incomplete in execution.²⁵ Jesus did not reach many Gentiles but the Gentile mission was strongly foreshadowed in the Gospel. Simeon prophesies that Jesus will take on the role of the servant of the Lord and so be a light to the Gentiles (Luke 2:31). The genealogy in Luke is different from Matthew's and shows the common heritage of Jesus Christ with all humanity, tracing his "family tree" back, not to Abraham but to God, the universal father of humanity (3:23ff).

The Gentiles are often portrayed in a favourable light in the Gospel. In the Nazareth sermon Jesus points to the fact that in Elijah and Elisha's day it was two Gentiles who were healed, not Jews. "What he communicated to them *inter alia* was that God was not only the God of Israel but also and equally God of the Gentiles."²⁶ Jesus also heals Gentiles; the centurion's servant and a Gentile woman's son (7:1-16). Luke is the only one of the synoptics who record the healing of the ten lepers and the one who returned to thank Jesus; a Samaritan (17:11ff). "The Samaritan mission suggests a fundamental break with Jewish attitudes."²⁷ Finally, it is interesting how Luke places the sending out of the seventy (or the seventy-two) next to the woes on the unrepentant cities. Obviously this sending foreshadows the Gentile mission and the juxtaposition of the woes seems to imply that if the Israelite cities did not repent then the gospel would be preached to the Gentiles, represented by the cities of Tyre and Sidon (10:1-23). This is echoed in Acts with the reaction of Paul and Barnabas in Acts 13:46 (see also verses 47 and 51 of the same chapter) when they turned to the Gentiles (cf. Acts 28:28).

Clearly, in Acts the Gentile mission is more prominent. Many non-Jewish peoples are represented on the day of Pentecost (2:8-11) and three thousand of those became full members of God's people (2:41). The inclusion of the Gentiles in the church is increased with the conversion of Cornelius and other God-fearers and the subsequent rejoicing (10:1-11:18). The mission to the Gentiles is seen to have reached an important point when Paul reaches Rome and although the task is not finished, God's work is continuing (Acts 28:28). The gospel's universal application had been partially fulfilled: both Jew and Gentile, in the centre of the civilised world, were seeing God's salvation.

²⁵ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 95.

²⁶ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 89.

²⁷ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 91.

From Jerusalem

The story of the progression of the “way” has its locus in Jerusalem. For Luke Jerusalem is “not only the destination of Jesus’ wanderings and the place of his death, but also the location from which the message will go out in concentric circles to Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth”.²⁸

Jerusalem and all that it represents in the temple and Jewish religion are central to the message of Luke-Acts. The gospel begins (1:5ff) and finishes (24) in Jerusalem. Jesus, in the travel narrative, is making his way to Jerusalem (9:51; etc.). From 19:28 the rest of the gospel takes place in and around Jerusalem. Jerusalem is where the apostles are empowered “from on high” (Luke 24:49) and it is where some of the most spectacular conversions take place (Acts 2:41; 4:4). The apostles in Acts constantly return to Jerusalem (8:25; 9:26; 11:2; 15) and the elders in Jerusalem are obviously the ones with most authority (11:1ff; 15:1ff). Paul feels compelled to return to Jerusalem (20:22) and from there Paul and the gospel reach their furthest point (Acts 28).

So Jerusalem is more than just a geographical location for Luke; it is, as Bosch calls it, “a highly concentrated theological symbol”.²⁹ It is, for Luke, the sacred centre of the world.

Witness

The apostles form a link between Jesus’ and the church’s history and they are called to be witnesses to what they have seen and experienced (24:48; Acts 1:8).

Even before they receive this call, witness is a prominent theme. At the beginning of the Gospel Luke affirms that eye-witnesses have provided him with information for his Gospel (1:2). In the birth narratives there are many witnesses to the birth of Jesus. The angels witness to the shepherds and they, in turn, become witnesses (2:8-20); Simeon and Anna witness to the destiny of the child (2:21ff).

John the Baptist witnessed to the coming of Jesus (3:1-19); the Spirit and the voice from heaven also witnessed to him (3:21ff). Luke gives reports of three appearances of Jesus to various people who subsequently witness to others regarding Jesus’ resurrection (Luke 24). “In Acts witness becomes the appropriate term for ‘mission’”.³⁰ The apostles are to go out and witness to the fact of Jesus’ resurrection because they had seen it as his chosen witnesses (Acts 10:41).

²⁸ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 94.

²⁹ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 93.

³⁰ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 116.

The Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is the major mover of mission in Luke-Acts. Among the evangelists, Luke has so emphasised the role of the Holy Spirit that he has been called "the theologian of the Spirit".³¹ The Holy Spirit is involved time and again in the birth narratives. John is said to be "filled with Holy Spirit even from birth" (1:15). The Spirit is the agent of the incarnation (1:35); Elizabeth, (1:41) Zechariah (1:67) and Simeon (2:25-27) are moved, filled or revealed to, by the Holy Spirit. In Jesus' ministry the influence of the Spirit continues: Jesus is the one who will baptise with the Holy Spirit (3:16) and is filled with the Spirit at his baptism (3:22). He returns from the Jordan full of the Spirit, is led immediately into the desert by the Spirit (4:1) and returns triumphant to Galilee in the power of the Spirit (4:14). The Spirit is the Spirit of mission. Jesus' mission is inaugurated because the Spirit is upon him (4:18) and the disciples are filled with the Holy Spirit to empower them for their mission (Acts 2:17-21).

He gives tongues to the apostles (Acts 2). Stephen is full of the Spirit in his work (6:3) and when he is preaching (6:10). The Spirit directs Philip in his conversation with the eunuch (8:8-29) and then transports him elsewhere (8:39). The Spirit makes the preparations and directs the special event in which Cornelius receives the gospel. In another key moment in Acts, the council of Jerusalem, the Gentiles are recognised to be Christians because they have received the same Spirit as the Jewish Christians. Finally, the Spirit directs Paul and his companions (13:2, 4; 16:6).

Navone says, "The gift of the Holy Spirit leads the disciples to missionary work that they had not planned. It is not man's [sic] design but God's that will be realised through the agency of the Holy Spirit."³² Indeed, it has been correctly noted that Acts should be called *The Acts of the Spirit* rather than *The Acts of the Apostles*.

Some Reflections on the Latin American Context

The challenge for the church in Latin America today is not to pull out some verses from the Bible to justify its mission in the world, but rather to understand and take part in the mission of God (*missio Dei*) in its context in the light of God's word. Our intention in this section is to begin to outline a missiology of Luke-Acts for Latin America.

Not all the themes mentioned above can be applied to the Latin American context but we will highlight some of them under three headings that seem

³¹ Senior and Stuhlmuehler, *Biblical Foundations*, 227.

³² Navone, *Themes in St. Luke*, 1970: 169.

to me to be pertinent to the situation – the manner of mission, the message of mission and the motivation/motivator of mission.

The Manner of Mission

(i) Suffering

As we have already noted, the suffering of Jesus (and of the church) in the fulfilling of their mission is not only a historical fact but Luke also underlines it as a necessity. For Luke the gospel is always communicated in the context of the suffering of the messenger.

In Latin America, the first messengers of the “gospel” came with military and political power. The first “Christians” that the indigenous peoples saw brought the sword and a gospel of power. The *conquistadores* were accompanied by their priests and, although we do not want to propagate “the Black Legend”, we know that the vast majority did not defend the human rights of the indigenous but rather consented to their exploitation or even participated in it. The mixture of power and religion left people with the impression that Christianity is the religion of the powerful oppressor.

This same impression was maintained when the first Protestant missionaries arrived in this part of the world. They did not bring with them military power, but often they came with the blessing of the governments that had recently won their battles for independence. President Justo Rufino Barrios of Guatemala, for example, personally accompanied from the United States the first Protestant missionary to his country in 1882. In a continent where often money is synonymous with power, missionaries that come from countries with great economic might, without wishing to, give the impression that Christianity is the religion of the rich. Today, the so-called “theology of prosperity” reaffirms that interpretation.

Jesus, on the other hand, came in weakness and vulnerability. He was not born into a rich palace or privileged position. His birth to a young peasant woman had a hint of scandal and the witnesses to his birth were not the great but the humble. In his life he did not take political office or reach a high social standing but identified himself with the despised, rejected and marginalised. His death was not the honourable death of a hero but the ignoble death of a slave or common criminal.

The community in Acts continued in the same vein. In the early church, there were, without doubt, some of higher rank but mostly it was made up of the common people. The apostles were not able to use the forces of the Roman Empire to spread the gospel but went out in weakness and vulnerability. They suffered from the beginning of their mission to the last page of Acts.

What does all this tell us? Suffering was always a part of the mission of the church. It seems as if God has ordained this type of mission. Even today the Roman Catholic church holds a great deal of political power and the Protestant churches, which are growing very rapidly, are gaining political power in certain countries. In this context we must remember our peacemaking and meek Lord. Meek, of course, does not mean that Jesus did not have power, but rather that he used it in the right way. As servant of the world, which we see in Luke-Acts, the church must identify with the despised, rejected and marginalised.

(ii) Witness

The method practised by the Spanish and Portuguese of spreading the gospel in Latin America was inhuman and denied the very nature of the gospel. Daniel Vidart quotes the discourse of the time called the *requerimiento* that was always read to the indigenous before going into battle:

If you do not do this [submit]... I will, with the help of God, enter powerfully against you and I will make war in all parts in order to subject you to the yoke and obedience of the Church and His Majesty and I will take your women and children and make them slaves, and sell them and dispose of them any way His Majesty orders me. I will take all your goods and will do all kinds of evil and hurt that I can.³³

This is how the gospel reached Latin America.

Even today "the military method" exists in Latin America. Many books speak of "spiritual warfare". Mainly these come from the United States and, in general, from a school of thought with leaders such as Benny Hinn, Kenneth Copeland, Kenneth Hagan and C. Peter Wagner. One stream of this movement declares the presence of "territorial spirits". The argument, according to a particular interpretation of Daniel 10:13, is that each part of the world is governed by its own demon. Mission, therefore, becomes the task of identifying and binding the spirits of the country, city, area or locality. Power is the most important element. In order to do this task, prayer marches are carried out around cities, entreating God in the streets and avenues in order to take possession of this land. The similarity with the *requerimiento* is too close to ignore. The emphasis on power, the territorial claim and the use of the word "march", taken from military language, are all echoes from the 16th century.

The major method of mission in Luke-Acts is *witness*. Jesus and the disciples did not go out with military power but rather as witnesses, giving testimony to the marvellous works of God. Even though the apostles did

³³ Daniel Vidart, *Ideología y realidad de América*, Montevideo, 1968 (quotes from Eduardo Galeano, *Las venas abiertas de América Latina*, Siglo Veintiuno, México, 1971), 18.

liberate demonised people, there is not one verse that presents the apostles trying to cast out the spirit of a city or an area.

In our context the gospel must now be incarnated by a vulnerable, suffering church which identifies with vulnerable, suffering people. In this context it must witness to the full saving power of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Message of Mission

(i) Salvation

“Political, economic, cultural, social and spiritual factors seem to conspire as they generate instability, uncontrolled change, violence and chaos.”³⁴ A wider and deeper reflection on the message of salvation described in Luke-Acts would need a more extensive study than is presented here. Before reflecting on Luke-Acts it would be good to describe, among other things, some of the social, cultural and historical problems that Latin America suffers. For reasons of space we must be content with a brief description of the situation in the hope that it will lead to interest in the reader for a more profound investigation.

Five hundred years after Columbus, Latin America is a continent in crisis. It has a multi-billion-dollars-a-year drugs industry (serving local and international demands) which multiplies the problems of addiction and HIV/AIDS. The World Bank and International Monetary Fund enslave the majority of Latin American governments, forcing them into policies that make the rich richer and the poor poorer. People feel that there is no real democracy in their countries. Informal sectors of the economy, because of underemployment and unemployment grow at a dizzying pace. Each day there are more people begging in the streets or selling matches, chocolates or city guides in the trains and buses or in the street. There are still armed groups that fight against governments and use violence to carry forward their purposes. The growing threat of AIDS affects the whole population and the numbers of people infected grows with giant steps. Apart from injustice and corruption that are already part of daily life, there are the growing problems of street children, machismo and the exploitation of women. The church must fulfil its mission in this context. Luke’s broad perspective on salvation makes us reflect upon the problems that we have just described. Luke tells us that, in this continent of endemic poverty, oppression and injustice, there is hope (4:18, 19). The people need to hear Luke’s full gospel – the hope of sins forgiven, release from all kinds of prison and a jubilee – the

³⁴ Emilio A. Nuñez and William D. Taylor, *Crisis in Latin America* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), 11.

reversal of fortunes for the poor and oppressed. But this continent does not only need to hear this news but also experience it in concrete terms. Salvation in Luke-Acts is not only words but also actions. Solidarity with the vulnerable, the poor and the oppressed is essential. The message of hope belongs to street children, and AIDS sufferers, to those discriminated against and exploited women, and this means that the church must identify, serve and announce the full salvation in Christ to these people.

(ii) All Nations

"Walk through the streets any major city of Latin America and you cannot help but see the polychromatic spectrum of the races. From pure Indigenous – with hints of oriental features – to white European, from ebony black to shades of mulatto, brown and yellow, Latin America presents a racial mosaic."³⁵ In this context, the promise of Jesus that the gospel will reach to all nations takes on a sharper hue. There were a multiplicity of races that heard the gospel on the day of Pentecost and there are multiplicities of races that need to hear and have a right to hear the gospel today in Latin America.

Reflecting on this issue brings to light the problem of racism and discrimination. There is no peace among the races in Latin America. This is demonstrated by the fact that, even in the popular religiosity of the Andes region of Bolivia and Peru, the sanctuaries of the Virgin Mary associated with the Mestizos (mixed indigenous and European blood) are believed to have more power than those associated with Aymara or Quechua (the pure blood indigenous people). In the bigger cities it is easier for a light-skinned person to get work than it is for an indigenous or darker-skinned person.

The gospel is for all nations, and therefore it dignifies. It was not only for the Jews and today it is not the prerogative of the rich or for those of European descent.

The church today must be a model: it must emphasise the universality of the gospel and the fact that the equality that the gospel brings dignifies all people without distinction. The prayers of the white man are not more powerful than those of the indigenous. This represents a huge challenge for white missionaries. They must humble themselves and act in a coherent way, in word and deed in front of their Latin American brothers and sisters.

This equality and universality brings into focus the issue of mono-cultural churches: churches for the Chinese, for blacks or whites all separated according to the "Homogeneous Unit Principle". The idea of Luke-Acts is that all nations will find their place in the same church. Our evangelisation and discipleship must reflect this doctrine. Our evangelisation and ecclesiology cannot, and should not, be separated.

³⁵ Taylor and Nuñez, *Crisis*, 28.

The Motivation/Motivator of Mission

(i) The Advance of the Way

The mission of the church is not an easy task in any situation, but when thinking of Latin America "... a sense of gloom can sweep in when one contemplates the structural inequities that generate endemic poverty and human tragedy".³⁶ The problems seem hopeless, the resources inadequate and the hurdles insuperable.

The same must have been true for the apostles in the New Testament. The Jewish authorities were against them, the Romans were opposed to them, the physical, social and economic dilemmas insurmountable. But one thing which kept them, and can keep us, working is the confidence that *The Way of the Lord* is unstoppable. The valleys will be filled in, the mountains brought low, the crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth until *all flesh will see the salvation of the Lord*.

In the church's mission in Latin America it must be conscious of the ultimate success of that mission. The *missiones ecclesiae* are only a part of the *missio Dei*, which ultimately belongs to the Lord, who will fulfil what he started. Our task is to cooperate with him in this.

(ii) The Holy Spirit

The charismatic awakening that the church has experienced in almost every part of the world has corrected an imbalance in the theology of the Holy Spirit. The churches in Latin America have seen the work of the Holy Spirit in several areas and in different ways: its massive growth, the gifts of the Spirit, revival, awakening, healings, etc. Without doubt, the Holy Spirit is active in this continent. In this context, the teaching of the missiology of Luke can help us a great deal. Luke, "the evangelist of the Spirit", describes in his writings several roles that the Spirit fulfils.

As we have already mentioned, the mission of the church is to cooperate with God in his mission. We can see this in Luke's missiology. In Luke-Acts the Spirit initiates mission, which would not have been started if it were not for the Spirit's ministry (Luke 3-4; Acts 2). In our context we can affirm that wherever there is a movement of the Holy Spirit it is not only for the blessing of the church but in order that the church carries out its mission.

The Spirit also guided the missionary task. The Spirit worked in places even before the apostles had arrived. The experience of Philip is a good example: The Spirit took him to the desert to meet the eunuch, who had

³⁶ Taylor and Nuñez, *Crisis*, 11.

already been prepared for this meeting and was reading a passage from the sacred Scriptures pertinent to his context (Acts 8:8-29). Another case is that of Cornelius in Acts 10: the Spirit arranged the meeting between Peter and Cornelius, even though God had to persuade the apostle to go.

In the Latin American context the *conquistadores*, just like many Protestants, didn't believe that God was in Latin America before their arrival. They believed that they had to "bring Christ". But without doubt the Spirit was there before the first arrivals, working in the culture and in the people themselves. Many elements within the Incan culture (e.g. the three laws of the Inca, the concept of the Condor as messenger of the gods or Wiracocha [the creator god]) could have been used without any problem to contextualise the gospel so that it would have put down roots in Latin American soil. However, the first "missionaries" believed in *tabula rasa* (one must destroy the receiving culture before evangelising) and for this reason all these elements were left aside. Today, we must be aware of those areas in which the Holy Spirit is working and follow him. In a conference in England Samuel Escobar, the Peruvian theologian, speaking of the Spirit as the wind (John 3), said that a child playing with a kite does not control the wind but rather places the kite in the wind's direction and adjusts it so that it will catch the wind better. Our task in regard to the Spirit is similar: We do not control the Spirit but rather we follow him and adjust ourselves to him in order to work better in mission. The story of Cornelius teaches us that the Spirit does not always move in the direction we expect.

Conclusion

Luke gives us a model for our mission in all contexts but, as we have seen, we can apply his teaching especially to Latin America in that he provides us with the *manner*, *message* and *motivation* of mission. We must incarnate the gospel of Jesus Christ in our vulnerability and humble witness, announcing the whole gospel, witnessing to all peoples, following *The Way of the Lord* with the Holy Spirit as our guide.

REVIEW ARTICLE: *HARD ROCK THEOLOGY*

'FOR THEIR ROCK IS NOT AS OUR ROCK':

AN EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

Daniel Strange, Apollos, 2014, 384pp, £19.99

Daniel Strange's book is a major contribution to the field of the theology of religion. Expounding earlier work by such writers as J. H. Bavinck and Hendrik Kraemer, Strange builds on it by a careful exegesis of Scripture and integrating into his argument the work of more recent writers. This review article summarises the main arguments of the book and interacts primarily with the author's method. While there is much to be commended in this work, the reviewer argues that a major problem is introduced by equating religion and religions and pleads for a more positive incorporation of sociological enquiry into the field.

A few years ago I read this extract of a letter from a Japanese student on returning to Japan after studying in England:

Two months have already passed since I came home. I've been missing England and all my friends so much that I sometimes cry... Please listen to me. I've decided not to follow Christianity any more. I'm so sorry if my decision disappoints you. I can't deny Christianity at all because I really know what I experienced in England... But now I must follow my family's religion. Please don't misunderstand. I've decided by myself although it was hard for me.

No sensitive disciple of Christ, regardless of their position on perseverance and apostasy, would be left unmoved on reading such words. But they also provoke questions: What does she mean when she says she is not going to follow Christianity anymore? Just what did she experience in England? What is it about her family's religion that has led her to take such a decision? Quite apart from the pastoral issues that arise from such a situation the need for clear thinking on religion and religions is obvious. This volume by Daniel Strange, Academic Vice-Principal and Lecturer in Culture, Religion and Public Theology at Oak Hill College, London, is his attempt to do just that.

Strange draws the geological metaphor for his title from Moses' song (Deut 32:31) and is not shy to declare his theological commitments: "this is a book for evangelical Christians, written by an evangelical Christian" (33). His particular confessional stance is that of Reformed theology ("the confessional tradition I believe to be closest to God's revelation in Scripture") although he hopes that the common evangelical position on the authority of

Scripture will encourage a broad range of evangelical interaction. He also believes in the creation and fall as real space-time historical events, the uniqueness of Christ, and the necessity of conscious faith in the finished work of Christ for salvation, which I also affirm.

Approaching the Rocks

Moses' declaration is expounded by Strange by integrating a number of disciplines that are often compartmentalised in theological studies: systematic theology, exegesis, biblical theology and missiology. He is aware that this is an ambitious undertaking but is ideologically convinced, as I am, that we need to break out of our narrow ghettos and interact more. Such an ambitious goal is almost guaranteed to fail but it is a noble goal; attempt must be made and Strange bravely wades in. Given the spectacular failure that could result, the partial success of the undertaking is a great encouragement that should advance this very important discussion forward.

Strange is well aware of the "somewhat 'derived' nature" (34) of the work, depending heavily on the work of J. H. Bavinck (1895-1964), Hendrik Kraemer (1888-1965) and Cornelius Van Til (1885-1987). The author would be happy, he tells us, if this work achieved nothing but republicising and championing Kraemer and Bavinck for a new generation of Christians.¹ He has done that much and more and has set a challenging agenda for this generation; my hope is that this agenda will indeed be taken up by a host of others both from within the Reformed evangelical constituency and from without.

My own area is missiology and it is in this area that I will attempt to critique this work. This is difficult enough for one person as the area of missiology is itself one that attempts to integrate insights from a wide range of disciplines, primarily exegesis, systematic theology, biblical theology, history, communication, linguistics, anthropology, sociology, comparative religions, and geography. Just writing that list makes me go weak at the knees; no one missiologist can hope to become familiar with such a wide field of scholarship and Strange's understandable fear of superficiality and amateurism is even more apposite for the contribution of someone seeking to bring such a multi-faceted perspective.

Strange recognises that many evangelical Christians will want to quickly move on through the complex arguments to their missiological implications. He is sympathetic to such an impulse but warns his readers that, in this volume at least, missiological implications are restricted to a single chapter

¹ The serious dearth of evangelical reflection on religion is glaringly expressed in the omission of an article on religion in John Corrie, J. Samuel Escobar and Wilbert R. Shenk, eds., *Dictionary of Mission Theology: Evangelical Foundations* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity, 2007).

with the tantalising prospect of a subsequent volume. This present volume, he tells us, seeks to provide “a theological analysis... for such missiological application” (36).

Strange clarifies his method as a particularly theological one: “From the presupposition of an epistemologically authoritative biblical revelation” (42). He rightly, then, bases his study on the doctrine of revelation (43-51). We can access truth about God and his creation because a true God has chosen to make truth known. As finite and sinful human beings our reception of that truth can be both true, in the sense that we are thinking God’s thoughts after him, and partial so that “we do not presume to think God’s thoughts” (44).² Furthermore, Strange accepts the multiperspectivalist and symphonic approaches of John Frame and Vern Poythress respectively (45-46).³ God’s revelation of himself, therefore, is not all of a kind but “comes to us through various media (nature, history, word, person), all of which are authoritative and consistent” (46). The Bible, however, he asserts (and quoting Frame), has a unique role in that it is necessary to correct our vision. Our doctrine of *sola Scriptura* must be informed and shaped by these considerations. The author is keen to avoid the mistake of dichotomising Scripture from the other media of revelation and argues that he is seeking to “highlight their complementarity and unity” (49) while reserving for the Bible the “ultimate authority in all metaphysical, epistemological, ethical and soteriological issues” (50).⁴

Mapping the Terrain

In chapters 1 and 2 Strange introduces the subject of the book, outlines his method and describes the theological anthropology that underpins his argument. His thesis is this:

From the presupposition of an epistemologically authoritative biblical revelation non-Christian religions are sovereignly directed, variegated and dynamic, collective human idolatrous responses to divine revelation, behind which stand deceiving demonic forces. Being antithetically against yet parasitically dependent upon the truth of the Christian worldview, non-Christian religions are “subversively fulfilled” in the gospel of Jesus Christ. (98, original emphasis)

² Here Strange is quoting Michael S. Horton, “Consistently Reformed: The Inheritance and Legacy of Van Til’s Apologetic”, in *Revelation and Reason: New Essays in Reformed Theology* (ed. K. Scott Oliphant and Lane G. Tipton; Phillipsburg: P&R, 2007), 131-148.

³ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God: A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2002), 89-90, 191-194, 200-204; Vern S. Poythress, *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1987).

⁴ Strange expounds his theology of Scripture further in “Not Ashamed! The Sufficiency of Scripture for Public Theology”, *Themelios* 36 (2011): 238-60.

I will focus this review on these two chapters, not because the other chapters do not also deserve focussed attention, but rather because the matters dealt with here are properly foundational.⁵ But before I come back to Strange's method I need to briefly outline the meat of the book.

In chapter 3 Strange turns his attention to self-confessedly speculative reflections on the "*historical* origin of the phenomena of the 'religions'" (98, original emphasis) arguing that religion and the religions stem from a single source, a *prisca theologia* and an original monotheism. Basing his argument on the writings of Van Til, Herman Bavinck, Jonathan Edwards, and Wilhelm Schmidt (the latter two refracted through the work of Gerald McDermott and Winfried Corduan respectively), he asserts that "there is a historical *remnantal* revelation within religious traditions, which, though entropically distorted over time, through for example the mechanisms of etymology or euhemerism, gives us a comparative theological explanation of 'commonalities' and 'continuities', between religious traditions" (120). This is a stimulating chapter and, though somewhat speculative, adds a significant building block to his argument.⁶ Strange's conclusion here is that there is a revelatory single source out of which "non-Christian religions" are fashioned.

In chapter 4 Strange continues his speculative reflections on OT prehistory, focussing on what he argues persuasively, along with a number of recent commentators, is the dischronologically-ordered single literary unit of Genesis 10–11. Here he very helpfully introduces the work of Mark Kreitzer on ethnicity.⁷ Running with Kreitzer's argument and finding agreement from the likes of Peter Harrison, Franz Delitzsch, C. A. Auberlen, Robert Candlish and Herman Bavinck, Strange argues that the Babel incident is the explanation, not only for linguistic and cultural diversity, but also for religious diversity (125–54). He then argues, after Meredith Kline, James Jordon and James Montgomery Boice, that such religious diversity is intimately connected to the demonic realm (Gen 6:1–4 and Deut 4:19; 32:7–9, 15–17, 21).⁸ At this point I think Strange overstretches himself, as we find

⁵ Indeed, this work could do with a number of substantial reviews from scholars of the variety of disciplines within which Strange marshals his evidence. I will also not list a surprising number of typographical errors that should have been caught by the proof-readers. Hopefully the US edition will have these corrected.

⁶ I am grateful to be introduced to the work of Corduan, with whose work I was not previously acquainted. See e.g. Winfried Corduan, *In the Beginning God: A Fresh Look at the Case for Original Monotheism* (Nashville: B&H, 2013).

⁷ Mark Kreitzer, *The Concept of Ethnicity in the Bible: A Theological Analysis* (London: Edwin Mellen, 2008).

⁸ Strange's position on Genesis 6:4 is that the "sons of God" (*bēnē hā'ēlōhīm*) were in fact demons and that they also produced hybridised offspring after the flood (148). Although it would not be conclusive (as the lineages of these hybrids may have died out) a genetic study of human populations might help to illuminate this argument. Recent genetic studies have suggested a single male ancestor and a single female ancestor of all living humans. See Spencer Wells, *The Journey of Man: A Genetic Odyssey* (London: Penguin, 2002) on Y-chromosome studies

him concluding with Rohinton Mody that demons “stand behind” idols (149).⁹ He argues that the speculations of this chapter are not game-changers for his argument but I wonder if a more chastened view of the connection between idols and demons might undermine his argument more substantially than he thinks.

In chapters 5 and 6 Strange expands on his theme of idolatry as “perhaps *the* hermeneutical master key with which to unlock the nature of non-Christian religion and religions” (156, original emphasis). Strange argues that the Old and New Testaments are “testimony to the condensed picture” sketched out in Romans 1:18-32, that of “idolatrous human response to divine revelation” (236), and that “the Old Testament’s positive affirmation of Yahweh’s transcendent uniqueness reveals a corollary negative assessment of the religious Other, witnessed in the strong denouncement of idolatry” (210).

After Larry Poston,¹⁰ Strange asserts, wrongly I think, that religion outside of the OT covenant community is always viewed as something negative (158). Melchizedek’s priesthood is viewed without a shred of negativity (Gen 14; Heb 5:6; 7:1-10) and the repentance of Nineveh was met with the salvific response of the Lord (Jonah 3).

Strange seems to assume that biblical chronology is to be understood in a strict way. He speculates that, since Babel was a “fresh religious memory” to Abraham and Abimelech (Gen 20) “we are at an early stage where knowledge of the true God and his actions was still widespread” (190). That presupposes that the chronologies of Genesis 5 and 11 are strict, which is surely a moot point with which evangelical commentators are not agreed. The distinguished Old Testament scholar, Bruce Waltke comments on Genesis 4:17-18, 5:1-31; 11:10-26 in this way: “linear genealogies... establish continuity over stretches of time without narrative. Because the genealogies are concerned to propel the story and establish relational links, they cannot

and Luigi Cavalli-Sforza, *Genes, Peoples, and Languages* (trans. Mark Seielstad; New York: North Point, 2000) on mitochondrial DNA. I have not been able to find a single scholarly interaction with this work by an author coming from a theologically-conservative paradigm. This is surely a lacuna that screams for attention.

⁹ Rohinton Mody, “The Relationship between Powers of Evil and Idols in 1 Corinthians 8:4-5 and 10:18-22 in the Context of the Pauline Corpus and Early Judaism”, PhD diss., Aberdeen University, 2008. I argue that such language can lead to the idea that demons are attached in some way to particular idols, a conclusion that is unwarranted as, though Paul clearly tells us that “the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons”, he does not tell us that the idol-demon connection is one of proximity (1 Cor 10:20). Idol worship is demonic but an idol is “nothing” (1 Cor 10:19-20).

¹⁰ Larry Poston, “The Bible and the Religions” in *The Narrow Gate* (unpublished manuscript, n.d.), 68.

be used to compute absolute chronology.”¹¹ So the religious memory of Babel may well have been quite stale by the time Abraham and Abimelech came along. That is not to say, however, that it had disappeared altogether.

In chapter 7 Strange pulls the threads of the previous argument together to argue that the relationship between the gospel of Jesus Christ and the religious Other is, to borrow a phrase from Kraemer, one of “subversive fulfillment” (273). Chapters 8 and 9 introduce missiological and pastoral implications, respectively, of this central idea.

Topographic Features

I want to return now to Strange’s approach and method. While acknowledging that there are great difficulties in defining the terms, Strange argues that there are “inextricable links between ‘culture’, ‘worldview’ and ‘religion’” (68), a position I share. Culture, he says, “...is worldview exteriorized, and worldview is culture interiorized, and both stem from the religion of the human heart. In other words, the specific contours of the products we use to ‘make a home for ourselves’ come from our understanding of the world, our *Weltanschauung*, and, as carriers of worldview, these cultural products (or ‘texts’) contour our consciousness along the lines of the worldviews they carry” (69). A note of ambiguity is introduced here in the relations between these three concepts. Both worldview and culture are said to “stem from” one’s religion but it is not clear in Strange’s construction how this happens.

Furthermore, Strange argues that, though a Christian worldview is singular it should not give rise to a singular culture: “...the Christian worldview is never to be equated and wedded to any one cultural context” (85, note 101). By what process does a singular Christian worldview give rise to a plurality of cultures when culture is “worldview exteriorized”? Clearly, there are other factors involved in the creation of culture that Strange hardly addresses.

Kevin Vanhoozer, who agrees with Strange’s view of the relation of worldview and culture, is keen to avoid “simplistic theories that account for everything in culture in terms of one factor only”.¹² “Everyday theology”, he says, “is faith seeking nonreductive understanding”.¹³ “In order to make sense of culture as a complex whole, then, we must use a wide-angle lens”

¹¹ Bruce K. Waltke and Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 106.

¹² Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “What is Everyday Theology? How and Why Christians Should Read Culture” in *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends* (ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Charles A. Anderson and Michael J. Sleasman; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 45 (cf. 26).

¹³ *Ibid.*

and “a variety of academic disciplines and approaches to illumine what is going on in cultural discourse”.¹⁴ Strange is aware of the danger of a simplistic and reductionist explanation (237) but it seems to me that his construction of the meaning of religion is indeed limited by his narrow, theology-specific approach. To be fair, he acknowledges this in his recognition of his own strengths and weaknesses and his call for evangelical scholars who come from different disciplinary backgrounds to offer “more rigorous contributions” to the development of this field (336-37). But other theologians, historians and social scientists would do well first to deconstruct what Strange calls his “skeleton” (36) before they can put flesh on the bones. It may be that the animal, to pursue this metaphor, will turn out not to belong to that particular order of creature at all.

A major problem with Strange’s construction, then, is his failure to distinguish sufficiently between “religion” and “religions”. This is most plainly seen in his explanation of his approach (36-38). Acknowledging that the term “‘religion’ as a defined category is more ‘Western’ than biblical”, he nevertheless wants to use it inclusively “in terms of one’s ultimate heart commitments and presuppositions concerning reality” (37): so far so good. But Strange then explains that his “focus will be on what are often called ‘world religions’”. The argument is suddenly and with little explanation turned away from ultimate heart commitments to “rival social realities... that are competitors to Christianity”. And so we are introduced to the world of “‘other religions’”. J. H. Bavinck, as Strange himself recognises (70), warns us that, in dealing with the “adherents of other religions” “[e]ach generalization, every systematization, carries within itself the danger that one will do injustice to the living person.”¹⁵ But Strange is happy to argue that “Religions are hermetically sealed interpretations of reality (worldviews) and as such are incommensurable” (242). No place seems to be allowed for the phenomenon of syncretism or of someone following Christ within a non-Christian religious tradition.¹⁶ This, it seems to me, is a problem inherent in the method that Strange has adopted.

The author then goes on to explain his definition of “Christianity” as a “wholistic worldview that produces cultural fruit” (38). He acknowledges that the gospel critiques “not only the religious Other but any lived expressions of Christianity not keeping to the revealed pattern of sound

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ J. H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions* (trans. David H. Freeman; Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1960), 240.

¹⁶ A recent chapter by Thai theologian Natee Tanchanpongs demonstrates the complexity of the phenomena we label syncretism: “Developing a Palate for Authentic Theology” in *Local Theology for the Global Church: Principles for an Evangelical Approach to Contextualization* (Globalization of Mission Series; ed. Matthew Cook, Rob Haskell, Ruth Julian, and Natee Tanchanpongs; Pasadena: William Carey, 2010), 109-23.

teaching (2 Tim 1:13), and ethically not living lives worthy of Christ" (38) but wants to reserve a *sui generis* place for Christianity as a category that does not belong to the "world religions" because of the "inextricable link between Christ himself, Christ's gospel, Christ's bride (the church), consisting of Christ's people (Christians) and given sacred historical, social and institutional expression in what we call the 'Christian faith' and 'Christianity'" (39). In so doing Strange commits a logical fallacy that has serious implications throughout his argument.

Seismic Analysis

Strange argues elsewhere that, "[b]oth 'the light of nature' and 'Christian prudence' mentioned in the *WCF* are necessary to give us guidance, not by adding to Scripture but by applying the 'general rules of the Word'. They are 'a means of determining how the sufficient word of Scripture should be applied to a specific situation'."¹⁷ I take this to mean that the application of the sufficient word of Scripture is shaped, at least partially, by the situation itself. It is vital, therefore, that we use all available evidence, interpreted through Scripture, to prudently apply the Scriptures. It is for this reason that missiology has developed an interest in the social sciences and, in particular, anthropology with its method of ethnography. This is not to be put down or minimized, but rather encouraged as an exercise in Christian prudence, or *sapientia* as Augustine called it.¹⁸

How should the relationship of ethnography to missiology (and thereby to theology) be conceptualised? Theology has traditionally drawn on the disciplines of philosophy and history as well as biblical studies in order to construct a faithful, accurate and coherent account of the things of God. Good theology, then, draws on the best that those disciplines have to offer. Take the discipline of history, for example: A careful reading of history helps us to appreciate doctrine by enabling us to understand the contemporary circumstances in which that doctrine was worked out.

If history is "remembered past", as Carl Trueman reports John Lukacs as saying,¹⁹ then ethnography is *observed present* or, rather less snappy but slightly more accurate, *recently observed past*. It is the synchronic partner to the diachronic of history. Ethnography is a representation of the present among the incredibly wide diversity of societies and their cultures around the globe. As such, like history, as Trueman rightly asserts,²⁰ it is not, and

¹⁷ Strange, "Not Ashamed!" 249.

¹⁸ David K. Clark, *To Know and Love God: Method for Theology* (Foundations of Evangelical Theology; Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2003), xxix.

¹⁹ Carl R. Trueman, *Histories and Fallacies: Problems Faced in the Writing of History* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 26.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

cannot be, a neutral exercise. The ethnographic present is an account by a person with all the limitations that people bring to such a project. But those limitations do not, in spite of the postmodern criticism of the discipline, render all such accounts invalid. Careful accounts by reflexive observers can be hugely enlightening to the reader. The “light of nature” and “Christian prudence”, then, are not just necessary for the appropriate *application* of the sufficient word of Scripture but also necessary for the appropriate construction of a theology of religions. Any theology of religions can only be as faithful to Scripture as its understanding of religions permits it to be.²¹ Strange’s “rival social realities”, then, need to be subjected to careful sociological analysis, without which theological reflection on the reality will be misplaced. So why is it that there seems to be a retrenchment by conservative theologians so as not to acknowledge the valuable place that chastened social science can play in missiology? Calvin reminds us that it is to dishonour the Spirit of God if we “despise truth wherever it shall appear”.²² I, therefore, am mystified that such truth as that discovered by the social sciences is thus despised.²³

Elsewhere, Strange affirms the God-glorifying work of science: “In a similar vein, inscribed in Latin over the door of the physics laboratory in Cambridge is neither ‘physics is fun’ nor ‘leave your faith before entering’ but Ps 111:2: ‘Great are the works of the Lord. Studied by all those who delight in them’, a verse chosen by the scientist and formulator of electromagnetic theory, James Clark Maxwell.”²⁴ Analogously, then, I argue that human societies are to be explored under the same framework as the physical world of atoms and stars and forces, while recognising that there are some profound differences as well: human societies are composed of individuals who are both made in God’s image, and therefore have real agency and are as

²¹ See Eric J. Sharpe, *Understanding Religion* (London: Duckworth, 1983) for a scholarly yet accessible argument for the careful study of the phenomenology of religion.

²² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; 2 vols.; Library of Christian Classics; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1.2.15.

²³ It is true that early pioneers of anthropological theory such as E. B. Tylor (1832-1917) and J. G. Frazer (1854-1941) were cultural evolutionists teaching, after Darwin, that culture, as nature, had evolved from the simple to the complex and attempting to do so without reference to creation and providence. Such sweeping diachronic theories have long gone out of fashion. Interestingly, much of the ethnographic work that was used for those theories was produced by missionaries. It took several decades of armchair theorising before anthropologists followed the missionaries and colonial administrators into the field. The resultant wealth of ethnography coupled with the postmodern distaste for unitary theories means that the discipline is indeed much chastened from its former hubris. See Paul G. Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts: Anthropological Explorations for Contemporary Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 108-26.

²⁴ “Magna opera Domini exquisita in omnes voluntates ejus”. Dan Strange, “Not Ashamed! The Sufficiency of Scripture for Public Theology”, *Themelios* 36 (2011): 239. Cited 9 June 2014. http://legacy.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/not_ashamed_the_sufficiency_of_scripture_for_public_theology.

much the constructors of their societies as God is, and fallen and, except for the grace of God, in rebellion against their creator.

Nevertheless, the objective reality of the social phenomena we call religions means that scientific methods of observation and analysis must have some validity. The differences between social phenomena and those of the physical world do not invalidate such methods but rather demonstrate their limitation. The apostle Paul, himself, demonstrates his appreciation of this in his address to the Areopagus in which he says that, he had “walked around and looked carefully at [their] objects of worship” (Acts 17:23). Strange, himself, is keen to “provide both a unifying paradigm for acquiring theological and scientific knowledge, and a model for interdisciplinarity” (99), and accepts that we add further complexity to the already canonically limited polyphony of Scripture by adding insights from historical and phenomenological studies (237-38).²⁵ I hope, therefore, that Strange’s argument will be further developed by means of sociological and anthropological enquiry.

Hard Rock/Soft Rock

The confusion created by Strange’s logical leap from religion to “rival social realities” is made yet muddier in Strange’s apparent acceptance of an unreferenced “contemporary discourse between ‘religion’ (social) and ‘spirituality’ (individual)” (38). This distinction is surely as much a product of the Enlightenment as the idea that monotheism evolved from animism and polytheism, which he rightly debunks (165). Clearly if, as Strange argues, culture and worldview “stem from the religion of the human heart” (69) then spirituality and religion should be treated as one and the same, as the human heart is an individual phenomenon. It seems to me that this distinction between religion and spirituality is a categorical fallacy that has been created by those who want to make a case for their own eclectic explorations of transcendence without the disciplined restrictions that come from having to accept a more formal tradition.²⁶

If we do accept religion and spirituality as synonymous we are still left with the clear reality of social groups that share cultural systems that express, as Clifford Geertz put it, “*powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by... formulating conceptions of a general order of existence...*”²⁷ These observable social realities are then *cultural* systems and

²⁵ Quoting Kreitzer, *The Concept of Ethnicity in the Bible*, 47.

²⁶ For a recent case against such a self-centred quest see Tom Shakespeare, “A Point of View: Is it Better to Be Religious than Spiritual?” Cited 25 June 2014. Online: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-27554640>.

²⁷ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic, 1973), 90 (original emphasis).

as such it seems to me to be completely inadequate to treat “Christianity” as a *sui generis*, utterly different sort of system. Strange has come under flak for such a treatment before²⁸ but, while he recognises “the finitude, failures and inconsistencies of God’s people, together with the terrible truth that judgment begins within God’s household (1 Peter 4:17)”, he is “still able to say that there is a fundamental, indeed antithetical, difference in principle between *the* regenerated and Spirit-enabled confession that Jesus is Lord... and every other confession where Jesus is not Lord...” (39, original emphasis). I could not disagree with such a statement but here the categorical fallacy is most clearly highlighted. The Scriptures make it clear, and this is borne out in our experience, that not all those who confess “Jesus is Lord” are doing so as “regenerated and Spirit-enabled people”, as the Lord Jesus himself strikingly warns us (Matt 7:21-23). Christianity, then, as a broad collective of social groups that express an allegiance to Christ (rightly or wrongly conceived) is a social reality (or better, a complex of social realities) that deserve sociological analysis every bit as much as other such realities. Is this then to completely relativise the truth in Christ alongside idolatrous rivals? This is certainly not my intention as the orientation of the heart to the Lord Jesus is indeed at the heart of true religion. Such an inward “spiritual” phenomenon cannot be observed and analysed by the social sciences. What can be observed is the way this is worked out in the diverse modes in which believers in Christ express their discipleship in the cultural pluriverse of the world.

Strange contends that “deeply sunk (and cherished) theological, epistemological and anthropological foundations should not be ignored or, worse, ‘dug up’, when faced with the religious Other” (54). In chapter 2, then, Strange seeks to describe those foundations, largely through an exegesis of Genesis 1-11. Given my argument above, however, and our common desire to have a sound theological building, it would seem that careful excavation does indeed need to take place in order to put that construction on a sound footing.

Religions that do not identify with the Christian tradition, then, are not necessarily, in my view, any more idolatrous than those that do. Since the hearts of many who identify themselves as Christian are themselves captive to idolatry this should be no great surprise.

²⁸ Terrence L. Tiessen, “My Reflections on the Conversation between Strange and D’Costa” (2012). Cited 26 June 2014. Online: <http://thoughtstheological.com/d-costas-critique-of-stranges-subversive-fulfilment-interpretation-of-other-religions/>.

Plate Tectonics

Strange's schema includes a fundamental role for worldview (68-69). I agree that worldview is a very significant element in the life of both individuals and collectives of individuals, or societies. Strange depends heavily here on the work of David Naugle²⁹ and that great champion of worldview analysis, James Sire, whose more recent revision of his work³⁰ also owes much to Naugle.

Worldview to Strange is concerned with horizontal relationships whereas religion is more to do with the vertical (69). Sire, after Naugle, argues that "there is... an *interactive or reciprocal* relationship with the external world".³¹ I agree. Worldview, then, is not a faculty that is formed purely out of one's heart commitment to or against God but also by a lifetime of experiences in the particular circumstances that one has lived in. In other words there is a reciprocal relationship between worldview and culture. Furthermore, worldview is not a purely cognitive faculty but is also affective and volitional. Summarising Wilhelm Dilthey's (1833-1911) groundbreaking work on worldview, Naugle says that "worldviews spring from the totality of human psychological existence: intellectually in the cognition of reality, affectively in the appraisal of life, and volitionally in the active performance of the will".³² If this is so, as I believe it is, then clearly there cannot be a singular "Christian" worldview. There are as many worldviews as there are people. Such a reality could, of course, put an end to all attempts at analysis as we become mired in the particularities of human existence. This need not be the case, however, as significant and life-shaping experiences of individuals are almost without exception shared by communities of people as they create culture. Generalisation and systematisation are, therefore, legitimate tasks, as Strange himself argues (70). So the traffic of influences between worldview and culture is not one-way – the worldview giving rise to the culture – but two-way, with culture also giving rise to worldview.

This being so, if we are committed to a single Christian worldview then we must also be committed to a single Christian culture: all believers in Christ must speak alike, eat alike, dress alike, play alike and worship alike. On the basis of the "manyness" of the Triune God, in whose image we are made, Strange recognises and celebrates cultural diversity (85, footnote 101). But this seems to be predicated on a definition of worldview that has been made to produce such a conclusion. If a worldview is a set of

²⁹ David K. Naugle, *Worldview: The History of a Concept* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2002).

³⁰ James W. Sire, *Naming the Elephant: Worldview as a Concept* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2004).

³¹ Sire, *Naming the Elephant*, 46, citing Naugle, *Worldview*, 271.

³² Naugle, *Worldview*, 88.

presuppositions, as Sire would define it,³³ then it must include such presuppositions as, that children are to be nurtured rather than abused, a presupposition that, as far as I know, is shared by all societies everywhere, though, of course, by no society consistently. Worldviews, then, cannot be neatly divided between one that is “Christian” and all the others that are not. Sire, I think, senses this tension: “Even the way I have described the Christian worldview may constitute only my version of that worldview” he writes.³⁴ To acknowledge variation within a worldview then is also, I would argue, to acknowledge the fuzziness of the boundaries between them. So, although, with Strange, I would recognise the biblical insistence that “the antithesis means that in reality there are only two categories of human beings that operate as bounded sets [i.e. those in Christ and those outside of Christ]” (85) I cannot identify these bounded sets as the “rival social realities” that he calls Christianity and other religions.

Types of Rock

I have been arguing that, contra Strange, “Christianity” is not *sui generis*, of its own category, to be contrasted with “other religions”. The religions and cultures of the world are broad, or not so broad, constructs that enable us to compare and contrast human communities from the small scale to the global. Though culture, as Strange argues, is the exteriorisation of religion (as the fundamental orientation of the heart), the relationship of religions (as social realities) to cultures is not the same. We should conceptualise that distinction as being two sides of the same coin, or two perspectives of the same reality.

What factors, then, have shaped our cultures and religions? In Strange’s definition “*non-Christian religions are sovereignly directed, variegated and dynamic, collective human idolatrous responses to divine revelation, behind which stand deceiving demonic forces*” (98, original emphasis). Given that I am including “Christianity” in the rubric of the “religions” I can hardly be content with that definition. Strange’s emphasis is entirely negative, which is understandable if we consider that “non-Christian religions” are the outworking of deceiving demonic forces.³⁵ But if, as I am attempting to demonstrate, religions and cultures (being virtually synonymous, whether

³³ Sire, *Naming the Elephant*, 19.

³⁴ Sire, *Naming the Elephant*, 153.

³⁵ In a response by Gavin D’Costa to a previous articulation of Strange’s theology of religions the former highlights a tension between the latter’s appreciation of J. H. Bavinck’s perspective on religions and his own overwhelmingly, though not absolutely, negative perspective. See Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*, 179-90. Tiessen also comments on this tension in Strange’s construction (“My Reflections on the Conversation between Strange and D’Costa”, 2012).

called Christian or not) are under evaluation, then demonic forces cannot be the sole factor in their development. All religions and cultures, rather, are the products of human agency (Geertz's "webs of significance"³⁶) interacting with a multitude of influences thrown up by our spiritual, ecological, social, political and economic environments.³⁷

Conclusion

This volume is, as William Edgar writes on the back cover, "deeply learned" and "theologically solid" but I disagree that it is "well-informed in anthropology". Strange's argument, therefore, suffers from an ethnographically poorly informed and resultantly insufficiently robust method. I hope that correction in this will result in much more valuable work in future. Such work will be able to provide a mature and sophisticated response to the Japanese student mentioned above, and millions of others like her who love Jesus but just do not seem to fit into the global phenomenon commonly called Christianity.

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³⁶ Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 5.

³⁷ As I have attempted to demonstrate in my monograph on the people of the Kathmandu Valley: Mark Pickett, *Caste and Kinship in a Modern Hindu Society: The Newars of Lalitpur, Nepal* (Bangkok: Orchid, 2013).

REVIEW ARTICLE:

THE GOSPEL IN THE MARKET PLACE OF IDEAS

*THE GOSPEL IN THE MARKET PLACE OF IDEAS: PAUL'S MARS HILL
EXPERIENCE FOR OUR PLURALISTIC WORLD*

Paul Copan & Kenneth D Litwak, IVP, 2014, 180pp, £11.99

Introduction

Steak is undeniably superb (vegetarians may not be aware of this but will have to take me on trust); it forms a fantastic centre-piece to a meal and, when cooked well, provides satisfaction guaranteed. However, a meal consisting of steak alone may leave something to be desired and a diet of steak alone will eventually leave you weakened and probably quite unwell. The question before us is: Do Paul Copan and Kenneth Litwak in their book, *The Gospel in the Marketplace of Ideas*, offer a nourishing apologetic diet?

Alister McGrath warns us against a uniform presentation of the gospel for fear “It may lead to the proclamation of the gospel in terms that either fail to connect with the cultural context, or which presents Christianity in such a way that it needlessly violates cultural norms of rationality or social acceptability”.¹ Copan and Litwak urge the reader to learn the lessons of Paul’s Areopagus speech in Acts 17 so as to avoid such “translation problems” in presenting the gospel to those around us.² They understand Paul in Acts 17 to be deploying an extensive apologetic ground-game in order to connect authentically and effectively with his audience.³ Their central question is: “How can we authentically and effectively present the

¹ Alister E. McGrath, “Evangelism and Apologetics”, n.p. [cited 24th June 2013]. Link available on this page: <http://www.edinburgh2010.org/en/study-themes/main-study-themes/christian-mission-among-other-faiths/hamburg-consultation.html>.

² Paul Copan and Kenneth D. Litwak, *The Gospel in the Marketplace of Ideas: Paul’s Mars Hill Experience for Our Pluralistic World* (Nottingham: IVP, 2014), 14.

³ “Paul’s speech in Athens served to make room on the table for the ideas he was presenting about God. We likewise may need to do some pre-evangelistic table clearing ourselves in order to earn the right to be heard.” 16.

message of Jesus the Messiah to those around us?"⁴ In reviewing their efforts, we will use this central question as a yardstick by which we might measure their exegesis and application of Acts 17. First we will attempt a brief synopsis of the chapters and flow of the argument, and then we will offer a critique of the argument.

Argument Flow

In the first chapter, "Welcome to Athens", Copan and Litwak draw a parallel between first-century Athens and our current context in the West, insofar as both consist in a pluriformity of worldviews and social structures.⁵ This means Christians cannot simply ask religious questions without risk of being totally misunderstood.⁶ Given this parallel, Paul's approach in Acts 17 should serve as a model for us.

In chapter two, Copan and Litwak engage with the argument that Paul's speech is actually a mistake, included by Luke as instruction in how not to do apologetics and evangelism.⁷ They persuasively argue the contrary, not least from Acts 17:34.

This allows them in chapters three and four to move forward to explore Paul's Athens and our "Athens". In chapter three there are some illuminating thumbnail sketches of the various philosophies and worldviews on offer in Athens.⁸ These sketches are accompanied by some helpful links to contemporary worldviews. Chapter four feels like a gear shift as Copan and Litwak set out their case that Paul is portrayed by Luke as a Christian Socrates, making use of philosophical argumentation to present the gospel: "Paul used philosophical tools at his disposal, all the while setting his speech within a solidly biblical framework."⁹ Given Paul's example, Christians should argue for biblical truths using *all* means, every "stubborn fact" that points to such truths: philosophical, historical, scientific and cultural. Not only should we practice this methodology in building bridges, but from the earliest apologists, Christians have been happy to do so.¹⁰ The rest of the chapter is spent outlining some of the dominant worldviews in our Athens.¹¹

⁴ Copan and Litwak, *Gospel in the Marketplace*, 11.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁶ Questions like: "How do you get into heaven?" This risk is acknowledged by many; cf. McGrath above and Randy Newman in his book on evangelism: *Questioning Evangelism: Engaging People's Hearts the Way Jesus Did* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Kregel, 2004), 22.

⁷ Copan and Litwak, *Gospel in the Marketplace*, 19-25.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 27-35.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁰ E.g. Tertullian, Justin Martyr and Augustine (Copan and Litwak, *Gospel in the Marketplace*, 39-48).

¹¹ E.g. post-modern relativism, emotivism, pluralism, ad naturalism and scientism (Copan and Litwak, *Gospel in the Marketplace*, 49-62).

Chapters five and six explore Paul's speeches and Paul's audience respectively. The former returns again (!) to the argument that Paul's speeches in Acts 14:13-17 and Acts 17:16-34 are models to imitate which both present three key elements: they provide a template for gospel sharing, they illustrate how to connect meaningfully with an audience, and they provoke a mixed response.¹² Chapter six then unpacks the manner in which various segments of Paul's Areopagus audience might have understood and reacted to his speech. At the head and the tail of chapter six are two important points to which we will return later. At the beginning Litwak and Copan share evidence that most people accept the gospel because they first experienced a relationship of trust with a Christian.¹³ In concluding the chapter, they assert that Paul's Athens speech is a model for engaging with academics.¹⁴

Chapter seven takes this observation and expands it, interpreting the speech theologically point-by-point to demonstrate how Paul challenged his (academic) audience with the gospel.¹⁵ From these observations, Litwak and Copan extrapolate principles of contextualisation for every cross-cultural evangelist (note the small "e") in speaking to unchurched friends and neighbours: "Paul's speech then begins with a biblical foundation, without asking his audience to know about the Scriptures."¹⁶ Chapter nine then explains how Paul's audience should have acted once confronted with the truth: "Paul first used the language of the philosophers and poets to challenge his audience's beliefs and then challenged them to act on his new knowledge concerning the unknown God."¹⁷ Chapters seven to nine appear to be an exercise in the "subversive fulfillment" model of apologetics whose recent proponents include Richard Pratt, Randy Newman, John Frame, Tim Keller, and Dan Strange.¹⁸

This brings us to chapter ten, the concluding chapter, which attempts to draw all cords together in demonstrating how Paul's Acts 17 methodology might actually be applied in the twenty-first century. This includes a discussion of principles (e.g. how to describe the unknown God), praxis (e.g. the possibility of holding dialogue suppers), and of various contemporary idolatries that need challenging.

¹² Copan and Litwak, *Gospel in the Marketplace*, 72.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 94-113.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 136.

¹⁸ These in turn stand in the heritage of Harvie Conn, Cornelius Van Til, J. H. Bavinck and Henrik Kraemer.

Critique

In Praise

Litwak and Copan offer numerous morsels of steak for our edification. Their fundamental premise, that Paul's speeches are a model for us, is persuasive, and they provide helpful insights into some of the parallels between Paul's Athens and our own context. Chapter six is a useful outline of how to simultaneously connect and challenge, and chapters seven and eight offer both a model in contextualisation and instructive principles in how all Christians might do likewise.

Reservations

There are two significant points that require further clarification or modification. The first is foundational to Copan and Litwak's project: the assertion that the pluriformity of world views and social structures in first-century Athens mirrors our own.¹⁹ There are certainly similarities but we are now in a fundamentally different time with regard to epistemology. At this point in Western thought, we sit at the end of a trajectory of epistemological skepticism.²⁰ From Aristotle through Descartes, Locke, Hume and perhaps most significantly Kant and Nietzsche, we have arrived at a point where ultimate truth in the realm of ideas (and therefore metaphysics, ethics etc.) is considered to be unattainable. First-century Athens had not yet arrived at this point, even though Aristotle's dyadic worldview had laid the foundations for such an intellectual landscape. Paul contended for truth therefore, in a context *and on a subject*, where people accepted that truth could be found (even if they disagreed significantly on what that truth was). I would contend that Paul's approach remains a model in dealing with certain questions, but we need a richer, broader apologetic approach to reach all people, academics included.²¹ We need to give some thought to how people come to trust anything at all.²²

¹⁹ Copan and Litwak, *Gospel in the Marketplace*, 12.

²⁰ The following ideas are primarily derived from Fellows' work on epistemology. Andrew Fellows, "Epistemology - What is it to Know?" n. p. [cited 8th October 2014]. <http://www.bethinking.org/truth/epistemology-what-is-it-to-know>.

²¹ For academics will have both academic and non-academic reasons for not accepting the gospel. Here Copan and Litwak need to take their presuppositional approach further, naming it formally perhaps, and digging into the *faith* positions that lie behind the worldviews.

²² Here the work of Tom Simpson at Oxford University bears closer inspection, whose chief area of investigation includes establishing testimony as epistemologically trustworthy. It does not take much imagination to see the significance of such when it comes to presenting the eyewitness accounts of the apostles. It is possible to see a record of his publications here: <http://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/people/tom-simpson#publications>.

This leads to the second point of criticism. Copan and Litwak deduce an overly-rationalistic apologetic approach from Paul's Athens speech.²³ In a context where many are epistemologically skeptical, rational arguments will only "talk past" our interlocutors, for we will be unable to persuade people of the truth of the gospel if they do not believe truth in the realm of values is possible. Furthermore, as Copan and Litwak briefly acknowledge,²⁴ people often cite the most significant reason for coming to Christ as a relationship of trust with a Christian.²⁵ This resonates with the work of Lesslie Newbigin who, building on the work of Polanyi,²⁶ argues for the necessity of the church as a plausibility structure that embodies the truth of the gospel and challenges the fundamental faith positions of those outside Christianity: "Only by means of the ongoing life of believing congregations can this understanding of reality be made visible and comprehensible to others."²⁷

Conclusion

As noted above, Copan and Litwak argue that Paul's speech is a model for fruitfully engaging with intellectuals.²⁸ My response would be that Paul's speech is a model for fruitfully engaging with certain intellectual arguments. Bavinck argues:

Abstract, disembodied and history-less sinners do not exist; only very concrete sinners exist, whose sinful life is determined and characterised by all sorts of cultural and historical factors; by poverty, hunger, superstition, traditions, chronic illness, tribal morality, and thousands of other things. I must bring the gospel of God's grace in Jesus Christ to the whole man, in his concrete existence, in his everyday environment.²⁹

²³ By this I do not mean that our apologetic approach should care little for rational defences for the gospel or rational points of attachment in engaging those around us. Rather, Copan and Litwak ignore all the other factors at play in apologetics and evangelism and in chapter four, dismiss the role of emotions all too easily.

²⁴ Copan and Litwak, *Gospel in the Marketplace*, 74.

²⁵ Copan and Litwak themselves cite Dave Bennett's research into people's experience of conversion and recommend: <http://www.bridge-builders.net/current/howadults.php>.

²⁶ Polanyi argues that all knowledge was perspectival and based fundamentally on faith. Kärkkäinen has a helpful chapter summarising Newbigin's position and how he built on Polanyi's work, particularly in demonstrating that contemporary culture believes "facts" only exist in the realm of science, not in the realm of values. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2003), 245-255. See also Krish Kandiah, "Towards a Theology of Evangelism for Late Modern Cultures: A Critical Dialogue with Lesslie Newbigin's Doctrine of Revelation" (Ph.D. Thesis, King's College London, 2005).

²⁷ Paul Weston, "Gospel, Mission and Culture: The Contribution of Lesslie Newbigin", in *Witness to the World* (ed. David Peterson; Carlisle, UK: Zondervan, 1999), 50. For a similar argument see Henrik Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (London: Edinburgh House, 1938), 333.

²⁸ Copan and Litwak, *Gospel in the Marketplace*, 90.

²⁹ J. H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions* (trans. David H. Freeman; 1954; repr., Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1960), 81.

If Copan and Litwak are arguing that Paul's Acts 17 speech is *the* model for engaging with intellectuals this risks ignoring that intellectuals can and do have non-intellectual reasons for their academic positions and for their opposition to the gospel which are rarely overcome by straightforward intellectual discourse *alone*.³⁰ This is something they hint at but fail to develop satisfactorily: "Both evangelising and defending the faith involves a process of engagement at various levels (social, intellectual, emotional, spiritual), and we enter into this process and thoughtfully."³¹

The question throughout has been "How can we authentically and effectively present the message of Jesus the Messiah to those around us?"³² Copan and Litwak offer valuable insights and warnings for the Christian engaging evangelistically in the West in the 21st Century. However, their failure to draw a sufficient contradistinction between the intellectual landscape of Athens in Acts to our own means they risk recommending a somewhat lopsided approach,³³ both in terms of contextualisation,³⁴ and in their treatment of Acts 17.³⁵

I am aware that all this risks reviewing a book that Copan and Litwak have not written. Theirs is after all, a treatment of Paul's Areopagus speech, not a work on missiology in general. However, I believe the insufficiently

³⁰ For further evidence of this see Dave Bennett's research, cited above. Copan and Litwak come perilously close at times to falling foul of McGrath's criticism of Western apologetics: "Western apologetics is still dominated (especially among older male North American writers) by rationalist approaches, which focus on winning arguments. There is an urgent need to break away from this approach, for two reasons. First, it is wedded to a modernist way of thinking, which lost its cultural dominance in the west a decade ago, and fails to connect with postmodern trends in culture, especially among younger people. Second, the New Testament itself sees the appeal of the Christian faith as transcending reason, involving an appeal to the heart and the imagination, rather than abstract argumentation. I hope you will move beyond this, and not lock evangelism into the past." McGrath, "Evangelism and Apologetics", n.p.

³¹ Copan and Litwak, *Gospel in the Marketplace*, 153.

³² *Ibid.*, 11.

³³ Newbigin consistently offers a more satisfactory reading of Western culture and appropriate missiological responses. Whilst we would not necessarily be comfortable with Newbigin's theological understanding of salvation outside orthodox Christian faith in Jesus by grace alone, his writing on culture and missiology is highly valuable. See for example, "Religious Pluralism: a Missiological Approach (1993)", in *Lesslie Newbigin: Missionary Theologian* (ed. Paul Weston; London: SPCK, 2006), "The Gospel and Our Culture Programme," n.p. [cited 29th April 2013]. Online: <http://www.gospel-culture.org.uk/autobiog.htm>, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK, 1988), *The Open Secret* (London, UK: SPCK, 1995).

³⁴ See the works of J. H. Bavinck for a broader treatment of contextualisation and mission in *Introduction*, and *The Church Between Temple and Mosque: A Study of the Relationship Between the Christian Faith and Other Religions* (1966; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981).

³⁵ See Dan Strange's treatment of Acts 17 for a more thoroughly theological understanding of Paul's Areopagus speech and what it means for a contemporary missiological approach: Dan Strange, *For Their Rock is Not as Our Rock: An Evangelical Theology of Religions* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2014), 285-302.

nuanced parallel between ancient Athens and the West in the 21st Century means some of the implications they draw from Acts 17 means the work as a whole has a somewhat disappointing rationally reductionist flavour. Make no mistake, Copan and Litwak offer numerous morsels of steak which I found personally nourishing, I just wish they had at least pointed to the rest of the meal more.

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REVIEW ARTICLE: *READY, STEADY, GROW*

READY, STEADY, GROW

Ray Evans, IVP, 2014, 224pp, £10.99

Many gospel churches are not growing, yet they could be, and they should be. That's the argument of Ray Evans' book *Ready, Steady, Grow*, written out of a conviction that "*too many churches stagnate in their growth, or even derail in their gospel proclamation, because of problems that could be overcome if they just knew how*" (11). Whilst this is decidedly not a book on church-growth techniques, Evans shares what has worked in his own thirty years of ministry whilst always guided by biblical principles and practice.

The unique selling point of the book is its focus on the challenges involved in understanding the changing dynamics at work in our churches as they grow through different sizes. Quite simply, leaders underestimate and often fail to grasp altogether, how the size of a church impacts the very way they must lead in order for the church to fulfil its purpose. Acts 6 is presented as a case study of "diversionary confusion" in which leaders battle the challenges thrown up by church growth. Organisational complexity requires careful consideration if a church is not to be unsettled or even undone by the problems of growth.

Central to the argument of the book is that it is a failure to grasp the dynamics of growth that leads churches and their leaders to get stuck at a certain size. It's not easy for churches to transition from small to medium, and medium to large, and they certainly won't unless growth is understood and church structures adapted. Of particular help to my own thinking is the description of a stage between medium and large-sized church, described as "awkward" size. Whilst not a description unique to Evans, his analysis of the stage of church life where a church is too large to be pastored by a single pastor, or for everyone to be relationally connected, yet not large enough to adopt the structures inherent in a large church, will prove helpful for many. Evans also gives some consideration to responding to a resistance to growth sometimes found in congregations as a result of a church culture that is inherently too cautious and risk-averse, or simply a congregation unwilling to change.

Ray Evans confesses to be an "everyday leader" in an "ordinary town" who has nevertheless overseen a growing church and taken that church from

small to large. That experience shows in the wisdom offered to help leaders and churches overcome “spiritual and practical blockages” that arise from “confusion, numbers, complexity and complaints”. The combination of insights from Scripture alongside common-sense wisdom is a winning one.

Having set out his thesis and offered some general reflections on leading through change, Evans goes on in the second half to show how for a church to grow, and grow through barriers, leaders need to be able to “work on areas of the Christian life *simultaneously*” (100-101). He sums up those areas that require our attention under the heading of three M’s: maturity, ministry and mission.

For churches to grow, all three must be constantly in view, church members must share that commitment to growth in each but “it also needs a ‘top-down’ lead and practical organisation, which leaders must facilitate” (104).

In this short review I will highlight just one insight from each area in turn.

Growing to maturity

The impact of organisational complexity in a growing church can be felt in Evans’ observation, “*if you grow large, you have to grow small at the same time*” because “*if large attracts, small keeps*” (119). Any large church must, at the same time, be a church of small groups if individuals are to grow. What is lost on a Sunday must be celebrated through the week as small groups become the place where relationships flourish and where individuals are given the time and opportunity to contribute, something not easy to do in the dynamic of large church.

Serve in ministry: getting teams mobilised

When it comes to serving in the local church, meeting the challenge of growth requires a recognition that people have to be trained to serve in a new way. A culture-shift needs to take place across a congregation from generalisation to specialisation, from individual relationships to formalised teams and from wisdom caught to teams trained. Again the issue of complexity arises: how do you recruit a team, train a team, motivate a team and keep a team now that relationships are not the glue to service?

Reach out in mission

I’m grateful that Evans devotes three whole chapters to growing in mission. These chapters are further enhanced in that the end of each application is directed to the different categories of size of church. So, Evans’ insights of the

danger facing growing churches that they will turn in on themselves, once they are financially viable and ministry needs are all being met. He also recognises that growing churches tend to develop new ministries, new ministries call for a greater time commitment from members, so much so that over time a growing church with “an overcrowded schedule may be slowly cutting off a key outreach strategy” (167).

Six reflections on growing churches

Ray Evans provides us with an excellent introduction to an overlooked issue. For the simple truth is that church leaders feel ill-equipped to lead their churches through change, and particularly the transitions involved in gospel growth.

His experience of leading a church for a long time through the stages of growth also ensures that this book is not theoretical but one written out of experience. His insights will open eyes to see what otherwise may have gone unseen and yet all along had been inhibiting growth.

Whilst this book suggests many good answers to some of the issues that face church pastors, there are a number of issues related to growth, that also need to occupy the mind of a leader, which remain unaddressed by the book.

1. How do we address the reality that many churches don't desire the changes necessary to bring about growth?

The book is written for leaders already committed to growing a church, and it presumes at least some level of commitment on the part of church to the need to embrace change in order to grow. As a result, the focus is on strategies for growth. However, many leaders need wisdom to know how, when, and in what ways to challenge a prevailing culture of a church, through the gospel, so that change becomes the desired prerequisite facilitating growth. Evans does touch on this issue but, for example, just three pages are given to considering how preaching grows a church. Church growth *begins* in the heart of every individual member and growing a church begins with preaching to change hearts that begin to change and grow churches.

So, one might imagine resistance to church growth coming from the obvious costs involved. Breaking through barriers of growth can be costly in terms of relationships as new structures necessitate new teams, and costly in terms of financial stability as staff are appointed in advance of any growth to help facilitate it. How do we motivate members? How and when does growth become a de-motivator for individuals? These questions are as significant as any others in managing growth.

2. Might church growth be a barrier to church growth?

It would also be of interest to many to consider one dynamic at work in larger churches that might actually act against and inhibit growth in the life of the individual Christian, and that is the opportunity for discovering and developing gifting. In larger churches, certain opportunities are rarely available to members who otherwise would be offered them in other-sized churches. As a young man I was preaching within two months of attending a church of 60 people; in the church I now pastor it is more likely to be 5 years before a young man with an embryonic preaching gift could expect a pulpit opportunity. Later, when planting a church from scratch it was a privilege to witness individuals stepping up to take opportunities and responsibilities that they would never have dreamed of in a larger church. How then do we recognise and raise up gifted leaders in our larger churches?

All this demonstrates that growth can inhibit growth; growing in numbers makes growth in young leaders a much greater challenge. Our response in Birmingham has been to prefer planting new congregations to growing a larger single church.

3. Is church growth inevitable?

A danger inherent in any church growth book is the implicit (and often unintentional) suggestion that churches ought to grow and will grow if we can only get our leadership right. Whilst Evans is clear in his closing chapter that God alone gives the growth, some consideration needs to be given to the dynamics at work *on* the church, as well as *in* the church, that make growth difficult in many contexts.

Twenty years of gospel ministry teaches me that there are certain forces at work in our culture that makes growth uneven. Some ministry contexts are a much greater challenge than others. Many ministers in rural contexts cannot expect to keep young men and women who, priced out of the market, cannot afford to live in the community once, say, children come along. Some churches have witnessed significant changes in the ethnic make-up of their communities and struggle to meet the challenges of what is almost a mission context, and so on.

4. Is growth always desirable?

Another suggestion, woven into the structure of the book is that churches *progress* if they go from small through to large, and that this is the best way to grow. Evans argues “the wise use of scarce resources (money, time and ability) means that growing a large church may be better than developing many smaller churches, all of which need gifted speakers and leaders to take

them forward" (39). I don't find the logic of the argument compelling. Further thinking needs to be given to considering the question of whether growing large churches is the way to maximise gospel effectiveness. Whilst some churches remain medium to awkward size because they can't grow, others remain that size because they choose to give away growth. The approach our church in Birmingham has taken, along with a number of others in the city, has been to pursue growth through multiple church-planting. The result has been the multiplication of gospel witness as we minister in more communities across the city. By working closely together we also ensure ideas, resources and vision can be shared. We reach many more people, raise up many more leaders and mobilise many more members into ministry than we could as a single congregation. It is a decision to grow, but to grow through multiplication, and is a decision at the same time not to grow quite as much as a mother church.

5. Is growth achievable given our current resources?

Evans says "great leadership is about character and skills combined". True enough, but for growing a church, a third aspect of great leadership cannot be overlooked, and that is gifting. *Ready, Steady, Grow* does not address to what extent the reason a church does not grow is the God-given limitations of the leadership. I use the word limitation advisedly because I do not want to suggest in any way that a limitation is a failure. Do some churches grow because God not only gives gifts but the measure of a gift? We ought to expect leaders to be leading to their full potential, and yet be leading different sized churches. We ought to expect the gift-mix that God has given different leaders to enable them to serve congregations with different dynamics.

Leaders can be made to feel guilty if their churches are not growing – how many dread the question "how many attend your church?" The *measure* of gifting can be a blind-spot in thinking. Some leaders have simply been unable to recognise that reality. It's not an easy thing to recognise our own limitations, and that perhaps the greatest barrier to further growth might be me!

For some churches, if the desire of a congregation is growth through to large church, a leader may need to demonstrate leadership by appointing someone more gifted to pastor a larger church. Learning to lead may well mean leading through the leadership of others.

6. How important is contextualisation for church growth?

One significant factor in growing Biblical churches that is not the focus of Evans' book is contextualisation. Many churches don't grow because they are unable (any longer?) effectively to engage their communities. The apostle

Paul memorably wrote “I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.” Until and unless we recognise this issue, growth will be limited.

Tim Keller has commented that “culture is complex, subtle, and inescapable” (*Center Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 186). The consequence is that if we want to grow our churches, we must always be deliberately thinking about our culture. Keller concludes:

No church can be all things to all people. There is no culturally neutral way of doing ministry. The urban church will have to choose practices that reflect the values of some cultural group... nevertheless, the ever-present challenge is to work to make urban ministry as broadly appealing as possible and as inclusive of different cultures as possible (Ibid., 174).

If our churches are to grow, sooner or later we need to help leaders engage with culture and contextualise faithfully to their ever-changing communities.

Conclusion

This book is an important addition to a leader’s library. It is a particular encouragement to me that a good resource on growing churches has been written by a British church leader. This has been long overdue. There are few, if any, books written for UK churches by experienced leaders who have grown their congregations through the challenges and transitions.

Perhaps more than anything else, the book is a testimony to grace and the fact that the Lord Jesus continues to build his church. We may plant, we may water, we may strategise, we may train, but it is only and always God that gives the growth.

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