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Contents

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Foundations

Foundations is an international journal of evangelical theology published in the United Kingdom. Its aim is to cover contemporary theological issues by articles and reviews, taking in exegesis, biblical theology, church history and apologetics, and to indicate their relevance to pastoral ministry. Its particular focus is the theology of evangelical churches which are committed to biblical truth and evangelical ecumenism. It has been published by Affinity (formerly The British Evangelical Council) from its inception as a print journal. It became a digital journal in April 2011.

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EDITORIAL

God is our refuge and strength,
A very present help in trouble.
(Psalm 46:1, NKJV)

It is a pleasure to take on the editing of Foundations. However, this, my first edition, does not arrive in normal times. Britain, and the world, is being convulsed by the effects of Covid-19. The pandemic is leaving social and economic tragedy in its wake. And so, for now, thoughts of a vision for this theological journal will have to wait. There are more important and pressing matters for us to devote our thoughts and prayers to. Instead, then, of outlining my hopes for *Foundations*, I have included a homily on Psalm 46. This is a section of the sermon preached in the first "virtual" service we held at Cambridge Presbyterian Church following government advice for churches to cease meeting physically. I trust the simple truths of the forty-sixth psalm will speak to us all in our national situation.

However, my hope is still, that in an unplanned way, this edition speaks to the times in which we live. The great need of Christians now (as always) is to "behold our God". And the theological discipline which most invites us to do this is systematic theology. My intention with this edition is to honour the launch of Bob Letham's *Systematic Theology*,[1] with a focus on that particular discipline. It is always an important moment when a theologian of standing presents their systematic thought. But, for us in the UK, it is particularly so when one of the premier British theologians of our day commits their mature reflections to writing. And so, this edition of Foundations coheres around systematic theology.

We begin with an excellent in-depth review article on Bob's *Systematic Theology* by Dr Jonathan Bayes. The review is insightful, sympathetic, but also offers correctives from Dr Bayes' Reformed Baptist position. This dialogue among believers from differing perspectives is one of the great benefits Foundations can bring (though, for the record, I still agree with Dr Letham!).

Following this there is a very helpful case made for the role of systematic theology in theological training from Dr Marty Foord – an argument I am sure that Dr Letham would appreciate. Foord outlines the nature of theological education, the nature of systematic theology and makes a compelling case for the necessity of the latter in training for pastoral ministry. Foord does not shy away from highlighting the weakness of systematic theology done badly, but rightly argues that this should not be used to discredit its vital importance, when done well.

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[1] Robert Letham, *Systematic Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019).

Next up is an article that is close to my heart. John Murray (1898-1975), for many years Professor of Systematic Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary, has been a profound theological influence in my life. His ability to expound the truths of the Reformed faith so that they rise organically from Scripture, gives them a genuine power and vitality. Murray was a systematic theologian of the first order, but he was this because he was first an exceptional exegete and biblical theologian. Daniel Schrock's article does a wonderful job in expounding and defending Murray's theological method for us. Indeed, Daniel seems at times to so appreciate Murray that he has adopted Murray's penchant for precise but obscure words! But stick with it; even if you need to google some of the vocabulary, it is worth it. I hope this article will lead many to discover Murray for themselves. The riches of his four-volume *Collected Writings*, the exegetical rigour of his commentary on Romans, and the beautiful power of his *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* and much more are there waiting to be discovered![2]

The final article in the realm of systematic theology is Benedict Bird's overview of John Owen's covenant theology. If Spurgeon's statement is true there can be few more important themes to discuss in an edition devoted to systematic theology: "The doctrine of the covenant lies at the root of all true theology. It has been said that he who well understands the distinction between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace, is a master of divinity."[3] Owen's articulation of covenant theology has been a matter of scholarly dispute. Bird is a safe guide through these debates, and opens up Owen's views simply to enable us to weigh them in the light of Scripture.

One exception to the theme of systematic theology is Thorsten Prill's presentation of the case that missionaries should learn local languages, even where English is spoken. I am delighted that we have an article on a missiological theme, and also specifically on *this* theme. I grew up in a home where Scottish Gaelic was very much a living language. Yes, everyone spoke English, but English was never the *heart* language of older generations of my mother's family. And so, I can deeply appreciate the concern that motivates Thorsten's plea, and value his unfolding of the biblical and practical reasons for his case.

I hope you will enjoy this issue of *Foundations* even in troubling times. If nothing else, it should give you some reading material during lockdown!

Dr Donald John MacLean

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[2] John Murray, *Collected Writings* (4 vols.; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976-1982); *The Epistle to the Romans* (Repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2016).

[3] C. H. Spurgeon, "The Wonderous Covenant" in *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit, Volume 58 (1912)*. Online: https://www.ccel.org/ccel/spurgeon/sermons58.xliv.html [Cited: 26 March 2020]

"GOD IS OUR REFUGE AND STRENGTH" (PSALM 46:1)

Donald John MacLean[*]

We live in days when the foundations of society are being shaken. We are experiencing tragic loss of life, and financial hardship with accompanying worry, concern and fear have gripped many. Places of work are empty; centres of entertainment are shut; schools are closed, exams are cancelled – and places of worship are silent. Not since the World Wars have Britain and the world known such challenges.

What is our response to all this to be? As Christians how are we to live in the days of Covid-19? Obviously, there are many answers to this. We must care for one another, and for the world. We must look out for one another, and for our neighbours, so that we don't become isolated or run out of food and other necessities. We must care for one another spiritually, and use the gospel opportunities this time might bring. But more fundamentally, what is the response of our soul to be? How should believing in the God of the Bible affect us in a time of crisis?

We find an answer to this in Psalm 46. Quite when or in what circumstances this psalm was written, we don't know. But evidently it was written in a time of great distress, with the purpose to give God's people perspective through great tumultuous events of history. And they have found great comfort in this psalm over the centuries. Luther would often say to his friend in times of distress, "Come Philip let us sing the Forty-Sixth Psalm, and let them do their worst."[1] The Scottish covenanters, as they worshipped on the moors and in caves in fear of their lives in the seventeenth century, would often sing this psalm, and in doing so find the strength to go on. And we today can find in this psalm the same strength and comfort.

Even just the first three verses, which make up its first section, are so full of consolation.[2]

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[1] As cited, for example, in W. S. Plummer, *Psalms* (Repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1990), 522.
[2] The original sermon covered all three sections: v1-3, God's reigns over nature; v4-7, God's reign over the church's enemies; v8-11, God's reigns over the whole warring world.

1.   They tell us that times of trial and distress are not unexpected

We are not to be surprised that disasters and pandemics will come upon the earth. And nor are we to be surprised that God's people are caught up in their impact. At the end of verse 1 the psalmist speaks of being "in trouble". And the word is really plural – he is in "troubles".

The picture in vv2-3 reveals how bad these troubles can become. Here the world is being turned upside down: The earth appears to be giving way, the mountains which stand so tall are cast into the depths of the sea, reduced to trembling by the raging waves. The image is of the undoing of creation. On the third day of creation God said, Genesis 1:9-10, "Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear... And God saw that it was good." But now, what God in his goodness separated is being mixed into confusion. The creation order is reduced to disarray.

And this is, in a sense, the situation we face today: A pandemic is turning our society upside down, removing social contact, disrupting work patterns, causing ill health and in some cases death. But God has told us here and elsewhere that times of trial will come. And so, however else we respond, we should not be surprised that we live in a time where we have to say:

> Mine are tears in times of sorrow
> Darkness not yet understood
> Through the valley I must travel
> Where I see no earthly good.[3]

But more than just warning us that times of sorrow would come; Psalm 46 tells us how to respond. It calls us to behold our God (Isa. 40:9). And in beholding our God to find, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble" (verse 1).

2.   So, in times of distress, as we look to God, we find first a refuge

When you are in a storm you need a refuge, a shelter. In the Scottish Highlands the weather can turn wild almost at any moment. If you are out hillwalking and are suddenly caught in a storm, it can quickly become life threatening. But scattered through the Highlands are a series of bothies, essentially little cottages, always open for anyone to use. And when you find one of these in the middle of a storm, the cold, wind and snow that have been sapping your strength can no longer affect you. You get through the bothy door, close it behind you, and all becomes calm; you are safe. And that is what God is for us in times of trouble; running to him we find security, shelter and calm.

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[3] http://www.cityalight.com/christ-is-mine-forevermore/ [Cited 3 April 2020]

God is that refuge because while the earth quakes, while the mountains fall, while the sea rages, God sits above it all. Among all the troubles he alone remains secure. He cannot be overwhelmed; he cannot be reduced to trembling. And so, the psalmist says, when the world is falling apart, find security in the God who can never fall apart.

3. *As well as a refuge, God is also our strength*

Times of difficulty and trial make us realise our own weakness and insufficiency. Our health under strain reminds us of our own mortality; our lack of understanding about how to respond shows us the inadequacy of our own wisdom. Trials bring us to an end of ourselves – and that is no bad thing, because in looking out from ourselves to God we find the strength we lack. When we feel we cannot go on, then we find that God's strength will carry us. Deuteronomy 1:31 records, "in the wilderness", in time of trial and distress, "you have seen how the Lord your God carried you, as a man carries his son". And it will be so for us. God may not remove the trial; he may not immediately remove the affliction. But he will always be our strength. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12:8-10, "Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me." Three times Paul prayed for his affliction to be taken away. It wasn't. However, he goes on: "But he said to me, my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Our strength, like Paul's, is found in renouncing our own reserves and fleeing to God's strength.

4. *In trials, God is our refuge, he is our strength and, wonderfully, he is our "very present help"*

The NIV translates this as our "ever present" help. And what a comfort is it to know that God is no absentee in our troubles! He is with us; he is not far off, remote. He is here with his people, and he is here to help. In times of isolation and social distancing, what a comfort to know that, however absent others are, God is with us. "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you." (Isa. 43:2); "In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them." (Isa. 63:9. However it seems to the eye of sight, by faith we know he is always ever present with us to help us.

5. *And what does this mean for us?*

What does it mean in earth-shattering times that God is a refuge, a strength and a present help? Well, it simply means this: "Therefore we will not fear" (v2a). The great Christian calling today is to trust in our God, to sink ourselves into the truth that he is the strength of Israel, that he is our help and our refuge.

And so, as the earth trembles, "we will not fear". Now this does not mean we are turned into lumps of stone. Calvin says, "The psalm is not to be understood as meaning that the minds of the godly are exempt from all… fear, as if they were destitute of feeling."[4] But it does mean that as we look to God we can face into our fears with the confidence of faith. And if we have this confidence of faith, we will be enabled to do all the other things we need to do – to support, to practically help, to show compassion.

And so, as Covid-19 reduces the world to turmoil, "Behold your God". Realise, yes, we have to say,

> Mine are tears in times of sorrow
> Darkness not yet understood
> Through the valley I must travel
> Where I see no earthly good.

But go on as the hymn does,

> But mine is peace that flows from heaven
> And the strength in times of need
> I know my pain will not be wasted
> Christ completes his work in me.[5]

God does not waste trials. He uses them for good. Painful though they are, at the end our ever-present help will use them to complete the work of forming Christ in us. He will use the upheaval of Covid-19, as he uses all other things, for the good of his people.

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[4] https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom09.xii.i.html [Cited 3 April 2020].
[5] http://www.cityalight.com/christ-is-mine-forevermore/ [Cited 3 April 2020].

REVIEW ARTICLE: ROBERT LETHAM'S SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY
Robert Letham (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway), 2019, 1072pp, £39.70 (Amazon), £14.01 (Kindle)

Jonathan Bayes[*]

It was my privilege at a conference last year to hear Bob Letham for the first time. His subject was the Trinity. I can honestly say that it was the first time that a lecture on that subject had moved me to tears. Dr Letham spoke of the diversity in creation as a reflection of the triune nature of the Creator, and used the western musical heritage as an example, arguing that its harmonies could only have come about within a culture shaped by belief in a God characterised by plurality within unity. To follow the lecture by the singing of a hymn in four-part harmony was indeed a fitting conclusion.

It was, therefore, with some anticipation that I turned first, on receiving this book, to the section on the Trinity. I was pleased to find again reference to some of the classical composers whose music, as an avid listener to symphonies, I love to hear. The section was fairly brief, as Dr Letham has already written a significant book devoted to this theme.[1] As at the conference, once again mention was made of the many triadic patterns in the created world, unity in diversity pointing to the nature of the Creator. Dr Letham was, however, careful to insist that it is impossible to find any illustrations of the Trinity; all attempts lead inevitably to Trinitarian heresy.

I then turned to the Introduction, and my attention was caught by the statement that, in distinction from many other systematic theologies, this one combines the doctrines of salvation and the church. That sounded to me a very promising approach, but I resisted the temptation to jump straight into that section, and started to read from the beginning, with great anticipation of what I would learn once I reached that section.

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[1] R. Letham, *The Holy Trinity* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2004, 2019).

The work begins with a discussion of Anselm's ontological argument, which Dr Letham, rightly in my view, is prepared to endorse, provided it is recognised that Anselm set it within a prayerful and worshipful acknowledgement of the reality of God. It never was Anselm's intention that it should be a means of convincing an unbeliever.

It was pleasing to read the section where Dr Letham rejects the modern propensity to translate *monogenēs* in John's Gospel merely as "only", rather than "only begotten". He demonstrated well that the argument is not sustainable contextually.

In this work, Dr Letham treats the Trinity before the attributes of God. Recognising that this is a different order from that found in many similar works, he explains his twofold rationale: First, the demographic changes in western society demand a stronger assertion of what is distinctive in the Christian doctrine of God as Trinity, over against the general monotheism of false religions, particularly Islam. Second, that which is last to be revealed is primary in importance, and therefore, in the light of God's completed revelation, his nature as Trinity ought to be our starting point.

When he does turn to the attributes of God, he makes the salient point that it is God himself who defines his own attributes. We are not to interpret the statement "God is love" by reference to our own preconceived idea of what love is, but rather to define love from the actions of God. Moreover, it is only a triune God who can be love, and given the triune nature of God, love is at the very heart of all reality. In this section, it was good to find a passage on the beauty of God, a topic sadly missing, it seems, from many systematic theologies.

Dr Letham helpfully reminds us that, inevitably, we have our own blind spots when it comes to the interpretation of Scripture. However, while he rightly insists on the vital place of careful thought in Bible reading, there was, I am afraid, one sentence in the chapter on the doctrine of Scripture which caused alarm bells to ring in my mind. Regarding the historicity of the biblical record, he writes: "Events are reported in ways that do not accord with twenty-first-century historiography." The example which he proceeds to give – the use of round numbers in dating – is innocuous enough, but without further clarification and qualification, the sentence could leave the door open for a dangerous questioning of the Bible's historical accuracy, which might undermine the doctrine of inerrancy, albeit that inerrancy is a truth which Dr Letham strenuously maintains, rightly demonstrating that, contrary to the claims of some, this doctrine is not a modern novelty.

The author's discussion of the phrase *sola Scriptura* is instructive. He rejects the claim that it means that the Bible is the only source for Christian theology, referring to the credal affirmations that what may logically be deduced from Scripture is equally binding upon the church as the truth of God. Acknowledging that Scripture certainly is our supreme authority for all

matters of faith and practice, he highlights the dangers in an extreme "Scripture alone" approach: it may as easily lead to heresy as to truth, and it risks disregarding the historic witness of the church, to whom the Scriptures truly belong, as if to claim that what has, purportedly, been revealed to us outweighs the cumulative wisdom of the centuries. That said, we are reminded that if any principle other than Scripture itself becomes the key to its interpretation, then Scripture is no longer our ultimate authority. Later, a salutary example of this dubious practice is cited, in the way that Old Testament scholarship was, at one time, taken up with ancient near-eastern treaty patterns as a key to interpreting God's covenants.

I very much enjoyed reading Dr Letham's comments on Origen's approach to biblical interpretation. I have often felt uneasy at how quickly Origen's approach is dismissed. I am in total agreement with the author when he observes that, "at least we can say that Origen ultimately sought a Christocentric reading"; that, I am sure, was Origen's great and timeless contribution to hermeneutical theory.

The section on the doctrine of creation rightly notes that there is no conflict between theology and science. When disputes arise, it is rather because of opposing worldviews. The issue of the interpretation of Genesis 1 is reserved for an appendix. This, presumably, reflects the author's conviction that the subject is not central to the doctrine. His consideration of the various views is fair; recognising that Bible-believers over the centuries have taken various views of the matter, he appeals for humility in any pronouncements which we might make on the subject. This is, perhaps, a necessary challenge to those of us who hold strongly to what Dr Letham labels "the twenty-four-hour-day theory". His treatment of the subject seems to be deliberately inconclusive, as he refuses to come down explicitly for any particular interpretation. There is, no doubt, wisdom in this, in ensuring that he does not alienate a particular batch of readers, from whichever side of the debate – and we are left unsure of which side that would be!

I read the section on God's covenant with the entire human race via Noah while the outbreak of the coronavirus was dominating the news headlines. Dr Letham acknowledges the threats to human life in a fallen world, and faces up to the reality that at times pandemics, amongst other things, have been known to wipe out a third of the world's population. Although the author does not mention this, it accords precisely with the depictions in the book of Revelation of the scope of God's temporal judgmental warnings. However, through the Noahic covenant God promises that there will not be a *universal* judgment before his planned *final* judgment – a reassuring note, which, as the author notes, leads us to prayer.

Turning to the doctrine of humanity as the image of God, Dr Letham draws out the fundamental incompatibilities between feminism and Christianity, and, importantly, in this age of transgender ideology, stresses the biblical

teaching on male and female as equal yet different. He sums up the current secular western outlook as a culture of death, symptomised by such things as abortion and euthanasia, practices which epitomise rebellion against the God of life.

Assuming the covenantal nature of God's dealings with unfallen Adam, Dr Letham discusses the question whether the covenant of works was also a covenant of grace. He concludes that the integrity of biblical revelation regarding God's covenantal principles requires an affirmative answer. This left me a little uneasy. I can readily accept that it was a covenant marked by love and kindness but I am not sure of the appropriateness of introducing the word "grace" prior to the entry of sin. In a later chapter the author indicates that Meredith Kline was also of the opinion that the basis for grace is demerit, and therefore to speak of grace prior to the fall is anachronistic. But perhaps I need to ponder a little further the full implications of the term. It is certainly true that, ultimately, Adam could never in any sense *deserve* anything from God; his very existence was a free gift from his Creator, but whether that makes it appropriate to speak of it in terms of *grace* is a question for further reflection.

Dr Letham's discussion of the differing views of the means by which original sin and guilt are propagated from Adam to all his descendants is insightful and instructive. Distinguishing the federalist from the realist interpretation, he argues compellingly that the two are not incompatible and should be held together. Adam was indeed the representative head of the human race, but there is also a genetic unity of humanity, such that corruption is passed down through the generations. The author goes on, again with compelling insight, to demonstrate the incompatibility with the basic principles of justice, as well as with the biblical revelation of divine justice, of Charles Hodge's view that Adam's sin was imputed to his descendants independently of their own guilt.

Part 5 of the book is entitled *The Covenant of God*. I found this section scintillating to read. Early on, though, there was one sentence that made me pause: The first chapter in this section relates to election. Dr Letham, acknowledging that Scripture reveals election as an expression of God's grace and love, rightly infers that we should entertain hope for all people. He then raises the question, "Can we say for certain that Esau or even Judas are reprobate?" Esau maybe not, but does Jesus' pronouncement of woe upon his betrayer not seem to rule out any hope for Judas, the man of whom he makes the sombre declaration that "it would have been good for that man if he had never been born" (Mark 14:21)?

Dr Letham considers the fairly prevalent theory of a covenant of redemption between the Father and the Son, and expresses significant reservations. He notes the absence of the Holy Spirit from most articulations of the theory, suggesting that it therefore undermines the truth of the unity of

the Trinity in all the external divine works, as well as having subordinationist overtones.

The author also rebuts the mistaken claim that the Mosaic covenant was a republication of the covenant of works. He lists four major views about the Mosaic covenant found in classic reformed theology. The second, that it was subservient to the covenant of grace and was designed to prepare Israel for the coming of the gospel, although not explicitly endorsed by Dr Letham, seems to me to accord most closely with Paul's teaching in Galatians 3. This whole discussion is relevant to the question of the third use of the law and to the assessment of new covenant theology, a position which the author, rightly in my view, summarily dismisses in a single sentence.

In the part of the work dealing with Christology my attention was caught by the author's discussion of the relative merits of the theories of Christ's impeccability, represented by W. G. T. Shedd, and his peccability, represented by Charles Hodge. I have tended to think, with Hodge, that our Lord's sinlessness was not an inability to sin, but his triumph over temptation and the fact that he did not sin. Dr Letham prefers the opposite conclusion – that Christ's humanity was intrinsically sinless, but the argument is well rehearsed, and I recognise that deciding between the two positions is not simple and straightforward.

Related to this point is a comment on the comparison and contrast between Adam and Christ as they faced temptation: Adam was tempted in a beautiful garden, Jesus in a barren desert; Adam was surrounded by a luxuriant abundance, Jesus was entirely alone; Adam had free access to all the trees of the garden but one, Jesus had no resources at all; Adam had a plentiful food supply, Jesus had gone without food for forty days, and so was at his weakest. Nonetheless, where Adam fell, Jesus triumphed, and where Adam disobeyed in connection with a tree, Jesus obeyed on a tree. These observations reappear on several occasions. The reader gets the impression that there is something here that has warmed the author's heart, and the reader's heart is also warmed in response.

When Dr Letham turns to the threefold office of Christ as prophet, priest and king, there is tantalisingly little on his prophetic ministry. This no doubt relates to a point made in the introduction, where the author explains that the limitations of space preclude an exhaustive discussion of every topic, and indicates his intention to focus more extensively on issues which have been the subjects of more recent dispute. The office of Christ as prophet does not come into that category, and therefore is legitimately summarised in a paragraph, with a footnote referring back to the earlier chapter which dealt with the doctrine of Scripture. That chapter notes that the New Testament, as a record of the teaching of the apostles, may be traced back to Christ himself, since it was by the authority which he delegated to them that they wrote.

In considering the high priestly ministry of the Lord Jesus, Dr Letham offers an important section on the necessity of the Lord's obedience. Some years ago, I read the proceedings of the Evangelical Alliance symposium on the atonement, which followed the publication of Steve Chalke's notorious dismissal of penal substitution. I found the article by Garry Williams the most worthwhile of all the contributions, apart from one thing. He related the necessity of Christ's incarnate life prior to his crucifixion to his role as the new Israel. I think that Dr Letham offers a far more compelling explanation: he relates the necessity of Christ's life of obedience to his fulfilment of the role of the last Adam, who had to succeed where Adam failed, and so be qualified to suffer, on our behalf, the consequences of Adam's failure. Dr Letham proceeds to defend the truth of penal substitution, which he roots in the union between Christ and his people.

When the author turns to the extent of the atonement, he is eager to defend the doctrine of definite atonement – that, in the intention of the triune God, Christ died specifically to save his elect people. I did think that he might have given a little more extensive coverage of the apparently universal texts, given that this is a live issue for many of us today.

The chapter on Christ as King was very thought-provoking. Preparing the way for what is to come when he addresses the twin issues of salvation and the church, Dr Letham points out that Christ is king over his covenant people, to which individual believers belong. This corporate understanding of salvation is crucial. But a large part of this chapter concerns the question of the extent of Christ's kingdom: the author vigorously defends the traditional Reformed outlook which teaches that Christ is the universal king. This contrasts with the two kingdoms theory, often associated with Lutheranism, which equates kingdom and church, so creating a dualistic perspective in which the rest of creation is governed not by Christ but by natural law. This idea has serious repercussions in that it encourages neutrality in the secular realm and leaves open the door for evil to run rampant in the world. The Reformed vision sees earthly rulers as accountable to Christ, and works for a society which mirrors the reign of Christ.

And so we reach, at last, the section highlighted in the introduction on the doctrine of salvation and the church. The tendency to separate the two and treat them as separate doctrines is traced back to Enlightenment individualism, and the result is that even evangelical accounts of these subjects are far adrift from Scripture, which, Dr Letham maintains, differs from both western individualism and Marxist corporatism, though this latter point, a little frustratingly, is not elaborated.

The consistent biblical vision is of humanity as a relational reality: you are who you are according to with whom you are connected. This remains the case in many non-western cultures, typified, for example, by the Chinese term *guanxi*, which roughly translates as "connections". Dr Letham, therefore, finds

salvation connected inextricably in the New Testament to the community of the church, and this parallels the solidarity of the human race in sin in Adam.

The priority issue in the doctrine of the church is its unity, and out of this flows its diversity, mirroring the reality of the Trinity. Local churches exist as parts of the one universal church, which has its origin in the eternal counsel of God. Although Dr Letham does not cite 2 Clement, his emphasis here reminded me very much of the following statement:

> If we do the will of God our Father we will belong to the first church, the spiritual church, the church that was created before the sun and moon. But if we do not do what the Lord wants, we will belong to the Scripture that says, "My house has become a cave of thieves". So then, let us choose to belong to the church of life, that we may be saved… And as you know, the Bible and the apostles indicate that the church has not come into being just now, but has existed from the beginning.[2]

The chapter on salvation and the church also considers the means of grace, of which Dr Letham sees preaching as primary. I found this section very thought-provoking. We preachers are challenged to know how to read and understand the text, how to use words in various moods – indicative, imperative and interrogative – to ensure that our preaching is full of intellectual content, while not being a show of rhetoric. We should be devoted to preaching Christ clearly and directly.

One memorable phrase which caught my attention reminds us that without the Spirit the word is ineffective, but without the word the Spirit is inaudible. At this point I found myself forced to reflect further on the relationship between the Spirit and the word, a process of reflection which will have to be ongoing. Dr Letham comments on the impact of the eighteenth-century revivals on our doctrine of preaching. He cites Stuart Olyott as an example of those who have observed the powerlessness of so much preaching and called for fervent prayer for God to move in power by his Spirit. As one who has been involved in organising and leading prayer meetings for revival, that is exactly the background from which I come. However, Dr Letham insists, by contrast, that we are to expect the Spirit to work through the word, such expectancy not being presumptuous, but faith in God's promise. He sees in the revivalist approach the danger of creating a divide between God and his word, of failing to believe the Scriptural assertion that the word is the word of the Spirit, and so of implying that the Spirit who inspired the word may unpredictably "wander off and leave his ambassadors in the lurch".

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[2] *Second Epistle of Clement*, 14 [translation by Bart Ehrman, *Loeb Classical Library: The Apostolic Fathers, Vol. 1* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2003), 187].

Dr. Letham divides his consideration of the Christian life into two parts – its beginning and then its progress. The former section covers calling, regeneration, faith, repentance, justification and baptism. Within that section the comments on the so-called "New Perspective on Paul" are perceptive, and he rightly dismisses it as a reason for rewriting the doctrine of justification through faith.

The progress section deals with the issues of assurance, adoption, sanctification, perseverance, union with Christ (or *theōsis*) and the Lord's Supper. It was interesting to read of the nurturing power of Christian fellowship as a positive form of discipline, and instructive to be reminded that our perseverance is primarily for Christ's benefit, representing the Father's faithfulness to his promise to give his people to his Son. The consideration of *theōsis*, rooted in 2 Peter 1:4, was fascinating and enlightening, but I need to give it further attention before I will feel qualified to comment. I did find that a question was raised in my mind by the placing of the doctrine of adoption within this section.

The section on the church and salvation ends with a chapter on the church and its offices. This includes a rejection of the role of women as teachers in settings where adult males are present, and also affirming the biblical ban on women being appointed as elders. The author recognises that the drift in the opposite direction has come about under pressure from modern culture, but rightly insists that there is no mandate for any culture to pass judgment on the Word of God.

The book ends, as is customary for a systematic theology, with eschatology. An intriguing comment in the introductory paragraph caught my attention and whetted my appetite for what was to come: Dr Letham suggests that the future prospects for church and gospel are not what is frequently taught. A little later he notes the danger in the idea of a future great tribulation, which can breed pessimism, and sees it as inconsistent with Jesus' teaching. His comments on 2 Thessalonians 2 intrigued me: He cites Warfield as arguing that Paul's references to the apostasy and the man of sin, if the text was to be relevant in its original context, must relate to events that would take place in the first century. It does not seem to me that that conclusion follows necessarily from the premise. However, at the same time, it does remove a seeming inconsistency between that particular passage and the overall biblical vision for the end times, which Dr Letham aptly summarises as bringing the nations to obedience. I found myself fully in agreement with his reading of Romans 9-11, and I was pleased to see that he understands the apostle to foresee the future conversion of Israel.

As regards the reading of Revelation, I find myself diverging somewhat from the author's position. Whereas he prefers the preterist reading, I have

written elsewhere [3] in defence of the idealist interpretation. Dr Letham accepts that the preterist interpretation may be qualified, particularly in the latter part of the book, in recognition of the fact that the ultimate future is there in view. However, he does not seem to allow for the same caveat relating to the idealist reading.

As regards his overall eschatological position, Dr Letham, perhaps helpfully, having dismissed both varieties of premillennialism, sees amillennialism and postmillennialism as a continuum, rather than two completely separate theories. He stands somewhere in the middle of the spectrum, adopting an optimistic amillennial position which regards Revelation 20 as depicting the whole period between the ascension and the Parousia.

My problem with such a reading is that those who interpret Revelation 20 like that, generally make it contemporary with most of the rest of the book. William Hendriksen is most well-known for expounding the book in this way:

> A careful reading of the book of Revelation has made it clear that
> the book consists of seven sections, and that these seven sections
> run parallel to one another. Each of them spans the entire
> dispensation from the first to the second coming of Christ.[4]

The difficulty with this is that we read in Revelation 20:3 that Satan deceives the nations no more during the thousand years, whereas we have read on four occasions earlier in the book (12:9; 13:14; 18:23; 19:20) of his deception of the nations. I fail to see, therefore, how Revelation 20 can refer to the same period of time as those earlier parts of the book. To be fair, Dr Letham, while accepting this general reading of the book, does not explicitly equate chapter 20 with the earlier sections, though it seems to be the implication of his preferred reading.

The author has ended each chapter with two or three study questions. However, when we reach the final chapter there are no questions, but rather, and very appropriately, an invitation to awe, worship, thanksgiving and prayer.

References to the sacraments occur periodically in the course of the book, culminating in the detailed treatment under the heading of the church and salvation. I have reserved consideration of this subject to the end of my article for two reasons. The first is that, writing as a Baptist, it was always likely to be in connection with baptism that I would disagree with my Presbyterian

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[3] J. F. Bayes, *Revival: the New Testament Expectation* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2016), Kindle ed., loc. 2375.

[4] W. Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1940, 1967), Kindle ed., loc. 375.

brother. His six-point summary of Baptist arguments is accurate, but some of his surrounding comments, I would suggest, are not.

One problem was that I thought that he misrepresented the Baptist position, or at least that he generalised from the position advocated by some Baptists as if it is universally held by all Baptists, a conclusion with which I beg to differ. He claims that Baptists believe the new covenant to be made with the believer only, and that this leads Baptists to highlight individual responsibility. This assertion is, however, questionable, given that we who are Reformed Baptists are one with our paedobaptist friends in affirming the priority of God's electing grace in enabling any individual response at all. I have no issue at all with his statement that saving faith "is a gift from God and cannot be manufactured autonomously". His assertion that, for Baptists, covenantal grace is conditioned on the individual response is simply not true. The 1689 Confession recognises that God requires faith in order that people may be saved, but then adds that he promises "to give unto all those that are ordained unto eternal life, his Holy Spirit, to make them willing and able to believe", a wording identical with the Westminster Confession.[5] Dr Letham therefore misrepresents the position, and creates an imbalanced comparison, when he contrasts the basic Baptist paradigm that faith precedes baptism with the paedobaptist understanding that grace is prior to faith. The Baptist equally accepts that latter truth. The difference arises when the author adds that God's grace in baptism precedes our response; the Baptist does not tie God's grace to the baptismal event.

Dr Letham claims that the Baptist order where faith precedes baptism is inconsistent with the New Testament order, being baptism first, followed by faith. This claim seems doubtful. The first of the two passages which he cites (Romans 6) expounds the meaning of baptism, but does not even mention faith, and therefore is not germane to the argument, while the point of the other passage (1 Corinthians 10:1-13) is to exhort those who have been baptised to take heed to live consistently, and, once again, there is no reference to faith. As for passages where faith and baptism are mentioned together, the order (of the events, not necessarily of the mention) is invariably faith first, then baptism.[6]

Moreover, Dr Letham's interpretation of the Baptist outlook as being that "individuals must decide for themselves whether to be baptised" may reflect a careless approach on the part of some Baptist churches, but cannot sit comfortably with a genuine Baptist theology of baptism. As far as I am concerned, as a Baptist, baptism is an obligation which Scripture places on every new believer, and it should be fulfilled as immediately as is realistically possible. Disobedience to Christ's command would raise serious questions

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[5] 1689 Baptist Confession, 7.2; cf. Westminster Confession, 7.3.

[6] Mark 16:16; Acts 8:12f, 36f; 16:31-33; 18:8; 19:1-5; Ephesians 4:5; Colossians 2:12.

about the genuineness of a profession of faith: for one's discipleship to falter at the first hurdle would not bode well for the long-term future.

In contrast to the Baptist position, Dr Letham defends the view that the new covenant is made with believers and their children, on the basis of the corporate context in which Scripture sets individuals. He overlooks the fact that the Baptist position assumes the election of a people in Christ – which must qualify the individualistic assertion. Here again the 1689 Confession is in agreement with Westminster in defining the universal church as "the whole number of the elect",[7] and in affirming that *a people* was given to Christ to be his seed.[8] Interestingly, union with Christ, which Dr Letham defines as "churchly, not individualistic", is referenced three times in the 1689 Confession,[9] but only once in the Westminster Confession.[10] All this surely indicates that the Baptist position is certainly no less corporate than that of the paedobaptists

Moreover, Dr Letham believes that a child of believing parents is not baptised in order to become a church member, but, being a church member from birth by virtue of God's covenant, is baptised. He claims that the exclusion of believers' children from the new covenant would turn Pentecost into a day of mass excommunication. However, he nowhere considers that argument that the inclusion of believers' children in the covenant has the effect of undermining the faithfulness of God, since it is not the case that believers' children invariably follow in their parents' footsteps; what then becomes of God's covenant promise to be God to the children? The only way to avoid thus jeopardising the truth of God's faithfulness is to adopt just such an approach as he (wrongly) accuses Baptists of taking, namely one which makes individual response normative, rather than the prevenient grace of God. I once heard a paedobaptist preacher describe the unconverted children of Christian parents as covenant-breakers, and this, supposedly, lets God off the hook. But if salvation is his initiative, does he not become the greater covenant-breaker?

Dr Letham considers the "repeated and unrestricted references to households" in the New Testament as evidence for his claim that the household remains the primary locus of God's administration in the new covenant. He also assumes that the household baptisms mentioned included infants. However, such a characterisation of references to households is exaggerated. In the book of Acts we hear of only four households being saved and baptised (those of Cornelius, Lydia, the Philippian jailer and Crispus). In the rest of the New Testament we hear of just two more (those of Stephanas

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[7] 1689 Baptist Confession, 26.1; Westminster Confession, 25.1.
[8] 1689 Baptist Confession, 8.1; Westminster Confession, 8.1.
[9] 1689 Baptist Confession, 17.2; 27.1; 13.1.
[10] Westminster Confession, 17.2.

and Onesiphorus). That is not a lot to go on for a period of something over 30 years. Moreover, the assumption that there were infants in these six households is entirely speculative.

The further New Testament evidence which Dr Letham offers in support of paedobaptism is not compelling. He refers to Acts 2:39, "the promise is to you and to your children", but has only quoted half the verse, which continues, "and to all who afar off". This seems to open the door to indiscriminate baptism. But the verse finishes, "as many as the Lord our God will call", the decisive phrase which qualifies both the preceding categories. The reference to 1 Corinthians 7:14 is also dubious. Albert Barnes and Tom Wright – both paedobaptists – accept that a reference here to covenant holiness has to be read into the text, and is not what the text actually means.[11] These texts say nothing to undermine the Baptist conviction that the counterpart in the new covenant of the chosen people and their children is the church and its members, that the key issue is not being born into a believing family, but being born again into God's family.

Dr Letham suggests that whereas paedobaptists stress the continuity between the old and new covenants, Baptists emphasise the discontinuity. This, however, is another sweeping generalisation; the 1689 Confession, although somewhat briefer in its treatment of the covenant than the equivalent section of Westminster, is nonetheless clear that there has only ever been one covenant of grace, revealed first to Adam, then "by farther steps", until the completion of its "full discovery" in the New Testament.[12] Continuity does not mean that nothing changes at all, as Dr Letham recognises when he acknowledges the elements of discontinuity.

Some of Dr Letham's arguments in defence of the paedobaptist position raise questions. He rightly notes the connection between circumcision and baptism made in Colossians 2:11-13, but it is mere inference to move from here to paedobaptism. Paul is using circumcision as a symbol of new life in Christ, and it is that of which baptism is the sign. There is no mention of children or descendants, as in the Old Testament references to the covenant. Dr Letham also notes the instructions given to children in the church later in that letter (Colossians 3:20) as well as in Ephesians 6:1-4. He comments that they are being treated as Christians, and "considered 'in the Lord'". Well, perhaps that is because they were. A Baptist has no problem with the possibility of conversion taking place during childhood.

Many of Dr Letham's comments on baptism logically point to the Baptist position. He emphasises how the New Testament makes a close connection between baptism and regeneration, faith, cleansing from sin, reception of the

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[11] A. Barnes, *Notes on the New Testament* [1766] (CCEL edition, reprinted 2003), 2555; N. T. Wright, *New Testament for Everyone: 1 Corinthians* (London: SPCK, 2003), 82.

[12] 1689 Baptist Confession, 7.3.

Holy Spirit and union with Christ, and depicts baptism as marking the start of the Christian life. Such a definition does not seem consistent with the practice of paedobaptism. Moreover, in the section on the Lord's Supper, while rejecting paedocommunion, Dr Letham notes that, since the means of grace may become means of judgment if wrongly used, it is essential that the participants be penitent sinners. It seems inconsistent to apply this to the Lord's Supper but not to baptism. It is striking, incidentally, how some of the paedobaptist confessions are unable to avoid facing up to their own embarrassment with their position, as if aware that paedobaptism is not genuinely tenable in a new covenant context. The Genevan Catechism is a prime example of the need to bend over backwards to try to defend the position, and also of the need to resort to reason and "due pondering", apparently well aware that there is no scriptural argument available to defend the position.[13] Dr Letham rightly states that in the New Testament baptism was administered when a person could first be considered a Christian, but goes on to make what, to a Baptist, seems the rather dubious claim that, in the case of an infant born in a Christian home, this is at birth. His claim that there is no New Testament record of a child born in a believing home not being baptised until later seems rather to be clutching at straws.

Having said all that, there are points where, as a Baptist I wholeheartedly endorse Dr Letham's comments, even on the subject of baptism! I recognise that there are some Baptists who have lost something of the biblical richness on this subject, and would do well to learn from our Presbyterian friend. He says that baptism is not merely symbolic, the reality which it symbolises existing independently of the action. He is absolutely right; Baptism accomplishes something in the life of the believer – it really is a means of grace.

And that leads me to the second reason for treating this subject last, namely that, wanting to end on a positive note, I fully endorse Dr. Letham's general view of the sacraments, which is very instructive and a necessary corrective in a day when so much of the church seems to have emptied the sacraments of all effective content. He rightly notes that the 1689 Baptist Confession prefers the word "ordinance", but, as Samuel Waldron points out in his exposition of the Confession, there is no intrinsic objection, from a Baptist point of view, to the term "sacrament"; the wariness arises from the Roman Catholic abuse of the term.[14] Nonetheless, it would be truly encouraging to witness a recovery in evangelical circles of an authentic sacramental understanding of the ordinances as real means of grace.

It is with reference to the Lord's Supper that Dr Letham's positive view of the purpose of the sacraments comes into its own. He helpfully compares the

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[13] Genevan Catechism (1545), Qs. 157, 332-339.

[14] S. Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith* (Darlington: EP, 2013), 422.

Lord's Supper as an act of remembrance to the setting up of the memorial stones by Jacob at Bethel and by Joshua after the crossing of the Jordan. Like them, it is a record of the Lord's mighty act. Rightly, the author describes the Supper as our indispensable spiritual nourishment. He quotes Calvin to the effect that participation is a necessity for heavenly life, and argues that the degree to which a church wants the communion is a reliable gauge of how eagerly it wants Christ. That is a very challenging comment. It takes me back to my days growing up as a boy in a Baptist Church in West London. I still remember watching, baffled, as a mass exodus took place whenever communion was about to follow the "main" service. Dr Letham's comment articulates my juvenile bewilderment: where was the love for Jesus on the part of so many professing believers? More recently, I recall being told by a sister from one of my former congregations that I had been rather daring on an occasion when I preached on the words of institution in 1 Corinthians 11. I had evidently made it very clear that participation is an obligation placed upon every church member, and this sister pointed out that there were some members present who never attended the communion service in our church. My reply was that all I thought I was doing was expounding the passage.

Reading Dr Letham's outline of the different understandings of the Lord's Supper in the course of history and in the contemporary church I was reminded of a conversation to which I was party at theological college while I was training for the ministry. Dr. Letham identifies four approaches, one of which he labels the doctrine of the "real absence". A group of us at the college, along with a tutor, were discussing the meaning of the real presence, and objecting to interpretations of the phrase with which we disagreed. The tutor commented that however we might define (or refuse to define) the real presence, nonetheless "no one believes in the real absence". Well, it seems that Dr Letham would disagree. I suspect that he is not claiming that anyone would actually use that description for their view of communion, but is highlighting the logical outcome of viewing the Supper as nothing more than symbolic.

Dr Letham's mastery of the English language is superb, and the book is, for such a weighty work, attractively easy to read. The subdivision of each chapter into short sections with headings and subheadings makes grappling with its profundities manageable. These features make reading this work not a mere intellectual challenge, but also a worthwhile spiritual exercise. Frequently, comments made by the author stimulate the reader to heartfelt worship. The book is thoughtfully written, and as we read it we are compelled to contemplate with the author both the sublime truths on which he is meditating, and the insights of the centuries as we are presented with the comments of godly believers from every period of church history.

Indeed, Dr Letham's comprehensive familiarity with our Christian predecessors is impressive. He shows a thorough mastery of patristic teaching, makes regular reference to Aquinas, quotes constantly from the

Reformers, the puritans, and their successors in the Reformed tradition, as well as discussing modern and contemporary theologians. Indeed, there is much historical theology in addition to systematic theology in this work, the historical serving as the basis for the systematisation. The author is careful to consider respectfully even positions which must ultimately be classed as indefensible. In short, the author's intellectual brilliance is discernible, both in the breadth of his knowledge, and in the skill of his assessment of multiple positions.

The accessibility of the work is aided by regular imaginative comparisons, many of them thoroughly homely. Some of these are intended to illustrate a truth being expounded; more often they serve to demonstrate precisely what is not being affirmed. Here are just half a dozen representative examples: a pizza, a detective novel, beads on a string, a pancake, a bicycle wheel and a bucket.

Clearly a review of this length of a book of such a size can only be selective in what it highlights. My own interests and concerns, as well as those areas where I was made to think, will have shaped the elements in Dr Letham's magnificent work on which I have chosen to comment. I trust that they are sufficient to commend the work wholeheartedly. The author refers to Paul's sobering words in 1 Corinthians 3 about the coming rewards for those called to gospel ministry. Having read this book, I sense that the author is one who has built with "gold, silver and precious stones".

THE NEED FOR SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY IN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

Martin Foord[*]

Many have questioned whether systematic theology is necessary for training pastors. This paper argues that systematic theology is essential for pastoral ministry and therefore indispensable for training future pastors. The argument has two steps: Firstly, we explore the nature of theological education to show its ongoing need and purpose in the life of the church. And then secondly, we examine the character of systematic theology to demonstrate its necessity for everyday practical Christian living. Given these two conclusions, we then consider the place of systematic theology in theological education. And finally, we close by answering some common criticisms of systematic theology.

Why should training for pastoral ministry bother with systematic theology? Why not simply spend the time studying books of the Bible in depth? After all, God gave us a Bible not a systematic theology. Why should future pastors impose some "system" on God-inspired Scripture?

While these questions may be well meaning they betray a misunder-standing of systematic theology. Ironically, such queries are themselves systematic theological questions. In order to understand the place and purpose of systematic theology in theological education it is critical to grasp what they both are. So, firstly, we will examine what theological education is, secondly, explore the nature of systematic theology, and thirdly, explain its role in theological education.

I.   What is Theological Education?

1)   Word-Gift Ministry

The nature of theological education cannot be grasped until the nature of word-gift ministry is understood first. Central to the reformers re-envisioning

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of church ministry and leadership was Ephesians 4:11-12:[1]

> So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists,
> the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service,
> so that the body of Christ may be built up.

Here we find a list of specific gifts Christ gives to the church: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers.[2] We notice, firstly, they are not just abilities but *people* themselves. Secondly, the gifts all have one thing in common: proclamation of the word (whether publicly or privately). And, thirdly, the purpose of these word-gifts is to "equip the saints for works of ministry".[3] Put bluntly, God's people will not be prepared to serve without the word-gifts in action.

No doubt, some who have word-gifts will be appointed to a church office (such as a teaching elder) whilst others will not. But either way, the word-gifts have an enabling function for the rest of the church. As Heinrich Bullinger put it, "the church is built and conserved by God's word through ministers appointed for that purpose by the Lord". [4] This, of course, reflects the reformers' doctrine of the visible church as a congregation marked out by word and sacrament (where the sacraments are visible words).[5] If the church

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[1] See John Calvin, *Institutes* 4.1.5, 4.3.1-2, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols., Library of Christian Classics (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 1015-1016, 1053-1055; Heinrich Bullinger, *Compendium* 6.15, *Compendium Christianae Religionis Decem Libris Comprehensum* (Tiguri: Froschoverum, 1556), 87; Heinrich Bullinger, *Decades* 5.3, *The Decades of Heinrich Bullinger, The Fifth Decade*, The Parker Society 4 (Cambridge: The University Press, 1852), 104-06; Martin Bucer, *A Brief Summary of Christian Doctrine* 11, *Common Places of Martin Bucer*, trans. David F. Wright, Courtenay Library of Reformation Classics (Appleford: The Sutton Courtenay Press, 1972), 83; Musculus, *Loci Communes* 22, Wolfgang Musculus, *Loci Communes in usus sacrae Theologiae candidatorum parti* (Basileae: Ex Officina Heruagiana, 1560), 244; Philip Melanchthon, *Loci Communes* 12, *Loci Communes, 1543*, trans. Jacob A. O. Preus (St. Louis: Concordia Pub. House, 1992), 131-32.

[2] I leave aside the debates about (1) whether the "pastor" and "teacher" are the same or different gifts; and (2) whether the prophets continue in today's church. They are not essential for the point being made.

[3] For a defence that it is highly likely the phrase "for the work of ministry" is dependent on "to equip the saints" see amongst others, Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 262-64; Frank Thielman, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 277-80; Ernest Best, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), 398; Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 458-59; Peter Thomas O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 301-03.

[4] Bullinger, *Sermonium Decades* 5.3, Heinrich Bullinger, *Sermonum decades quinque* (Tiguri: Christoffel Froschouer, 1552), 3:292.

[5] For example, "The visible Church of Christ is a congregational of faithful men, in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly administered according to Christ's ordinance", Article 19 of the *39 Articles*, Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom, with a History and Critical Notes: The Evangelical Protestant Creeds, with Translations*, trans. Philip Schaff, 3 vols. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1882), 3:499.

is to grow, word-gift ministry will be fundamental.[6]

2) Training for Word-Gift Ministry

The centrality of word-gift ministry for the church raises the issue of how people are trained for it. If word-gift ministry focuses on proclamation, then those who do this work need to know thoroughly the word they proclaim; one cannot declare what they do not know. Paul himself saw the need to train some people in a body of teaching when he said, "And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others" (2 Timothy 2:2).

Here is the work of entrusting knowledge to others who will also go on to teach it. This entrusting is itself theological education.[7] It is a concentrated time of learning God's word that is generally necessary for those who will exercise a word-gift ministry.

However, we do note that word-gift ministry is more than mere proclamation. Timothy was to entrust apostolic knowledge to "reliable" people (2 Tim 2:2). He exhorted Timothy, "Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers" (1 Timothy 4:16, NIV).

Here both doctrine and life are crucial for the ultimate salvation of God's people. In other words, those in word-gift ministry are to provide a real-life model of Christian living (1 Tim 4:12). As Titus was told: "In everything set them an example by doing what is good" (Titus 2:7). The most effective sermon illustration is the preacher's lifestyle. And Paul's qualifications for the elder focus on character (1 Tim 3:2-7; Tit 1:6-9). As John Wyclif aptly said, "There are two elements that concern the pastoral position: holiness of the pastor and wholesomeness in teaching".[8]

And so, training for word-gift ministry must concentrate on more than accumulation of biblical knowledge. Paul gave a sober warning: "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up" (1 Cor 8:1). Indeed "knowledge" can be used to destroy (1 Cor 8:11). What is essential for word-gift ministry is the *way knowledge is used* – from a heart that loves others.

Therefore, training for word-gift ministry or a theological education involves (at least) attention to a godly character and training in biblical understanding. We discover examples of concentrated times of training like

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[6] Hence Paul's numbering of the word gifts first in 1 Cor 12:28.

[7] For a fuller defence of theological education see Martin Alexander Foord, "The Elements of a Theology of Theological Education", in *Theological Education: Foundations, Practices, and Future Directions*, ed. Andrew M. Bain and Ian Hussey (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2018), 29-43.

[8] "*Duo autem sunt, que pertinent statui pastorali, scilicet pastoris sanctitas et doctrine sue salubritas*", John Wyclif, *Tractatus De Officio Pastorali*, ed. Gotthardus Victor Lechler (Lipsiae: Prostat apud A. Edelmannum, 1863), 7.

this in the New Testament itself: Christ gave special attention to equipping the twelve over a three-year period for their future apostolic work; Paul engaged in concentrated training whilst in Ephesus. For two years he daily taught in the Hall of Tyrannus (Acts 19:9-10). And, as a result, the "entire province of Asia" heard God's word helped by Paul's co-workers (Acts 19:10).[9] Hence, models of theological education are not foreign to Scripture.

But what is the best context for theological education? Ideally it would be in a local church where trainees can view the coalface. But in reality, the local church is unlikely to have the resources and expertise for the needs of theological education such as a library, those skilled in biblical languages, and the like. Hence, there is a need for some training at an institution that can provide these resources, like a theological college or seminary.

II. What is Systematic Theology?

If theological education includes (amongst other things) training in God's word, why the need for systematic theology? It is because the Bible cannot properly be understood without it. Put another way, the Bible itself demands we do systematic theology. How so? We now come to the nature of systematic theology.

1)   The Nature of Doctrines

Systematic theology works with biblical topics (or doctrines). So, before we define systematic theology, we must understand the nature of biblical doctrines. There are three main reasons Scripture must be understood topically.

Firstly, Scripture itself demands the exploration of itself by topic. The writer to the Hebrews urges his readers to move beyond the "elementary teaching about Christ" (Heb 5:1). And this elementary teaching is then summarised as a series of six topics: "repentance from dead works, faith in God, teaching about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgement". But Hebrews does not unpack these six topics. So, to understand the "elementary teaching" of Christianity we must discover what the rest of Scripture says about them. Thus, Hebrews urges the study of Scripture topically.

Secondly, studying Scripture topically is necessary because we have no Scripture without it. This is because "Scripture" is itself a topic (or doctrine). No one passage of Scripture gives us all we need to know about the Bible, not least which books make up the canon. The collection of the sixty-six books is a consequence of the biblical topic of inspiration. No doctrine, no Scripture.

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[9] See Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts*, ed. Clinton E. Arnold, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 739.

Thirdly, Scripture cannot be faithfully applied without using biblical topics. For example, suppose one is preaching, or running a Bible study, on Romans 13:1-7. There we discover the importance of submitting to governing authorities because God has placed them in power. But this may give the impression that Christians must always submit to governing authorities, even tyrants like a Hitler, Stalin or Mao.

However, the work of doctrine reminds us there is *more in Scripture* about governing authorities than Romans 13:1-7. Amongst other things, we learn there is a place to reject a human authority that transgresses God's ultimate authority. As Peter said, "We must obey God rather than human beings!" (Acts 5:29). In other words, to properly live in relation to political authority, a Christian needs to know what the *whole Bible* says about that topic. Without grasping Scripture's full presentation, we run the risk of reductionism and hence misapplication.

From this third reason we can provide a proper definition of a biblical doctrine. It is *a summary of what the whole Bible says on a topic*. This is because a half-truth, when taken as whole-truth, becomes an untruth. It is true from Scripture that Christ is fully human. But it is heresy if he is only human. Mark 10:1-12 has important teaching about divorce. But it does not provide all that a Christian needs to know about this subject.

A caveat is relevant here. Unlike inspired and infallible Scripture, the human work of formulating biblical topics will always be fallible and therefore constantly in need of testing and refinement.

2)   The Nature of Systematic Theology

We are now in a position to understand the nature of systematic theology. When Jude urges his readers "to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3), he shows that Christian belief can be understood *as a whole*: it is "the faith", one body of belief.[10] Moreover, when Paul says to Timothy, "that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons" (1 Tim 4:1), he understands Christian belief as a unit: "the faith" as opposed to the plural "teachings [διδασκαλίαι] of demons".[11] But neither Jude nor Paul explicate "the faith" of which they speak. The only way for Christians to know "the faith"

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[10] "Clearly 'faith' has this objective meaning here. It describes what Christians believe – such things as Jesus' atoning death and resurrection, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, salvation by grace through faith, and (especially in Jude's situation) the holy lifestyle that flows from God's grace in Christ.", Douglas J. Moo, *2 Peter, Jude*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 229.

[11] "The plural form, lit. 'teachings' ('doctrines'), creates an intentional, traditional contrast with the singularity (and therefore authority and truthfulness) of the apostolic doctrine (LXX Isa 29:13).", Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2006), 290.

is through gleaning from Scripture its major topics and how they relate to each other *as a whole*. This is the work of systematic theology. It seeks to discover *the Bible's own arrangement of its topics*.

Christians need to grasp how biblical topics are arranged because biblical revelation urges it in two ways. Firstly, Scripture reveals that some topics are more important than others. For example, Jesus chides the Jewish leaders because they focused on the trivial at the expense of the central:

> Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices – mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practised the latter, without neglecting the former. (Matthew 23:23, NIV)

Jesus speaks of the "more important matters of the law" indicating a hierarchy of topics. When Paul says, "these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love", again we see levels of importance in biblical topics. Crucial to the task of systematic theology is discerning the importance of biblical doctrines and knowing which should be the church's priorities.

A second reason why systematic theology is necessary is because scriptural topics are connected. If we change one topic, it will have implications upon those related to it. For example, Paul says, "I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!" (Galatians 2:21, NIV).

Paul here shows that the doctrines of God's grace, Christ's death and human Torah-righteousness are connected. If Torah-righteousness comes by human performance, it lessens the need for Christ's death, and in turn diminishes God's grace. Put simply, change human Torah-righteousness and God's grace will be changed. And so, another task of systematic theology is discerning the connections between biblical topics, and so understanding how the topics are related.

Two qualifiers need to be made about systematic theology here. Firstly, like the work of formulating doctrines, systematic theology is a human enterprise. Therefore, it is fallible and will always need to be tested and refined against the ultimate norm of Scripture. Secondly, it is tempting to arrange the biblical topics in a way that seems fitting to us. But a scriptural systematic theology must discover the Bible's *own arrangement* of its topics.

3) The Need of Other Disciplines

It must be noted that systematic theology itself is dependent on other disciplines such as (at least) exegesis, biblical theology, hermeneutics and historical theology. For example, exegesis is necessary in ascertaining the

meaning of scriptural texts.[12] It provides the raw material for the formulation and exploration of biblical topics. And good exegesis will, of course, use the biblical languages. Hence, those being trained for in-depth systematic theology will need a level of proficiency with the biblical languages.

Another example is the need systematic theology has for biblical theology. The difference between the two is that biblical theology is diachronic whereas systematic theology is synchronic. Biblical theology explores topics according to the Bible's canonical ordering and storyline, whereas systematic theology summarises scriptural topics.[13] For example, a biblical theology of sin will show how the topic of sin unfolds according to the books and storyline of Scripture from Genesis to Revelation;[14] a systematic theology of sin will present a definition of sin and its parts, and show its relation to other scriptural topics. So, the synthesising work of systematic theology depends upon the inductive work of biblical theology.

The various disciplines should not be played off against each because they are all needed. For example, whilst systematic theology relies on biblical theology, biblical theology depends on a doctrine of Scripture provided by systematic theology.

III. The Necessity of Systematic Theology in Theological Education

We have argued that systematic theology is necessary to understand, teach and apply Scripture faithfully. Therefore, systematic theology will be critical for a well-balanced theological education. But how, practically, would this affect pastoral (or word-gift) ministry?

Firstly, if systematic theology works with *biblical topics* then how can it not help shepherding work which so often relies on them? For example, any pastoral problem that relates to issues like divorce, sexuality, career, child rearing, will proceed from a biblical understanding of those topics.

Additionally, knowledge of biblical topics is essential in evangelism. Many of the questions non-Christians have are not about the meaning of Bible texts but what Christians believe topically: why would a good God allow evil? Why is sex confined to marriage? How can a loving God send people to hell? Indeed, sharing the gospel with unbelievers requires a knowledge of foundational topics like God, sin, judgment and the like.

Secondly, because systematic theology explores the *hierarchy of biblical*

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[12] For further elaboration see, Donald A. Carson, "The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology", in *Doing Theology in Today's World*, ed. John D. Woodbridge and Thomas E. McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 46-48.

[13] See Carson, "The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology", 45.

[14] An excellent biblical theology is William Dumbrell, *The End of the Beginning: Revelation 21-22 and the Old Testament* (Homebush West: Lancer Books, 1985).

topics it helps Christians find right priorities about all aspects of life. What church should I attend? How do I balance home and work life? What activities are most important for the church? These are questions that systematic theology answers.

Thirdly, seeing that systematic theology considers the *relationship between biblical doctrines*, it enables those in pastoral ministry to shed light on subjects that Scripture does not directly address. For example, Scripture nowhere explicitly speaks of the use of antidepressants or embryonic stem-cell research. But it does contain topics that will relate to them and thus shed light on how we should think about them. This is the work of systematic theology.

Fourthly, if systematic theology engages with Christian truth *as a whole*, then it particularly informs a Christian's worldview. A worldview is that pair of conceptual spectacles through which a person views and understands the world. Every person is marinated in a particular culture with its accompanying worldview, and Christians are no exception. And all worldviews have unbelieving biases. A great struggle for every Christian is simply to be aware of their unbelieving cultural biases and blindspots, let alone rectify them. It is too easy to look *through* our cultural spectacles not *at* them. Systematic theology is especially positioned to help with this.

For example, half a century ago, in countries like England and Australia, same-sex marriage was unthinkable for the majority of the population. The prevailing worldview made it difficult to accept. But in recent times the dominant worldview has so shifted that a majority now see same-sex marriage as obvious, indeed just and right. Why? What is it about the current worldview that makes same-sex marriage so plausible? Given that systematic theology explores the whole of Christian belief with its interrelated parts, it is the appropriate tool to analyse and respond to a worldview paradigm shift like this. Word-gift ministry is to use systematic theology to unmask the prevailing culture, demonstrate its inadequacies, and show how a Christian worldview makes much better sense of reality.

IV. Criticisms of Systematic Theology

If systematic theology plays such a fundamental role in pastoral ministry, why do some speak so negatively about it? Let us examine four popular criticisms.

The first is that systematic theological writings often explicate doctrines with little reference to Scripture. For example, John Webster's *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* contains, ironically, very few references to Scripture within its pages. Yet if a systematic theological work pays scant attention to Scripture, it is not the problem with the discipline itself but of systematic theology done badly. Systematic theology should relentlessly show how its topics and arrangement of them are anchored in Scripture.

A second criticism is that systematic theology cannot account for the large amount of narrative that makes up Scripture. For example, the Gospels present theology in story form and to extract the theology from the narrative ruins the latter's purpose. But this is to confuse apples and oranges; systematic theology is not a replacement for biblical narrative but a companion to it. Biblical narrative informs the development of systematic theology. And systematic theology provides a context to enhance our understanding of biblical narrative. The two are recursive.

A third criticism is that systematic theology creates a framework which is then read into Scripture rather than allowing Scripture to speak for itself. That is, the systematic framework encourages eisegesis (reading into) rather than exegesis (reading out of). And so, a biblical text is used to prove a doctrine which in fact makes no such point, the classic problem of "proof-texting". For example, it is common for systematicians to prove that sin is fundamentally a breaking of God's law. And a common verse used to prove such is, "... sin is lawlessness (ἀνομία)" (1 John 3:4).[15] However in the context of this verse, ἀνομία does not mean simply a breaking of God's law but a wholesale rejection of God himself.[16] Sin here is an attitude of independence from God rather than an illegal action.

But once again this is not a problem with systematic theology itself but with it being done badly. Firstly, systematic theology uses and depends upon the proper practise of exegesis. Bad exegesis is not the problem of systematic theology but of bad exegesis. And secondly as argued above, the (human) work of systematic theology is a fallible affair, and one's system needs continual re-evaluation and refinement against the ultimate norm of Scripture.

The real problem here, perhaps, is an ever-increasing specialisation in the theological disciplines such as Old Testament, New Testament, biblical languages, biblical theology, hermeneutics and so forth. For example, take the

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[15] For example, John M. Frame, *Salvation Belongs to the Lord: An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2006), 100.

[16] "To be "lawless" does not mean simply to break the law; it means to disdain the very idea of a law to which one must submit", Karen H. Jobes, *1, 2, and 3 John*, ed. Clinton E. Arnold, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 143; "It implies not merely breaking God's law, but flagrantly opposing him (in Satanic fashion) by so doing.", Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 155; "the idea of "law" contained in the Greek word [*anomia*], according to its etymology, has been obscured and the stress falls more on the idea of opposition to God which is inherent in disregarding his law", I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 166-67; "disregard for the commandments as set out in 1 John", John Painter, *1, 2, and 3 John*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville: Michael Glazier, 2002), 222; Daniel L. Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, The New American Commentary 38 (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2001), 140; Robert W. Yarbrough, *1, 2, and 3 John*, ed. Robert Yarbrough and Robert Stein (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 182; Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, The Anchor Bible (Doubleday, 1982), 399-400.

discipline of New Testament studies: The secondary literature on Romans is now so vast that any person game to teach it in a theological college or seminary will need some time to master it – and that is only Romans. What about the Gospels let alone the rest of the NT? The result of such specialisation is a growing chasm both within and between the disciplines. And the less contact the disciplines have with each other, the more likely they each become idiosyncratic. If the knowledge of God is unified, which it must be if God is one and true, then the disciplines need to work with and not against each other. Systematic theology will rely on good exegetical practice provided by the disciplines of Old and New Testament. But, at the same time, these disciplines depend on a doctrine of Scripture that systematic theology provides.

A final criticism of systematic theology is that it can become so focused on controversies in its own discipline that it loses sight of what is important to Scripture. A classic example is the doctrine of resurrection: It is central to the Christian faith, but many systems of theology give it little or no attention. For example, in Millard Erickson's section on the work of Christ in his large *Christian Theology*[17] the resurrection is all but absent. Surely such a critical doctrine should be central in any such volume. But, again, lopsided systematic theology should not be used to denigrate the discipline altogether.

V. Conclusion

Like any discipline, systematic theology will have its excesses. But its misuse does not justify its abandonment. We have seen that systematic theology is necessary for Christian living and godliness. And if this is so, it is indispensable for a theological education. The need of the hour, especially in the seminaries, is to do systematic theology that is anchored in the Scripture and applied to practical Christian living.

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[17] Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1983).

JOHN MURRAY, BIBLICAL THEOLOGY AND SYSTEMATIC-THEOLOGICAL METHOD

Daniel Schrock[*]

This article provides an analysis of the theological methodology of John Murray. Specifically, it examines the way in which Murray defended the coherence of the distinct disciplines of biblical theology and systematic theology, and further proposed and practised the integration of the two disciplines. Its analysis proceeds first to explicate Murray's definition of biblical theology, second to assess the fundamental role Murray reserved for scriptural exegesis in systematic theology, and third to show how Murray framed biblical theology's regulative role for exegesis and thus indispensability for systematics. In light of this integration, lastly this article defends Murray's systematic-theological method against the possible charges that it constitutes either a species of "biblicism" or presents an arid theological rationalism.

I. Introduction

Interest in the discipline of biblical theology has proliferated significantly over the past decades. New monographs which either give whole biblical theologies of the Testaments or give a biblical theology of some particular biblical theme or corpora are being published with a rapidity which the purchasing power of most book budgets of pastors and scholars cannot match. Especially within the world of evangelicalism, the discipline of biblical theology seems to be in full flower. The present flourishing of the discipline alone warrants a re-visitation of the dogmatic method of John Murray[1] as a man who advocated and modelled in action the integration of the fruits of biblical theology into the work of dogmatic or systematic theology.[2] But a re-visitation of Murray's

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[1] For a biography of John Murray see Ian H. Murray, "The Life of John Murray", in *Collected Writings of John Murray,* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), 3:3-158. For a very brief biographical overview see Danny E. Olinger, "John Murray", *The Confessional Presbyterian* 11 (2015), 3-4.

[2] Given the rise in popularity of the classic term "dogmatics", I will be using it throughout this essay interchangeably with the term "systematic theology."

dogmatic method is also worthwhile given that it has been the subject of criticism precisely on the point of his way of relating the disciplines of biblical and systematic theology.[3]

   This article will first argue that Murray's manner of integrating the work of biblical theology into the discipline of systematics presents a fecund and hermeneutically responsible way of pursing the work of cultivating and then curating the dogmas which are latent in the organism of Scripture as the *principium cognoscendi unicum* of the science of systematic theology. It does this by supplying to the dogmatician the requisite hermeneutical tools for exegetically handling Scripture as a revelatory organism given within the matrix of redemptive-history. The remainder of the article will attempt to clear Murray's method of two indictments: (1) that is presents a species of "biblicism", and (2) that it proffers an aridly rationalistic theological method.

II. Biblical Theology, Systematic Theology and *the* Principium *of Scripture*

1)   Murray's Definition of Biblical Theology

Any treatment of the relationship which Murray framed between biblical and systematic theology comes with the desideratum of defining what is meant exactly by the disciplinary designation "biblical theology". A dizzying array of models of what it constitutes confronts us. Or, as the *bon mot* of D. A. Carson observes, "Everyone does that which is right in his or her own eyes, and calls it biblical theology."[4] Murray himself recognised this definitional menagerie which was already burgeoning in his own day:

> But it is necessary to point out the radical divergences that exist
> between the viewpoint reflected in the definition by Vos... and

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[3] John Bolt, "*Sola Scriptura* as an Evangelical Theological Method?", in *Reforming or Conforming?: Post-Conservative Evangelicals and the Emerging Church,* ed. Gary L. W. Johnson and Ronald N. Gleason (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008), 68; D. G. Hart, "Systematic Theology at Old Princeton: Unoriginal Calvinism", in *The Pattern of Sound Doctrine: Systematic Theology at the Westminster Seminaries,* ed. David VanDrunen (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2004), 22.

[4] D. A. Carson, "Systematic and Biblical Theology", in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology: Exploring the Unity and Diversity of Scripture*, ed. Brian S. Rosner, T. Desmond Alexander, Graeme Goldsworthy, D. A. Carson, (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2000), 91. Edward W. Klink III and Darian R. Lockett have done the yeoman work of providing the theological world with a contemporary, taxonomical survey of this spectrum in their *Understanding Biblical Theology: A Comparison of Theory and Practice,* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012).

some of the representative exponents of biblical theology in the
last two decades.[5]

As for Murray, he embraced the definition of biblical theology proffered by his former teacher at Princeton Seminary, Geerhardus Vos. [6] This embrace appears in Murray's programmatic treatment of the relationship between the disciplines of systematic and biblical theology.[7]

Biblical theology deals with the data of special revelation from the standpoint of its history; systematic theology deals with the same in its totality as a finished product. The method of the latter is logical, that of the former historical. Vos' definition puts this difference in focus:

> Biblical theology is that branch of exegetical theology which deals with the process of the self-revelation of God deposited in the Bible." The pivotal term in this definition is the word 'process' as applied to God's special self-revelation.[8]

Murray adopts Vos' charge that the titular designation "biblical theology" bears a certain conceptual deficiency and indicates that he shares with Vos a preference for the disciplinary title "history of special revelation."[9] Given the persisting cacophonous range of what is put forth as biblical theology at present, Murray's shared misgivings with Vos on this point continue to be relevant. Nevertheless if it was difficult "to change a name which has the sanction of usage"[10] from Vos' vantage point in the first half of the twentieth century, it seems virtually impossible to disgorge the term from the mouths of theological scholarship now that it has accumulated the sanction of usage from nearly another full century. So, rather than charge off on a quixotic campaign to convince the theological world to shift in vocabulary, the disciplinary title of biblical theology, it seems, will have to remain in our usage for now with all of its descriptive deficiencies.

Granting the term then, it is evident that certain theological presuppositions underly Vos' and Murray's notion of biblical theology. First, their definition operates with an identification of Scripture as a species of God's special revelation. Murray writes,

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[5] John Murray, "Systematic Theology", in *Collected Writings of John Murray,* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), 4:11.

[6] Murray, "The Life of John Murray", 29.

[7] This work was originally a two-part article published in sequential issues of the Westminster Theological Journal over a year. John Murray, "Systematic Theology", *WTJ* 25, no 2 (May 1963), 133-142, and "Systematic Theology: Second Article" *WTJ* 26, no. 1 (November 1963), 33-46.

[8] Murray, "Systematic Theology", 9. Murray cites here Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments,* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 13.

[9] Murray, "Systematic Theology", 10.

[10] Vos, *Biblical Theology,* 14.

> Furthermore, inscripturation is a mode of revelation and so with
> inscripturation there are revelatory data that belong only to the
> inscripturation itself. Inscripturation does not merely provide us
> with a record of revelations previously given by other modes;
> Scripture is itself revelation.[11]

Special revelation is understood to be a wider circle in which God discloses
himself to his creatures, but the only abiding deposit of that divine activity is
Scripture.

Second, their definition operates with the dogmatic commitment that
God's self-disclosure forms a unified organism which progressively unfolds
over the process that is tethered to redemptive history. Murray understands
biblical theology as a department of theological science which is dedicated to
studying the ontogeny of this divine revelation with its structural lineaments
and specific organic components. This understanding proceeds on the basis of
the theological commitment that there is such a unified and developing
organism. In Murray's framing of biblical theology, this robust commitment to
the fundamental unity of this progressive self-revelation rules out of hand a
certain kind of diffidence which might be shown by other species of biblical
theology. Namely, it rules out any attempt to attribute a "distinct witness" to
the Old Testament which appraises it as a document that could be sufficiently
understood and rightly interpreted in hermetic isolation from its final
fulfilment in the revelation of the New Testament. Murray does caution,

> To be concrete, we may not import into one period the data of
> revelation which belong to a later period. When we do this we
> violate the conditions which define the distinctiveness of this
> study.[12]

But then he qualifies this admonition:

> We are not prevented thereby from using the data of later periods
> of revelation in determining the precise import and purport of
> earlier data, their import and purport, however, in the precise
> context in which they were given.[13]

Murray's student and institutional heir at Westminster Seminary, Richard B.
Gaffin, expresses this commitment of both Vos and Murray well.

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[11] Murray, "Systematic Theology", 19fn1.
[12] *Ibid.,* 19.
[13] *Ibid.,* 19fn1.

While not explicit in the definition just cited the organic character of the revelation process is insisted on by both. This process is not heterogeneous, involving ongoing self-correction. Nor does it have anything to do with an evolutionary movement from what is erroneous and defective to what is relatively more true and perfect. To illustrate, Vos repeatedly uses the organic model of maturing plant life, of growth from a perfect seed into a perfect tree or flower. The movement of the revelation process is from what is germinal and provisional to what is complete and final.[14]

The organic model of Vos and Murray thus assumes a fundamental continuity of identity between the Testaments which obviates any attempt to isolate them in a decidedly discrete treatment from one another. Their approach assumes a kind of organic continuity of identity in the single unfolding organism of God's revelation. This establishes as a prerequisite for the practitioner of biblical theology that they self-consciously and expressly treat Old Testament theology as the nascent to adolescent historical stages of the same organism of revelation which reaches its coming of age in the New Testament.

To say that these are dogmatic commitments which inform the disciplinary definition of biblical theology as it is pursued by Murray is not thereby to indict him with a methodological transgression. Rather, it is to make explicit what is sometimes left tacit in the world of biblical scholarship. Whether expressly admitted or not, dogmatic commitments about that nature of revelation and the textual entity of Scripture, commitments which dwell in the realm of the systematic-theological *locus* of prolegomena, are always assumed in any model of biblical theology. There is an inevitable reciprocity that must exist between biblical theology and systematic theology; the biblical theologian does not and cannot start to go about their discipline with a theological *tabula rasa* informing the nature of that discipline. The pretensions of a sort of non-theological objectivity posited, for example, by James Barr in his admonitions about the proper method of biblical theology cannot evade this either.[15] It too assumes fundamental things about the nature of the revealing activity of God in the history behind the text of Scripture and in the text of Scripture itself. And it proceeds to define the discipline of biblical theology in light of them.

2)   *Exegesis and Systematic Theology*

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[14] Richard B. Gaffin, "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology", *WTJ* 38, no 3 (Spring 1976), 289.

[15] James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective,* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 58. For a helpful summary of Barr's approach to biblical theology see Klink and Lockett, *Understanding Biblical Theology,* 43-56.

Having explored what exactly Murray understands by the discipline of biblical theology, we are now positioned to see how he advocates its deployment for the enrichment of the task of systematic theology.

Barr pilloried Karl Barth for including exegetical attention to Scripture in his *Church Dogmatics,* alleging that it "encouraged a confusion of the boundaries between biblical and dogmatic theology".[16] John Calvin similarly is given a rap across the knuckles by Barr for daring to do a kind of biblical theology that depends "on *ad hoc* redefinitions of the terminology".[17] Among other things, such assessments display an unfortunately banal failure on the part of many modern biblical scholars to account for the rigorous, linguistic, humanist training of Calvin and other Reformation and Post-Reformation theologians.[18] Their training in humanism is largely responsible for the rise of the early modern biblical scholarship which rejuvenated widespread expertise in the linguistic dynamics of the Greek and Hebrew Testaments. Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment biblical scholarship too often betrays a certain generational arrogance which has forgotten from whence the first tools of their work with the original languages and textual criticism of the biblical text has come. Barr is an unfortunate exemplar of this.

One can safely imagine that Murray would be the recipient of a similar stricture from Barr as Barth and Calvin had been. Under Barr's paradigm, apparently the dogmatician dare not approach even the foot of the holy mountain of Scripture to exegete its meaning for himself. Rather he must wait at the base camp with the rest of the Israelites and receive the determinations which the high-priestly work of modern critical biblical scholarship has made as the appointed mediators between the text of Scripture and the rest of the world.

But Murray would not countenance such higher-critical pretensions. His model was an older Protestant model which did not buy the bill of goods hocked by the rise of the Enlightenment historical-critical tradition that insisted upon seeing the distinct theological disciplines of exegesis, biblical theology and systematic theology as hermetically-sealed compartments of the theological encyclopedia. Murray's method is, in important ways, a

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[16] Barr, *Concept of Biblical Theology,* 71.

[17] *Ibid.,* 3.

[18] For a helpful treatment of Calvin's use of humanism see Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundations of a Theological Tradition,* (New York: Oxford, 2000), 9-14. For a helpful treatment of Martin Luther's use of humanism see Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther: Confessor of the Faith,* (New York: Oxford, 2009), 37-39. For a survey of the humanist background of the Reformation see Carlos M. N. Eire, *Reformations: The Early Modern World, 1450-1650,* (New Haven, CT: Yale, 2016), 64-113. For a treatment of the use of humanism among the Post-Reformation Protestant scholastics see Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725,* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 34-37.

descendent of the classic method of the Reformation and post-Reformation which incorporated persistent exegesis of the biblical text.[19]

Murray was renowned for the way in which he gave exceptional exegetical attention to biblical texts as a systematician. Cornelius Van Til aptly described Murray's conviction that "systematic theology must, first, grow out of and be the ripe fruitage of penetrating, linguistic exegesis".[20] One student attests, "Reverent, precise exegesis was our daily fare in Professor Murray's lectures."[21] Furthermore, it is important to note that the exegesis Murray practiced in class was not the sort that assumed the accuracy of a given English translation of a biblical proof text and left matters with a quotation from an English version. As Edmund P. Clowney notes,

> Before studying systematic theology with Professor Murray, we had spent a year with apologetics, the biblical languages, church history, and preaching. Following the Westminster curriculum, we needed Greek and Hebrew first. Murray taught the topics of theology by exegeting the principal biblical passages in Hebrew or Greek from which those doctrines were drawn.[22]

Beyond the testimonials of his students to the methodological commitment of Murray in his class lectures to the primacy of biblical-theological exegesis for systematic theology, we also have ample evidence of this careful method distributed throughout the corpus of his writings. Consider for example his extended canonical appraisal of the meaning of *baptizo* in his work *Christian Baptism*,[23] or his survey of the views concerning Paul's use in Rom. 5:12 of the phrase *eph hoi pantes hemarton* in *The Imputation of Adam's Sin,*[24] or his

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[19] Murray did this in a way that bears striking resemblance to the method of a theologian just now being rediscovered in English translation, Petrus van Mastricht. Mastricht began every *locus* of his *Theoretico-practica theologia* with an exegetical treatment of Scripture. The methodical arrangement of every *loci* of Mastricht's *Theoretico-practica theologia* moves from the exegetical part, to the dogmatic part, to the elenctic part, to finally the practical part. Petrus van Mastricht, *Theoretico-practica theologia* (Utrecht: W. van de Water, J.v. Poolsum, J Wagens, G. v. Paddenburg, 1724); Petrus van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology,* ed. Joel R. Beeke; trans. Todd M. Rester, (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2018). For a treatment of Mastricht's theological method see Adriaan C. Neele, *The Art of Living to God: A Study of Method and Piety in the* Theoretico-practica theologia *of Petrus van Mastricht (1630-1706)*, (Pretoria: University of Pretoria, 2005).

[20] Quoted by Murray in "Life of John Murray", 94.

[21] Walter J. Chantry quoted in "Life of John Murray", 94.

[22] Edmund P. Clowney, "Professor John Murray at Westminster Theological Seminary", in *The Pattern of Sound Doctrine: Systematic Theology at the Westminster Seminaries,* ed. David VanDrunen (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004), 29.

[23] John Murray, *Christian Baptism,* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1980), 6-30.

[24] John Murray, "The Imputation of Adam's Sin", in *Justified in Christ: God's Plan for Us in Justification,* ed. K. Scott Oliphint, (Fearn, Scotland: Mentor, 2007), 209-222.

treatment of the Hebrew phrase *'ervah galah* in his *Principles of Conduct.*[25] More examples could be multiplied, but of course the most conspicuous monument to Murray's magisterial competency in exegesis is his commentary on Paul's epistle to the Romans. [26] William Hendriksen observed in his laudatory review of the first volume of the commentary,

> It is not often that a professor is "good" in two fields, in this case, systematic theology and New Testament exegesis. Professor Murray's reputation as a teacher of Reformed dogmatics is outstanding and unquestioned. The present volume proves that he is also an exegete of the highest rank. And should not exegesis and systematics dwell in the same house?[27]

Perhaps an even more apt metaphor for capturing the way that Murray understood exegesis to relate to systematics is not to speak of them as two residents in the same house, but rather to say that the house of systematics must by necessity have its structural integrity established upon a foundation of proper exegesis. Murray asserts,

> The paramount consideration, however, is the demand residing in the fact of revelation, namely, that the Word of God requires the most exacting attention so that we as individuals and as members in the solidaric unity of the church may be able to correlate the manifold data of revelation in our understanding and the more effectively apply this knowledge to all phases of our thinking and conduct.[28]

Murray's fastidious deployment of Hebrew and Greek exegesis in his work as a dogmatician is at home with the way Scott R. Swain has framed the theological task as one of "reading as an act of covenant mutuality". Swain's expressive summary captures the spirit of Murray's relentless pursuit of exegesis in systematic theology:

> The commerce and communion between God and his people is an inherently textual phenomenon. The eternally eloquent God has stooped to speak a word of saving consolation to us… Because

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[25] John Murray, *Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics,* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1957), 49fn3.

[26] John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans,* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968).

[27] William Hendriksen, "The Epistle to the Romans", *WTJ* 24 no 1 (Nov 1961), 90-91.

[28] Murray, "Systematic Theology", 5.

> God communicates Christ and covenant to us in Holy Scripture, Christians read.[29]

Murray understood well this inherently textual nature of God's covenant relation to his people.

It does not stretch the boundaries of plausibility to think that Murray's inexorable use of exegesis as the alpha point of his systematic theological work had in back of it the exhortation of his teacher Vos,

> The point to be observed for our present purpose is the position given to exegetical theology as the first among these four [departments of theology]. This precedence is due to the instinctive recognition that at the beginning of all theology lies a passive, receptive attitude on the part of the one who engages in its study. The assumption of such an attitude is characteristic of all truly exegetical pursuit. It is eminently a process in which God speaks and man listens.[30]

If systematic theology would dare to speak about God, then it must pay meticulous attention to what God has already spoken about himself. A corollary of the conviction that God has spoken about himself sufficiently, authoritatively and perspicuously in the pages of Scripture is that the dogmatician must be an intensely attentive reader of that Scripture. And to be an intensely attentive reader requires one to be an intensely attentive exegete. The biblical imperative to "hear" (*shema*) hangs over the task of dogmatics. The ear is the primary organ of obedience no less in the intellectual obedience to which the believing reasoning of the dogmatician aspires. If this is true, then it is the intransigent duty of the dogmatician to be first an exegete of Scripture. This conviction drove the totality of Murray's labours and found expression in his hands with astonishing rigour. Down to his dying days, Murray left behind him copies of the Greek New Testament worn from his unremitting reading.[31] The worn pages of those artefacts attest to the personal conviction of his exhortation:

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[29] Scott R. Swain, *Trinity, Revelation, and Reading: A Theological Introduction to the Bible and Its Interpretation,* (New York: T&T Clark, 2011), 95.

[30] Vos, *Biblical Theology,* 4. Cf. "The very nature of theology requires us to begin with those branches which relate to the revelation-basis of our science. Our attitude from the outset must be a dependent and receptive one. To let the image of God's self-revelation in the Scriptures mirror itself as fully and clearly as possible in his mind, is the first and most important duty of every theologian." Vos, "The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Discipline", in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos,* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1980), 5.

[31] Murray, "Life of John Murray", 156.

> Systematic theology has gravely suffered, indeed has deserted its
> vocation, when it has been divorced from meticulous attention to
> biblical exegesis… systematics becomes lifeless and fails in its
> mandate just to the extent to which it has become detached from
> exegesis… Exegesis keeps systematics not only in direct contact
> with the Word but it ever imparts to systematics the power which
> is derived from that Word. The Word is living and powerful.[32]

3) Biblical Theology, Exegesis, and Systematic Theology

Understanding the exegetical imperative that operated in Murray's dogmatic
method positions us then to understand exactly how he understood the
discipline of biblical theology to be an indispensable tool for the dogmatician.

> Systematic theology is tied to exegesis. It coordinates and
> synthesises the whole witness of Scripture on various topics with
> which it deals. But systematic theology will fail of its task to the
> extent to which it discards its rootage in biblical theology as
> properly conceived and developed.[33]

Attention to this observation will preserve dogmatics from the conceptual
pitfall we find exemplified in Thomas Aquinas, a pitfall which cannot
adequately account for the redemptive-historical character of special
revelation. Thomistic-Aristotelian realism affirms that science properly is
concerned with the universal.[34] Thus, in the opening of the *Summa Theologiae*
Aquinas has to apologise before Aristotle for the fact that Scripture is pre-
eminently concerned with particular, historical events and persons. Aquinas'
interlocutor gives the objection which he wishes to meet. In Question 1 article
2 the interlocutor objects that Christian theology does not appear to be a
science. And the second reason given for this is as follows,

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[32] Murray, "Systematic Theology", 17.

[33] *Ibid.,* 19.

[34] For instance, Aquinas in his commentary on Aristotle writes, "Theoretical, i.e. speculative
knowledge differs from practical knowledge by its end; for the end of speculative knowledge is
truth, because it has knowledge of the truth as its objective. But the end of practical knowledge is
action, because even though 'practical men,' i.e. men of action, attempt to understand the truth as
it belongs to certain things, they do not seek this as an ultimate end; for they do not consider the
cause of truth in and for itself as an end but in relation to action, either by applying it to some
definite individual, or to some definite time. Therefore, if we add to the above the fact that wisdom
or first philosophy is not practical but speculative, it follows that first philosophy is not fittingly
called the science of truth." *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, trans. John P. Rowan,
(Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1961), 121. What is important to note for our purposes here is the
preference in the "science of truth" for the abstraction of truth into a universal over the practical
application of truth to a particular thing and a particular time. Such particularity is a lower order
of science and lower order of truth for Aquinas as he agrees with Aristotle.

> Besides, a science is not concerned with individual cases. Sacred doctrine, however, deals with individual events and people, for instance the doings of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the like. Therefore, sacred doctrine is not a science.

To this point Aquinas replies,

> Sacred doctrine sets out individual cases, not as being preoccupied with them, but in order both to introduce them as examples for our own lives, as is the wont of moral sciences, and to proclaim the authority of the men through whom divine revelation has come down to us, which revelation is the basis of sacred Scripture or doctrine.[35]

Aquinas here reduces the theological significance of the historical particulars of redemptive-history to examples and authoritative mouthpieces of revelation. The concrete, particular, redemptive actions of God in redemptive-history become a residuum for which Aquinas seems to have no account available for how to relate their significance to sacred doctrine. Strikingly, we should observe that not least of these particular, redemptive actions of God in redemptive-history are the "individual cases" of Christ's incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension.

The historical particularity of redemptive-history is a difficulty to be solved for Aquinas. It is so because he takes the Aristotelian, hierarchical preference of the universal to be a sound preference for the science of Christian theology. In the hierarchy of truth, the abstract universal is a rung above the particular. A Thomistic-Aristotelian notion of "science" and thus theological science is ill-equipped to deal with the particularity of biblical revelation as it has come in the manifold concreteness of redemptive-history. It cannot satisfactorily account for the irreducibly historical character of special revelation as it is given through "individual events and people".[36]

In contrast to this, Murray's way of framing the relationship of the discipline of biblical theology to systematic theology imparts to the latter a theological framework which is not embarrassed by the historical particularity of the redemptive-historically mediated text of Scripture. Rather, it takes the historical particularity of God's redeeming and revealing actions, as they are authoritatively attested to and interpreted in the text of Scripture,

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[35] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae Latin Text and English Translation, Introductions, Notes, Appendices, and Glossaries* (60 vols., New York and London: Blackfriars in conjunction with Eyre & Spottiswoode and McGraw-Hill, 1964-1981), 1a., 1, 2.

[36] *Ibid.,* 1, 2.

as the basis for theological science. And it takes exegesis of that Scriptural text as the alpha-point for that science.

Granted, we need to temper our criticisms of Aquinas' approach by recognising that there is a proper desideratum of universality for theology if it is to be a science. To embrace historical particularity is not to dismiss universality. Recognising this is all the more important against the tidal wave of post-modernity. Holding together the concrete particularity of redemptive history which is centred in Christ, and the universal implications and relevance of that redemptive history centred in Christ, is at the core of the relationship between biblical and systematic theology. The dogmatician aims to set forth the totality of God's revelation in the particulars of Scripture as it is given in redemptive history, to set forth that totality as *dogmata* which command the confessing apprehension, assent and trust of the nations. Dogmatics, then, is inherently a science which attempts to trace and set forth the universal nature and implications of the redemptive-historical particular. To do this properly it must deploy the resources of biblical theology in the execution of the systematic-theological imperative to develop its body of dogmatic truth from Scripture as the *principium cognoscendi unicum* of dogmatics.

Systematics fails in its task of exegesis to the degree that it neglects biblical theology[37] because it is this that provides the redemptive-historical framework – with all of its historical and epochal particularity – within which the texts of Scripture must be set as they summon our exegetical attention. Inscripturated revelation is given within the epochal iterations of redemptive history – the Patriarchal, the Mosaic, the Davidic, the Royal, the Exilic, the Post-Exilic and the Messianic:

> The science concerned with the history of special revelation must take account of this epochal character and it would be an artificial biblical theology that did not adhere to the lines which this epochal feature prescribes.[38]

As biblical theology attends to the anatomical study of the lineaments of the organism of God's redemptive revelation as it progresses through the developmental stages of its epochs, it provides the proper hermeneutical matrix for exegetical treatment of Scriptural texts as they have been given within the particularities of those epochs.

Exegesis is the interpretation of particular passages. This is just to say the interpretation of particular revelatory data. But these revelatory data occur within a particular period of revelation and the principle which guides biblical

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[37] Murray, "Systematic Theology", 17.
[38] *Ibid.,* 18.

theology must also be applied in exegesis. Thus, biblical theology is regulative of exegesis.[39]

Biblical theology serves dogmatics in so far as it presses the dogmatician to be self-aware of how a particular biblical text and its revelatory content are situated in the progressive unfolding of redemptive history. It thus presses the dogmatician in his exegesis to avoid drawing naïve systematic-theological conclusions from a given text in ways that end up by-passing the necessary hermeneutical steps involved in the biblical-theological task of situating that text in its place in redemptive history and the whole organism of biblical revelation.

This integrative feature of biblical theology as a bridge between systematics and exegesis is intimately related to the boundaries demarcating the text of Scripture itself from the church's responsive labours of dogmatics. Gaffin has perceptively diagnosed the deficiencies involved in Abraham Kuyper's – and, by way of implication, Herman Bavinck's – attempts to regulate anything that can rightly bear the moniker "theology" as categorically distinct from what occurs through the human agency involved in the authorship of Scripture.[40] Kuyper claims, "If Holy Scripture is the *principium* of theology, then theology only *begins* when Holy Scripture is there."[41] Against this, Gaffin (following Vos) has convincingly argued that we can rightly speak of Paul and other biblical authors as theologians. However, what is salutary in Kuyper and Bavinck's observations is that the text of Scripture has not been given to us in the literary genre of dogmatics. Gaffin (following Vos) also recognises this:

> Elsewhere [Vos] finds among the practical uses of biblical theology that it "imparts new life and freshness to the truth" by making us aware that "the Bible is not a dogmatic handbook but a historical book full of dramatic interest." Further, it corrects the impression that the basic tenets of Christianity rest on isolated proof texts by showing that its system of doctrine grows organically from biblical revelation.[42]

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[39] *Ibid.,* 19.

[40] Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., *Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul's Soteriology,* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1987), 19-30. The sections of Kuyper's writings which Gaffin criticises can be found in *Encylopaedie der Heilige Godgeleerdheid,* 3:166-180; 3:355ff; 3:395-404. Though Gaffin does not explicitly criticise him, Herman Bavinck holds the same view along with Kuyper: "There is as yet no dogma and theology, strictly speaking, in Scripture. As long as revelation itself was still in progress, it could not become the object of scientific reflection. Inspiration had to be complete before reflection could begin." Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, (ed. John Bolt; trans. John Vriend; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003-08.), 1:607. See also *Reformed Dogmatics* 1:89, 1:116.

[41] Kuyper, *Encylopaedie der Heilige Godgeleerdheid,* 3:167.

[42] Gaffin, "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology", 290-291.

This observation points up the way that biblical theology offers its service to the exegetical work of the dogmatician. The dogmatician must exercise circumspect awareness of the difference between the text of Scripture on the one hand as it is understood in its redemptive-historically concrete, variegated literary character and on the other hand a dogmatic textbook which attempts to synthesise the data of biblical revelation into the logically ordered cyclus of the dogmatic *loci.* This self-consciousness of the difference between the organism of Scripture and a dogmatic textbook requires of the dogmatician that he lean upon the work of biblical theology. Bavinck's observations are instructive in this regard:

> Scripture is the principle of theology. But the Bible is not a book of laws; it is an organic whole. The material for theology, specifically for dogmatics, is distributed throughout Scripture. Like gold from a mine, so the truth of faith has to be extracted from Scripture by the exertion of all available mental powers. Nothing can be done with a handful of proof texts. Dogma has to be built, not on a few isolated texts, but on Scripture in its entirety. It must arise organically from the principles that are everywhere present for that purpose in Scripture. The doctrines of God, of humanity, of sin, of Christ, etc., after all, are not to be found in a few pronouncements but are spread throughout Scripture and are contained, not only in a few proof texts, but also in a wide range of images and parables, ceremonies and histories. No part of Scripture may be neglected. The whole of Scripture must prove the whole system.[43]

By deployment of biblical theology, the dogmatician is rendered more competent in his task to situate with percipient care this vast and variegated data of Scripture in its proper, epochal milieu in redemptive history. He will therefore read poetry, parable, wisdom, law, historical narrative and typology in Scripture with a hermeneutical skilfulness which has been shaped by an alertness to where all these literary treasures of special revelation find their proper place in the progressive unfolding of redemptive history. As biblical theology is "regulative of [his] exegesis",[44] the systematician will work with greater adroitness in his lapidary task of bringing forth all the particular dogmas which are divinely disclosed in the organism of Scripture, the dogmas with which he is charged as a systematician to present in the system of their manifold, synthetic relationships to one another. To put it another way, biblical theology equips the dogmatician to handle the *principium cognoscendi*

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[43] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics,* 1:617.
[44] Murray, "Systematic Theology", 19.

unicum of Scripture in a way that is responsive to its ineradicably organic and historical character as it is the fruit of a long and progressive maturation of God's redemptive self-disclosure:

> As we think of, study, appreciate, appropriate, and apply the revelation put in our possession by inscripturation, we do not properly engage in any of these exercises except as the panorama of God's movements in history comes within our vision or at least forms the background of our thought. In other words, redemptive and revelatory history conditions our thought at every point or stage of our study of Scripture revelation. Therefore, what is the special interest of biblical theology is never divorced from our thought when we study any part of Scripture and seek to bring its treasures of truth to bear upon the synthesis which systematic theology aims to accomplish.[45]

III. Clearing Indictments

1) Biblicism

The term "biblicism" is often deployed in theological discourse in a way that is akin to the dynamics Plantinga has observed about the use of the term "fundamentalist".[46] It has a meaning which can expand or contract depending on the pejorative intent of the person using it. For Barr it is an appellation that belongs to anyone who "suggests that the Bible alone is the final decisive authority in theology"[47] – or, in other words, any historically confessional Protestant. John Bolt has indicted Murray's systematic-theological method with being a biblicism of a different sort.[48] Bolt's notion of "biblicism" seems to be descriptive of any systematic-theological method which asserts that "Christian theology is in fact nothing else but good exegesis and interpretation of Scripture alone".[49]

Murray does acknowledge that systematic theology must deal "with the data of general revelation insofar as these data bear upon theology", but in definition and practice Murray sees its task much as the Hodges do: the systematic (rather than historical) ordering of biblical givens. Strictly

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[45] Murray, "Systematic Theology", 20.
[46] Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: 2000), 245.
[47] Barr, *Concept of Biblical Theology,* 70.
[48] Bolt, "*Sola Scriptura* as an Evangelical Method?", 68; 78.
[49] *Ibid.,* 65.

speaking, both are forms of "biblical theology"; one is the comprehensive logical structuring of biblical doctrine, the other is *historia revelationis.*[50]

The most prominent problem at work in Bolt's essay overall is the ambiguity surrounding his central proposal, namely whether or not he is advancing the claim that Scripture is not in fact the *principium cognoscendi unicum* of theology. If the defining characteristic of "biblicism" is that it takes Scripture to be the sole source or *principium unicum* for the material content of the body of dogmatics, then it is difficult to see how Bolt's definition of "biblicism" would in fact be any different than Barr's. Bolt writes of this grouping of theologians that their commitments place

> them in the same methodological sphere as the first generation or two of Christian theologians who had available to them as their *source* for doing normative theology only the apostolic testimony that eventually became the canonical texts of Scripture. Today, however, we have some two millennia of Christian church reflection on Scripture along with certain received consensual dogmas…[51]

This raises the question, then, if Bolt actually conceives of the history of the theological labours of the church and their creedal fruit as supplemental *sources* proper for dogmatics. Or put another way: are these things further *principia* which the dogmatician must take alongside of Scripture as authoritative *sources* for dogmatics? Bolt would surely shudder at answering this question in the affirmative given the fact that he sets forth Turretin and Bavinck as alternative theological models which he wishes to emulate.[52]

It seems more congruent with Bolt's intent that "biblicism" is not understood to be a dogmatic method which takes Scripture to be its *principium cognoscendi unicum* but rather is a method that (1) simplistically and naively sees its discipline as the simple arrangement of biblical proof texts with a very limited or even wholly absent attention to their synthetic relationships and the good and necessary consequences[53] of those biblical texts and (2) attempts to bypass or ignore the historic theological reflection of

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[50] *Ibid.,* 68.

[51] Bolt, "*Sola Scriptura* as an Evangelical Method?", 66. Emphasis added.

[52] *Ibid.,* 79-82, 86-88. Cf. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics,* 1:86; Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology,* trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992), 1.8, 1.21.

[53] For a helpful contemporary treatment of "good and necessary consequence" see Ryan M. McGraw, *By Good and Necessary Consequence,* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012). For a classic treatment see George Gillespie, *A Treatise of Miscellany Questions: Wherein Many Useful Questions and Cases of Conscience Are Discussed and Resolved; for the Satisfaction of Those, Who Desire Nothing More, Than to Search for and Find Out Precious Truths, in the Controversies of These Times,* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, 1649), 238-245.

the church which has long laboured to develop biblical dogmas out of the organism of Scripture.

If this is accurate, then applying the appellation "biblicist" to Murray is dubious on account of several factors. The first is the way in which he accounts for the synthesising character of the work of systematic theology. The second is the way in which he accounts for the necessity of engaging the historical dogmatic labours of the church.

First, it can hardly be said of Murray that he saw "Christian theology" as "in fact nothing else but good exegesis and interpretation of Scripture alone".[54] While Murray insisted upon rigorous linguistic exegesis to be the starting point of dogmatics, he did not think it to be the ending point. Murray asserts,

> All other departments of theological discipline contribute their findings to systematic theology and it brings all the wealth of knowledge derived from these disciplines to bear upon the more inclusive systemisation which it undertakes.[55]

Systematics necessarily involves the exegesis and interpretation of Scripture, but it has not exhausted its disciplinary task in them. It aims at a "systemisation" which methodologically moves forward from sound exegesis of the biblical text to the further steps involved in its craft. That further step is characterised by Murray as one of synthesis:

> Systematics must coordinate the teaching of particular passages and systematize this teaching under the appropriate topics. There is thus a synthesis that belongs to systematics that does not belong to exegesis as such. But to the extent to which systematic theology synthesises the teaching of Scripture, and this is its main purpose, it is apparent how dependent it is upon the science of exegesis.[56]

And in case one might think that Murray saw this synthesis as a rather simplistic comparison of various texts of Scripture as they mutually interpret one another, Murray adds a qualification:

> The principle known as the analogy of Scripture is indispensable to exegesis for "the infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself". But the analogy of Scripture is not to be

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[54] Bolt, "*Sola Scriptura* as an Evangelical Method?", 65.
[55] Murray, "Systematic Theology", 4.
[56] *Ibid.*, 17.

equated with the synthesis which is the specific task of systematic theology.[57]

Murray does not elaborate in this essay on what might be involved in the difference between systematic-theological synthesis and the "analogy of Scripture", but it is not unwarranted to surmise that he would have affirmed that it hinges on the way dogmatics draws out implications from the data of Scripture and casts them into technical language which utilises philosophical terminology in the classical way that designates philosophy as the handmaiden to theology. Murray certainly deployed such technical terminology throughout the corpus of his writings and engaged in the ratiocinative processing which synthetically drew together the data of Scripture and cast it into dogmatic form. So, the charge of biblicism does not convincingly stick to Murray on account of this alone.

But secondly, the charge does not stick because Murray insisted upon and methodically practised a rigorous use and engagement with the dogmatic labours of the church catholic. Typical of this is the admission he made in the preface of one of his most famous works, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*:

> I am conscious of the profound debt I owe to numberless theologians and expositors. Acknowledgement in details would be impossible. Other men have laboured and we have entered into their labours.[58]

Murray by no means thinks that the dogmatician can responsibly bypass the vast deposit of the theological and confessional traditions of the church. To the contrary, Murray asserted that the work of the Holy Spirit as the *Doctor Ecclesiae* hands to the dogmatician a divine writ which summons him to engage the theological fruit of the work of the church catholic.

The Holy Spirit, in accordance with Christ's promise, had led the apostles into all truth (cf. John 16:13) in a way consonant with their unique commission and function. But he has also been present in the church in all the generations of the church's history, endowing the church in its organic unity as the body of Christ with gifts of understanding and expression. It is this ceaseless activity of the Holy Spirit that explains the development throughout the centuries of what we call Christian doctrine. Individual theologians are but the spokesmen of this accumulating understanding which the Spirit of truth has been granting to the church.[59]

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[57] *Ibid.*, 17fn1.

[58] John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied,* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), x.

[59] Murray, "Systematic Theology", 6.

Incorporation of the work of the discipline of biblical theology into the work of the discipline of dogmatics ought not to be understood to entail a jettisoning of the historical, doctrinal formulations of the church. The "theological heritage" of the church "deserves and demands" from theologians "understanding, fidelity, zeal, [and] practice".[60] Murray certainly never sought a dogmatics which repristinated tradition, as though dogmatics was merely the work of the museum curator whose sole job is to preserve artefacts in completely unaltered condition. To the contrary, he asserts,

> However epochal have been the advances made at certain periods
> and however great the contributions of particular men we may
> not suppose that theological construction ever reaches definitive
> finality.[61]

But Murray also never evinced a commitment to theological revolution which sought to overthrow the cumulative, dogmatic heirlooms of the church, particularly as they found expression in the confessional documents of the Reformed stream of the church. The pattern of the deployment of biblical theology which we see in the hands of Murray, however successful or unsuccessful it might be at points, is one that exhibited a desire to preserve the heirlooms of the dogmatic tradition of confessionally Reformed theology while also seeking to develop and expand their veracious splendour in fuller conformity to the rich contours of the organism of the special revelation of Scripture.

> History likewise demonstrates how, after long neglect, the
> deposit of the past comes, in times of theological revival, to have
> renewed meaning and influence. Treasures that have suffered
> relative oblivion are rediscovered by a new generation... The
> theology that does not build upon these constructions or pretends
> to ignore them places a premium upon retrogression and
> dishonours the Holy Spirit by whose endowments and grace these
> epochal strides in understanding and presentation have been
> taken.[62]

We find in Murray's expert hand both a predilection for what we might call – in the vogue parlance of contemporary theology – theological retrieval,[63] as

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[60] *Ibid.*, 6.

[61] Murray, "Systematic Theology", 7.

[62] *Ibid.*, 7.

[63] For an account of a Reformed programme of theological retrieval, see Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain, *Reformed Catholicity: The Promise of Retrieval for Theology and Biblical Interpretation,* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015).

well as a predilection for further doctrinal development animated by the vivaciousness of biblical theology.

2) *Arid Rationalism and Rigid Finality*

The moniker of "rationalism" is slung about the world of post-modern theological scholarship with the same sort of pejorative ambiguity as what was noted above about the term "biblicist". Rarely is it accompanied by an attempt to define what exactly is meant by the term in its usage. Certainly, few theologians who have had this agnomen of shame pinned to them of late subscribe to an epistemology in the family tree of Descartes which seeks to develop and establish the whole body of human knowledge from *a priori* reason. In the usage of Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke it seems to indicate any theologian who believes in the abiding relevance of propositional truth in theology[64] – in which case it basically seems to mean anyone who is not a postmodernist. But if the byword "rationalist" is meant as a term to indicate, in a broad sort of way, an epistemology which reposes itself exclusively on the powers of the human intellect in order to produce a body of propositions to which intellectual assent is the highest and nearly exclusive goal, then Murray can by no means be inculpated as such.

For all the methodological rigour which Murray sought to lend to his labours as a systematician through exactingly-attentive exegesis of biblical texts, we must not mistakenly think that he thereby thought he had crafted an intellectual mechanism which could be deployed to produce assured dogmatic results irrespective of the mysterious working of the Spirit. Rather, Murray asserts the indispensability of illumination in the work of systematic theology:

> But it is a travesty for a man not knowing the power of revelation to pose as an expositor of it. This is just saying that the Scriptures cannot be properly interpreted without the illumination of the Holy Spirit nor can they be properly studied as God's revelation apart from the sealing witness of the Spirit by whom alone we can be convinced that they are the Word of God. The person who addresses himself to the interpretation and formulation of the truth conveyed to us by revelation is destitute of the prime requisite if he is not imbued with the humility and enlightenment which the indwelling of the Holy Spirit imparts.[65]

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[64] Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context,* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 37.

[65] Murray, "Systematic Theology", 5.

Murray by no means advocated that a fastidious use of exegesis and biblical theology could, in and of itself, perfunctorily yield to the systematician the treasures of the Scriptures by sheer dint of intellectual and methodological diligence. For the dogmatician not to be a grotesque charade, it must be the case for him that the *viva voce* of the Holy Spirit speaking in Scripture connects with the internal vitality of the illumined intellect of one who has been made receptive to that voice by the operation of that same Holy Spirit.

Further, Murray is cleared of the charges of arid rationalism by another consideration: The degree to which piety is conjoined to theological scholarship is often evident in the aroma which exudes from pages written by such godly men. This unmistakably rises from the works which flowed from John Murray's pen. They have the redolence of a man who prayed as he wrote theology and wrote theology as he prayed. Woven into the fibres of his systematic-theological labours are the expressions of a man gripped by the majesty of the God about whom he wrote.

Yet, the evidence of just how much piety pervades the labours of a theologian is even more manifest to those near enough to his life to bear witness to the degree of authenticity of such a wedding of piety and theology. Murray's life has no shortage of those who provide such testimonials. One shining example of this appears in the letter Cornelius Van Til sent to him upon news of Murray's impending death:

> Throughout the years of our association together you were to me (a) an example of godly living and (b) of utter devotion to your Lord. It was obvious to all of us that you loved your Saviour passionately, that you sought to serve your Lord with utter sincerity, and that your ambition was to point out to all men everywhere that only by the "good pleasure" of God can they be saved from the wrath of God. Nothing has helped me more, John, than to hear you pour out your heart in prayer for the church of Jesus Christ as a whole and for individuals in particular.[66]

Far from producing a dogmatics which suffered from the spiritual dystrophy of arid intellectualism, Murray left to the church a body of work that is suffused with a spiritual vigour which rose from his own spiritual vigour. And his dedication to the persistent use of an exegesis which is regulated by biblical theology is an iteration of that spiritual vigour insofar as he understood it to keep his systematic-theological work "in direct contact with the Word" as "it ever imparts to systematics the power which is derived from that Word".[67]

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[66] Quoted in Murray, "Life of Murray", 154.
[67] Murray, "Systematic Theology", 17.

And this point is related to the second charge that abounds among the polemics of postmodern evangelicals towards systematicians of the likes of Murray. The indictment is that non-postmodern theological methods aim at the production of a "timeless"[68] system of truth which can safely dispose of the text of Scripture once it has completed its task of the production of a full text of systematic theology. Thus, Grenz and Franke:

> In effect, the scholastic theological agenda meant that the ongoing task of reading the Bible as a text was superseded by the publication of the skilled theologian's *magnum opus.* If the goal of theological inquiry was to extrapolate the system of propositions the divine Communicator had inscripturated in the pages of the text, it would seem that systematic theology could – and eventually would – make the Bible superfluous. Why should the sincere believer continue to read the Bible when biblical truth – correct doctrine – is more readily at hand in the latest systematic compilation offered by the skilled theologian?[69]

One is hard pressed to think of any theologian in the history of the church who would have the audacity to make such a claim about their dogmatic labours. This is enough by itself to raise strong suspicion that Grenz and Franke are not doing here anything more than constructing a rather absurd kind of strawman. But if such an allegation were to be levied at Murray, his explicit methodological commitment to exegesis and his indefatigable deployment of that exegesis in the course of his career are at hand to exculpate him.

Murray understood well that all human theological efforts this side of the theology of vision given to the church in its heavenly beatitude bears the indelible character of the provisionality which belongs to all *theologia viatorum*:

> In him are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge and from this fulness that resides in him he communicates to the church so that the church organically and corporately may increase and grow up into knowledge unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ. It is this perspective that not only brings to view but also requires the progression by which systematic theology has been characterised. The history of doctrine demonstrates the progressive development and we may never think that this progression has ever reached a finale.

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[68] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism,* 35.
[69] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism,* 63.

> Systematic theology is never a finished science nor is its task ever completed.[70]

Murray by no means thought that his labours – or those of any other theologian – could produce a calcified body of truth that bore no potentiality for expansion, refinement or correction from the text of Scripture. While the dogmatician's theological labours must not neglect the faithful work of the whole church catholic which has come before, if they are a confessional son or daughter of the Reformation, their theological labours presuppose that the immediately inspired and authentical nature of the autographs of the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures intractably preserves the right of careful exegesis of Scripture in its original languages to correct and reform theological tradition. Exegesis preserves the right of the systematician to cut off from the body of dogmas which he elucidates in his work any excrescence which disfigures it due to a lack of proper attentiveness to the biblical text. And exegesis preserves the right of the systematician to develop further the latent potentialities in biblical dogmas which have been recognised by the church but not yet cultivated into full flower. Murray recognised the kind of effervescence which attends the theological labours of every generation of the church as well as the way in which the adjective "timeless" is somewhat maladroit to describe the theological fruit of those labours:

> It is true, however, that the presentation of the gospel must be pointed to the needs of each generation. So is it with theology. A theology that does not build upon the past ignores our debt to history and naively overlooks the fact that the present is conditioned by history. A theology that relies upon the past evades the demands of the present.[71]

This perennial task of dogmatic refinement, correction and growth brings into the picture the way in which Murray saw the discipline of biblical theology as capable of fertilising the dogmatician's task. The systematic-theological vitality envisioned by Murray requires the sort of constant exegetical contact with the text of Scripture in its original languages that he advocated. The essence of Murray's theological vision has been eloquently captured by Bavinck:

> This is thus the delightful, but also the difficult task of the dogmatician, to dissect dogmas in their most hidden fibres, and to trace how they are wholly and entirely rooted in Holy Scripture.

[70] Murray, "Systematic Theology", 6.
[71] Murray, "Systematic Theology", 9.

He must recapitulate the work of the church as it were, grow up out of Scripture the *dogmata* before our eyes, and produce them anew. Thereby he shall not in the slightest degree contribute to the church and confession the preservation of a fossilised and dead orthodoxy. Because he takes dogmas and dips them again and again into that fresh bath of the water of life that ripples in Holy Scripture.[72]

Dipping the dogmatic labours of the church over and over again into the fresh bath of Scripture ought to mean dipping it into the rich vitality of the redemptive-historically mediated, progressively unfolded organism of revelation which biblical theology seeks to study. If exegesis is indispensable for dogmatics in order to keep it in this abiding, life-imparting contact with Scripture, and if biblical theology ought to be regulative for the exegesis of Scripture, then the use of biblical theology in the task of systematic theology ought to be nutrition for the full flourishing of the dogmatic calling of the systematician.

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[72] Herman Bavinck, "Confessie en Dogmatiek", *Theologische Studiën* 9 (1891) 3, 267. Translation my own.

JOHN OWEN'S TAXONOMY OF THE COVENANTS: WAS HE A DICHOTOMIST OR A TRICHOTOMIST?

Benedict Bird[*]

Owen's understanding of the biblical covenants provides structure and a considerable degree of coherence to his theology. It is a theme that runs from one end of his writings to the other. It is of great assistance to anyone wishing to understand his work, and his expression of Reformed theology generally, to understand his view of the covenants. This article briefly explains Owen's understanding of the eternal Covenant of Redemption, the temporal Covenants of Works and Grace, and the several historical manifestations of those over-arching covenants that found fulfilment in the New Covenant. It then interacts with a recent debate over whether Owen's view of the covenants may be understood as "dichotomistic", in the sense of seeing the principal distinction as being between the Covenants of Works and Grace, or "trichotomistic", wherein the Mosaic Covenant is regarded as an third arrangement that stands on its own. The conclusion is that those labels detract from what Owen has already made clear.

John Owen, perhaps the leading English theologian of the seventeenth century, devotes significant attention to the biblical doctrine of the covenants.[1] Owen said: "All theology is… based on a covenant."[2] It is "the very centre wherein all the lines concerning the grace of God and our own duty do

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[1] For assessments of the importance of Owen, see C. Trueman, *John Owen, Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007); K. Kapic and M. Jones, eds., *The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen's Theology* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012). For Owen's life, see A. Thomson, "Life of Dr. Owen" in *Works of John Owen* (London: Johnstone & Hunter, 1850, repr. Banner of Truth, 1965); C. Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism: Experiences of Defeat* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[2] "*Cum enim omnis theologia, uti diximus, in foedere fundetur*", Owen's *Theologoumena Pantodapa*, in *Works* vol. 17, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1862, 44.

meet, wherein the whole of religion doth consist".[3] His view of the covenants, carefully drawn from Scripture and consistently expressed, forms what Willem van Asselt calls the "constitutive structure and controlling idea of [his] whole theological enterprise".[4]

Owen himself regarded the subject as being "wrapped up in much obscurity, and attended with many difficulties", requiring "the best of our diligence [for it to be] distinctly apprehended". [5] Indeed, to avoid mis-construing Owen's own view of the covenants similar diligence is required. One area of potential misunderstanding concerns the nature of the Mosaic Covenant: Did Owen regard it as an expression of the redemptive "Covenant of Grace", or of the Adamic "Covenant of Works"; or as being distinct from both? If it was merely an expression of one of those other covenants then his understanding might be called "dichotomous". If it was a distinct third kind, then the label "trichotomous" might be appropriate.

On this point Joel Beeke and Mark Jones describe Owen's covenant theology as "so complex that any attempt to label him dichotomous or trichotomous inevitably misses some of the nuances of his thought".[6] They refer to essays by Sebastian Rehnman and Brenton Ferry, who assert that Owen's theology is trichotomous. [7] I aim to show in this article how his thinking may be straightforwardly explained without resorting to either of these complexity-adding labels. Before interacting with their writing, I summarise Owen's thinking on the principal covenants. I include a depiction of his schema as an Appendix.

I.   The Meaning of "Covenant"

Covenant theology has been regularly criticised for asserting the existence of covenants that are not expressly referred to in Scripture.[8] Owen anticipates

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[3] Preface by John Owen, sig. A2ᵛ, to Patrick Gillespie's *The Ark of the Covenant Opened*, London, 1677.

[4] W. J. van Asselt, "Covenant Theology as Relational Theology: The Contributions of Johannes Cocceius (1603-1669) and John Owen (1618-1683) to a Living Reformed Theology" in *The Ashgate Research Companion*, 83.

[5] Owen, *Exposition of Hebrews*, repr. Banner of Truth vol. 6, p.60. Hereafter I will give page references in the form *Hebrews*, 6:60, and similarly for Owen's other works.

[6] J. R. Beeke and M. Jones, *A Puritan Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 294.

[7] S. Rehnman, Is the Narrative of Redemptive History Trichotomous or Dichotomous? A Problem for Federal Theology, Nederlands Archief voor Kergeschiedenis 80 (2000), 296-308; B. C. Ferry, "Works in the Mosaic Covenant", in *The Law is not of Faith: Essays on Works and Grace in the Mosaic Covenant*, eds. B. D. Estelle, J. V. Fesko and D. VanDrunen (Phillipsburg NJ: P&R, 2009), 101.

[8] See, for example, J. Murray, *Collected Writings* vol. 2, Banner of Truth, 1977, 130, whose issue is terminological. The objection of others goes beyond mere terminology: Karl Barth "dismissed it as mythology" (*per* C. Trueman in "The Harvest of Reformation Mythology?", in

the criticisms by defining his terms and using them with consistency. Rather than insisting upon the term "covenant" where Scripture does not, he identifies five general criteria for a "compact, covenant, convention or agreement, as depends on personal service".[9] In essence: (i) two or more persons should agree voluntarily to bring about a "common end" acceptable to them both; (ii) the "principal engager" should prescribe some works of service to accomplish that end; (iii) the principal engager should make such promises as are necessary to support, encourage and "fully balance" the other's works; (iv) the one undertaking the works should carry them out, looking forward to the prescribed reward; and (v) having completed the work to the satisfaction of the engager, the common end should be brought about and established.[10] If these things are present, we may "call it a covenant".[11]

Owen is untroubled if others wish to refer to an arrangement having those characteristics as a mere agreement, compact or exercise of divine counsel.[12] It is not as if "covenant" has such a fixed contrary meaning, that one is abusing the English language by using it as Owen does.[13] Moreover, he has given detailed consideration to the meaning of

> the Hebrew בְּרִית, and the Greek διαθήκη, whose signification and use alone are to be attended to in the business of any covenant of God; and in what a large sense they are used is known to all that… have made inquiry into their import.[14]

So he is satisfied that these terms, translated "covenant", have a sufficiently broad semantic range in Scripture to support his use of it.[15]

Scholasticism Reformed – Essays in Honour of Willem J. van Asselt (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 197; and see J. G. Reisinger, *Abraham's Four Seeds* (New Covenant Media, 1998), and Blake White, *What is New Covenant Theology?* (New Covenant Media, 2012).

[9] Owen, *Vindiciæ Evangelicæ*, 12:497.

[10] *Ibid.,* 12:499. Owen's criteria in "Exercitation XXVIII on Federal Transactions between the Father and the Son in Hebrews," *Hebrews*, 2:82-4, are essentially consistent.

[11] Owen, *Vindiciæ Evangelicæ*, 12:499.

[12] Robert Letham, for example, is concerned by the application of covenant concepts to the relations between the three persons of the Trinity: *The Holy Trinity in Scripture, History, Theology and Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2019), 319.

[13] The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, 1983, vol. 1), 444, gives as a contemporary meaning of the term "a mutual agreement between two or more persons to do or refrain from doing certain acts; sometimes, the undertaking of one of the parties (now mainly legal or theological)." It would be anachronistic to suggest that this is necessarily what Owen understood by the term. However, the dictionary also cites some seventeenth century uses, such as "the terms of an agreement, 1614; … the matter agreed upon, undertaken or promised, 1596 …; the name given esp. to the Solemn League and Covenant entered into in 1643."

[14] Owen, *Vindiciæ Evangelicæ,* 12:499. See also Owen, "Exercitation XXVIII," *Hebrews*, 2:78-82.

[15] See Owen, *Hebrews*, 2:81, where he refers to a "great variety" of uses.

We turn now to each of the important covenants that Owen finds described in Scripture, and see how his five criteria apply to the covenants that are not expressly described as such.

II.   The Covenant of Redemption

The Covenant of Redemption, or *pactum salutis*, is the eternal foundation and cause of the temporal Covenant of Grace, as finally expressed in the New Covenant. In *Vindiciæ Evangelicæ* Owen speaks of it as the "great foundation" of the whole work of Christ.[16] This work was written in 1655, at the request of Cromwell's Council of State, to refute the anti-Trinitarian Socinian heresy that had been gaining ground at that time. In it, Owen describes the Covenant of Redemption as

> that compact, covenant, convention or agreement that was
> between the Father and the Son for the accomplishment of the
> work of our redemption by the mediation of Christ, to the praise
> of the glorious grace of God.[17]

In eternity, Christ willingly accepted the obligations which he executed in time. As a contemporary of Owen, Patrick Gillespie, put it: "[there is] nothing… here transacted in time which was not from eternity concluded in the counsel of God's will".[18]

These obligations included the requirements that Christ assume the human nature of those he was to save, and that, on behalf of his elect, he keep those laws of God that they had failed to keep; and so by suffering the punishment due to them, he would achieve their salvation. The Father, having in eternity promised to assist the incarnated Son in the performance of the work, graciously promised to accept the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the elect. On that account, believers would justly be accounted righteous; and the Son would be rewarded with glory.[19]

Owen finds each of the five criteria outlined above to be "eminently expressed in the Scripture… in the compact between the Father and the Son whereof we speak".[20]

Taking each in turn:

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[16] Owen, *Vindiciæ Evangelicæ*, 12:507.

[17] *Ibid.,* 12:497.

[18] Gillespie, *The Ark of the Covenant*, 124. Owen wrote the Preface to this work: see footnote 3 above.

[19] The terms of the Covenant of Redemption, including Gillespie's description of eight ways in which the Father covenanted to support the Son in his work, are conveniently summarised by Beeke and Jones, *A Puritan Theology*, 248-249.

[20] Owen, *Vindiciæ Evangelicæ*, 12:499.

(i)   He regards the covenant as being essentially between the Father and Son. That is because Christ was thereby eternally appointed to the role of mediator between God and man, a role which would involve subordination, condescension and humiliation. This subordination was only in the *economy*, meaning God's activity vis-à-vis the created order, not within the personal relations or very being of God. Owen always insists on the ontological equality of the persons of the Trinity, thereby rejecting not only Socinian subordinationism, but all forms of subordinationism.[21]

Owen insists too that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit have a single divine will, even as they covenant together, since they are of one divine essence or nature. He is willing to speak of the "will of the Father" and the "will of the Son" as that single will is applied to their distinct personal actings in the economy:

> The will of God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost is but one... but in respect of their distinct personal actings, this will is appropriated to them respectively, so that the will of the Father and the will of the Son may be considered [distinctly] in this business.[22]

Thus, the one will of God has distinct applications to the distinct *ad extra* acts of each person of the Trinity.

Owen does not say that the Holy Spirit is a *party* to the covenant, as such. That is because only the Son was to take on human nature, an act which for God must necessarily involve condescension and humiliation, thereby bringing into being "a new habitude of will in the Father and Son towards each other that is not in them essentially."[23] That is not the case with the Spirit. The role of the Spirit in this covenant is one of eternal concurrence, which manifests itself in time in his work of applying to believers the benefits won for them by Christ's work. In eternity, the Spirit concurs with the plan of the Father and the Son; temporally he is intimately involved at every point in its outworking.[24]

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[21] For Owen's rejection of subordinationism see, B. Bird, "John Owen and the Question of the Eternal Submission of the Son within the Ontological Trinity," *Westminster Theological Journal* 80, no. 2 (2018): 299–334; and his analysis of the Covenant of Redemption in more detail in "The Covenant of Redemption According to John Owen and Patrick Gillespie," *Foundations* 70, no. 1 (2016), www.affinity.org.uk/foundations-issues/issue-70-article-1---the-covenant-of-redemption-according-to-john-owen-and-patrick-gillespie.

[22] Owen, *Vindiciæ Evangelicæ*, 12:497, my emphasis. The "[distinctly]" is as printed in the Banner of Truth edition. See also Owen, "Exercitation XXVIII", *Hebrews*, 2:87. Cf. W. J. van Asselt in "Covenant Theology as Relational Theology" in *The Ashgate Research Companion*, 80.

[23] When Owen says "new", he says "I speak not of time, because that 'new' relation is established eternally by virtue of this covenantal compact", – *Vindiciæ Evangelicæ* 12:497.

[24] See Owen, Πνευματολόγια, 3:159-188; and *The Death of Death*, 10:178-179. Critics of the Covenant of Redemption have objected to the apparently limited involvement of the Spirit, and

Why does Owen call it a covenant when it could simply be referred to as a divine decree? Owen's answer is that it is "more than a decree".[25] Decretal language is fitting when we speak of the work of the undivided essence of God; covenantal language is fitting when the focus is on the persons of the Trinity and their intra-Trinitarian relations – and especially when the *personal willingness* of the Son is vital for the efficacy of the work of redemption and substitutionary atonement which he undertook. Salvation of fallen man, for the maximal glory of God, was the "common end" which Father and Son each voluntarily engaged to accomplish; and in that, there was no "imposition of one upon the other".[26]

(ii) As for the Father's prescription of works of service for the Son to accomplish, Owen sees this as Christ accepting the mediatorial office of prophet, priest and king. In order to fulfil the priestly role, he must "take on him the nature of those whom he was to bring to God";[27] for "A body thou hast prepared for me".[28]

Owen finds further scriptural support for this in Christ's several declarations that he "came to do the will of him who sent me".[29] According to Hebrews 10:7, quoting Psalm 40:7-8, Christ declares "I have come to do your will, O God." Owen says that the covenant is here "most clearly expressed".[30] Isaiah 53:10 says "it was the will of the LORD to crush him... when his soul makes an offering for guilt he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand." Taken together, Christ's incarnation and work of atonement were pursuant to the will of the Father and consent of the Son.

When was that will formulated and established? A doubter could be forgiven for saying "Did not Christ say 'I have come to do your will' when he 'came into the world', Hebrews 10:5? How is that evidence for an eternal covenant?" But the writer of Hebrews was not speaking of God's will as a temporal, post-incarnation event. His will is eternal; it must have been formulated in eternity. Given his omniscient and immutable attributes, the plan of salvation cannot have been concocted temporally, as if in reaction to events as they unfolded in time. God would not be God if his plan of salvation had not been settled upon before time began.[31] Nor were these merely

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go on to characterise it as a "bipartite covenant". For example, Letham suggests that A. A. Hodge presented it as if the covenant had been settled at "a divine committee meeting, the Spirit... having sent apologies for absence": *The Holy Trinity*, 319. That criticism would not be well founded in relation to Owen's explanation of it.

[25] Owen, *Vindiciæ Evangelicæ*, 12:497.

[26] Owen, "Exercitation XXVIII," *Hebrews*, 2:89-90 ; and *Vindiciæ Evangelicæ*, 12:499.

[27] *Ibid.,* 12:502.

[28] Hebrews 10:5; see also Philippians 2:7, fulfilling Isaiah 53:10.

[29] In particular, John 4:34, 6:38.

[30] Owen, *Vindiciæ Evangelicæ*, 12:498.

[31] *Ibid.,* 12:554-555.

temporal assertions from a man who, during his incarnation, came to realise his mission in life. Rather, they were his "perpetual profession".[32] Owen sees no inconsistency in the Son declaring "I have come to do your will" and there being a divine intention, settled in eternity, underlying that temporal declaration.

(iii) Owen says that the Father promised to support, encourage and "fully balance" the works that Christ would do.[33] These promises Christ could plead in prayer during his trials, that he would be sustained to do his Father's will.

> [He] would not be wanting in any assistance in trials, strength against oppositions, encouragements against temptations and strong consolation in the midst of terrors... Hence arose that confidence of our Saviour in his greatest and utmost trials, being assured by virtue of his Father's engagement in this covenant... that he would never leave him nor forsake him.[34]

The Father made promises too that the work of salvation should succeed.[35]

(iv) Upon such terms, Christ undertook the work:

> By his own voluntary consent, he came under the law of the mediator; which afterward... he would not [and] could not decline... he was legally subject to all that attended it... he became responsible [as surety] for the whole debt.[36]

Hence Christ was legally bound to perform and complete his mission.

Did Owen need to go so far as to call it a "legal" obligation? Surely it is inconceivable, given his divine nature, that he might default and become liable to an intra-Trinitarian law-suit? If the idea of an enforcement action by the Father against the Son must be purely hypothetical or even blasphemous, is this an argument against the use of any legal language, including "covenant"? One answer is that it is a problem that does not derive from the use of legal language *per se*, but from the unnecessary importation of human legal concepts into the consideration of it. Human covenants require law enforcement mechanisms because humans breach their covenants. A God-

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[32] Owen, *Vindiciæ Evangelicæ,* 12:503.

[33] He refers to Isaiah 42:4-6 and 50:7-9, Psalms 16:10 and 89:27-28.

[34] Owen, *The Death of Death*, 10:168-9.

[35] He refers to Isaiah 52:1-4 and 53:10-11. For example, Owen states, "He who prescribes the hard conditions of incarnation, obedience and death, doth also make the glorious promises of preservation, protection and success", Owen, *Vindiciæ Evangelicæ,* 12:505; Owen, "Exercitation XXVIII", *Hebrews*, 2:93.

[36] Owen, *Vindiciæ Evangelicæ,* 12:505. Owen refers to Psalms 16:2, 40:7-8, Isaiah 50:5 and Philippians 2:6-8.

given promise is no less legal just because God does not break his promises. It matters not that the notion of enforcement is wholly hypothetical in the context of Christ's obligations. They are legal obligations because they are binding promises.

(v) The last criterion, of God approving and accepting Christ's finished work and of Christ laying claim to the promises made, are "fully manifest in this compact".[37] By his resurrection, God "declared [him] to be the Son of God in power".[38] God gave him the nations as his inheritance, and gave him "as a covenant to the people", so that his "salvation may reach the end of the earth".[39]

Owen is careful to distinguish between the conception of the Covenant of Redemption in eternity, and the bestowing of salvation "in [its] due time towards us [as] we are united to Christ by the communication of his Spirit to us".[40] In human experience we must be born "by natural generation" before we can be "dead in sin and obnoxious to eternal death"; similarly, we must be born and united to Christ by faith before we experience the benefits of his priestly work. The Covenant of Redemption does not support the notion of eternal justification.

Therefore, all of the five criteria are satisfied. Owen leaves little ground for the objection that it cannot be a covenant because it is not expressly identified as such. The necessary support is present in Scripture – just as it is for the Trinity, though that term is also not found.[41]

Owen notes the usefulness of the Covenant of Redemption in rebutting "the Socinian clamour concerning the unrighteousness of one man's suffering personally for another man's sin" – and hence their objection to penal substitutionary atonement.[42] It is unjust for one man to be punished for the crime of an unrelated man; but Christ is the federal head of the elect, and voluntarily accepted the task of redeeming them. "It is no unrighteousness, if the hand offend, that the head be smitten… Christ is our head; we are his members."[43] By virtue of the Covenant of Redemption, the complaints of unfairness and injustice fall away.[44] The doctrine is similarly useful today in responding to arguments such as Steve Chalke's against penal substitutionary

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[37] Owen, *Vindiciæ Evangelicæ*, 12:505.

[38] Romans 1:4.

[39] Cf. Psalm 2:8 and Isaiah 49:6-9. Owen says: "John 17, throughout the whole chapter, is the demand of Christ for the accomplishment of the whole compact and all the promises that were made to him when he undertook to be a Saviour." *Vindiciæ Evangelicæ*, 12:506.

[40] *Ibid.*, 12:507.

[41] Murray, perhaps aware that his objection to calling it a covenant might also rule out use of the term Trinity, limits his objection to the "use of a *biblical* term to designate something to which it is not applied in the Scripture", *Collected Writings* vol. 2, 130, my emphasis.

[42] Owen, *Vindiciæ Evangelicæ*, 12:507.

[43] *Ibid.*, 12:507.

[44] Owen, "Exercitation XXVIII," *Hebrews*, 2:87-89.

atonement.[45] The silliness of the charge of "cosmic child abuse" stands in stark contrast with Owen's conclusion that "Father and Son… were fully agreed upon the whole matter".[46] It is not for us to stand in judgment upon their agreement, but rather to admire it: "We can never sufficiently admire the love and grace of… Christ in undertaking this… This is the grace, the love, the mercy of God."[47]

III.   The Covenant of Works

One might be tempted to proceed from discussion of the Covenant of Redemption directly to its implementation in the Covenant of Grace, and thence to its full outworking in the New Covenant. But the temporal history of redemption and its revelation in Scripture proceed progressively, laying necessary foundations upon which the church of God will be built. According to Owen, the first-revealed covenant between God and man was the Covenant of Works.[48] It was first in time, and logically precedes the Covenant of Grace.

Owen's five criteria may again be considered.[49] Again, he is not troubled that it is "not expressly called a covenant" because "it contained the express nature of a covenant".[50] Each of his five criteria set out in *Vindiciæ Evangelicæ* is present in his analysis:

(i)   The parties were God and man, and their "common end" was that man should serve and glorify God through their mutual relationship and man's obedience.

(ii)   God prescribed laws, briefly stated in Genesis 2:15-17, to accomplish that end. It "was a consequent of the nature of God and man [that some] law was necessary".[51] Man was created to honour and respect God. Even pre-fall, he was to serve God as God required, not as he pleased.

(iii) Law is one thing; a covenant, according to Owen, involves promises, not just rules.[52] God specified "promises and threatenings of reward and punishment": of eternal life upon perfect obedience; and of death upon disobedience.[53]

(iv) Until the fall, it was not in Adam's nature to reject God's gracious proposal of friendship or its terms. He "was required [to] accept of this law…

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[45] S. Chalke and A. Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus*, Zondervan, 2004.

[46] Owen, *Vindiciæ Evangelicæ*, 12:507.

[47] Owen, *Hebrews*, 6:51.

[48] *Ibid.*, 6:61.

[49] *Ibid.*, 6:59-66.

[50] *Ibid.*, 6:60.

[51] *Ibid.*, 6:60.

[52] *Ibid.*, 6:65.

[53] *Ibid.*, 6:60, 78; see also Owen, *Justification by Faith*, 5:275 and Genesis 2:17.

by the innate principles of light and obedience concreated with his nature [by which he] universally assented unto the law".[54]

(v)   The final criterion was of God's acceptance of man's work following his accomplishment of the work and man's concomitant receipt of the promised eternal life.[55]

God instituted this covenant to display something of his nature that would not otherwise be displayed. "Had he treated with us merely by a law, he had therein only revealed his sovereign authority and holiness";[56] whereas his grace, love and mercy are displayed by the giving of promises that he was under no obligation to give.[57]

Adam stood to gain infinitely more than he deserved by his mere obedience: "The reward proposed in the promise doth infinitely exceed the obedience performed."[58] But he was not content with that, instead counting equality with God a thing to be grasped.[59]

When a covenant is broken, its promises and rewards are forfeited. But its obligations are not thereby abrogated; so it was with the Covenant of Works. Adam forfeited the promise of life and brought down upon himself the curse of death: immediately dying spiritually, as he was expelled from God's presence and garden temple, then dying physically. Thus, the covenantal benefits of "acceptation with God, life and salvation ceased... at the entrance of sin".[60] The requirement of perfect obedience remained in place, as later expressed in Leviticus 18:5: "keep my rules and statutes [and you shall] live by them".[61] Adam was obliged to do what he was no longer capable of doing. Worse still, as federal head of mankind, he forfeited the covenant benefits for all his kind.[62] Yet every obligation of the covenant "doth remain in full force and efficacy, not as a covenant, but as a law."[63] All men were condemned as law-breakers, and thereby liable – unless somehow pardoned – to experience the penalty that God had specified.

It is in this sense that the Covenant of Works logically precedes the Covenant of Grace. Its obligations remained in full force and effect, awaiting a

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[54] Owen, *Hebrews*, 6:60-61.

[55] See *Biblical Theology by John Owen*, transl. Westcott, 25, for Owen's views on the hypothetical duration of Adam's probation after which he would receive eternal life.

[56] Owen, *Hebrews*, 6:66. See discussion of pre-fall "grace" in Trueman, *John Owen, Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man*, 74 fn. 31.

[57] "There is infinite grace in every divine covenant... Infinite condescension... that he will enter into covenant with dust and ashes, with poor worms of the earth. And herein lies the spring of all grace, from whence all the streams of it do flow" – Owen, *Hebrews*, 6:68.

[58] *Ibid.*, 6:66.

[59] Cf. Philippians 2:5.

[60] Owen, *Hebrews*, 6:61.

[61] *Ibid.*, 6:78. Cf. Luke 10:28.

[62] Romans 5:18-19. See Owen, *A Display of Arminianism*, 10:75ff.

[63] Owen, *Hebrews*, 6:61.

second Adam who would keep them perfectly, for the benefit of all who were under *his* federal headship.[64] This keeping of the Covenant of Works by Christ would be an essential part of the next over-arching temporal covenant to be revealed.

IV.   *The Covenant of Grace*

If the Covenant of Works displayed something of God's sovereign authority and infinite grace, how much more does the Covenant of Grace, which is "the promise of grace in and by Jesus Christ"?[65] The original creation, being "wholly good", was insufficient for displaying either the depth of God's love, or his "patience and forbearance".[66] Nor could it adequately display his great wisdom:

> A design in Christ shines out from his bosom, that was lodged
> there from eternity, to recover things to such an estate as shall be
> exceedingly to the advantage of his glory, infinitely above what at
> first appeared, and for the putting of sinners into inconceivably a
> better condition than they were in before the entrance of sin.[67]

That design "from eternity" was the Covenant of Redemption; it "shone out" from there, in time, as the Covenant of Grace.

Again, we may consider Owen's five covenant criteria:

(i)   The direct parties to the Covenant of Grace were, as with the Covenant of Redemption, the Father and the Son. But that does not make them the same covenant.[68] The Covenant of Redemption concerned Christ's appointment as mediator. The Covenant of Grace is the means by which the benefits of the Covenant of Redemption are temporally extended to the elect. Unlike in the Covenant of Works, which had no mediator, it was no longer fitting after Adam's fall for God to deal directly with man: "it became not the holiness or righteousness of God to treat immediately with [man] any more".[69] So the Covenant of Redemption provided for God to deal with man in history upon the terms of the Covenant of Grace, through a mediator, Christ.[70] A Christian is not directly a party to the Covenant of Grace; he is only a party in so far as he is "in Christ".

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[64] Romans 5:19.

[65] Owen, *Hebrews*, 6:74.

[66] "The whole fabric of heaven and earth considered in itself, as at first created, will not discover any such thing as patience and forbearance in God" – Owen, *Communion with God*, 2:80.

[67] *Ibid.*, 2:89.

[68] Owen, "Exercitation XXVIII," *Hebrews*, 2 :78.

[69] Owen, *Hebrews*, 6:59.

[70] Owen, *Justification by Faith*, 5:190-3

(ii)-(iii) The terms of the Covenant of Grace – both obligations and promises, and the central role of its mediator, were first revealed in embryo, "unto our first parents immediately after the fall", Genesis 3:15.[71] This was the first indication of a remedy for the fall coming from God, by grace alone.[72] The difference between this covenant and the Covenant of Works is *not* that the latter required perfect godliness from man whereas this one did not. The Covenant of Grace also required perfect godliness from man. The difference is that that perfect godliness would be performed by the God-man, Christ Jesus. Hence, in the Covenant of Grace, "the undertaking of God [is] on both sides in this covenant".[73] This covenant "hath a mediator and surety… to do for us what we could not do for ourselves, and not merely to suffer what we had deserved."[74]

 (iv) Owen's fourth criterion requires the one undertaking the obligations of a covenant to perform all that is required under the covenant. Christ temporally undertook all of the things which we "could not do for ourselves": both atoning for our own sin, inherited from Adam and perpetrated personally; and keeping God's law in perfect righteousness. He "underwent and performed all that which, in the righteousness and wisdom of God, was required".[75] Christ undertook the undiluted obligations of the Covenant of Works, on behalf of the elect.

Does that leave nothing for man to do? Owen's answer avoids Pelagian works-righteousness, Libertarian antinomianism and Baxterian neo-nomianism:

> I do not say that the Covenant of Grace is absolutely without… duties of obedience which God requireth of us in and by virtue of that covenant; but [those duties] are not… remunerative of our obedience in the covenant.[76]

Obedience follows and corroborates salvation; it does not earn it.
What about faith? Is that not a condition antecedent?

> Although faith be required in order of nature antecedently unto our actual receiving of the pardon of sin, yet is that faith itself wrought in us by the grace of the promise… the pardon of sin is [not] the reward of our faith.[77]

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[71] Owen, *Hebrews*, 6:62.
[72] Genesis 3:15.
[73] Owen, *Justification by Faith*, 11:211.
[74] *Ibid.*, 5:276-7.
[75] *Ibid.*, 5:193.
[76] Owen, *Hebrews*, 6:68-9.
[77] *Ibid.*, 6:69.

Faith is necessary, but is itself a gift of grace.

(v) Following the accomplishment of the work, Christ claims the promised reward. As mediator he did all things on behalf of the elect. Therefore, the elect, through him, with humility and gratitude but also confidence, do claim what has been promised.

The Covenant of Grace is not an abstract notion, but was revealed and enacted in history. Owen therefore proceeds to consider the various historical covenants that give effect to it and are expressly spoken of in Scripture.

V.   The Abrahamic Covenant

Owen describes the Abrahamic Covenant as an "external administration" of the Covenant of Grace,[78] and as a "renovation" of it.[79] It was made in an external sense with those people who were expressly named as parties: "Abraham and his seed", meaning his biological descendants, believing and unbelieving.[80] In this external sense, the promises were of a physical land and a visible multitude of nations.[81] In this sense also, there were obligations: "walk before me and be blameless"; "every male among you shall be circumcised".[82] So far, this seems reminiscent of the Covenant of Works.

But Owen also shows that this covenant operates in an internal, spiritual sense. For believers it was an "effectual dispensation of the grace of the covenant... peculiar to them only who are the children of the promise".[83] In this sense, "Abraham's seed" has a different meaning: in the full, spiritual sense it means Christ;[84] he is a party to the Abrahamic Covenant.[85] As an early manifestation of the Covenant of Grace, it could not be otherwise; once again, "it became not the holiness or righteousness of God to treat immediately with [man] any more".[86] Abraham could not be a party to, or a beneficiary of the Covenant of Grace were Christ not a party as the true mediator, and had Abraham not been a man of faith and hence "in Christ". Only in that capacity can Abraham be called "father of the faithful".[87] Abraham is made party to the Abrahamic Covenant "with respect unto all believers [as] representative".[88] In

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[78] Owen, *Justification by Faith*, 11:206.

[79] Owen, *Hebrews*, 6:64.

[80] Genesis 17:7. Owen, *Justification by Faith*, 11:206, discussing Galatians 4:22-30.

[81] Genesis 17:4-8.

[82] Genesis 17:1, 10-14.

[83] Owen, *Justification by Faith*, 11:206.

[84] Galatians 3:16.

[85] "The promise which is made *concerning* Christ in one sense, is made *unto* him in another... as unto the first grant, intention and stability of the promise it was made unto Christ himself... as unto the first [intention] of the promise it was made unto Christ himself." – Owen, *Hebrews*, 5:229.

[86] Owen, *Hebrews*, 6:59.

[87] *Ibid.*, 6:78.

[88] *Ibid.*, 5:229.

the internal, spiritual sense, the promises are "the same [as] all believers receive… All the blessings that from God are conveyed in and by his seed, Jesus Christ."[89]

Hence Owen recognises the continuing *principles* of the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace in the Abrahamic Covenant. The obligations of the first condemn, unless performed perfectly. They condemn those who are merely outward, visible members of the covenant. Such were the unbelievers in the family of Abraham. But the Covenant of Grace promises eternal life in Christ – because he is the true mediator of it and the only keeper (as surety for the elect) of those obligations. The salvation of Abraham and all true believers in his family apparently depended on the Abrahamic Covenant; but truly and actually they were saved in accordance with what it represented: The Covenant of Grace.

VI.   The Mosaic Covenant

How then did Owen regard the Mosaic Covenant and the way in which it related to the Abrahamic? Did it build on it, or was it wholly independent? His principal propositions are these:

1.   It was established so that "the whole church-state of the Jews" should know how they must relate to God; they "depended wholly on the covenant that God made with them at Sinai".[90]

2.   It was intended as a temporary covenant "wherein the church of Israel walked with God until such time as this better [i.e. New] covenant was solemnly introduced".[91] As such, it was a temporary "dispensation" specifically for them; in time it would be "removed out of the way".[92]

3.   It required a mediator since, like all fallen men, the Jews "found themselves utterly insufficient for an immediate treaty with God".[93] Moses was that mediator, prefiguring Christ.[94]

4.   It is referred to in Hebrews as "the first covenant" to distinguish it from the New Covenant; but also to distinguish it from the Covenant of Works, which might also be called "first" except that that one was not enacted as a formal testament, διαθήκη.[95]

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[89] Owen, *Justification by Faith*, 11:206.

[90] Owen, *Hebrews*, 6:49.

[91] *Ibid.*, 6:62, my parentheses; see also 6:86.

[92] *Ibid.*, 6:49-50, 64. Owen has no need to avoid the term on the basis of the Dispensationalist ideas of later centuries, with which he would plainly disagree. It is the language of the Westminster Confession of Faith, Article 7.5.

[93] *Ibid.*, 6:55.

[94] *Ibid.*, 6:89.

[95] Hebrews 8:7. "Now there can be no testament [without a] death for the confirmation of it, Hebrews 9:16. But in the making of the covenant with Adam there was not the death of anything

5.   It did not serve to bring the Jews back under the Covenant of Works, in such a way as to cancel the promise of the Covenant of Grace that had been given to them in the Abrahamic Covenant: "No law could afterwards be given or covenant made that should disannul that promise, Galatians 3:17." If it had done so, then they all would have "perished eternally: which is openly false".[96]

6.   But it did incorporate the Covenant of Works principle: "do this and live".[97] It did not in itself abrogate the Covenant of Works, but "in sundry things... re-enforced, established and confirmed that covenant", in that it "revived, declared, and expressed *all the commands of that covenant in the Decalogue*; for that is nothing but a divine summary of the law written in the heart of man at his creation".[98] Though the Covenant of Works could not offer fallen men a path to eternal life, its obligations stood, and were expansively expressed in the Mosaic obligations. In that sense the Mosaic "law contained the whole of the Covenant [of Works]".[99] Furthermore, to "subdue the pride" of the Jews, it burdened them with "a multitude of arbitrary precepts" which were "hard to be understood and difficult to be observed".[100] It reiterated the threat of death for transgression, as well as the promise of eternal life upon perfect obedience; but "because none could answer its demands, or comply with it therein, it was called 'the ministration of death', causing fear and bondage, 2 Cor. iii. 7".[101]

7.   Yet there is also much in the Mosaic Covenant which was consistent with the Covenant of Grace:

> The new covenant... as it was administered from the foundation of the world in the way of a promise [i.e. the Covenant of Grace, not the New Covenant as finally established]... was consistent with that covenant made with the people in Sinai... There was no interruption of its administration made by the introduction of the [Mosaic] law.[102]

The Mosaic Covenant bore a "figurative relation unto the covenant of grace", apart from which "none was ever eternally saved"; [103] it "declare[d] the

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whence it might be called a testament. But there was the death of beasts in sacrifice in the confirmation of the covenant at Sinai" – Owen, *Hebrews*, 6:61.

[96] Owen, *Hebrews*, 6:62; see also 6:78.

[97] *Ibid.*; see also 6:98.

[98] *Ibid.*, 6:77, original emphasis.

[99] *Ibid.*, 2:389.

[100] *Ibid.*, 6:84, Owen noting that "The present Jews reckon up 613 of them, about the sense of most of which they dispute endlessly among themselves."

[101] *Ibid.*, 6:77.

[102] *Ibid.*, 6:64, my parentheses.

[103] *Ibid.*, 6:71.

doctrine of justification and salvation by Christ".[104] It was a covenant "super-added unto the promises" of the Covenant of Grace.[105] Its underlying principle was internal and spiritual, not external: "Thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thy soul."[106] It "put forth [the] efficacy [of the new covenant] under types and shadows" until such time as the antitype was revealed.[107] In its institutions of worship and other "outward, typical things", and in the threatenings of judgment and promises of mercy in its teachings, it served a *usus pedagogicus* role, directing men to Christ: "The law was our school-master to bring us to Christ."[108] Hence those who trusted the promises as put forth in the type were counted as having faith in the antitype, and so "enjoyed the way of life and salvation in the promise".[109]

8.   Owen does not regard it as a "mere administration" of the Covenant of Grace.[110] "It is said that the… new and the old [covenants] were not indeed two distinct covenants as unto their essence and substance, but only different administrations of the same covenant". However, "there is such express mention made… of two distinct covenants or testaments, and such different natures, properties and effects ascribed unto them, as seem to constitute two distinct covenants."[111] That said, he comments irenically that this disagreement with the "one covenant, two administrations" formula "seems rather to be a difference about the expression of the same truth than any real contradiction about the things themselves".[112]

9.   It served a particular purpose in ensuring that all could see that God had kept the promises that he had given to Abraham. He had promised that the blessing to the nations would come from among his descendants. To that end, it was necessary that God should preserve the Jews as a distinct nation until Christ had come. If they had been "scattered abroad on the face of the earth" God might still have raised up Christ from Abraham's posterity, but he desired that that "accomplishment should be evident and conspicuous".[113]

We can compare Owen's view of the Mosaic Covenant with that of the Abrahamic Covenant given above. The similarity is striking. Again, the principles of both the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace were affirmed. They flowed through to, underpinned and were expressed in the Mosaic Covenant. The one, as republished through Moses, continued to condemn unless performed perfectly. The other, which it represented

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[104] Owen, *Hebrews*, 6:71; see also 6:79.
[105] *Ibid.*, 6:113.
[106] Deuteronomy 6:5; Owen, *Hebrews*, 6:87.
[107] Owen, *Hebrews*, 6:64.
[108] Galatians 3:24; Owen, *Hebrews*, 6:71, 73, 80, 98.
[109] Romans 4:4-8; Owen, *Hebrews*, 6:99.
[110] Owen, *Hebrews*, 6:77.
[111] *Ibid.*, 6:70-71, 76.
[112] *Ibid.*, 6:71.
[113] *Ibid.*, 6:82-83.

"figuratively" and held out through "types and shadows", continued "uninterrupted" to promise eternal life in Christ. As a manifestation of the Covenant of Grace "the way of reconciliation with God, of justification and salvation, was always one and the same".[114]

VII.   The New Covenant

The New Covenant was the Covenant of Grace "legally established" (νενομοθέτηται). What had been a promise, "which is an oath", became a formalised covenant: that is, a blood-ratified testament (διαθήκη). The promise was "now solemnly sealed, ratified and confirmed in the death and resurrection of Christ".[115]

In the Covenant of Redemption, Father and Son agreed that Christ would come as saving mediator and surety. In the Covenant of Grace, the promise of that coming was put into effect, through Christ, for the salvation of the elect. In the New Covenant, the promise was ratified. Christ had now come; Christ had now died and been raised; the gift of salvation was "signed, sealed and delivered".

This is not to say that the New Covenant was only effective upon its institution in time. It was always the way of salvation for all true believers: "There was grace given in an eminent manner unto many holy persons under the old testament, and all true believers had true, real, saving grace communicated unto them."[116] But from its "solemn confirmation" it became the fulfilment of all that had gone before. It became "the entire rule of the church's faith, obedience and worship in all things". [117] The church then "enjoyed all the spiritual benefits of the promise".[118] No longer did believers need to live or worship under the burdensome Mosaic Covenant. This had served its purpose and was abrogated – without annulling the underlying principles of the Covenants of Works (requiring perfect obedience) and Grace (applying Christ's obedience to his people). The new and only way of worship was "spiritual, rational and plainly subservient unto the ends of the covenant itself".[119]

Owen's main burden, in his commentary on Hebrews 8:6, is to explain how the New Covenant is superior to the Mosaic Covenant. He finds seventeen differences, as he compares their dates, place and manner of execution; their mediators and subject-matter; their formalising; their priests and sacrifices; their ends and effects; the grant and dispensation of the Holy Spirit; their

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[114] Owen, *Hebrews*, 6:71.
[115] *Ibid.*, 6:64, 74.
[116] *Ibid.*, 6:72, 77.
[117] *Ibid.*, 6:64.
[118] *Ibid.*, 6:75.
[119] *Ibid.*, 6:73.

external and internal kingdoms; their shadowy and real natures; their extension among the nations; their efficacy; and their duration.[120]

He finds the New Covenant to be superior in every respect. The one merely "discovered" (revealed) sin and pointed to Christ, while threatening death for those who neglected him or pursued self-salvation in works of the law. The other brought people to the Christ who had accomplished for them all that the Covenant of Works required, through his obedience and suffering.[121] It gave freedom and liberty to the subjects of his kingdom, by declaring "the love, grace and mercy of God… [therewith giving] repentance, remission of sin and life eternal."[122] It granted them the "unspeakable privilege" of the indwelling Holy Spirit, who brought about the great expansion of the church from one small nation to "all nations under heaven".[123] In all these things, "the state of the church under the New Covenant excels that under the old".[124]

The New Covenant is then the end of the logical and temporal progression described above – at least, almost.[125] It was founded eternally in the Covenant of Redemption. It was founded temporally in and upon the Covenant of Works and Covenant of Grace. It was manifested in the "proto-evangelium" of Genesis 3:15, the Abrahamic Covenant and then the Mosaic Covenant. It was formally and fully established and ratified by the death and resurrection of Christ.

VIII.   Was Owen, then, a dichotomist or a trichotomist?

We may return now to the question of Owen's allegedly ambiguous position on the Mosaic covenant. Was it an expression of one of the two over-arching covenants, or in a class of its own? Beeke and Jones seek to answer the question, "Is Owen's federal theology dichotomous or trichotomous?"[126] They lean away from the conclusions of Rehnman and Ferry that it is trichotomous, saying that in one sense "Owen is better understood as a dichotomist rather than a trichotomist". [127] A page later, with some reservations, they say "Owen may possibly be described as a trichotomist"; but there they also suggest that his schema may "actually [be] fourfold or fivefold, if the… covenant of redemption is included".[128] Their final conclusion is that "the customary labels may not be helpful in describing the thought of one who produced his own

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[120] Owen, *Hebrews*, 6:87-97.

[121] *Ibid.*, 6:90.

[122] *Ibid.*, 6:91.

[123] *Ibid.*, 6:93-97.

[124] *Ibid.*, 6:99.

[125] "When we come to heaven and the full enjoyment of God, there shall be no use of any covenant any more, seeing we shall be in eternal rest" – *ibid.*, 6:66.

[126] Beeke and Jones, *A Puritan Theology*, 282, 303.

[127] *Ibid.*, 302.

[128] *Ibid.*, 303.

'minority report' among the various interpretations of the seventeenth-century orthodox reformed", suggesting that his theology, because of its complexity, really stands on its own.[129]

The arguments of Beeke and Jones, Rehnman and Ferry do not sit easily with my summary of Owen's view of the covenants outlined above.[130] I will explain my disagreement with each in turn, taking Rehnman first because Beeke and Jones refer to his terminology.[131]

1)   Rehnman

In his essay, Rehnman states: "Owen follows the trichotomist federal theology, possibly in particular the Cameronian version... He formulates a distinct and separate covenant for the Mosaic era and thus adheres to the threefold covenantal structure."[132] John Cameron was a Saumur theologian, who argued that "there is one covenant of nature, one of grace, and one subservient to the covenant of grace (which in Scripture is called the 'old covenant')." [133] According to Rehnman, Cameron wished to distinguish between the Covenant of Works, the Covenant of Grace as it existed merely in the form of a "promise" (meaning the Mosaic Covenant) and the Covenant of Grace in its final form as it was "promulgated and confirmed" (meaning the New Covenant). Cameron's motive was to "pave... the way for a distinct and lower status for the old covenant [and] emphasise the supreme revelation of grace in Christ".[134]

Owen shared that motive. Indeed, that was the major theme of his commentary on Hebrews 8:6. He also regarded the Mosaic Covenant as a distinct and formally-enacted covenant, not merely a promissory covenant and not a "mere administration" of the Covenant of Grace, as Rehnman rightly notes.[135]

But is that enough to establish Rehnman's assertion that Owen is a trichotomist? I do not think so. The Cameronian view as presented by Rehnman suggests that the Covenants of Works, Moses and Grace represent God's way of dealing with man in three successive post-lapsarian

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[129] Beeke and Jones, *A Puritan Theology*, 294, 303.

[130] Both Beeke and Jones, and Rehnman, in places misread Owen, saying that he is speaking of one covenant when he is in fact speaking of another. Beeke and Jones, 275, lines 12-13, refer to the New Covenant, though Owen is in fact speaking of the Covenant of Grace as awaiting formalisation; and Rehnman, 304, speaks of the Old Testament not having "full covenantal status", though again Owen is speaking of the Covenant of Grace.

[131] Beeke and Jones, *A Puritan Theology*, 295.

[132] Rehnman, *Is the Narrative of Redemptive History Trichotomous or Dichotomous?*, 302.

[133] Cameron, *De triplici Dei*, 7, cited by Rehnman, 298.

[134] Rehnman, *Is the Narrative of Redemptive History Trichotomous or Dichotomous?*, 298. For the purpose of this article, I will assume that Rehnman has fairly and adequately, albeit briefly, summarised Cameron's position.

[135] Rehnman, *Is the Narrative of Redemptive History Trichotomous or Dichotomous?*, 297.

dispensations: the first requiring works; the next promising grace; the last delivering grace. But emphasising this dispensation-*trichotomy* has the effect of understating the soteriology-*dichotomy* that is of greater significance. It also blurs the distinction between the Covenant of Grace and the New Covenant that Owen carefully maintains.[136] Owen strongly maintains the superiority of the New Covenant. But his structure also gives full weight to the antithetical yet co-foundational principles of Covenants of Works and Grace, which principles then flow through all of the distinct historic covenants until they find fulfilment in the New Covenant.[137] The four covenants that Rehnman discusses cannot be reduced to three without loss, nor can Owen be squeezed into Cameron's mould without loss.

2) Beeke and Jones

Analysing the position of Beeke and Jones is difficult because they use "dichotomous" in different senses in different places. In one place, they say that Owen has a "dichotomous view of the old and new covenants".[138] Elsewhere they say that the dichotomy is between the Covenants of Works and Grace.[139] As they are interacting – and disagreeing – with Rehnman (for whom "dichotomy" sets the Covenant of Works against the Old and New Covenants of Grace) it would have been preferable to keep to the latter sense. In that latter sense – distinguishing between the Covenants of Works and Grace – the term "dichotomous" then expresses "the majority view of Reformed theologians", being that "the Sinaitic covenant and the new covenant were not different covenants, but only different administrations of the one and the same covenant of grace".[140] In other words, they say that the "majority view" was that the Mosaic Covenant was merely an expression of the Covenant of Grace.

Beeke and Jones do not state Owen's position on this entirely accurately, with the result that the difference between Owen and "the majority" is exaggerated. First, they say that his argument was "that the old and new covenants are *not different administrations* of the covenant of grace, but two distinct covenants".[141] In fact Owen is quite willing to say that the Mosaic and New Covenants are "different administrations".[142] But what he consistently says is that they are not "only" or "merely" different administrations. That is

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[136] Beeke and Jones rightly note this point: *A Puritan Theology*, 297.

[137] I have illustrated this by means of two arrows in the diagram in the Appendix.

[138] *Ibid.*, 298.

[139] *Ibid.*, 294.

[140] Rehnman, *Is the Narrative of Redemptive History Trichotomous or Dichotomous?*, 297.

[141] Beeke and Jones, *A Puritan Theology*, 298, my emphasis.

[142] See, for example, Owen, *Hebrews*, 6:71-73, including the reference to "each administration" of the Covenant of Grace, 6:73.

because Scripture "plainly and expressly" calls them distinct testaments or covenants.[143] He is not willing to call them "mere administrations" for the sake of emphasising the unity of Scripture, because it is not faithful to Scripture to do so. It may seem a small point, but it is not a trivial one for Owen. As Rehnman notes, he uses "emotive language" in refuting it.[144] I will come back to its significance.

Secondly, Beeke and Jones say that Owen understands the Mosaic Covenant as "coincid[ing] with the covenant of works" and being "abstracted from [Christ]". They contrast him with Turretin, who saw that the Mosaic Covenant could also be understood "in order [i.e. relation] to Christ". Turretin (unlike Owen, they imply) saw that abstraction as unwarranted because he understood that the Mosaic Covenant had a *usus pedagogicus*, driving sinners to Christ. They say, "Owen separates Sinai altogether from the covenant of grace because he understands the old covenant only in its legal aspect."[145] But in so saying that they have overly focussed on those parts of Owen which emphasise the discontinuities between the Mosaic and New Covenants. It is true that Owen's primary purpose in his exposition of Hebrews 8:6 was to show the superiority of the New; but they have given inadequate weight to what he says about the continuities,[146] although their subsequent discussion of "Sinai's function" is essentially accurate.

In the circumstances it is perhaps not surprising that Beeke and Jones struggle to reconcile Owen's supposedly trichotomistic exposition of Hebrews 8:6 and with his soteriologically-dichotomistic exposition of Hebrews 7:9-10.[147] I have already stated the solution to the puzzle in the context of Rehnman's essay: the dichotomistic principles of the Covenants of Works and Grace flow through *all* of the distinct historic covenants until they find resolution and fulfilment in the New Covenant. It is true that the Mosaic Covenant is a distinct and inferior covenant; but Beeke and Jones have understated the crucial lines of continuity that Owen insists upon. Four covenants cannot be squeezed into two any more successfully than they can be squeezed into three.

What alignment, then, is there between Owen and "the majority"? Is he out on a limb, as Beeke and Jones suggest? Not really: he would have had no difficulty in endorsing the soteriologically-dichotomistic Articles 7.2-7.4 of the Westminster Confession of Faith.[148] He led the drafting of the Savoy

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[143] Owen, *Hebrews*, 6:76.

[144] Rehnman, *Is the Narrative of Redemptive History Trichotomous or Dichotomous?*, 303; Owen, *Hebrews*, 6:76.

[145] Beeke and Jones, *A Puritan Theology*, 299.

[146] See point 7 under the heading "The Mosaic Covenant", above.

[147] Ibid., 302.

[148] These confessions, and also the London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1677/1689, are helpfully set out side by side at www.proginosko.com/docs/wcf_sdfo_lbcf.html#WCF7.

Declaration, along with Thomas Goodwin who attended the Westminster Assembly. There is no doubt that Owen approved the modest revisions of the Westminster Confession, whether or not the wording was all his.[149] In any event, these articles are consistent with his taxonomy as summarised above.

Westminster Confession Articles 7.5-6 say "There are not… two covenants of grace differing in substance, but one and the same under various dispensations"; and they refer to the "law" administration of Moses "called the Old Testament" and to the "gospel" administration "called the New Testament". This aligns with the "one covenant, two administrations" formula of the majority of divines. But does it thereby exclude Owen's view, of one Covenant of Grace issuing in two administrations, the administrations themselves being in the form of formal διαθήκαι? Not at all. The Savoy version of Article 7.5 is shorter, but still refers to one Covenant of Grace issuing in Old and New Testament administrations.

It seems, therefore, that Beeke and Jones' suggestion that Owen was out on a limb is over-stated. Owen insisted on calling a covenant a covenant, where Scripture does so; subject to that, his own assessment appears correct: that the difference concerns "expression of the same truth [rather] than any real contradiction".[150]

3) Ferry

The difference between Owen and "the majority" is also over-stated by Ferry. He argues that, for Owen, the discontinuities between the Mosaic Covenant and the Covenant of Grace "are so antithetical as to require extracting the Mosaic covenant from the stream of the covenant of grace".[151] His reasoning, drawn only from Owen's *Exposition of Hebrews*, is similar to that of Beeke and Jones, discussed above. His conclusion, like Rehnman's, is that Owen can be aligned with Cameron as a trichotomist.[152] I dissent for the reasons given above.

IX.   Conclusion

Owen's view of the covenants is not simplistic, nor simple, but is exegetically driven and consistently expressed across his works. He explains the necessity and purpose of the one eternal and over-arching Covenant of Redemption,

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[149] A. Thomson, "Life of Dr. Owen," *Works* vol. 1, Banner of Truth, lxix; S. Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian life*, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987, 14.
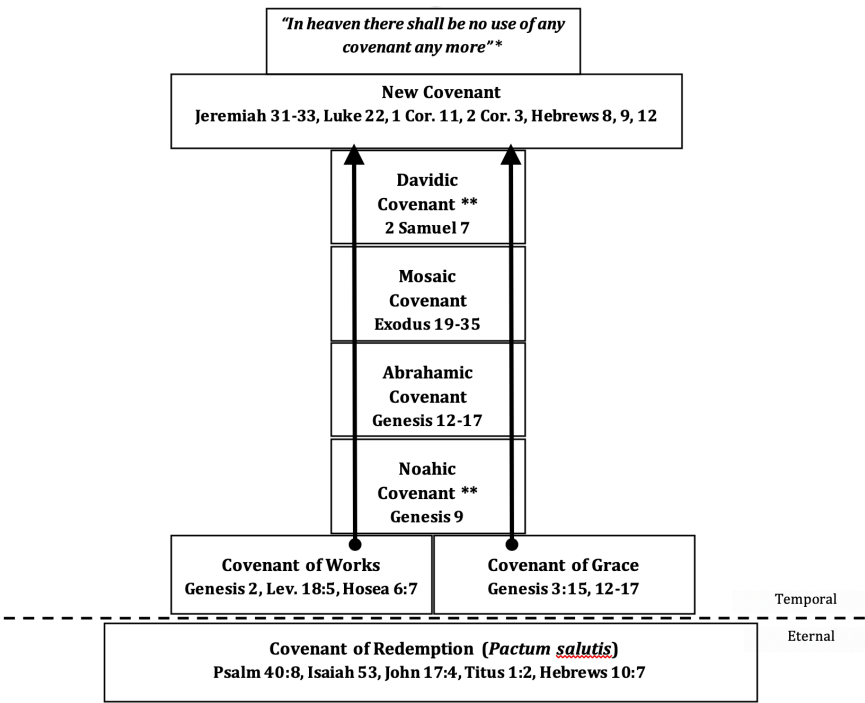
[150] Owen, *Hebrews*, 6:71.

[151] Ferry, "Works in the Mosaic Covenant" in *The Law is not of Faith*, 82.

[152] *Ibid.*, 101. In the footnotes of his essay, Ferry only refers to Owen's *Hebrews*, though he does refer to one other work in his appendix. Although I disagree with his conclusion on Owen, his survey is very helpful.

which leads to two over-arching temporal covenants reflecting the only two routes to salvation that God has ever proposed to man, those of Works and Grace. Upon these foundations are established the various historically-enacted covenants that are "expressly called covenants" in Scripture, each reflecting the Works and Grace principles.[153] These culminate in the New Covenant, under which Christ performs on behalf of his people all of the works required of them under the Covenant of Works, thereby graciously bestowing upon them all "excellent and glorious... privileges", though in themselves they are unworthy sinners.[154]

By distinguishing between the over-arching covenants and the historic covenants we can better understand and teach the continuities and discontinuities between them. We can avoid the reductionism implicit in the dichotomous and trichotomous assessments that are discussed above. And we can rejoice, as did Owen, in the great plan of salvation, settled and promised before all ages according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will: *Soli Deo Gloria.*

Appendix: Owen's taxonomy of the covenants

"In heaven there shall be no use of any covenant any more" *

| **New Covenant** |
| Jeremiah 31-33, Luke 22, 1 Cor. 11, 2 Cor. 3, Hebrews 8, 9, 12 |

Davidic Covenant ** 2 Samuel 7
Mosaic Covenant Exodus 19-35
Abrahamic Covenant Genesis 12-17
Noahic Covenant ** Genesis 9

Covenant of Works Genesis 2, Lev. 18:5, Hosea 6:7	**Covenant of Grace** Genesis 3:15, 12-17

Temporal

Eternal

Covenant of Redemption (*Pactum salutis*) Psalm 40:8, Isaiah 53, John 17:4, Titus 1:2, Hebrews 10:7

*   Owen, *Hebrews*, 6:66.
**   Not addressed in this article.

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[153] Owen, *Hebrews*, 6:60.
[154] *Ibid.*, 6:98.

THE USE OF ENGLISH IN CROSS-CULTURAL MISSION: OBSERVATIONS FROM AFRICA

*Thorsten Prill**

This article discusses the use of the English language on the mission field in Africa today. While the learning of indigenous African languages was a must for every missionary in the past, contemporary experience shows that more and more missionaries tend to operate only in English (or some other colonial language). This development, which can be observed especially among those missionaries who speak English as their first language, has proven to be problematic. Use of English as the sole language does not assist missionaries in overcoming the cultural gap between them and the African people they have come to serve. It rather conveys an attitude of insensitivity and superiority, which only serves to further cultural distance. Consequentially, missionaries who insist on speaking English alone face the danger of remaining cultural outsiders, and risk hindering the effectiveness of their ministries. If missionaries believe the Bible is God's revelation in written form, they must then recognise how seriously God takes human language as a means of communication. Accordingly, the importance of sharing the gospel of Christ in the mother tongue of indigenous peoples, i.e. in their heart language, should again become a staple element of missionary practice today.

I. Introduction

An orphanage in southern Africa was led by both local Christians and foreign missionaries. At the leadership meetings the local African Christians usually kept very quiet while most of the talking was done by the missionaries. The latter interpreted the silence of the former as ignorance or a lack of interest in the affairs of the organisation. The truth, however, was far from that. The local Christians were very much committed to the orphanage but, amongst other

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reasons for their silence, they felt inferior to the missionaries. The missionaries fostered that feeling through their behaviour; though English was the official language of the country hardly any local person spoke it as his or her native language. For the local members of the leadership team English was a second or third language, while the missionaries from the UK and the USA were all English native speakers. Often they would use words or expressions their indigenous colleagues had never heard before. When it came to writing the minutes for the meeting a missionary would complete the task within a very short time, while for a local member of the team it would take much more effort. Missionaries usually produced all project proposals. All brochures or press releases were written or proof-read by them. In addition, the missionaries showed little interest in learning any of the local languages.[1]

II.   The Cross-cultural and Linguistic Perspectives

The Western missionaries did not see the necessity to learn any of the local languages as they were serving in a country which had English as the main official language. Local people spoke that language with varying degrees of proficiency. English was also the designated *company language* of their host organisation. The missionaries failed to recognise the struggles their African team members had with the country's main official language. Some of the Africans had only a functional command of English. In the words of de Klerk and Gough, they lacked "the more empowering cultural and critical literacies which usually operate through more prestigious forms of English".[2] Neither did the missionaries understand that using the same language, i.e. English, did not do away with the cultural differences that existed between them and their African colleagues. As Jim Harries puts it,

> Western people who engage with African partners using English are forgetting something very important… the cultural gap between them and the Africans who they are endeavouring to reach. Often they seem to assume that cultural differences disappear when one uses one language. I think this is illogical: how can cultural differences disappear as a result of someone's having learned a language? They cannot. At best they go into temporary hiding.[3]

[1] This scenario is fictitious but nonetheless represents real cases.
[2] V. de Klerk & D. Gough, "Black South African English", in R. Mesthrie (ed.), *Language in South Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 373.
[3] J. Harries, "Building Castles in the Sky: A Case for the Use of Indigenous Languages (and Resources) in Western Mission-partnerships to Africa", *Global Missiology* 13, 3 (2016), 3.

Though it was not their intention at all, by using the English language the way they did the missionaries not only exercised power over their indigenous co-leaders but also sent out a message of cultural insensitivity and communicative superiority. This message was emphasised even more by their refusal to learn a local language.

Sometimes it happens that missionaries who do not have English as their first language find themselves at the receiving end of such an attitude too. English has become the language of global Christianity.[4] This can be seen in a variety of developments. All over the world the teaching of English, for example, is used by missionaries as an evangelistic tool.[5] "Christian books, journals, and daily devotionals published in English" have, as Zoltán Dörnyei points out, an "international impact".[6] In many international mission organisations English serves as the *lingua franca*. In such organisations English native speakers often have an advantage over their colleagues; they tend to have the ability to better articulate themselves in the team language than their Brazilian, Filipino or Korean missionary colleagues.

When missionaries underestimate the power of language negative results can follow. This is especially true for those missionaries who come from English-speaking countries and who serve in a context where English is used on a daily basis though not as a first language. To speak English as one's mother tongue in such a situation means to have power. This is certainly true for those parts of Africa which were once under British rule or influence and which still use English as the language of politics, business and education.[7]

In order to avoid the mistakes described above and to overcome an attitude of superiority which is rooted in language skills (or to avoid giving the impression of having such an attitude) it is essential for missionaries to understand how problematic it can be to speak a privileged language in a multilingual context. Johannes Weiß and Thomas Schwietring write:

> In multilingual contexts, problematic constellations regularly arise from the fact that one language is elevated to the status of the official language and so the language of the elites and the powerful, while other languages are relegated to a lower status and discriminated against. This may be observed in various political and historical contexts, and invariably where a plurality

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[4] Z. Dörnyei, "The English Language and the Word of God", in M. S. Wong & S. Canagarajah (eds.), *Christian and Critical English Language Educators in Dialogue: Pedagogical and Ethical Dilemmas* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 156.

[5] A. Pennycook & S. Makoni, "The Modern Mission: The Language Effects of Christianity", *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education* 4, 1 (2005), 141.

[6] Dörnyei, "The English Language and the Word of God", 156.

[7] Cf. V. Webb, "English and Language Planning for South Africa: The Flip Side", in V. de Klerk (ed.), *Focus on South Africa* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1996), 176.

of indigenous and partly unwritten languages are subordinated to an official language in state affairs and transactions. This is particularly clear in post-colonial Africa, where the problems of de-colonialisation amidst the continuance of colonial power structures may be read off from the linguistic relations.[8]

In African countries which have English or another European language as their official language, speakers of local languages can easily feel that their mother tongues are inferior. Harries comments:

> Others familiar with the African scene are likely to know the almost universal practice in schools on the continent. It is also one of those practices that is kept hidden. I am referring to punishment given in primary and secondary schools for children who deign [sic] to use an unapproved language within the school grounds… One day, I found a boy of about 14 making a cardboard mask of the face of a cow. "What's the mask for?" I asked. He responded, "The teacher told me to make it. If someone speaks mother-tongue in school, they will be forced to stand in the corner of the class wearing this mask." Children are taught from an early age that their own languages are inferior. The teacher's punishment above implies that they resemble the mooing of cattle when they speak their own language. This has become part of the language policy, at least in practice if not in theory, of numerous African states. European languages such as English are seen as being the way forward, whereas African languages are associated with poverty and primitivity.[9]

As a result, more and more Africans are giving up on their own language without being able to communicate in English or another colonial language at mother tongue level. Niyi Osundare speaks of the danger of "alingualism", which he describes as "a terrible state of disarticulation in which one has sacrificed his mother tongue in pursuit of a foreign language that he is not in a position to master to an appreciative degree".[10]

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[8] J. Weiß & T. Schwietring, "The Power of Language: A Philosophical-sociological Reflection", (Goethe-Institut, 2016), http://www.goethe.de/lhr/prj/mac/msp/en1253450.htm; Date of access: 15.03.2019.

[9] J. Harries, "The Importance of Using Indigenous Languages", *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 53, 4 (2017), https://missionexus.org/the-importance-of-using-indigenous-languages/; Date of access: 18.03.2019.

[10] N. Osundare, "Joined at the Hip: African Literature and Africa's Body Politic", in T. Olaniyan (ed.), *State and Culture in Postcolonial Africa: Enchantings* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), 49.

For English-speaking missionaries who serve in such situations it is crucial that they are aware of the challenges local people and some of their fellow missionaries face by using a language which is not their first language and the role a person's first language plays in general:

> The first language acquired by an individual necessarily becomes his "natural language". Everything that he later thinks and decides can be analysed and interpreted by his understanding, but finally he must always reach back to the level of his natural language. This observation touches on the double function of the first language. The first language lays the foundation for the understanding, its possibilities of grasping things and expressing them. And at the same time it socialises the individual.[11]

One way of gaining an awareness of the challenges that local people and fellow missionaries face is for English-speaking missionaries to learn the local language or, in a multi-lingual context, at least one of the local languages. By learning a local language it will be easier for them to identify with local Africans and missionary colleagues; it will help English-speaking missionaries to understand the difficulties and limitations which occur when people are compelled to operate in a second or even third or fourth language. They will also gain new insights into a local culture which will enrich them personally and better equip them for their ministries.[12] Learning a local language will even help them when they communicate in English with local people. Harries explains why that is the case:

> It is important to remember that African uses of English and other European languages invariably build on their people's knowledge of their own tongues. That is to say, when people say a word in English, they are often implicitly translating from their mother tongue. This means that to understand people's use of English in depth requires a knowledge of their mother tongue.[13]

Native speakers of Oshiwambo, the most common Namibian indigenous language, for example, use the word "paife" which is usually translated into English as "now". But "paife" has a slightly different meaning from the word "now" as it is used by most speakers of American or British English. Whereas for them, "now" means something like "right at this very moment in time",

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[11] Weiß & Schwietring, "The Power of Language: A Philosophical-sociological Reflection".

[12] Cf. P. Switz & M. Lessard-Clouston, "Is English a Blessing or Curse in Missions", *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 51, 4 (2015), https://missionexus.org/is-english-a-blessings-or-a-curse-in-missions/; Date of access: 18.03.2019.

[13] Harries, "The Importance of Using Indigenous Languages".

"paife" can mean anything between "in a few minutes" and "sometime today". [14] If an Oshiwambo native speaker communicates in (Namibian) English and uses the English word "now" it is very likely that he has the latter meaning in mind. The result is likely to be confusion and misunderstanding if he is talking to a foreigner. To come closer to the British or American sense of "now" an Oshiwambo speaker would say "paife, paife " or even "paife, paife, paife" in his mother tongue or "now, now, now" in English, which can be equally confusing for any speaker of British or American English who does not know any Oshiwambo. Similarly, to figure out, by using the English language, how everyone on a Namibian homestead is related might be a real challenge, as the person who is introduced as "my mother" in English can be the birth mother, one of the grandmothers or any of the birth mother's sisters.

By learning local African languages missionaries not only avoid misunderstandings (and even conflicts), but also demonstrate in practical terms that these languages are in no way inferior to English or any other European language and, by inference, that the Africans who speak these local languages are in no way inferior to foreigners.[15] Missionaries, however, who insist on speaking English only, face the danger of remaining what they were when they first entered their country of service: cultural outsiders. Without learning a local language they might still gain some cultural knowledge but in most cases it will be rather superficial. Without a local language they will not become part of the African community and can expect to misunderstand the people they have come to serve and to be misunderstood by them.

In his book *Cross-cultural Servanthood: Serving the World in Christlike Humility* Duane Elmer underlines the importance of language learning. [16] According to Elmer, to learn another's language means to value that person;[17] not to learn their language means to reject that person or, as Lianne Roembke puts it, "Expecting the other to learn your language is just another form of cultural imperialism." [18] For missionaries language learning is therefore a must. Elmer writes: "We cannot separate ourselves from the language we speak. It is how we define ourselves and make meaning out of life. Not to know my language is not to know me. Even when short-term missionaries make an effort to learn at least some greetings and a farewell, it communicates that they value others."[19] To illustrate this point Elmer tells the following story:

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[14] Cf. T. Crane, K. Lindgren-Streicher & A. Wingo, *Hai ti! A Beginner's Guide to Oshikwanyama*, 33, wingolog.org/pub/hai-ti/hai-ti.pdf.; Date of access: 22.04.2019.

[15] Cf. A. Bamgbose, *Language and Exclusion: The Consequences of Language Policies in Africa* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2000), 48.

[16] D. Elmer, *Cross-cultural Servanthood: Serving the World in Christlike Humility* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006).

[17] *Ibid.*, 66-67.

[18] L. Roembke, *Building Credible Multicultural Teams* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2000), 26.

[19] Elmer, *Cross-cultural Servanthood*, 67.

When my wife and I lived in South Africa, we occasionally journeyed north into Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia), the land of her birth, the home of her missionary mother and the burial place of her father. The first time we entered Zimbabwe we stopped for gas, and a black Zimbabwean served us. I spoke to him in English (probably his third language after Ndebele and Shona), and he dutifully attended to our car. My wife got out of the car and greeted him in Shona. A huge smile lit up his face and his body quickened with joy. Never have I seen such an immediate transformation, all because a white person spoke his language. He felt accepted – valued.[20]

Speaking the heart language of people is crucial for missionaries. Speaking people's heart language is an important indication that someone belongs to a community, that she or he is a cultural insider.[21] A host people will forgive missionaries many of their cross-cultural mistakes if they speak the native language.

III.   The Biblical Perspective

Christians believe in the God who communicates through human language; he uses human words to address human beings. Having language is a central aspect of his personhood, or as Gene Veith puts it, "God is no abstract force, as in many religions, but a Person. As such, He thinks, loves and expresses Himself, so that he has language. He created humans beings in His image, as persons, and so we too have language."[22] The premise that God speaks is pervasive in both the Old and the New Testament.[23] In the Old Testament we find many passages which claim to be the actual word of God. Often these passages are introduced by phrases like "God said" or "The LORD said".[24] In other Old Testament texts we read how prophets claim to speak the word of God on his behalf. These prophecies usually begin with phrases like "This is what the LORD says" or "The word of the LORD came to me".[25] The New Testament tells us that Jesus' words had a unique authority and power.[26] Jesus

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[20] Elmer, *Cross-cultural Servanthood*, 67.

[21] P. Keidel, *Career-defining Crises in Mission: Navigating the Major Decisions of Cross-cultural Service* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2005), 29.

[22] G. Veith, *The Spirituality of the Cross: The Way of the First Evangelicals* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 34-35.

[23] M. D. Thompson, *A Clear and Present Word: The Clarity of Scripture* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2006), 62.

[24] E.g. Genesis 1:3, 1:29; Exodus 4:11; 33:17; Leviticus 6:24; Numbers 4:1; Joshua 1:1.

[25] E.g. Isaiah 43:1, 48:17, 56:1; Jeremiah 31:2; 33:2; Ezekiel 12:21; 12:26.

[26] E.g. Matthew 5:21; John 6:63, 15:3; Mark 13:31.

asserted that his teachings came straight from God the Father: "For I did not speak on my own, but the Father who sent me commanded me to say all that I have spoken."[27]

God speaks because he wants to be known by human beings. He speaks to establish and sustain a relationship with them. The language he speaks is not some sort of unintelligible, heavenly language. No, God uses real human language which consists of real words and grammar.[28] In other words, God uses language which is accessible to his creatures. Mark Thompson writes,

> Human beings are addressed in human words that have their origin in God, in order that by repentance and faith in the promise of God we might be included in the salvation Jesus Christ has secured by his death and resurrection. Yet unlike those who stood at the base of Mount Sinai, or those who accompanied Jesus during his earthly ministry, or even those who first heard the prophets proclaim the word of the Lord or the apostles who preached as ambassadors for Christ, Christians in the twenty-first century have before them a book, a text.[29]

In order to make this book, i.e. the Bible, available in as many languages as possible, a large number of missionaries have worked hard for more than two centuries now.[30] They have done so because they realised that if their mission was to be successful people needed to hear and read the good news of Jesus in their heart language. Patrick Johnstone notes, "It is almost impossible to conceive of a strong church within a people that has none of the Bible translated into their own language."[31] Churches that do not have the Bible in their mother tongue struggle to grow spiritually.[32] They find it, for example, difficult to refute false teaching and to avoid syncretism.

In the New Testament, the importance of communicating the gospel in the heart language of people is emphasised by the evangelist Luke. In Acts 2 he tells us how Jesus' disciples, being filled with Holy Spirit, began to speak in other languages on the day of Pentecost. Luke also informs us about the reaction of those who were witnessing this manifestation of God's Spirit:

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[27] John 12:49-50.

[28] Veith, *The Spirituality of the Cross*, 35.

[29] Thompson, *A Clear and Present Word*, 70.

[30] S. H. Skreslet, *Comprehending Mission: The Questions, Methods, Themes, Problems, and Prospects of Missiology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2012), 38.

[31] P. Johnstone, "Covering the Globe", in R. D. Winter & S. C. Hawthorne (eds.), *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, Fourth Edition, (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2009), 551.

[32] B. F. Grimes, "From Every Language", in R. D. Winter & S.C. Hawthorne (eds), *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, Fourth Edition, (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2009), 566.

> When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in
> bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being
> spoken. Utterly amazed, they asked: "Aren't all these who are
> speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in
> our native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of
> Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia
> and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors
> from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and
> Arabs – we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own
> tongues!"[33]

Luke leaves us in no doubt that the languages spoken here by the Galilean
disciples were recognised human languages and not some ecstatic
utterances.[34] He stresses that Jews from all over the Diaspora identified the
words which they heard as being in their own home languages. John Stott
points out that the glossolalia phenomenon of Acts 2 should be interpreted as
"a deliberate and dramatic reversal of the curse of Babel"[35]. There people had
been separated by language because of their rebellion against God.[36] Because
of their desire to be like God, he caused them to speak in many different
languages and dispersed them throughout the earth. However, on the day of
Pentecost the language barrier was overcome in a supernatural way. This
served "as a sign that the nations would now be gathered together in Christ".[37]
For Luke, the glossolalia phenomenon was clearly pointing to the church's
global mission, or as William Neil puts it,

> He makes it plain in what follows that he saw in the Pentecostal
> utterances of the disciples a foreshadowing of the universal
> mission of the Church, when men of all nations would be brought
> into a unity of understanding through the preaching of the Gospel
> in the power of the Holy Spirit. There was added point in this,
> since it was said that the angels at Sinai had proclaimed the Law
> to all nations in their own tongues.[38]

The glossolalia phenomenon demonstrates God's acceptance of all languages
and the importance he places on them as a means of communicating his

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[33] Acts 2:6-11.

[34] Cf. I. H. Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Leicester: IVP, 1999), 69.

[35] J. Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Leicester: IVP, 2000), 68.

[36] Genesis 11:1-9.

[37] Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 68.

[38] W. Neil, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 73.

truths.[39] Timothy Tennent points out that in Jerusalem the followers of Jesus were "baptized into the reality of the infinite translatability of the gospel for every language and culture".[40] Pentecost is, as Tennent writes, more than a sociological event.[41] It is a "theological statement" which demonstrates "God's ongoing commitment to translate the good news of Jesus Christ into the heart language of every culture in the world".[42]

IV.   Conclusion

Traditionally, "[t]he mastery of local language(s) in the mission field has been seen by Protestant mission societies as an important, if not the most important, tool for the successful evangelization of non-Christian peoples."[43] In order to reach people one has to speak their language. That was the understanding right from the start of the Protestant mission movement. For missionaries to rely on English, French or Portuguese, even if these languages are widely spoken in their mission context today, means to limit themselves and to erect unnecessary barriers. Language learning, even though it is usually challenging and time consuming, should still be a must, especially for long-term missionaries. In his book *What in the World Is God Doing*, C. Gordon Olson demonstrates this when he tells the story of Cameron Townsend, who became one of the founders of the Wycliffe Bible Translators:

> Cameron Townsend was a missionary to Guatemala during the First World War who was impressed with the difficulty of reaching Indians through a Spanish language which they only poorly understood. He noted that his missionary colleagues were naively putting dependence upon a trade or literary language to reach the people, rather than through the language of the heart. He found that selling Spanish Bibles to the Indians was practically useless. The question from an Indian which really unsettled him was, "Why if your God is so smart, hasn't he learned our language?" Townsend spent the next thirteen years learning the

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[39] K. J. Franklin & C. J. P. Niemandt, "Vision 2025 and the Bible Translation Movement", *HTS Theological Studies* 69, 1 (2013), 3.

[40] T. C. Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-first Century* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2010), 412.

[41] *Ibid.*, 335.

[42] *Ibid.*,335. It is instructive to note that in Acts 22:2, the crowd quiets down and gives Paul a hearing when they are spoken to in their own native language. Further, the New Testament was written in Greek by Aramaic-speakers. The obvious reason for this is that they wanted to communicate to those whose native tongue was Greek.

[43] E. Eichholzer, "Missionary Linguistics on the Gold Coast: Wrestling with Language", in P. Harries & D. Maxwell (eds.), *The Spiritual in the Secular: Missionaries and Knowledge about Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 72.

intricacies of the Cakchiquel language and translating the New Testament.[44]

Many Africans could ask twenty-first-century Australian, East Asian, European or North American missionaries a similar question: "Why, if your ministry is so essential for the church in our country, haven't you learned our language?"

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[44] C.G. Olson, *What in the World Is God Doing? The Essentials of Global Missions: An Introductory Guide* (Cedar Knolls: Global Gospel Publishers), 176.

Book Reviews

Liberty in the Things of God: The Christian Origins of Religious Freedom
Robert Louis Wilken, Yale University Press, 2019, 248pp, £17.44 h/b (Amazon);
Kindle £13.53

Contemporary received wisdom says that religious freedom is the fruit of the Enlightenment. As the story goes, following the Reformation, Christians persecuted each other, on both sides of the divide, and set in motion the so-called wars of religion. We had to wait till the middle of the seventeenth century for "men with greater wisdom and less religious fervor" (1) to expound the benefits of religious freedom. Modern ideas of freedom of conscience and tolerance therefore originated with "enlightened" thinkers who realised the superiority of reason over faith and were distrustful of religious claims.

It is not difficult to see how this account is hostile towards Christianity, portraying the faith as intolerant and tending towards violence. Tolerance and freedom of religion are said to have emerged in the West as religious faith declined. It is this narrative which Robert Louis Wilken, Professor of Christian History at the University of Virginia, seeks to challenge in this, his latest book.

Wilken first takes us back to the early church. Those Christians were faced with a Roman Empire which was distrustful to say the least of foreign cults, and wanted to impose uniformity of worship, resulting in the persecution of adherents to the newly-formed faith. Tertullian used his writing gifts to defend the rights of Christians to worship as they saw fit. He was actually the first person in the history of Western civilisation to use the phrase "freedom of religion". (11). "I am not allowed to worship what I wish, but am forced to worship what I do not wish. Not even a human being would like to be honoured unwillingly", (11) he wrote, deliberately scorning forced piety.

Then came Lactantius (c. 250-c. 325) who argued that "religion cannot be imposed by force… only by words, not by blows" (20). Or again, "Laws are able to punish offences, but they are unable to punish the conscience" (20). He went on to suggest that religious acts which are forced are a mockery of God if the mind is not persuaded. The Edict of Milan in 313AD, by Constantine and his co-Emperor Licinius, allowed freedom of religion throughout the empire. Its impact was short-lived, but the ideas lived on.

By the time we get to the Middle Ages, the church was developing a theology of two powers, or two swords – that of the church and of the state. The idea of separating church and state, and therefore allowing dissenting groups to flourish, was a radical one. Pre-Reformation Christians and others "could not imagine a peaceful society divided by religious belief" (80). A

theology of conscience was also developed which allowed people to follow their consciences as long as this did not impinge on others. Pope Gregory the Great (590-604) spoke out against the persecution of Jews, writing that they should not be forced to believe, but persuaded, and criticising the practice of forced baptism (30). Ambrose argued that "The things of God are not subject to the authority of the emperor" (34).

Wilken then takes us, chapter by chapter, through the Reformation across Europe, focussing on Germany, Switzerland, France, the Netherlands and finally England. In each chapter he shows how arguments for freedom of religion were made by Christians who made use of Scripture to defend the principle and often appealed to church fathers for support. Martin Luther, of course, famously defended himself by saying "My conscience is captive to the Word of God... to go against conscience is neither right nor safe" (52). Wilken also quotes from the journals of Caritas Pirckheimer, abbess of a convent which resisted the reformers' attempts to convert them. "We cannot find in our conscience that we should believe and hold fast to what everyone wants us to", she writes (50). Her appeal to conscience echoes that of Luther. Both sides of this divide, therefore, were appealing to the dictates of conscience and thus for freedom in how they worshipped.

One of the highlights of the book is an anonymous tract, *Good Admonition to the Good Citizens of Brussels* (1579) which introduced the idea of a "natural right" of religious freedom (109-110). Another is Thomas Helwys, founder of the first Baptist church in England, and author of *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity* (1612). Helwys went so far as to argue for religious freedom not only for other dissenting Christians, but also for Jews, Catholics, and Muslims (140). His is not simply a defence of the rights of Christians, but a more thorough defence of the principle of religious freedom for all. Helwys was the first to argue comprehensively in this way. He was followed by Roger Williams, who in *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution* (1644) aimed to show that the Scriptures offer no support for the persecution of religious believers (148). Once again, he was not just talking about Christians, but pagans, Jews, Turks, and even antichristian consciences, arguing that God has clearly allowed such worship and that uniformity of religion in a civil state is contrary to the will of God because it confounds civil and religious matters. John Owen, following the 1662 Act of Uniformity, also wrote eloquently on toleration, reaching back to Tertullian, Lactantius, and others to argue that "liberty of conscience is a natural right" (164).

The book concludes with John Locke, who studied under Owen at Oxford. It was said that all Owen's students, including Locke, promised to defend "liberty of conscience" (169). Locke's *A Letter Concerning Toleration* argues forcefully for freedom of religion from both Scripture and reason. He advances no new arguments and clearly stands on the shoulders of Owen and many earlier Christian writers in making his case. Unlike Owen and others, though,

Locke does not cite earlier Christian writers such as Tertullian, Lactantius or Gregory the Great to support his argument. Wilken concludes:

> Locke's ideas on religious freedom cannot be understood without reference to Christianity. The *Letter Concerning Toleration* is, however, the work of a philosopher informed by Christian thinking, not a theological treatise. No doubt that is one reason it came to be held in such high regard in the generations after Locke's death. In his hands ideas first advanced by Christian thinkers came to be seen as reasonable without reference to their origins." (179)

Wilken has manifestly succeeded in demonstrating that ideas of religious freedom did not originate in the seventeenth century or in the writings of John Locke. It was early Christians who first defended freedom of conscience and freedom of religion. It was they who first advocated for a separation of church and state which paved the way for freedom of religion within a state. Freedom of religion was not born of religious scepticism, but of faith.

This book is a much needed, and valuable counter to the prevailing narrative on religious freedom. It does not offer an up-to-date defence of the concept, or a discussion of its limits, but ably defends the Christian origins of religious freedom. Al Mohler, in a revealing interview with the author, describes it as "the most important book written on religious liberty in a very, very long time."[1] It comes highly recommended for those interested in religious freedom or church history.

Tim Dieppe
Head of Public Policy, Christian Concern

Getting at Jesus: A Comprehensive Critique of Neo-Atheist Nonsense about the Jesus of History
Peter S. Williams, Wipf & Stock, 2019, 454pp, £17.95 (Amazon), £7.64 (Kindle)

Peter S. Williams is based in Southampton, England, and is a Christian philosopher and apologist who has published several books on apologetics and philosophy. The subtitle of this book is very deliberate and intentional as one might expect from a philosopher. The book is intended to be "comprehensive" – which following the dictionary definition means that it includes or deals with "all or nearly all aspects of something" (xi). He intends to demonstrate beyond reasonable doubt that neo-atheists' treatment of the

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[1] https://albertmohler.com/2019/09/17/robert-louis-wilken

historical Jesus is, in a phrase borrowed from Jeremy Bentham, "nonsense on stilts".

Neo-atheists, or the new atheist movement, arose after the twin towers terrorist attacks of 9/11. They expound an aggressive form of atheism that does not merely disagree with belief in God, but despises such faith. The key players are Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, Victor Stenger and others. Williams points out that although "they generally reject moral objectivism and/or libertarian free will", they manage to "portray themselves as engaging in a heroic moral struggle to defend civilisation against the evil irrationality of religion" (9). They are not interested in writing academic articles, but in producing best-sellers aimed at commanding cultural attention.

Williams' strategy in this book is frequently to quote one of the new atheists and then to take apart the quote phrase by phrase and point by point. A good example is the quotation used on page 1 from Victor Stenger:

> Physical and historical evidence might have been found for the
> miraculous events and the important narratives of the Scriptures.
> For example, Roman records might have been found for an
> earthquake in Judea at the time of a certain crucifixion ordered by
> Pontius Pilate... In fact, there isn't a shred of independent evid-
> ence that Jesus Christ is a historical figure.

Williams proceeds to dissect these claims and to critique the logic of insisting on "independent evidence". What was new to me at least was the recently published geological evidence for an earthquake in Judea around the time of the crucifixion which was published in an academic geology journal (5). This serves to illustrate how up-to-date this book is in its citations and arguments.

The book is structured in five chapters. Chapter 1, "Getting at Jesus" introduces the new atheists, sketching who they are and their perspectives. It then moves on to focus on the denial of miracles in a thorough analysis of the question of whether miracles can ever be believed or even allowed in discussions about religion.

Chapter 2 moves on to the historicity of Jesus and thoroughly rebuts the ridiculous statements of neo-atheists that Jesus was "not historical", or even that he was "probably fictional" (87). This may be a ridiculous thing for an academic to say, but surveys show that 25% of 18-34-year-olds in the UK believe that Jesus was a mythical or fictional character (88).

Here is another illustrative statement from Stenger that Williams demolishes point by point:

> There is not a single piece of independent historical evidence for
> the existence of Jesus or the veracity of the events described in the
> New Testament. Even the much-touted statement by the Jewish

historian Flavius Josephus is now accepted by almost all scholars
as a forgery. The paragraph in *Antiquities* that mentions Christ, his
"wonderful works", death on the cross, and appearance three
days later does not appear in earliest copies of that work and not
until the fourth century. (92)

In fact, of course, citing Gary Habermas, "at least seventeen non-Christian
writings record more than fifty details concerning the life, teachings, death
and resurrection of Jesus, plus details concerning the earliest church" (93).
Williams summarises this evidence and then proceeds to explain that Stenger
has also misrepresented the evidence from Josephus. The fourth-century
citation of that *Antiquities* paragraph is in fact the earliest of any citation of
Antiquities. The overall textual evidence for that passage is as good as for any
passage in Josephus. Williams then demonstrates with multiple quotations
that the scholarly consensus today is that the passage is substantially
authentic.

Also included in this chapter is discussion of the "James Ossuary" as
evidence for Jesus, and analysis of whether the divinity of Jesus was a late
development. This includes images of ancient wall paintings depicting Jesus in
ways that imply divinity. The chapter concludes by examining the trilemma
"Lord, Liar, Lunatic", and Dawkins' attempt to turn this into a quadrilemma.

Chapter 3 is about the historicity of the Gospels, looking at archaeological,
geographical and other evidence for them being accurate reports of what
happened at the time. The dates of each of the Gospels are extensively
examined, as well as how they were transmitted.

In Chapter 4 Williams looks at evidence for the resurrection. He follows
the usual procedure of establishing that Jesus died by crucifixion, that he was
buried, and then that the tomb was empty, and that he appeared to multiple
people. All of this is done with multiple quotations from academics on both
sides of the debate. He shows how each of these historical events match
multiple historical criteria for authenticity.

Finally, chapter 5, "Getting at the Best Explanation", rebuts various
proposed theories to account for the historical facts without accepting
Christianity. These include claiming that Jesus didn't die, and various
conspiracy and delusion theories. The conclusion to the book challenges the
neo-atheists to obey their own exhortations to seek the truth in an objective
unbiased fashion. Christianity makes truth claims that are open to historical
investigation; neo-atheists should follow their own advice and not avoid or
distort the evidence in their writings.

This is a 7"x10" book with over 450 pages of text, including over 2,000
footnotes and 45 pages of references. It contains a huge amount of valuable
information. Unfortunately, the book lacks an index, and there are only five
chapters, each of which is over 50 pages long. There is no outline showing the

overall structure of the book and its arguments. This means that it is not easy, at least in hard copy, to search for the relevant information on a particular topic.

That said, in my judgment Williams has succeeded in his aim of providing "a comprehensive critique of neo-atheist nonsense about the Jesus of History". Where this book really excels is the multiplicity of quotations from academics and other prominent authors. A substantial portion of the book consists of quotations which are all properly referenced. For example, I was struck by seven robust quotations from atheist philosophers dismissing the arguments and writings of the new atheists (16). In addition, chapter sections frequently conclude with Watch, Listen, and Read recommendations which reference YouTube videos, podcasts, internet resources, journal articles and books for further elaboration on the questions raised.

If you are looking for a one-stop comprehensive and up-to-date critique of the new atheists, look no further – this is it. I just wish the publishers had also included an index or at least an outline to make this more useful as a reference work.

Tim Dieppe
Head of Public Policy, Christian Concern

Asian Christian Theology: Evangelical Perspectives
eds. Timoteo D. Gener & Stephen T. Pardue, Langham Publishing, 2019, 354pp, £18.99 (Amazon), £7.79 (Kindle)

Across the world the gospel of Jesus is growing and this is something which should lead us to rejoice. The rapid growth of the majority-world church undoubtedly brings challenges, but there are also great blessings, such as this volume. *Asian Christian Theology: Evangelical Perspectives* is a collection of essays split into two sections addressing doctrinal themes and contemporary concerns across Asia.

There are 16 contributions spanning various contexts of the continent that have been drawn together in partnership with the Asia Theological Association and Langham Publishing. One positive to highlight before we go any further are the labours of the editors, Timoteo D. Gener and Stephen T. Pardue. They are to be commended for producing a volume which allows those outside of the Asian context easier access to some of the main areas of theological discussion and reflection among the churches throughout the region.

Each of the contributors holds firmly to evangelical orthodoxy and displays rigorous thinking regarding appropriate contextualisation of the

word of God and theological reflection in Asia. We would be remiss to make assumptions that this volume is only helpful to those who have an interest in Asia or cross-cultural mission and ministry. There is no denying that it will be very important for those engaged in these areas of service. However, this is not a parochial work for an interested minority. It is a key contribution for the global church and will be an influential text in theological discussions as we move further through the twenty-first century.

To illustrate this, here are two chapters from the book which stand out. Ivor Poobalan (Colombo Theological Seminary) discusses Christology in the Asian context, drawing our attention to the challenge of remaining biblically orthodox while being contextually comprehensible. His study notes that there are weaknesses in both the Western and Asian approaches, leading him to advocate for further reflection on how to make Christ known in pluralistic contexts – this is not a parochial issue. It is increasingly important for church leaders, theological educators, cross-cultural workers and trainee pastors to think through how we proclaim Jesus in the increasingly pluralistic European and American context.

Kar Yong Lim (Seminari Theoloji Malaysia) offers another important contribution to this volume for the world church. He addresses the central role of suffering and glory in Christian life and witness. Quite provocatively we are led to assess our own attitudes: Do we prize eloquence and power over being a suffering ambassador? None of us know exactly what will happen in the coming decades, but it is always good for the church of Jesus to be prepared for the day of suffering witness. Essays like this, from believers who are working these challenges out as a part of everyday Christian living, contain much to which we should pay attention.

More mundane but equally important are the bibliographies at the end of each essay. Having various contributors from across the Asian continent leads to a diverse mix of texts, articles and authors who are not so well known in the north-western hemisphere. As such, the spin-off is a one-stop shop of scholarly writing making this a great resources for further engagement with the global church on doctrinal and contemporary issues.

In most compilations there is an element of hit and miss and this volume is no different; each of the topics under consideration is important, but not all are as equally engaging. This down side should not deter the reader from investing in a copy of what seems likely to be a mandatory text for interacting with the global church. As noted earlier, *Asian Christian Theology* will be particularly helpful for church leaders, theologians, theology students and those involved in cross-cultural ministry.

Martin Paterson
OMF Area Representative, Scotland

Dominion: The making of the western mind
Tom Holland, Little Brown, 2019, 624pp, £16.99 h/b (Amazon), £9.99 (Kindle)

This is a big book; as it seeks to take us all the way from Xerxes crossing the Hellespont in 479 BC to AD 2017, Harvey Weinstein and the *#metoo* movement, it has to be. Tom Holland is a gifted and experienced writer, however, and this is a sure-footed and entertaining ride through the history of the Western world, a history that could have been a whole lot bigger.

Inevitably there are sweeping statements and huge selectivity but that is a virtue as much as a vice, even when your favourites are missing. His ability to make allusions and backward and forward references are a delight that enhances the reading experience. Examples would include a series of references to *Pilgrim's Progress* when talking about the Puritans, without ever mentioning Bunyan, and his statements about Winstanley the Digger of whom he writes that his "foes might dismiss him as a dreamer; but he was not the only one" and that his hope was that someday others would join the Diggers "and the world would be as one" (350). These references to John Lennon are later justified when he tells us that Lennon came to live in time where the Diggers digged on St George's Hill.

What Holland does is to choose stories, either unfamiliar but relevant ones or familiar ones that he has spun a little, to typify the periods about which he writes. The penultimate chapter takes us from 1967 to 2014 by talking only about the Beatles, Martin Luther King, Live Aid, Milingo, Tutu, Bush, Iraq and ISIS, so one can see how superficial such a work is in danger of being.

Holland writes at times very personally and wants us to know where he is coming from. Typical of many in this country perhaps, he grew up going to Sunday School and getting some sort of watered-down gospel from family and friends but rejected it all before he was old enough to grow a beard. As the years have gone by, however, he has thought about things a little more maturely and wonders if, in fact, he is more of a Christian than he ever realised. His previous works on Persians, Romans and Greeks leave him in no doubt that on the whole these people had a 'complete lack of any sense that the poor or the weak might have the slightest intrinsic value'. That disturbs him. Why? His conclusion is not that his concern is due to his human nature but that it is the result of the impact of Christianity on Western civilisation. What he aims to do in the book then is,

> to trace the course of what one Christian, writing in the third
> century AD, termed 'the flood-tide of Christ': how the belief that
> the Son of the one God of the Jews had been tortured to death on
> a cross came to be so enduringly and widely held that today most
> of us in the West are dulled to just how scandalous it originally
> was.

The book seeks to explore what made Christianity so "subversive and disruptive", how it came to saturate the Latin mind and why – for good or ill – the West, despite itself, retains its instincts.

The book is in three equal parts: The first, antiquity, covers the period up to Boniface and the conversion of the Germans. We then go, via Christendom, from Boniface to the Jesuits in China. The final section begins with the Diggers.

It is in this final section that Holland has his work cut out, even with the very broad definition of Christianity with which he is working. When dealing with Marx, he writes,

> For a self-professed materialist, he was oddly prone to seeing the world as the Church Fathers had once done: as a battleground between cosmic forces of good and evil... If, as he insisted, he offered his followers a liberation from Christianity, then it was one that seemed eerily like a recalibration of it.

Holland is hardly the first to see parallels between communism and the gospel; the fact that Richard Dawkins prefers church bells to the cry of *Allahu Akbar* is entirely subjective, as Holland himself almost admits. The only strength in such arguments is their accumulative one as together they appear to support what, at best, can only ever be a contentious hypothesis.

Holland is constantly hampered by his almost unquestioning commitment to the current scholarly consensus but he does have some few insights that you will enjoy and find stimulating. Do read the book if you can; it will rouse your thinking as well as raising useful questions in your mind.

Gary Brady
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Being a pastor: A conversation with Andrew Fuller
Michael Haykin, Brian Croft, Ian Clary, Evangelical Press, 2019, 256pp, £11.50

In his famous lectures published as *Preaching and Preachers* Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones revealed that when he was discouraged and weary in ministry he would invariably go to the eighteenth century for his reading. Many have taken his advice since he wrote that and found great refreshment and wisdom in Whitefield and Edwards and the other giants of that age when the Spirit was so powerfully at work in these islands and beyond. Reformed Baptists have discovered that one of the giants among their forefathers in the long eighteenth century was Andrew Fuller (1754-1815). This is the latest book to

seek to mine some of the golden riches available in Fuller and his writings. This time the subject is an under-explored but fascinating area, that of the ordination sermon.

At the heart of the book is a series of some 19 of the 29 extant ordination sermons and similar items preached by Fuller over the years and preserved to varying degrees and in various places. This forms the second of the three main parts of the book. The sermons themselves are on a good variety of Scriptures (Jeremiah, Ezra and Acts as well as the more obvious New Testament places) and make a number of useful points. They are supplemented by a number of additional items that together form a very useful handbook for pastoral ministry today.

Prior to that, Part I contains two items: First, an historical survey of the ordination sermon in eighteenth-century English Dissent by Professor Michael Haykin, who in recent years has done perhaps more than anyone to put the spotlight on eighteenth-century evangelicalism in general and on Fuller in particular. He usefully focuses on Presbyterian Matthew Henry, Baptist John Gill and the Congregationalist Philip Doddridge and shows where they and Fuller mesh in their concerns and emphases.

This is followed by a survey of Fuller's sermons by Andrew Fuller Centre fellow Dr Ian Clary. He picks up and outlines Fuller's main themes such as being a good man, getting one's religion from the Bible, habitually dealing with Christ, being full of the Spirit and faith and the importance of love.

After the sermons comes Part III. This is chiefly by Pastor Brian Croft. It seeks to drive home the lessons in the sermons with a number of modern pastoral applications. This is well done.

The book is further enhanced by its excellent footnotes throughout, a foreword by Jeremy Walker, ten monochrome illustrations, a time-line for Fuller and five appendices. An index would have been a useful addition. The appendices contain two relevant letters by Fuller, a description of his ordination by William Carey, a useful set of 22 study questions for use with Fuller's sermon on Barnabas and a list of all known ordination sermons published by eighteenth-century Particular Baptists. Fuller's collection of sermons is the largest known by a long way but there are 35 further items here by 21 men, from Beddome to Gill to Wallin and these might form the basis for a further work on this important but neglected subject (a fuller work one might say rather than this mere Fuller work).

It is a good idea for pastors to read at least one book a year on pastoral ministry. Why not make this your next? Better still, it would make great text for group or one-on-one study.

Gary Brady
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The Identity and Attributes of God
Terry L. Johnson, Banner of Truth, 2019, 352pp, £21.21 h/b (Amazon)

"We need to study about God because thoughts about God are inescapable, and errant thoughts about God are inevitable" asserts Terry Johnson (5). Knowing God is the primary vocation of God's people; and we must of course distinguish between *knowing about* God and *knowing* God, to which our garnered knowledge must lead.

In fifteen chapters Johnson takes us through the doctrines of the Trinity, God's attributes, his work as Creator and Preserver, as righteous judge and justifier. He discusses God's goodness, the "captain attribute" according to Stephen Charnock (242) and concludes with three heart-warming chapters on the love of God, its transforming power and our responsibility not only to reciprocate God's love but to replicate it in our lives.

This is more than a book about the doctrine of God. It is deliberately a representation of the classical doctrine as treated especially by the Puritans and is therefore enriched with quotations from them, their predecessors and successors. It is an introduction to the doctrine of God but pastorally and indeed, in places, evangelistically applied. The seasoned reader may wish for a little more detail at times – for example on topics of some contemporary debate such as subordinationism (38) or God's impassibility (81), but Johnson is not setting out to deal with contemporary controversies. This is an edifying introduction for any Christian and an uplifting refresher for the more experienced.

Read it. You will find it a delight. Give it as a gift. It will help any conscientious reader to know God better.

Mostyn Roberts
Pastor, Welwyn Evangelical Church