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Blameless Before God?

Philippians 3:6 in Context

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Paul's statement in Philippians 3:6 that he was blameless 'with respect to righteousness in the law' before his conversion has been the focus of much discussion in debates over 'covenantal nomism' and 'works righteousness' in the writings of Paul and first century Judaism. This article will examine in particular the problems that this verse raises with respect to: (1) the basis of Paul's confidence before God, and (2) universal human sinfulness and inability to keep the law. It will be argued here that Paul's (misplaced) pre-Christian basis of confidence before God included his obedience to the law. A summary of the views of two representatives of those who object to the argument will be presented before presenting the main support for this argument.

OBJECTIONS TO THE ARGUMENT FOR PAUL'S PRE-CHRISTIAN CONFIDENCE IN HIS OBEDIENCE

The views of Krister Stendahl and E.P. Sanders will be summarised as two of those who object to the view that Philippians 3:6 presents Paul's (misplaced) pre-Christian basis of confidence before God in his obedience to the law.¹ For varying reasons, both scholars argue that this verse highlights the possibility of keeping the law. Thus, in their view, Paul already had acceptance before God. The problem according to these scholars was not 'self-righteousness' but 'new righteousness'. The views of Krister Stendahl will be summarised briefly before turning to those of E.P. Sanders.

In recent decades Krister Stendahl has drawn attention to Philippians 3:6 in the context of debate over Paul's conversion/call. This text forms a key plank in Stendahl's argument against a reading of Paul that portrays Paul's conversion in the manner of an Augustinian-Lutheran agony of conscience.² Stendahl argues that individuals could, in

¹ The position of Heikki Räisänen, 'Paul's Conversion and the Development of His View of the Law', *NTS* 33 (1987): 404–19, and F. Watson, *Paul, Judaism and the Gentiles* SNTS (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), will be mentioned in conjunction with that of Sanders.

² The article 'The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West' was originally printed in *HTR* 56 (1963): 199–215. The following citations, however, are taken from its reprint in Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 78–96.

fact, keep the law. The problem according to Stendahl was that although individuals could keep the law, Israel as a whole failed to keep the law. Therefore the law was abandoned in light of the salvation-historical new covenant in Jesus.³ As mentioned above, one of the keys to Stendahl's argument that individuals could keep the law is Paul's apparent testimony of his own genuine blamelessness in Philippians 3:6. Thus, Stendahl argues that Paul was equipped with a 'robust conscience' rather than the 'introspective conscience' that has been anachronistically read back on to Paul by Western readers.⁴

E.P. Sanders has been the most influential scholar of recent decades to draw attention to the relationship of Philippians 3:6 to Pauline teaching on universal sinfulness.⁵ Sanders argues that Paul does not teach that it is impossible to observe the law. According to Sanders, Paul attacks a position that is Torah-centred, nationalistic and excludes Gentiles, rather than a position that centres on 'works-righteousness'.⁶ Since 'works-righteousness' is not the problem with the position that Paul attacks, Paul's own position does not involve an argument for the impossibility of keeping the law perfectly. Sanders supports his view by arguing that Philippians 3:6 provides evidence that one could live in perfect obedience to the law.⁷ In his view, the possibility of human blamelessness in Philippians 3:6 is in conflict with passages such as Romans 5:12. According to Sanders, Paul only reveals in Romans 5:12 that he is aware of a view that recognises that everyone sins. Paul, however, does not 'make use of that argument in the principal debates about righteousness'.⁸

Sanders also argues that in the context of Philippians 3:2-11, Paul does not charge himself with 'the attitudinal sin of self-righteousness'.⁹ Thus, the description of this 'righteousness' as 'my own righteousness' in Philippians 3:9 is not to be thought of as 'self-righteousness'. According to Sanders, this interpretation must be read in to what Paul is saying by imposing Romans 3:27 and 4:2 on Philippians.¹⁰ In contrast to the argument that 'my righteousness' equals 'self-righteousness', Sanders argues that just

³ Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*, 80-81.

⁴ Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*, 79-80.

⁵ E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977); *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983); and 'Paul on the Law, His Opponents, and the Jewish People in Philippians 3 and 2 Corinthians 11', in *Anti-Judaism in Early Christianity*. Vol. 1, *Paul and the Gospels*, ed. Peter Richardson and David Granskou (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1986), 75-90.

⁶ E.P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 47.

⁷ E.P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, 23-25. Cf. Thomas R. Schreiner, 'Paul and Perfect Obedience to the Law: An Evaluation of the View of E.P. Sanders', *WTJ* 47 (1985): 249.

⁸ E.P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, 24.

⁹ E.P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, 44. Cf. R.H. Gundry, 'Grace, Works, and Staying Saved in Paul', *Bib* 66 (1985): 14.

¹⁰ E.P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, 44.

as the phrase, 'their own righteousness', in Romans 10:3, is merely a righteousness that belongs to Israel, so the phrase, 'my own righteousness', in Philippians 3:9, is merely 'the righteousness peculiar to (Paul) as a Jew, according to which he was blameless (3:6)'.¹¹ Thus, Paul's 'righteousness according to the law' is merely 'the peculiar result of being an observant Jew, which is *in and of itself a good thing*'.¹² The boasting, therefore, in this context, is not one of self-dependent pride in accomplishments, but is confidence in the privileges of God's covenant people who possess the law. There is no fault with this old righteousness – his boasting after all was in things that were 'gain' – it is simply not the new one.¹³ The problem is merely a salvation-historical one; his confidence is now to be placed in Christ.¹⁴ In summary, Sanders' two arguments with regard to Philippians 3:6 are that 'the passage lends support neither to the view that Paul regarded the law as impossible to fulfil, nor to the view that he regarded fulfilling it as wrong because it leads to self-righteousness'.¹⁵

For various reasons, therefore, both Stendahl and Sanders argue for the possibility of keeping the law and that Paul was not guilty of the sin of 'self-righteousness'. Apart from the difficulty of relating this position to Paul's teaching on the universal sinfulness of humanity, this position also affects how the 'works/grace' contrast is to be understood in Paul – specifically, whether or not Paul argues against boasting in personal obedience. The following section will examine the phrase in its context to determine whether or not Paul gives evidence of boasting in personal achievement, and whether or not this suggests that Paul had 'acceptance' before God on the basis of this righteousness.

PAUL'S MISPLACED PRE-CONVERSION CONFIDENCE IN OBEDIENCE

As mentioned above, the argument of this paper is that this phrase shows that Paul's (misplaced) pre-Christian basis of confidence before God included his obedience to the law. Primary support for this argument will be found in the immediate context of Philippians 3:6. The evidence will be grouped under two main headings: confidence in personal achievements; and, human sinfulness and inability to keep the law.

Confidence in Personal Achievements

First: Against Sanders' general thesis that Paul was only opposed to boasting in Jewish privilege and status, Paul argues (in Phil. 3:4–6) that his former confidence in the flesh was based on both Jewish privilege (circumcision, people of Israel, tribe of Benjamin,

¹¹ E.P. Sanders, *Paul on the Law, His Opponents, and the Jewish People in Philippians 3 and 2 Corinthians 11*, 79.

¹² E.P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, 44–45 (emphasis original).

¹³ E.P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, 44, 139–41.

¹⁴ E.P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, 44.

¹⁵ E.P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*

Hebrew of Hebrews¹⁶) and personal accomplishments (Pharisee,¹⁷ zeal, blamelessness).¹⁸ In fact, in Paul's order of argumentation, the personal achievements climax the list with ever increasing intensity so that righteousness in the law, as the final item, 'brings the catalogue to its climax; everything else is pointing here'.¹⁹ Räisänen²⁰ and Watson,²¹ building on Sanders' position, draw the false dichotomy that the list in Philippians 3:5-6 must be either privileges or achievements and therefore subsume the achievements under the general category of privileges.²² Räisänen, in fact, has to re-write Paul's text to 'what he ought to have said' had Paul written in a more straightforward manner and reduced his list to simply renounce 'the biblical covenant'.²³ Contrary to Räisänen and Watson, however, Paul provides evidence here of the tension in first century Judaism between boasting in national privileges *and* in individual achievements.

Second: As Gundry has observed, several 'attitudinal' terms in the context draw attention to the fact that Paul is highlighting 'the attitudinal sin of self-righteousness'.²⁴

1. 'we who ... boast in Christ Jesus' (3);
2. 'we who put no confidence in the flesh' (3);
3. 'if anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh' (4);
4. 'to me (*moi*)' in connection with 'gain' (7);
5. 'I consider these things loss' (7, 8);
6. the indication that these achievements are superior to his opponents 'as though there is a contest over who can boast the most' (*egō mallon* in 4b);
7. 'the following denial that he now considers himself to have arrived' (12-16); and
8. the exhortation to think similarly about these things (*touto phronōmen*; 5).

¹⁶ R.H. Gundry, 'Grace, Works, and Staying Saved in Paul', 13, includes 'Hebrew of Hebrews' among the group of personal accomplishments. However it seems best to identify this as either part of the group of privileges that belongs to those who are born Hebrew or, as Fee suggests, a 'swing' term that sums up the preceding three and sets the stage for the final three. Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 307. The three-fold repetition of *kata* further suggests that the final three should be grouped together.

¹⁷ The phrase, 'according to the law, a Pharisee', may refer to a status that Paul took upon himself and thus is representative of a lifestyle and a particular interpretation of the law as opposed to other interpretations of the law (such as Sadducean). Or, the phrase may refer to the strictest approach to the law and highlight personal achievement even further. Either way, the phrase belongs to the second grouping of personal activities as opposed to national privilege.

¹⁸ R.H. Gundry, 'Grace, Works, and Staying Saved in Paul', 13-14; Sanders mentions this kind of structure (he omits 'Hebrew of Hebrews' and 'Pharisee' in his structure) as one of the arguments for the 'traditional view'. He then seems to admit that this is indeed the structure of the passage but denies that Paul thought there was anything wrong with it because these things were 'gain.' Cf. E.P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, 44.

¹⁹ Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 309.

²⁰ Heikki Räisänen, 'Paul's Conversion and the Development of His View of the Law,' 404-419, esp. 409-410.

Thus, contrary to Sanders, understanding 'my righteousness' in 3:9 as 'my individual righteousness', based on 'the performance of good deeds, which leads to boasting' does not depend on a conflation of Philippians 3:9 with Romans 3:27 and 4:2 and a misunderstanding of 'boasting' as 'boasting in one's individual performance' rather than 'boasting in the special status of Israel.'²⁵ Rather, this reading is based on the many phrases that highlight an attitude towards both individual performance and privilege in the context of Philippians 3 itself.

Third: In addition to Gundry's observations above concerning evidence for Paul's pre-conversion 'attitudinal self-righteousness', in the immediate context Philippians 3:9 adds further confirmation by elaborating on the different kind of righteousness Paul receives from knowing Christ.²⁶ The righteousness that Paul receives from knowing Christ is different in its origin (*ek theou*; from God), in its basis/ground (*dia pisteōs Christou*; as an objective genitive – through faith in Christ), and in the means of receiving it (*epi tēi pistei*; by faith). Thus, the problem is not simply that there has been a salvation-historical shift so that the 'old righteousness' must be replaced with the 'new righteousness'. The two different kinds of righteousness differ in that the 'old righteousness' was centred on moral achievement and was said to be 'a righteousness of Paul's own', whereas the 'new righteousness' centres on a right relationship with God.²⁷

Fourth: If Paul is merely boasting in national privileges here, why did he not describe his previous 'righteousness' as 'our righteousness' rather than 'my own righteousness' (3:9). The context indicates that Paul speaks of his own 'righteousness' due to the fact that he is making a comparison (*egō mallon* in verse 4b) with his opponents – fellow Jews who shared his 'national privileges'.²⁸

21 F. Watson, *Paul, Judaism and the Gentiles: A Sociological Approach*, 78.

22 Cf. J.D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 370, who also denies that the final three items are 'self-achieved'.

23 Heikki Räisänen, 'Paul's Conversion and the Development of his View of the Law', 410.

24 The following observations are drawn from R.H. Gundry, 'Grace, Works, and Staying Saved in Paul', 14.

25 E.P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, 44. Cf. Seyoon Kim, *The Origin of Paul's Gospel*, 2nd ed., WUNT 11/4 (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1984), 354, for the fact that Sanders and Räisänen misread the phrase 'their righteousness' in Romans 10:3. Kim asks why, in their view, 'does [Paul] criticise the Jews for seeking that righteousness which, as [Paul] himself admits, the Jews alone are privileged to obtain?'

26 The following observations are drawn from Peter T. O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 394, 396. Although O'Brien prefers to take *dia pisteōs Christou* as a subjective genitive, this does not affect the argument.

27 Peter T. O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 396. Contra J. A. Ziesler, *The Meaning of Righteousness in Paul: A Linguistic and Theological Enquiry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 149–51, who argues that both relate to ethical achievement.

28 Seyoon Kim, *Paul and the New Perspective: Second Thoughts on the Origin of Paul's Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 77.

Finally: It must be acknowledged that in Sanders' discussion of Philippians 3:6, his primary opponent is Rudolf Bultmann.²⁹ Sanders is right to insist that Bultmann's view that boasting is wrong in and of itself is to be rejected – Paul himself commends boasting in God (1 Cor. 1:31; 2 Cor. 10:17).³⁰ Sanders' view, however, that the problem is merely the *object* of boasting rather than the *fact* of boasting is both reductionistic and misses the primary point being made in Philippians 3.³¹ As Schreiner notes,

Paul discouraged boasting in the works of the law because this inevitably led to a pride in one's own *self*, in one's own devotion to, and performance of, the law. To boast in Christ or God, however, is not to boast in one's own accomplishments; one merely exults in what God in Christ has done.³²

Thus, contrary to the claim that Philippians 3:6 does not refer to 'self-righteousness', the immediate context of Philippians 3:6 (rather than an imposition of Romans 3:27 and 4:2), suggests that Paul's (misplaced) pre-Christian basis of confidence before God included confidence in his obedience and personal achievements as well as confidence in Jewish privilege.

HUMAN SINFULNESS AND INABILITY TO KEEP THE LAW

The following four points argue that Philippians 3:6 does not contradict Paul's teaching elsewhere concerning universal human sinfulness and inability to keep the law.

First: Sanders' argument that righteousness by the law is attainable neglects the implication of verse 4b ('if anyone else *thinks* he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more') that Paul is speaking from the perspective of a false human evaluation.³³ Thus as Gundry suggests, Paul is not 'implying that except for the better righteousness in Christ, God would have been satisfied with Paul's righteousness.'³⁴ Likewise, Sanders' repeated refrain that Paul's righteousness according to the law was not only attainable but good 'in and of itself' because it was 'gain', misses the significance of Paul's additional 'to me' in verse seven (*hatina ēn moi kerdē*; 'whatever was gain to me').³⁵ Once again, Paul is speaking from the perspective of a false human estimate, rather than real 'gain' before God.

²⁹ E.P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, 44, 63 n. 133, 134.

³⁰ R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, Vol. 1, trans. Kendrick Grobel (Charles Scribner's Sons: New York, 1951), 266ff.

³¹ The 'object/fact' distinction is observed by Thomas R. Schreiner, 'Paul and Perfect Obedience to the Law: An Evaluation of the View of E. P. Sanders,' 262 n. 26.

³² Schreiner, 'Paul and Perfect Obedience to the Law,' 262 n. 26 (emphasis original).

³³ R.H. Gundry, 'Grace, Works, and Staying Saved in Paul,' 17, in response to E.P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, 43–45.

³⁴ R.H. Gundry, 'Grace, Works, and Staying Saved in Paul,' 18.

³⁵ E.P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, 45.

Second: the meaning of 'blameless' (*amemptos*) in Philippians 3:6 is not necessarily 'sinlessness' before God. Although not weighty as individual arguments, the following, taken cumulatively, argue against a 'sinless' view of *amemptos*. (1) As Seifrid has argued, a combination of claiming blamelessness with regard to the law, while at the same time being aware that one's own response to the law was at times one of disobedience, was not inconsistent with first century Judaism and may be found in the Community Rule of Qumran (e.g. 1 QS 11:10) and Psalms of Solomon (e.g. Ps. Sol. 3:6-8).³⁶ (2) The self-inclusive portrait of Romans 7:7-13 seems to indicate that knowledge of the law brings knowledge of sin – in Paul's case, it seems that he was aware of coveting before conversion.³⁷ (3) The term 'blameless' (*amemptos*) is unlikely to mean 'sinless' in light of its use to refer to observable behaviour elsewhere (cf. the reference to Zechariah and Elizabeth in the context of Luke 1:6). Although largely an argument from silence, Schreiner is probably right to note that 'Zechariah's sceptical response to the message of Gabriel was presumably not the first time he sinned (Luke 1:18-20).'³⁸ Fourth: Even the possibility that Paul means to include the sacrifices required by the law acknowledges the presence of sin.³⁹ (4) Other contexts indicate that the law may indeed be a burden (Acts 15:10) in light of the struggle against the *Yetzer HaRa* (the 'evil impulse').⁴⁰

Third: in addition to the previous observations, the context of Philippians 3 itself suggests that 'blameless' (*amemptos*) does not necessarily mean a denial of sin. The immediate context of Philippians 3:4-6 indicates that Paul's emphasis is that 'by the standards of practising Pharisees he had an exceptionally good performance record'.⁴¹ Paul does not argue in this context that he had never sinned but that his record of law observance is as undeniable as his zeal in persecuting the church.⁴² Thus, in this context,

³⁶ Mark A. Seifrid, *Justification by Faith: The Origin and Development of a Central Pauline Theme* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992), 151, cf. also 97-98, 122-27; E.P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, 24, also notes this. Sanders, however, suggests that Paul may have held both views without realising they were 'mutually exclusive'.

³⁷ Mark A. Seifrid, *Justification by Faith: The Origin and Development of a Central Pauline Theme*, 150, 174.

³⁸ Thomas R. Schreiner, 'Paul and Perfect Obedience to the Law: An Evaluation of the View of E.P. Sanders', 260.

³⁹ Schreiner, *Paul and Perfect Obedience to the Law*, 261. As Kim argues, however, it is unlikely that Paul has in mind the provisions in the law for sin in this context as something to boast in. His Jewish opponents would also have had such provisions. The context, shows that a greater performance (*egō mallon* in 3:4b) than Paul's opponents is intended. Cf. Seyoon Kim, *Paul and the New Perspective* 149-50.

⁴⁰ Cf. the discussion in C.G. Montefiore, *Rabbinic Literature and Gospel Teachings* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1970 [1930]), 180, of the Rabbinic struggle as 'a sore burden and a heavy trial.' Cited by Donald A. Hagner, 'Paul and Judaism: Testing the New Perspective', in Peter Stuhlmacher, *Revisiting Paul's Doctrine of Justification: A Challenge to the New Perspective* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 92-93.

⁴¹ Donald A. Hagner, *Paul and Judaism: Testing the New Perspective*, 91.

⁴² John M. Espy, 'Paul's "Robust Conscience" Re-examined,' *NTS* 31 (1985): 177 n. 6. Cited also in Peter T. O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 380.

rather than claiming sinlessness, Paul is merely saying that 'his devotion to and observance of the law were extraordinary'.⁴³

Fourth: in light of the above observation, contrary to Stendahl, the meaning of 'blameless' is also not to be psychologized as referring to an internally 'robust conscience'. In this regard, Stendahl is as guilty of psychologizing Paul's conversion as the Lutheran position he claims to refute.⁴⁴ Stendahl claims that in Philippians 3:6 'Paul speaks about his subjective conscience' and that Paul 'experiences no troubles, no problems, no qualms of conscience, no feelings of shortcomings'.⁴⁵ On the contrary, Paul does not refer here to his conscience as either 'robust' or 'troubled'.

Thus, contrary to the claim that Philippians 3:6 provides evidence for the possibility of keeping the law and a denial of universal human sinfulness, the context indicates that Paul is speaking of a record of obedience to the law from a (false) pre-Christian perspective that does not deny the reality of sin.

CONCLUSION

Philippians 3 shows that some Jews would have taken encouragement from their personal achievements as much as from their heritage and status. This is indicated in the way that Paul attacks his adversaries by showing that he was better than them in both 'pedigree and performance'.⁴⁶ This demonstrates, however, Paul's pre-Christian basis of confidence. According to a Pharisaic interpretation of the law, his record of law observance was exceptional. After meeting Christ, however, he realised this 'so-called' righteousness, as a basis of confidence, was inadequate.⁴⁷ Thus, Paul does not claim sinless perfection in Philippians 3:6, and he does not contradict Romans 5:12. As Seifrid succinctly states, Paul's 'claim to having been "blameless according to the righteousness in the law"' represents his preconversion self-estimation, which his post-conversion soteriology exposed as less than adequate.⁴⁸

⁴³ Schreiner, 'Paul and Perfect Obedience to the Law', 261.

⁴⁴ Mark A. Seifrid, *Christ, Our Righteousness: Paul's Theology of Justification* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 27.

⁴⁵ Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*, 13, 81.

⁴⁶ Schreiner, 'Paul and Perfect Obedience to the Law', 261.

⁴⁷ Schreiner, 'Paul and Perfect Obedience to the Law', 262.

⁴⁸ Mark A. Seifrid, *Justification by Faith*, 174. Cf. also Seyoon Kim, *The Origin of Paul's Gospel*, 352, on the significance of Paul's conversion in Philippians 3:4ff.



The Transfiguration of Jesus Christ (Part 1)

Stephen Williams

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Relatively speaking, the transfiguration is a theme that is neglected in Western Christianity.[1] In Eastern Orthodoxy, generally speaking, it has been kept more lively, at a theological and liturgical level, although some non-Eastern churches join the Orthodox in marking August 6 as its festival day. In 1456 Pope Callistus III ordered its celebration on that date as thanksgiving for victory over the Turks - an irony, if we connect the transfiguration with the call to suffering or self-denying discipleship in the passages which precede the accounts of it.[2] But commemoration of the transfiguration in the churches actually goes further back than this in Western church history, predating the separation of Western and Eastern communions in the eleventh century. Still, the subject will strike some as better adapted for consideration by the more mystical mentality of Orthodoxy (as is often supposed) than the more rational Western one (even if the West is changing).

It probably comes as a surprise to many to discover that the accounts of the transfiguration of Jesus Christ are central to the Synoptic narratives.[3] At the half-way junction in both Matthew and Mark, we come to Peter's confession of Christ at Caesarea Philippi, from which point Jesus begins to explain to his disciples that he must

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suffer and die. The story from there on moves to its climax in the death and resurrection of Jesus. But as the narrative resumes its course, after the teaching which follows the prediction of the passion, we have the story of the transfiguration. In Luke's Gospel, the account is earlier than in the other two, in relation to the quantity of his material, but it follows structurally in the same sequence: Peter's confession; prediction of death and resurrection; teaching; transfiguration. It is also located at the same significant juncture as it is in Matthew and Mark in relation to the overall account of the Gospel for, at Luke 9:51, shortly after the transfiguration, we read that the time approaches for Jesus 'to be taken up into heaven' and so he 'resolutely sets out for Jerusalem'. The end is already in sight.

Still speaking in terms of broad structure, there is at least one other indication of the centrality of the transfiguration which warrants mention here. It is connected with the baptism of Jesus. Only twice, in the Synoptic Gospels, do we hear a voice from heaven: the first time is at the baptism,

the second at the transfiguration of Jesus Christ. If the baptism signifies and initiates the opening phase of Jesus' public ministry, the transfiguration apparently inaugurates the next, climactic phase. We have only to think of the content of the transfiguration accounts to have our sense of its importance in the Gospels reinforced. In some respects its visually dramatic features exceed those of any other part of the Gospels, with the possible exception of Luke's account of the ascension. The resurrection stories contain mysteries of recognition, appearance, disappearance and motion. There is drama enough at the empty tomb. But none are as visually spectacular as the transfiguration. Nor do the miracles performed by Jesus seem as dramatic as this, whether or not we describe it as a miracle performed upon him. Puzzling this all may be, but marginal it is not. It has even been said that in its content 'it presents the Gospel in microcosm'.^[4]

Outside the Synoptic Gospels we find only one clear reference to the transfiguration. According to 2 Peter 1:16-18:

We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eye-witnesses of his majesty. For he received honour and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.' We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.

There may be reminders or echoes of the scene of transfiguration elsewhere in the NT, of course; the stories of Paul's own conversion, in the Book of Acts that combine

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Jesus, light and a voice from heaven; the very rare (NT) word 'transfigure' is the one used by Paul when he tells the Corinthians that we 'are being transformed ['transfigured'] into his likeness with ever-increasing glory' (2 Cor. 3:18); the first chapter of Revelation, with its dramatic portrayal of Jesus, has resonances. John's Gospel is intriguing on this score. It contains no reference to the transfiguration, but it is a Gospel all about 'glory' and a voice from heaven thunders that God has glorified his name 'and will glorify it again' (12:28). The question about why John does not specifically mention transfiguration belongs to the wider discussion of its relationship to the Synoptics. We must bear in mind that John does not refer directly to the Last Supper either or directly report the actual baptism of Jesus, where the Synoptics do. John can be concerned with the surrounding interpretation of events that he does not report as do the Synoptists.

Credible Report

Over the years a number of scholars have supposed that the transfiguration story common to the synoptics is a misplaced resurrection account. That is, originally it circulated as a story of a resurrection appearance, but at some stage it became attached to the earthly ministry of Jesus and was transfigured into the form in which we now encounter it. Such a conjecture raises general questions about the nature and reliability of the Gospel accounts and how much we can know of the oral or written sources that lie behind them. It is baseless. There are several dissimilar features between resurrection and transfiguration narratives: the featuring of Moses and Elijah and the voice from heaven, for example, give the latter an entirely different ambience from the stories of the resurrection. All three evangelists take studious care to specify the period of time between Jesus' sayings and the transfiguration occurrence. But I shall not argue the point in detail here.^[5]

Others, who find the account credible as it stands, read it in light either of the experiences of Christian mystics through the ages or of reports of psychic phenomena that have circulated outside as well as within Christian circles.[6] But these avenues of interpretation do not really help us. It is certainly possible in principle to posit some connections between reports of mystical transformations, such as the radiant face of a

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Teresa of Avila, for example, and the radiant face of Jesus.[7] A proper investigation of this would mean a foray into the territory of mysticism and not just of transfiguration. It is even possible in principle to connect the experiences of those who tap into the realm of the dead with the manifestation of Moses and Elijah to the disciples. But even if we did, there would be a spiritual world of difference between accessing super-terrestrial realities paranormally by some occultic power and receiving a revelation from a gracious God for some specific purpose. The psychic route is dangerous, the disciples' experience glorious, even if it is theoretically possible that similar phenomena can be encountered. In relation to Christian mysticism, what is significant about the transfiguration is not what it might have in common with mystical experiences, but its specific revelation of Jesus Christ. 'This is my Son, whom I love' or 'my Son, whom I have chosen' says the voice from heaven, in a way that distinguishes Jesus from the greatest of mystics in the Christian tradition.

Yet should we take the historicity of the accounts seriously at all? A range of views is possible. Some have no difficulty in believing the accounts as they stand. Others will take such belief as evidence of an almost unbelievably superstitious mind-set. Others again will believe, but only with hesitation. They do not doubt that God exists, that Jesus rose from the dead, and that in such a context all things are possible. As a matter of theological logic and the ontological order, they do not deny the possibility of transfiguration. However they find this particular scene disturbingly strange, leaving them uncertain about exactly what to make of it and generating a touch of incredulity in the matter. On the opposite side, yet others are generally inclined to disbelief, but will find themselves reluctant to dismiss the narrative completely, for the world is full of strange phenomena and certain aspects of Christian belief may be plausible enough. All these responses are inextricably linked to questions about the nature and credibility of Christianity in general and of Scripture in particular. To do justice to all the concerns, we should have to talk not about transfiguration but about reason, authority and experience in religion and in Christianity. It can not be done here, so just three general observations are in order.

First, there is no single standard about what counts as reasonable. There are simply different standards of rationality and it is difficult or impossible to come by some neutral way of judging which gives us a touchstone for them all. Second, underlying or accompanying our rational modes of thought and judgement are a host of less rational or non-rational factors which help to condition our thinking - tradition, prejudice, experience, instinct, what we want to believe, what we unconsciously believe etc. Disagreements over particulars like the transfiguration have to be located within as wide a horizon as possible of encompassing and conflicting world-views. Third, we can not

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approach the question of transfiguration without making assumptions about larger issues, about the existence or purpose of God and the person, significance and resurrection of Jesus. My operational assumptions here are (a) the God of Israel, to whom witness is borne in the Old and New Testaments, truly exists as the Creator of this world who has revealed himself; (b) Jesus is

the definitive revelation in history of the nature and purposes of this God; (c) the NT witness grasped this and reliably conveys to us the shape of Jesus' life and ministry and the actuality of his resurrection. These are, as far as I am concerned, minimal claims. If we grant the truth or plausibility of these suppositions, what sense can we make of the transfiguration?

Alternative Approaches

A distinction is standardly made in discussion between the transfiguration as a subjective vision and the transfiguration as an objective event. On the face of it, the distinction is a clear one. In the first instance, the disciples were given a vision by God which allowed them to see something of the significance and glory of Jesus. This could have been given to three of them on the mountain top, as recorded. But vision it was; it was not an objective transformation of Jesus' physical countenance and material body. In the second instance the transfiguration is precisely an objective, historical event which could in principle have been seen by anyone walking the mountains, though in fact it was not, and which featured the actual transfiguration of Jesus' face and clothing. For which of these accounts should we plump, if these are our alternatives?

The distinction is in fact by no means as clear as many think. We must use our language carefully. A vision is an historical event and can be perfectly objective. It can be objective in the sense that in it we see exactly what we are meant (by God) to see and apprehend the exact significance of what we are meant to apprehend, all going on at a specifiable place and time. Visions are not the same as myths.[\[8\]](#) We really have to enquire about different kinds of objectivity. Probably the best way to get at the distinction in the two ways of envisioning the transfiguration is with reference to the external observer.[\[9\]](#) In the case of an external observer, nothing unusual would have been seen in the case of a vision, whereas what the disciples saw would have been seen in the case of an objectively physical transformation. At least, that is presumably how the issue should be described. But it is not clear that this makes one case more objective

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than another; rather, the objectivities are different. On the conceptual level, there are interesting biblical cases that we might consider here. Putting together the different accounts of his conversion that are reported in the Book of Acts, we should conclude that Saul's companions on the Damascus road heard the voice but not the words that were spoken to Saul; the latter were objective, but not accessible to others.[\[10\]](#) In the story of Balaam's donkey, we have a case of an objective appearance to a donkey, an appearance initially invisible to its rider.[\[11\]](#)

We should clearly study the way the vocabulary used in the synoptic accounts looks in the context of the wider way in which the words we translate as 'see' or 'vision' are used in the NT. Yet such a survey is inconclusive. For example, even if we render *horama* in Matthew 17:9 as 'vision' and believe it to be standardly used elsewhere in the NT for an inward experience, it does not force the conclusion that the seeing was not physical in this case.[\[12\]](#) But do we really need to settle the disagreement? On the visionary hypothesis, a hypothetical observer would have seen nothing abnormal, but the three disciples are granted by God at a particular point in time and space a perception of who and what Jesus really is in his being and role. His relationship with God is such that what they see is the visual representation of the reality of that unity with the Father, hidden from the naked eye, but belonging to the very deepest dimension of reality. On the non-visionary hypothesis, an hypothetical observer from a distance would have seen the light and

transformation but would not have been privy to the revelation given by the voice from heaven.

It is difficult to be conclusive in such a matter and it is therefore not clear that there is much at stake in the issue between the two points of view.[13] Thus, I think that Liefeld somewhat exaggerates, or at least does not accurately describe, the importance of what is at stake here.[14] Just how much care is needed here is indicated when even such a

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careful commentator as Charles Cranfield distinguishes in an unsatisfactory manner between the visionary and the factual.[15] And just how dangerous a visionary hypothesis is depends on the meaning attached to the word 'vision'. It depends also on the surrounding approach to the Bible. [16] Having said all this, the weight of the synoptic accounts on the publicly visible nature of the strange events which surround Jesus, even if what is publicly visible in principle is only privately witnessed in practice, should incline us to maximise empirical (in the sense of physical) components in the witness. If, alternatively, we subscribe to the visionary hypothesis as I have described it, while it does not need to cause the alarm that some defenders of historicity exhibit, we must not for a moment maintain it in a way that undermines the tangible nature of the events surrounding Jesus to which the NT bears witness. We must certainly beware lest any consequences of the way in which we view the transfiguration, undermine the historicity of the resurrection, understood as an affirmation of bodily continuity between the crucified and the risen one.[17]

Of course, the issue has been joined here as though the account concerned only Jesus. The appearance of Moses and Elijah further complicates the question of the nature of the event. Different views of the fate of the dead had developed among the Jews since OT times, involving different understandings of who were in Sheol, the underworld residence of the dead. According to the OT accounts, Moses had died, though his burial-place could not be located, while Elijah had exceptionally not been subject to death, having been taken up into heaven, though Enoch also was deathless. In pondering all this in our present context, it is fruitful to draw attention to Jesus' own intervention into the dispute concerning the dead. He said in reply to a question by the Sadducees, who denied resurrection altogether.

Now about the dead rising - have you not read in the book of Moses, in the account of the bush, how God said to him, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead, but of the living' (Mark 12:26f.).

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Jesus forces people to consider as follows: is it conceivable that God, having steered the patriarchs through so many ills and sufferings by binding himself to them in a covenant relationship, should, at their death, simply abandon them to eternal decay? The logic of God's relationship with them and his power on their behalf requires resurrection.

Of Moses and Elijah on the mountain-top, we may say that by the power of God they were then and ever will be fully alive. The question of the form in which Moses and Elijah appeared, and how the disciples' perceptions were operating at this point, seems to me hard to answer precisely though it seems that Jesus was bound to Moses and Elijah in mutually conscious communion. Calvin's refusal to be dogmatic here is still instructive:

It might be asked whether it was really Moses and Elijah who were present or whether only their

spectres were set before the disciples, just as often the prophets saw visions of absent things. Although there is much to be said on both sides, as they say, yet it seems more likely to me that they really were brought to that place.[18]

The Gospels testify to what the eyes saw and the ears heard; they do not conceptualise in such cases as miracles, resurrection body and, in the present case, transfiguration. The mystery of God, creator and sustainer, author of life and death, engulfs the whole account. Yet it is an account about Jesus, not about Moses nor about Elijah, for when the scene changed, the disciples still saw Jesus, but saw Jesus alone.

A Glimpse of Glory

The accounts of the transfiguration found in Matthew and Mark are basically similar with small differences. Luke's account, however, while quite generally similar to the others, has greater contrasts. Where the others refer to a period of six days between Jesus' previously reported teaching and the event of transfiguration, Luke speaks of 'about eight days', though this indicates the same period of time if you are including first and last days in your count. Interestingly, Luke does not use the word 'transfigure', a fact usually put down to his desire to avoid giving his readers the impression that Jesus was metamorphosed, changed from one form into another in a fashion that might be assimilated to pagan mythology. Luke is content to say that 'as he was praying, the appearance of his face changed' but it is he alone that tells us that Jesus was praying as it happened, just as he alone records that Jesus prayed at his baptism (3:21) and just prior to putting the question to his disciples recorded earlier in the chapter: 'Who do the crowds say I am?' (9:18). In Luke's account, the voice from heaven says: 'This is my Son,

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whom I have chosen' rather than 'whom I love', to which we shall return in the second part of the article. Questions asked by the disciples, following the appearance of Elijah, in particular, are omitted by Luke from his account. But he also adds detail which gives us a lead as to what is significant about the transfiguration. He makes much of 'glory'. Moses and Elijah appear 'in glorious splendour' and when the disciples 'became fully awake, they saw his glory'.

The last declarations that Jesus made 'about eight days' before the transfiguration is rendered somewhat differently by the three evangelists, but Luke accents 'glory' particularly heavily.

If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God (9:26f.).

Approaching the transfiguration by reference to these words looks like a case of explaining *obscurum per obscurius* (the already unclear by the even more unclear) and muddying already swirling waters of interpretation. Yet we can not avoid charting one or two of the currents.

A host of interpretations has been offered as commentators have striven from the earliest times to figure out what Jesus meant by these words or their parallels in the other Gospels. His own return; the destruction of Jerusalem; resurrection; ascension; Pentecost; the spread of the gospel; the community of the church where God visibly reigns; an intellectual perception of the significance of Jesus; spiritual rather than physical death - these singly or in some combination

have been proposed as exegeses of 'seeing the kingdom of God' without tasting death, or the renderings in the parallel passages. Amongst all the interpretations, one is of particular interest to us. The words have been taken as referring to the transfiguration. In fact, this was quite a dominant interpretation in the earliest Christian centuries, although it was emphasised too that the transfiguration was itself a foretaste of something else.[19] Is this good exegesis?

Obvious difficulties attend the proposal that we take this verse as having its primary and direct reference to the transfiguration in any of the three evangelists. It seems unnatural to refer to that event in terms of 'seeing the kingdom' or 'seeing the kingdom of God coming with power' or 'seeing the Son of Man coming in his kingdom'. And is it not, in biblical as in modern usage, a strained way of alluding to an event that would occur within a week, to say that some would not die before its occurrence? On the other hand, it is even more difficult to avoid making *some* connection between the words and the event of transfiguration. The highly specific mention of the interval of days is very

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unusual in the body of the Gospels and appears designed to alert the reader to some connection between the transfiguration and what has gone before. Certainly Luke makes it very clear that there is a connection. His repeated use of 'glory' with reference to Son, Father and angels, is picked up in the repeated use in the transfiguration account. The transfiguration is a sign, anticipation, instalment or foretaste of the glorious manifestation of the Son - it is hard to state this more precisely without deciding how to read the primary reference of Jesus' words, a matter beyond the scope of discussion here.[20]

'Glory' had strong OT connotations. The Hebrew word behind it appears more in the book of Exodus than in any other Pentateuchal or Historical book in the OT. When God delivered the Israelites from Egyptian bondage through cloud and fire, his glory could be revealed in terms of sheer saving strength, destroying Pharaoh and his hordes at the Red Sea (14:4-31). But it also appeared in the cloud itself, however we interpret the combination of manifestation and concealment (16:10). When the Israelites eventually arrived at Sinai and God summoned Moses up to the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments, 'the cloud covered it and the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai' (24:16). Moses subsequently ordered the construction of the tabernacle as a holy place and once that was up, the cloud moved from Sinai to the tabernacle and the glory of the Lord filled the place (40:34f.).

Amongst the parallels between this account and that of the transfiguration are the fact that names of three of Moses' companions are specified upon their ascent and the cloud covers the mountain for six days (24:1, 9, 16). More striking still is the record of Moses' shining face: when he came down from Sinai, his face was radiant; whenever he entered the presence of the Lord, his face shone (34:29-35). More or less the final word in the Pentateuch on Moses is that he was an incomparable prophet 'whom the Lord knew face to face' (Deut. 34:10). This prophetic stature or role is brought to mind by the voice that spoke at the mount of transfiguration, for the injunction to 'listen to' Jesus apparently echoes Moses' parting announcement that 'the Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him' (Deut. 18:15).

These connections are not flights of fancy. To the contrary, what often takes us time to dig up would have jumped to the minds of those steeped in the OT.[21] There is much

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more OT background to and in connection with the accounts in the New than we readily perceive. Luke's account points these up: 'Moses and Elijah spoke about his departure', the word for 'departure' being 'exodus'. 'Glory' and 'exodus' thus emerge as key themes in the interpretation of the transfiguration. It may be coincidence, but it is worth noting that the only other NT example of the word 'exodus' used as Luke does here is in 2 Peter (1:15), just before Peter refers to the transfiguration, making much of 'glory'.

Soteriological issues are at stake. When the presumably ageing Simeon took the baby Jesus in his arms and thanked God that he had set his eyes on the salvation he had prepared for the people, he had been waiting for the 'consolation of Israel' (Luke 2:25). Israel had had quite a grim time of it. In the intertestamental period, Alexander the Great had established his sprawling empire which, after his day, became divided into separate powers. These included Egypt and Syria, both of whom took a political interest in the homeland of the Jews in the service of their ambitions. The skies of Zion darkened in the second century with the encroachments of Antiochus IV of Syria, leading to successful insurrection and hopeful independence under the leadership of the Maccabees. Triumphs, however, were followed by internal splits within Israel, making the land all the more prey to the Romans who had incorporated Palestine into the empire some decades before the birth of Jesus. Whatever religious freedom the Jews maintained, they lacked political self-determination and national independence. Against this background, Jesus' ministry was bound to be interpreted by its earliest witnesses as an episode in the deliverance of the Jewish people. If transfiguration was resonant with themes of glory and exodus, it was contextualised by political hopes. If Jesus could be ranked alongside Moses, something historically decisive was in the air.[\[22\]](#)

Just How Glorious?

Familiarity with the NT, in a non-Jewish context, can make us blind to the incomparable prestige of Moses in, as before, Jesus' day. To cast an OT leader in the mould of a successor to Moses - for Moses to be at all a type of any future leader from Joshua onwards - was to bestow great honour on the anti-type. Outside the OT, Jesus' Jewish contemporary, Philo, all but deified Moses as Word and King, chosen one of God.[\[23\]](#) Indeed, in Philo's description, Moses is himself transfigured on the Sinai mountain-top

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when receiving the law.[\[24\]](#) However we interpret his joint appearance with Elijah, if Jesus stood just in the tradition of Moses, leader of the exodus, witness of glory, he was in high company.

The transfiguration account, by not just setting him in the company of Moses, but by exalting him more highly, is supremely the revelation of the divine sonship of Jesus, which is what the voice from heaven proclaimed. Jesus' ministry invited the question of his relationship to Moses and the law. But Jesus also forced the question not just of his own attitude to the law, but of Moses' relationship to him, in the former's capacity as one who had prophesied the coming of Jesus. John recorded some bitter disputes with the Pharisees where Jesus insisted that Moses' word and ministry signified none other than himself. Both Stephen and Paul were subsequently accused of being anti-Moses; the church struggled to figure out how the requirements of Moses' law applied to Gentile converts to Christ, and Paul's claim that we are justified through faith cut to the heart of this. But the apostolic preaching recorded in Acts proceeded as Jesus did, insisting that Moses actually pointed forward to Jesus Christ himself. So to position Jesus in relation to

Moses was to make Jesus' ministry the definitive action of God for Israel in the world. The transfiguration aside, the NT writings established a gulf between Jesus and Moses that opened out unexpected vistas on the messianic sonship declared on the mount of transfiguration. Because they take us away from the account, they will be noted only briefly and restricted to three.[25]

1. The author of Hebrews spoke of Jesus as 'worthy of greater honour than Moses' (3:3). Moses is portrayed as being both part of a house and a servant in the house, the images being consistent because the house is Israel. Jesus is the builder. And God is the builder. It does not follow from this that Jesus is God: in a background passage, both Solomon and the Lord are said to be builders and Solomon is not identified with God (1 Chron. 17:10-12). However, the Son has already been described as 'the radiance of God's glory' (language reminiscent of transfiguration) and 'the exact representation of his being', announcing what Westcott called the Son's 'unbroken connection with the Father'. [26] The identification of Jesus with God reaches an extraordinary pitch, to all appearances, in 1:8. In the fourth century, the Fathers consistently invoked the first chapter of Hebrews in response to the Arian denial of the equality of the Son with the Father. According to Theodoret, the followers of Arius rejected the place of Hebrews in the canon because of its teaching about the relationship of Father to Son in its opening chapter. [27] Behind the already considerable claim that Jesus was worthy of greater

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honour than Moses, lay not only the massive prestige of Moses, but a dramatic interpretation of sonship.

2. Loisy commented that John's Gospel affords us 'a perpetual theophany - a permanent sighting of the appearance of God's glory in Christ, temporarily glimpsed at transfiguration'. [28] According to the prologue, Moses mediated the law, Christ mediated grace and truth. A stronger contrast still is given in the claim that God has never been seen and that the Son has made him known (1:18). What is arresting here is not just that there is a contrast between seeing and making known, as opposed to invisibility and visibility. It is the way that the Son is ranged on the Father's side as revealer rather than on Moses' side as recipient of revelation. The connection between glory and sonship, presented in its way in the accounts of transfiguration, has already been made (1:14). The glorification of the Son of Man is later the subject of the speech from heaven (12:23-34).

3. In language that picks up 'transfiguration', Paul addresses the Corinthians with some extraordinary statements (2 Cor. 3:7-18). The Mosaic dispensation, when the law was received, was attended by its own kind of glory. Yet so intent is Paul on the belief that the law is ineffective in bringing salvation and that its function in God's plan is subordinate to the events that have taken place in the coming of Christ and subsequent gift of the Spirit, that he is even prepared to call the Mosaic dispensation 'a ministry of death'. One veil covered Moses, who prevented his fellow-Israelites from seeing the divine glory when he conversed with God; another covers the minds of those who can read of Moses without recognising the significance of Christ. We go beyond Moses, and are unlike him, for he had to put on a veil where we 'with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory' and so 'are being transformed [transfigured] into his likeness with ever-increasing glory'. God, Christ and Spirit are all associated in this Christian experience. Moses has been left far behind.

When we look out for associations of Jesus with Moses in the rest of the NT, we meet rather strikingly the themes set before eye, mind and heart at the mount of transfiguration: glory and sonship. [29] We are also in the region of what is sometimes termed 'high christology'. [30] Just

how much of this can be read out of or into the account of the transfiguration without missing its significance? We shall turn to this in the next part of the article.

[To read Part 2, click [here](#).]

References

[1] I am grateful for the invitation to adapt a draft booklet on the transfiguration into a two-part article for *Themelios*. That booklet was itself a popularised digest of a series of lectures given on 'The Transfigured Christ of the New Testament' and the double exercise in compression means that (a) exegetical discussion and reference to secondary literature have been all but eliminated, (b) substantively, far more about the transfiguration is omitted than included in this article and (c) discussion of discipleship in its light is completely absent. Walter Liefeld's article on 'Transfiguration' in Joel Green etc. (ed.), *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Leicester: IVP, 1992) contains a helpful bibliography, including reference to a good essay by Liefeld himself, quite apart from this particular article. The older study by A.M. Ramsey, *The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ* (London: Longmans, 1949) is generally helpful. For a more detailed study, see especially A.D.A. Moses, *Matthew's Transfiguration Story and the Jewish-Christian Controversy* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).

[2] Mark 8:31-38 and parallels.

[3] Matt. 17:1-13; Mark 9:2-13; Luke 9:28-36.

[4] A. Trites, 'The Transfiguration of Jesus: the Gospel in Microcosm' in *Evangelical Quarterly* 51 (1979), 67-79. Note also Trites' short study, *The Transfiguration of Christ: A Hinge of Holy History* (Nova Scotia: Lancelot, 1994).

[5] See R.H. Stein, 'Is the Transfiguration (Mark 9:2-8) a Misplaced Resurrection Account?', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 95 (1976), 79-96. It is by no means only the most conservative scholars who have held this over the years; C.H. Dodd and Krister Stendahl are amongst those who have challenged the 'resurrection-appearance' version.

[6] E.g., D. Evans, 'Academic Scepticism, Spiritual Reality and Transfiguration' in N.T. Wright and L.D. Hurst eds., *The Glory of Christ in the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987); Evelyn Underhill, *The Mystic Way* (London/Toronto: Dent, 1913), 120f., a work of 'no small influence', Ramsey commented (102) and taken up by George Caird, e.g., in *Saint Luke* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), 132; see too Caird on 'The Transfiguration' in *Expository Times* 67 (1955), 291-94.

[7] According to Evelyn Underhill, in another work, while Teresa was writing *The Interior Castle* 'her face, extremely beautiful in expression, shone with an unearthly splendour which afterwards faded away' (*Mysticism* [London: Methuen, 1914], 353).

[8] R.H. Stein confuses the issues here in *Jesus the Messiah: A Survey of the Life of Christ* (Downers Grove/Leicester: 1996) ch. 12, as does Donald Macleod along similar lines in *The Person of Jesus Christ* (Leicester: IVP, 1998) 101f. But while Howard Marshall may be right to say that 'the nature of the event is such as to almost defy historical investigation' it is unfortunate that he allows the possibility of 'myth' while favouring a 'supernatural event': I.H. Marshall, *The*

[9] So Robert Reymond, *Jesus: Divine Messiah, the New Testament Witness* (Phillippsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1990), 160f., who, again, does not make the right distinctions.

[10] See Acts 9:3-7; 22:6-9; 26:12-14. The NIV, for example, needlessly renders 22:9: 'they did not understand' but the word translated 'understand' is the same as that used in Acts 9:7 which says that they 'heard the sound'. There need be no contradiction if 22:9 is rendered as 'they did not hear' because there is a distinction between hearing a voice and hearing the words and this is plausibly applied to the two passages.

[11] Num. 22:21ff.

[12] As R.T. France admits, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Leicester: IVP, 1995), ad loc. Note the distinction made by Hagner between 'something really seen' and 'something merely imagined' in D. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28* (Dallas: Word Books, 1995), 492.

Compare how the one Greek word translated 'appeared' can cover slightly distinct forms of seeing in 1 Cor. 1 5:7f; neither here nor in Matthew does the word itself pin down a concept with empirical exactitude.

[13] Many conservative exegetes are willing to leave the matter open: France, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 262; William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1974), 317; Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to St Luke* (Leicester: IVP, 1974), 171.

[14] In 'Theological Motifs in the Transfiguration Narrative' in R.N. Longenecker and M.L. Tenney, *New Dimensions in New Testament Study* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 163. C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St Mark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 294.

[15] C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St Mark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 294.

[16] So, for example, one might subscribe to the letter of P.T. Forsyth's treatment of Paul's vision on the Damascus road but balk at it all the same, in the light of contextual remarks. See *Christ on Parnassus: Lectures on Art, Ethics and Theology* (London etc: Hodder & Stoughton, 1911), 249.

[17] For example, it seems to me that we are on dangerous ground if we begin to think in terms of something 'not only incongruous but repellent in the idea of the Risen Lord eating' - the spirit of such a remark is to be avoided. So James Denney; my attention was drawn to it by John Thompson, *Christ in Perspective in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: St Andrew Press, 1978), 178 n. 63, who contrasts Barth favourably with Denney on this point.

[18] *A Harmony of the Gospels*, II (Edinburgh: St Andrew Press, 1972), 199. While this is admirably open in its spirit, the notion of 'absence' is surely awkward here.

[19] See J.A. McGuckin, *The Transfiguration of Christ in Scripture and Tradition* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1986) and the selection that he gives.

[20] 2 Peter 1:16-18 does not provide solid evidence for the connection between transfiguration and *parousia*. Despite the weight of opinion against it, there is a good, though not convincing,

case, for reading the reference to 'coming' in 1:16 rather in terms of incarnation than *parousia*. See Samuel Benetrau, *Le Deuxieme Epitre de Pierre; L'Epitre de Jude* (Vaux-sur-Seine: Faculte Libre de Theologie Evangelique, 1994), ad loc.

[21] See Dale C. Allison, *The New Moses: a Matthean Typology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993). He quotes Auerbach's comment that biblical books are all 'fraught with background' (15).

[22] Allusion is made to Elijah in the second part of this article.

[23] For a brief account, see E. Goodenough, *An Introduction to Philo Judaeus* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), e.g. 145ff. For Moses as king and other accolades, see the very beginning and very end of Philo, *On The Life of Moses*, Book II (London: Heinemann/Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935). But references to Moses' high significance are also found elsewhere in his corpus. And much later, outside Judaism, see Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 1.24 on 'Moses as General': 'So there is Moses - prophet, legislator, organizer, general, statesman, philosopher' - not the Philonic heights, but plenty of breadth.

[24] Cf. D.F. Strauss, who regarded the transfiguration as 'an enhanced repetition of the glorification of Moses': quoted in Allison, *The New Moses: a Matthean Typology*, 293.

[25] In the next part, I shall touch briefly on methodological issues in the approach to NT Christology.

[26] B.F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (London: Macmillan, 1892) ad loc.

[27] See RE. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Michigan, 1977) ad loc.

[28] Quoted in A.M. Ramsey, *The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ*, 123.

[29] Though 'sonship' is not the point in 2 Cor. 3, Christ is identified as 'Son of God' in 1:19. Of course, I am collapsing sonships: Son of Man/Son of God. Reference to 'Son of Man' precedes the account of transfiguration in all three Synoptic accounts, especially emphasised by Matthew (16:28).

[30] Including 2 Cor. with its famous doxological conclusion though the exegesis of passages relevant to Christology in 2 Cor. 3 (16-18) is controversial.



The Trinity – Yesterday, Today and the Future

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In 1967 Karl Rahner famously drew attention to the then widespread neglect of the Trinity, claiming that 'should the doctrine of the Trinity have to be dropped as false, the major part of religious literature could well remain virtually unchanged'.¹ Since then a raft of works have appeared, volumes by the truckload, but as far as I can see this torrent of activity has yet to percolate through to pulpit or pew – it is mainly confined to theological treatises and ecumenical ventures. For the vast majority of Christians, including most ministers and theological students, the Trinity is still a mathematical conundrum, full of imposing philosophical jargon, relegated to an obscure alcove remote from daily life. I have been surprised over the years at the confusion prevalent in the most unexpected circles.

For this reason it is necessary to remind ourselves of the main contours of the doctrine as it has been unfolded by the church. The following are the words of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed, probably dating from the Council of Constantinople (381 AD), which brought to a resolution the convulsions of the fourth century:

We believe in one God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible;

And in one Lord Jesus Christ the Son of God, the Only-begotten, begotten by his Father before all ages, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, consubstantial with the Father, through whom all things came into existence, who for us men and for our salvation came down from the heavens and became incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became a man, and was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate and suffered and was buried and rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures and ascended into the heavens and is seated at the right hand of the Father and will come again with glory to judge the

¹ Rahner, K. *The Trinity*, (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 10–11.

living and the dead, and there will be no end to his kingdom;
 And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and life-giver, who proceeds from the Father, who is worshipped and glorified together with the Father and the Son, who spoke by the prophets;
 And in one holy, catholic and apostolic Church;
 We confess one baptism for the forgiveness of sins;
 We wait for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the coming age. Amen.

From this the following emerges, either directly or in further development:

God is one being (essence, from *esse*, to be), three persons, or from another angle, three persons, one being. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are each fully God. The whole God is in each person, and each person is the whole God. Each person is God-in-himself. Each person possesses the entire being of God (the one divine essence) and the entire being of God is in each person. Thus, each person indwells each other – the three mutually contain one another (*perichoresis*) – for the one being of God is undivided.

However, the three persons are not identical to one another. They are eternal and distinct. There are particular *relations* the three persons sustain to each other, that are inseparable from their particular identity. The Father is the Father of the Son, the Son is the Son of the Father. The Father begets the Son, the Son is begotten by the Father. This relation cannot be reversed – it is eternal and unchangeable. The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father (the West adds 'and the Son', the *filioque* clause added to the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed), the Father (and the Son, according to the West) spirates the Spirit. Again, this is never reversed. The Father is neither begotten nor proceeds, the Son does not beget nor does he proceed, the Spirit neither begets nor spirates. These relations exist in the context of the mutual indwelling of the three (*perichoresis*). Indeed, the Spirit is the Spirit of the Son, and so entailed is the Father as the Father of the Son. So too the relation of the Father and the Son is in the midst of the *perichoretic* relations of the three, and thus in the Holy Spirit. Hence, there is a distinction (not a division) between – on one hand – the three as they distinctly and together constitute the one undivided being of God and – at the same time – the three in their eternal and distinct personal relations.

Calvin sums this up when he says of the Son that he is God of himself (*ex seipso esse*) whereas in terms of his personal subsistence he is from the Father (*ex Patre*).²

In the course of its debates and struggles, the church was forced to use extra-biblical terms to defend the biblical language. This was necessary due to the heretics' use of the Bible to support their erroneous ideas. Athanasius provides a glimpse of what happened at the Council of Nicea (325 AD), when the assembled bishops outlawed the claim of

² Calvin, *J. Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. F. L. Battles, J. T. McNeill, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1:13:25, cf. 1:13:17–19.

Arius that the Son was not eternal but was created by God, who thereby became his Father. Originally, the statement was proposed to the Council that the Son came 'from God'. By this it was intended to say that he was not from some other source, nor was he a creature. However, those who sympathised with Arius agreed to the phrase, since in their eyes all creatures came forth from God. Consequently, the Council was forced to look for a word that excluded all possibility of an Arian interpretation.³ Biblical language could not resolve the issue for the conflict was over the meaning of Biblical language in the first place. This reminds us that to understand this or that we have to consider it in a context other than its own, for meaning cannot be derived by the repetition of that about which meaning is sought. A dictionary is an obvious example of a tool that explains meanings of words in terms of other words and phrases.

In addition to the foundational realisation that God is one being and three persons, the following terms proved essential to the church doctrine. The word *homoousios* (of the same substance or being) came in the course of the fourth century to state that the Son and the Spirit are of the identical being as the Father, and thus fully and absolutely God. *Perichoresis* (mutual indwelling) was used to assert that the three persons (each the whole God without remainder) dwell in each other, mutually contain each other, occupying the same 'infinite divine space'. *Taxis* (order) refers to the relations between the persons.

Augustine, in his *De Trinitate*, writes 'in no other subject is error more dangerous, or inquiry more laborious, or the discovery of truth more profitable'.⁴ Helvellyn, a mountain in the English Lake District, contains a famous section known as Striding Edge. At that point the path to the summit leads along a narrow ridge, the ground sloping away steeply on both sides. It is easily passable in good weather despite 'the nauseating feeling of height and fresh air on both sides'. However, 'many careful walkers have come to grief, as the memorials along the way will testify'.⁵ It 'cannot be recommended to anyone afraid of heights'.⁶ Exploration of the Trinity has a similar feel to it, always balanced precariously on a knife-edge far more precipitous even than Striding Edge. Dangers loom on both sides and many are those who fail to retain their balance.

The Eastern and Western churches have faced different tendencies to imbalance on one side or other. Early on the East faced the danger of subordinationism, viewing the Son and the Spirit as somehow derivative, with their divine status not precisely clear. This was endemic until the fourth century controversies. The conceptual tools had yet to be developed by which the way God is three could be expressed without detriment to the way he is one. Thereafter, beginning with a focus on the three persons, the East has sometimes tended to see the Father as the source not only of the personal subsistence

³ Athanasius, *On the Decrees of the Synod of Nicea*, 19–21.

⁴ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 1:3:5.

⁵ www.antonytowers.btinternet.co.uk/001/indexalt.html.

⁶ www.onedayhikes.com/Hikes.asp?HikesID=4.

of the Son and the Spirit but also of their deity. In this way, it is not difficult to understand how the Son could be viewed as a little less than the Father, as possessing his deity by derivation rather than of himself. This has been a tendency, but the best of Eastern theology has avoided these dangers. However, with the recent awakening in the West of interest in Eastern theology, a social model of the Trinity has come into prominence that brings into focus the distinctiveness of the three. It is noticeable where this is so that there is often a loose, almost tritheistic sounding, tendency.⁷

The West, for its part, has fallen more towards modalism. By this is meant the blurring or eclipsing of the eternal personal distinctions. This can come either by treating God's self-revelation as the Father, the Son, and the Spirit as merely successive modes of revelation of one unipersonal God (as Sabellius did in the third century) or, alternatively, by a reluctance to recognise God's revelation in human history as revealing anything about who he is eternally. Either way, we are left with no true knowledge of God, for what he says of himself in the Bible may not reflect who he actually is. Generally, and outside these heretical extremes, Western trinitarianism has based itself on the priority of the one divine essence and has had some difficulty in doing justice to the distinctions of person.

Since most readers of this article are from the West, this modalistic problem poses the most immediate threat. At root may be the dominant impact of Augustine. In the second half of *De Trinitate* Augustine introduces some analogies for the Trinity, hesitantly and aware of their serious limitations.⁸ However, these analogies have had a great impact over the years. They are based on the primacy of the essence of God over the three persons, for the unity of God is his starting point. In the analogies, Augustine found it difficult to do justice to the full personal distinctions of the three. He describes the Trinity in terms of a lover, the beloved, and the love that exists between them. In particular, there appears something of a quandary concerning the Holy Spirit. Does Augustine reduce the Spirit to an attribute? The lover and the one loved are clearly capable of being understood as distinct persons – but love is a quality, not a personal entity.

Later, Aquinas separated discussion of *de deo uno* (the one God) from *de deo trino* (the triune God). In his *Summa contra gentiles* he holds back discussion of the Trinity until book 4, having considered the doctrine of God in detail in book 1. In the *Summa theologia* he discusses the existence and attributes of God in Part One, qq. 1–25, turning to the Trinity only in qq. 27–43. This pattern became standard in theological textbooks in the Western church. In Protestant circles, Charles Hodge spends nearly two hundred and fifty pages discussing the existence and attributes of God before he turns

⁷ Moltmann, J. *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, (London: SCM, 1991), has been cited as possibly exhibiting this tendency. See Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:329–36, where he rejects this claim.

⁸ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 8–15.

his attention to the fact that God is triune. Louis Berkhof followed the same procedure.⁹ This tendency was exacerbated by the pressures of the enlightenment. The supernatural and so the whole idea of revelation was problematic in the Kantian framework. As a symptom of the malaise, Friedrich Schleiermacher restricted his treatment of the Trinity to an appendix in his book, *The Christian Faith*. Even B.B. Warfield toys with a modalist position when he suggests but then – happily – rejects the possibility that certain aspects of the relation between the Father and the Son in human history may have been the result of a covenant between the persons of the Trinity and thus may not represent eternal antecedent realities in God.¹⁰ J.I. Packer, in his book *Knowing God* devotes a chapter to the Trinity, part of the way through the volume, but then continues as if nothing has happened.¹¹

In keeping with the enlightenment worldview, the focus of attention from the eighteenth century shifted away from God to this world. Alexander Pope's famous lines sum it up: 'Know then thyself, presume not God to scan, the proper study of mankind is man'.¹² A batch of new academic disciplines emerged in the nineteenth century devoted to the study of man. The most prominent among them being psychology, sociology and anthropology. In turn, there was a striking development of the historical consciousness. Biblical scholars searched for the historical Jesus. Biblical theology, pressurised by the Kantian world to prescind from eternity and ontology, tended to restrict and limit the reference of biblical statements concerning the Father and the Son to the historical dimension only. A classic case was Oscar Cullmann's claim that the NT has a purely functional Christology.¹³ The problem with this line of thought is that, if the reference of Biblical statements is exclusively this-worldly and restricted to human history, then God as he has revealed himself does not necessarily reveal God as he is eternally in himself.

Evangelicals have their own peculiar problems. Biblicism has been a strong characteristic. The post-Reformation slide into a privatised, individualist religion that neglects the church and world has led many to downplay the ecumenical creeds in favour of the latest insights from biblical studies, whatever may be the motivation behind them.¹⁴ Prominent aspects of the church doctrine of the Trinity have often been

⁹ Hodge, C. *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 1:191–441 on the existence and attributes of God, 442–82 on the Trinity; Berkhof, L., *Systematic Theology*, (London: Banner of Truth, 1958), 19–81 on the existence and attributes of God, 82–99 on the Trinity.

¹⁰ Warfield, B., 'The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity', in *Biblical and Theological Studies*, (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1952), 22–59, esp. 54–55.

¹¹ Packer, J., *Knowing God*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973), 67–75, out of 314 pp.

¹² Pope, A., *An Essay on Man*, II:1.

¹³ Cullmann, O., *The Christology of the New Testament*, (London: SCM, 1959), 326–27. The reply of Professor Cullmann to Roman Catholic critics, *SJT* 15 (1962), 15:36–43, where he qualifies his earlier claims.

¹⁴ Letham, R., 'Is Evangelicalism Christian?', *Evangelical Quarterly*, 67.1 (1995), 3–33.

derided or neglected as unbiblical speculation.¹⁵ Opposition to the orthodox doctrine has often tended to come from those who stress the Bible at the expense of the teachings of the church.¹⁶ What these people forget is that the church was forced to use extra-biblical language since biblical language itself was open to a variety of interpretations, some faithful, others not. We alluded above to Athanasius' remarks about the introduction of the words *ousia* and *homoousios* at Nicea.

Today most Western Christians are practical modalists – the usual way of referring to God is 'God' or, particularly at the popular level, 'the Lord'. It is worth contrasting this with Gregory Nazianzen, the great Cappadocian of the fourth century, who spoke of 'my Trinity', saying 'when I say "God", I mean Father, Son, and Holy Spirit'.¹⁷ This practical modalism goes in tandem with a dire lack of understanding of the historic doctrine of the Trinity overall. In a letter to the editor of *The Times* (London) in June 1992, the well-known evangelical Anglican, David Prior, remarked how he had looked for an appropriate illustration for a sermon on the Trinity for Trinity Sunday. He found it watching cricket on television, the second Test Match between England and Pakistan. Ian Salisbury, the England leg-spinner, bowled in quick succession a leg-break, a googly, and a top spinner. There, Prior purred, was the illustration he needed – one person expressing himself in three different ways! We give full marks to Prior for spotting the importance of cricket – a pity about the theology. A perceptive correspondent wrote in reply that the letter should be signalled 'wide'.

Colin Gunton has argued that this overall tendency towards modalism, inherited from Augustine, lies at the root of the atheism and agnosticism that has confronted the Western church in a way that it has not done in the East. Whatever the validity of his claim, Western trinitarianism has found it difficult to break the shackles imposed by Augustine. Both Barth and Rahner, to cite but two examples, are strongly biased in that direction. In particular, Barth's statement on the Trinity as 'God reveals himself as the Lord' and his triad of revealer, revelation, and revealedness has the flavour of unipersonality, although in fairness we must recognise that, as Rahner, he distances himself from modalism as such.¹⁸

For its part, the East has seen clearly the modalistic tendency of the West. As one prime example, the *filioque* clause¹⁹ itself has, in their eyes, blurred the distinction between the Father and the Son by regarding them as sharing identically in the procession of the Spirit. (Augustine wrote of the Spirit proceeding from both 'as from a single source'.²⁰) According to the East, since the Father is not the Son, and the Son is

¹⁵ Reymond, R.L., *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, (New York: Nelson, 1998).

¹⁶ Gregory Nazianzen, *Oration*, 31:3; Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:13:2–5.

¹⁷ Gregory Nazianzen, *Oration*, 38:8.

¹⁸ Barth, K., *CD*, I/1, 295ff.

¹⁹ This is the Western addition to the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed: 'and the Son' (*filioque*).

²⁰ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 15:17:27, 15:26:47.

not the Father, how can the Spirit be said to proceed from both, without differentiation or qualification? In the East's eyes, this lack of distinction casts a shadow on the overall doctrine of the Trinity in the West.

The West, in turn, has been quick to point out what it sees as the dangers of subordinationism, and even tritheism, in the East. In my own limited experience many westerners balk at reference to the relations of the persons, and appear to think that this challenges the equality or even oneness of the three. Robert L. Reymond can be criticised here.²¹ In part, this may be due to the lack of attention given to the matter in conservative Protestantism.

POTENTIAL IMPACT

It is my belief that a recovery of the Trinity at ground level, the level of the ordinary minister and believer, will help to revitalise the life of the church and, in turn, its witness in the world.

First, let us look at its potential in worship. According to Paul, Christian experience is thoroughly trinitarian, flowing from the engagement of all three persons in planning and securing our salvation. The reconciliation, brought into effect by Christ, has introduced all in the church into communion with the holy Trinity. Whether Jew or Gentile, we have access in or by the Holy Spirit through Christ to the Father (Eph. 2:18). Prayer, worship and communion with God are by definition trinitarian. As the Father has made himself known through the Son 'for us and our salvation' in or by the Spirit, so we are all caught up in this reverse movement. We live, move and have our being in a pervasively trinitarian atmosphere. We recall too the words of Jesus to the Samaritan woman, that the true worshippers from then on would worship the Father in Spirit and in truth (John 4:21-24). How often have we heard this referred to inwardness in contrast to externals, to spirituality rather than material worship, to sincerity as opposed to formalism? Instead, with many of the Greek fathers such as Basil the Great and Cyril of Alexandria, a more immediate and pertinent reference is to the Holy Spirit (all other references in John to *pneuma* are to the third person of the Trinity, bar probably two - 11:33 and 13:21) and to the living embodiment of truth, Jesus Christ (the way, the truth, and the life, cf. 14:6, 17, 1:15, 17, 8:32ff., 16:12-15). The point is that Christian experience of God in its entirety, including worship, and prayer is inescapably trinitarian. How often have you heard that taught, preached, or stressed? The important point is that at a fundamental level of Christian experience, corresponding to what Polanyi termed the 'tacit dimension' of scientific knowledge,²² this is common to all Christian

²¹ Reymond, *Systematic Theology*, 317-41; Owen, P., 'An Examination of Robert Reymond's Understanding of the Trinity and his Appeal to John Calvin', *CTJ*, 35 (2000), 262-81; Letham, R., Review of Robert L. Reymond, 'A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith', *WTJ*, 62 (2000), 314-19.

²² Polanyi, M., *The Tacit Dimension*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

believers. The need is to bridge the gap between this pre-articulated level of experience and a developed theological understanding so that this is explicitly, demonstrably and strategically realised in the understanding of the church and its members. A necessary corrective to the problems I have mentioned must begin right here. If it begins here many of the matters below will be enormously illuminated, for it is in worship that our theology should be rooted.

Second, we need to recapture and refashion a trinitarian view of creation. Colin Gunton has produced some excellent work in this area. How can unity-in-diversity, diversity-in-unity, everywhere evident in the world around us and in the skies above, be explained without recourse to its trinitarian origination? Instead of expending their energies fighting against Darwinism, the prime need here for conservative Christians is to construct a positive *theological* approach to creation, and thus the environment, that expressly and explicitly accounts for both the order and coherence of the universe and the distinctiveness of its parts. Precisely because it declares the glory of its creator, the tri-personal God, the world is to be preserved and cultivated in thankful stewardship, not exploited as a plaything of fate or an accident of chance.

Third, a clear outlook on the Trinity should deeply affect how we treat people. The Father advances his kingdom by means of his Son, the Son glorifies the Father, the Spirit speaks not of himself but of the Son,²³ the Father glorifies the Son. All will call Jesus 'Lord' by the Holy Spirit to the glory of the Father. Each of the three delights in the good of the others.

In Philippians 2:5-11 Paul urges his readers to follow the example of the incarnate Christ. Christ did not use his status as equal with God as something to be exploited for his own advantage. Instead he emptied himself, by taking human nature and so adding 'the form of a servant'. He was obedient to the death of the cross, so as to bring about our salvation. Thus his followers are to shape their lives according to his, the faithful, obedient and self-giving second Adam in contrast to the grasping, self-interested first Adam. However, Paul's comments reach back to Christ's pre-incarnate state. His actions in his earthly ministry were in harmony with his attitudes beforehand. Being (present participle) in the form of God, Jesus acted like this because this is the way the Son always has been. In fact this is the way all three persons of the Trinity always are. We are to live like this – looking to the interests of others – because that is what Christ did and also *since this is what God is like*. The contrast is stark – the whole tenor of fallen man is the pursuit of self-interest. Instead, God actively pursues the interests of the other.²⁴

²³ Pannenberg, W., *Systematic Theology*, 1:308-27, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

²⁴ This is quite different from the case of a person who is persistently abused by another. In that case, either from unwillingness or enforced lack of opportunity the one abused is unable to contend for his or her own interests, let alone actively to pursue the interests of the other.

Fourth, a fully self-conscious and developed trinitarian theology is indispensable for the future progress of evangelism and missions. We find ourselves face to face with a militantly resurgent Islam. I find it hard to see how Islam, or any religion based on belief in a unitary god, can possibly account for human personality, or explain the *diversity-in-unity* of the world. Is it surprising that Islamic areas are associated with monolithic and dictatorial political systems?²⁵ If the Christian faith is to make headway after all these centuries, it must begin at the roots of Islam with the Qur'an's dismissal of Christianity as repugnant to reason due, among other things, to its teaching on the Trinity.²⁶ For historical reasons, the church in the East was on the defensive in the face of Islamic hegemony. For now and the future, we must recover our nerve for this is the root of Islamic unbelief and also its most vulnerable point. Politically correct pluralists will do all they can to stop us.

In a somewhat different way, postmodernism is unable to account for *unity-in-diversity*. Islam is a militant and monolithic unifying principle, with no provision for diversity, but post-modernism is a militant diversifying principle without a basis for unity. Its rejection of objective knowledge and absolute truth claims leaves it with no way to account for order in the world. Whereas enlightenment rationalism imposed a man-made unity, the post-enlightenment has spawned a fissiparous diversity-without-unity. By its rejection of objective knowledge it is unable consistently to support science, and so to maintain the fight against micro-organisms. (Has anyone told virulent drug-resistant bacteria and viruses that they are simply engaged in a language game or in a manipulative bid for power?) Nor eventually will it be able to sustain the development of the weapons our societies will need to defend themselves against aggressors who wish to overthrow them.

In politics, I have already suggested a connection between a unitary view of God and monolithic dictatorship. This is no new claim, for people like Moltmann have given it a good airing. A proper understanding of the triune God, to the extent of his revelation and our capacity, should lead to something quite different. Since God seeks the interests and well being of the other, whereas in sin we seek first our own interests, a trinitarian-based society could alone achieve in a very proximate fashion an appropriate balance between rights and responsibilities, freedom and order, peace and justice.

What of the path to reclaiming God's triunity as an integral and vital part of Christian experience, witness and mission? How are we to avoid the pitfalls of both Eastern and Western approaches, while staying clear of the dangers of subordinationism on the one side and modalism on the other? How can we further spell out these many possible outcomes? Unfortunately, there is not enough space to develop these points here! I will

²⁵ The one notable democratic system in a dominantly Islamic country, Turkey, was occasioned by the secularisation of the State in 1923 by Mustafa Kemal.

²⁶ The Holy Qur'an, Surah 4:171, Surah 5:73.

suggest lines of approach to these questions in a forthcoming book, tentatively entitled *The Holy Trinity* (Presbyterian & Reformed, late 2003/early 2004). This will include extensive biblical, historical, and theological discussion, and it will develop a range of practical ramifications.

I think I have written enough to alert you to the serious lacunae in contemporary Christian awareness of the triunity of God. At the same time, the prize is exceedingly great. Let us finish with Augustine. This is a dangerous area of thought and belief, he said, due to the near presence of heresy on both sides, for wrong views of God can twist and corrupt our worship and ministry, the life and witness of the church, and ultimately the peace, harmony and well-being of the world around us. It is arduous, for we are dealing in matters too great for us, before which we must bow in worship, and recognise our utter inadequacy. Barth's words are well chosen when he writes that 'correctness belongs exclusively to that about which we have thought and spoken, not to what we have thought and spoken'.²⁷ However, it is also (as Augustine added) supremely rewarding, for this is our God, who has truly and to the limits of which we may be capable made himself known to us, giving himself to us, and thus by the Spirit granting through Christ the Son access to the Father in the unity of his undivided being. This is eternal life, that we may know the Father and Jesus Christ whom he has sent, in the power and by the grace of the Holy Spirit. In his presence is life and joy for evermore, not simply for us but for others beyond, for those yet to believe and for those not yet born, for generations to come and beyond that, for eternity.

²⁷ Barth, *CD*, I/1, 432.

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Ontology and Biblical Theology. A Response to Carl Trueman's Editorial: *A Revolutionary Balancing Act*

Graeme Goldsworthy

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Carl Trueman's editorial (*Themelios* 27.3) offers a timely warning of some dangers that are inherent in making biblical theology a central concern in the evangelical study and proclamation of the Bible. There is however a difference between a timely warning and an unnecessary alarm. Perhaps the terminology of Marxist revolution is not the most helpful means of pointing out important biblical issues, and one wishes that Carl had exercised his editorial freedom with less provocative images. I contend that he somewhat overstates the case in a way that may cause some to harbour unfounded suspicions about the usefulness of biblical theology as an approach to the biblical data. Trueman makes several important and absolutely incontrovertible points, but these are blunted by some of the reasoning that seems to accompany them and the deductions he draws from them. It is also important to understand where the potential for misunderstanding lies. I will argue that his analysis is lacking in accuracy at certain crucial points and that his terminology gives the distinct impression that the situation with regard to the present acceptance of biblical theology in our churches is far more robust than is the case.

The Marxist concepts that seem to drive this editorial involve the revolutionaries (the old oppressed) becoming the establishment (and thus the new oppressors). So, who are these new oppressors? Carl leads us to them indirectly by speaking of the crisis in systematic theology (presumably the newly oppressed) in the churches. I would agree that there is a crisis. The dearth of sound doctrinal teaching is one of the most lamentable aspects of contemporary evangelicalism that has led to all kinds of aberrations in the local churches. The question, however, is what is the cause of this

crisis and how can it be remedied. Carl sees the crisis reflected in the nature of preaching, although he finds some alleviation of the gloom in the fairly recent revolution in preaching led by great expository preachers of the twentieth century (including Lloyd-Jones, Stott and Packer). A second revolution is perceived to be the resurgence of biblical theology and its attention to Christ-centred exegesis in preaching. He gives some credit for this to the 'biblical theological/redemptive historical movement from Moore College'. It is not clear what 'movement' means. It could be a fairly neutral term, but as the editorial proceeds it becomes quite pejorative with many negative overtones.

Carl next asks two pertinent questions. First: have the revolutionaries (the biblical theologians) become the new establishment (and therefore the new oppressors)? If we make allowances for his self-confessed interest in Marxist revolution, we might overlook the terminology. Unfortunately he continues to press it so that it not only colours his questions, but it also slants the answers he proposes. To name as revolutionaries those Bible students who try to respond to the text of the Bible as it presents itself (ontologically) is an invitation to misunderstanding. I have been convinced of the importance of doing biblical theology for over forty years. I have taught it in theological and Bible colleges, and in local churches; I have written about it;¹ but I have never perceived it to be a revolution, nor a thrust for establishment status. I presume that by establishment Carl means something like a governing perspective that, being in the ascendancy, tends to the suppression of all others. As I understand it, biblical theology as a method is just trying to do what the biblical authors themselves did as they testified to the saving acts of God that reveal, among other things, his ontological nature. I do not believe that the evidence supports the suggestion of a new biblical theological establishment. When he talks of the triumph of biblical theology having been so complete in some quarters I ask myself where these bastions of biblical orthodoxy are. I don't detect such a triumph, for example, in the Anglican Diocese of Sydney. A few years ago a British student at Moore College said to me, 'I came twelve thousand miles to learn biblical theology, but when I move around the diocese I don't hear it'. I have to say that, while there are encouraging signs that more and more evangelicals in the English-speaking world are recovering biblical theology, I see nothing that I could call a triumph.

The second question he raises is, 'are we *therefore* missing out on issues of crucial importance?' (emphasis mine). The rest of the article goes on to pose the answer in the positive. It is not the assertion that something is lacking that worries me. It is the use of 'therefore' which implies that a supposed ascendancy of biblical theology (which I and many others would question) is to blame. Carl tells us that the triumph of biblical

¹ Including, *The Goldsworthy Trilogy* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000); *According to Plan* (Leicester: IVP, 1991); *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture: the Application of Biblical Theology to Preaching* (Leicester: IVP, 2000).

theology has been so complete in some quarters that we need to realise that, as the new establishment 'it might be generating problems of its own'. Yes, it certainly might, even if it has not reached the status of establishment. There is nothing wrong with the biblical theological approach in and of itself, he concedes. But, then comes the big 'But'. It is primarily to this qualification and analysis I want to respond and to suggest alternative assessments.

We might first question whether it is the method that generates the problems, or whether the blame lies with the misuse, even the lack of use, of the method. Perhaps the failure to understand what biblical theology is all about is the cause of certain problems. Maybe it is a combination of those plus other problems that have existed for much longer.

Let me deal with Carl's first problem, the matter of mediocrity, especially in preaching. His reference to the story about the squirrel (a slight variation of which I included in my book on biblical theology in preaching) points to a potential for distortion of a central and inescapable truth: the answer to every question is Jesus. There is, of course, an important sense in which this is true. The answer to any question cannot be expressed in ultimate terms without recourse to the interpretive norm of all facts, namely Jesus Christ. Why else would Paul, who preached and wrote about the whole gamut of Christian faith and practice, describe his ministry as 'to know nothing among you except Christ and him crucified' (1 Cor. 2:2)? Why else would he proclaim that in Christ 'are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge' (Col. 2:3)? I want to propose that when there is boring mediocrity in preaching it is not the result of careful use of biblical theology. It may well be the result of poor use of biblical theology, even a grossly disfigured biblical theology. The problem is not that every sermon ends with Jesus. In fact, I would contend that, if a sermon doesn't find its resolution in the proclamation of Jesus, it is not a Christian sermon.² No, the problem is that the biblical-theological exegesis of the OT text (for this is where the problem is most likely to arise) has been done so superficially that its real, variegated, multifaceted, and beautifully textured, testimony to Jesus is not uncovered. Thus it is not possible to testify to the true nature of Jesus.

To press the last point a little more, the witness of the NT is that the whole of the OT is a testimony to Jesus (e.g., Luke 24:15-49; John 5:39-47). Biblical theology takes this seriously and aims to show the legitimate pathway from the text to Jesus. Even NT texts are dealt with in this way since the application of any biblical truth to a Christian is in terms of his or her relationship to Jesus. No text applies immediately to a Christian without being mediated through Jesus. The problem of mediocrity in preaching is, I suggest, not that we keep on ending up at Jesus but the very opposite. (Unless of course

² See my *Preaching the Whole Bible*, ch. 9.

we suppose that the 'truth as it is in Jesus' is mediocre.) Where we so often do end up is with a pale and distorted shadow of the biblical Christ, and there are many forms of this parody of the real Jesus. These can often be found in favourite evangelical clichés when given, as they often are, without proper explanation: 'ask Jesus into your heart'; 'make your decision for Jesus'; 'come to Jesus and experience joy with a capital J'; (these are respectively closer to Aquinas, Bultmann, and Schleiermacher than to biblical truth). Preachers who end up with the same hackneyed clichés about Jesus are not preaching Christ, nor have they even got to square one in doing biblical theology. Good biblical theology, conscientiously done, will not precipitate this problem but guard against it. The problem is there because so many pastors and teachers have given in to parish pragmatics, to skimping on sermon preparation, to experiential fads, to short cuts to church growth and the like. As Carl states, the crisis is in systematic theology, but we should not blame a resurgence of biblical theology for that.

I turn now to the contentious statement, 'the triumph of the biblical theological method in theology and preaching has come at the very high price of a neglect of the theological tradition.' I wish this assessment, and the argument that follows, had been a little more carefully nuanced. Carl refers briefly to the history of the church during which there was doctrinal reflection, and the writing of creeds and confessions. He says that the economics of salvation 'were always carefully balanced by judicious reflection upon the ontological aspects of God which undergirded the whole of the church's life and history'. Just what does *balanced* mean here? An equal number of tomes, or of sermons, on each? Two great truths simply stated? I would suggest that *balance* is not a biblical word, nor a biblical idea, and it doesn't explain anything. Try balancing divine sovereignty in predestination with human responsibility, as some argue we must. Or try balancing the human nature of Jesus with his divine nature. They simply do not balance, but there is a biblical perspective on them that we must try to understand and express. So there is also a biblical perspective on the relationship of the being of God and the action of God. It is this relationship between them, not giving them equal time, that is the important issue.

It is true that modern biblical theology has struggled to find itself and to define its distinctives. Evangelical biblical theologians have to realise that what separates them from non-evangelical biblical theologians is in fact a dogmatic construct, or a series of them. The myth that biblical theology was discovered or defined by Johann Philipp Gabler must be rejected. It is true that in his Altdorf speech (1787) he did a lot to define some important distinctions between biblical and dogmatic theology, as well as to give a quite unacceptable analysis of what biblical theology is. He spoke as a child of the Enlightenment, and his main interest was in preserving systematic theology. Evangelicals look much further back into the history of their heritage for the sources of the method. These, we contend, lie with the biblical authors themselves, including Moses, the prophets and the psalmists, along with the teaching of Jesus and the apostles. The early

fathers, the mediaeval exegetes, and the Reformers, especially in their attempts to understand the relevance of the OT, all engaged in biblical theology. It just wasn't called by that name and it had not become separated from systematics as it later did.

Most serious, however, is the suggestion that biblical theology places such an 'overwhelming emphasis upon the economy of salvation that it neglects these ontological aspects of theology'. What if the biblical documents, as they are presented in their canonical arrangement, do place such an emphasis (overwhelming is clearly pejorative and prejudicial) on the economy of salvation, why should biblical theology be criticised for pointing this out. If the biblical documents tell of these (unspecified) ontological aspects of theology, then any biblical theologian worth the name will uncover them and include them in the exposition of the text. Thus, when biblical theology is done with care it will not be unstable and collapse as suggested. If, again as suggested, Trinitarianism eventually dissolves into modalism, it will be because both biblical and systematic theologians have failed in their respective tasks and because they have not learned to talk to one another. My real problem with this negative assessment of biblical theology is that it makes it sound as if biblical theology is only about an economic view of salvation and God, and systematics is only about ontology. This simply is not so. Both are about both. Furthermore they are interdependent (maybe that's what Carl means by balance!).

Let us, then, pursue for a moment this matter of ontology. I have argued that it is only missing from biblical theology when the latter is not done well. By ontology I understand the nature of being in itself, whether we are talking about God, Jesus of Nazareth, Adam and Eve in the garden, the universe, the fallen human race, or the Bible. In respect to God, the ontological Trinity refers to the fact that the three persons are not mere names for three different kinds of action. If God had never created, had never met human need in salvation, had never indwelt his people, he would still be, from eternity to eternity, Trinity. The Anglican Catechism (presumably one of those precision theological documents that Carl praises) leans in the direction of the economic Trinity when it summarises the teaching of the Apostles' Creed as teaching about God the Father 'who hath made me', God the Son 'who hath redeemed me', and God the Holy Ghost 'who sanctifieth me, and all the elect people of God'. The reason it has an economic emphasis is that both the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed are predominantly economic rather than ontological statements. The fact is that ontology is not as clearly expressed in the formulations of the church as Carl suggests. One of the best ontological statements is the Creed of Saint Athanasius (*quicumque vult*). This is a magnificent doctrinal formulation that is almost never used in churches, although the 1662 Book of Common Prayer specifies at least thirteen occasions throughout the year when it should be read in the morning service. The problem is not that biblical theology has caused the economy of salvation to usurp ontology in the modern church. The problem is that ontology was rarely there to begin with. We still have not recovered from

the Enlightenment and the whole dissolution of theology into history of religion. Pietism and existentialism failed to restore biblical Christianity because neither of them took real biblical theology seriously. In my opinion, modern evangelicalism often is more pietistic and existentialist than biblical. The modern charismatic movement has rushed to fill the vacuum left by the retreat of biblical evangelicalism and the churches' abdication from the role of teaching doctrine.

What I would have liked to see in Carl's article is a greater acknowledgment of the interdependence of ontology and economy. This raises the further question of the relationship of biblical and systematic theology. If we are to prevent one or other emphasis becoming a controlling ideology, what is needed? The answer is not 'equal time' to radically different emphases. The answer is the genuine recognition of the problems that already exist and the theological reasons for eliminating them. Francis Watson of King's College, London, has pointed out the lamentable fact of the separation of theology and biblical studies, which means that biblical scholars avoid the theological questions and theologians ignore the Bible.³ This is plainly unacceptable for evangelicals. Yet we have allowed the Enlightenment perspective to shape much of our theological education. We go along with the virtually complete separation of the disciplines as a necessary division of labour and specialisation. But this method by default should be recognised as being eloquent of a dogmatic framework that rejects the authority of God and his word and refuses any notion of unity, inspiration, or authority of the Bible. This separation has further been allowed to occur within biblical studies so that the OT and NT departments rarely talk to each other. The writing of OT theologies and NT theologies is emphatically not doing biblical theology until the unity of the whole Bible is recognised. Evangelical academics and authors teach their courses and write their books and, for some reason, feel that they should not do anything to help the student and the reader to make the justified links with the fulfilment of the OT in Christ. Instead of being taught biblical theology as one aspect of the process of getting from text to hearer, they are left to fend for themselves, often with disastrous consequences.

This brings me to ask about the relationship of the carefully worded doctrinal statements of the church to the biblical documents and the theology within them. It could be put most simply as a succession of steps in going from biblical text to contemporary formulation. Exegesis leads to biblical theology and the formulation of certain hermeneutical steps, and these in turn lead to specific applications (sermons) and general formulations (systematics). But it is clearly not that simple. Take the case of the budding biblical theologian who says, 'I am not interested in theology, only in what the Bible says'. Or, it might be rephrased as, 'If we have biblical theology, what more do we

³ Francis Watson, *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1997), 2-9.

want?' The blind spot in these retorts is that they fail to see that the very idea of doing biblical theology can only proceed from having first formulated dogmatic constructs, however, tentatively. They have already assumed the existence (ontologically!) of the canon, which in turn assumes certain things about the origins of the canon. For the evangelical the origins lie in the ontological Trinity who is, who speaks, and who acts. We are thus, whether we reflect on it or not, within what is now popularly referred to as the hermeneutical spiral. This spiral essentially exists because of the interplay of ontology and the economy of salvation. It is the interplay of these two that makes both biblical theology and systematic theology necessary.

W.H. Griffith Thomas, in his *Principles of Theology*, makes the valid point that the ontological doctrine of the Trinity came to be formulated because of certain aspects of the economy of salvation. In other words: the early church was forced to come to terms with the nature of God as Trinity because of the way Jesus spoke and acted, and because he was perceived to be God who addressed God. The incarnation made inevitable the doctrine of the Trinity. While it cannot be contended that the church could have formulated its refined ontological notions of God on the basis of the OT alone, the incarnation of God the Son forces us to recognise that the raw data of such a doctrine does indeed exist in the OT. This leads me to another point. Earlier I referred to doctrinal preaching using a confessional standard as the basis. I have used the Thirty-nine Articles of the Anglican Church as a basis for such preaching. In the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands the standard was the Heidelberg Catechism which was conveniently divided into fifty-two 'Lord's Days' so that the whole range of doctrine could be explained each year. But it would be a gross error to suppose that systematic doctrinal preaching can only be achieved by following the systematic formulations of the churches. When, in 1996, the Moore College Annual School of Theology was devoted to the subject of biblical theology, one of the papers delivered was, 'Teaching Doctrine as Part of the Pastor's Role'.⁴ This contribution, from Peter Jensen, was in no sense an attempt to provide a balance between doctrine and biblical theology. Rather it set out to show that all biblical preaching is doctrinal. Jensen's stated thesis was that 'without biblical theology, doctrine is arbitrary, but without doctrine, biblical theology is ineffective'. In 1986, I contributed to the *Festschrift* for Broughton Knox with an essay entitled, "'Thus says the Lord!' – The Dogmatic Basis of Biblical Theology'.⁵ My argument was much the same as Jensen's: we cannot formulate dogma without biblical theology, but we cannot do biblical theology without dogmatic constructs. This is not

⁴ The papers read at this school are published as, R.J. Gibson (ed.), *Interpreting God's Plan: Biblical Theology and the Pastor* (Adelaide: The Open Book; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997).

⁵ P.T. O'Brien and D.G. Peterson (eds), *God Who is Rich in Mercy: Essays Presented to D.B. Knox* (Homebush West, NSW: Lancer; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 25-40.

balance, it is *perichoresis* (to use a more ontological term).⁶

To return to the Trinity, *perichoresis* is a term used to describe the fact that we cannot assert the unity of God without also asserting the distinctions of the persons of the Godhead. Thus, Christian theism is neither a modalistic-monistic theism, nor a cooperative tritheism. In the words of Cornelius Van Til, unity and distinction are equally ultimate. I would add that to assert equal ultimacy is not served by *balance* as well as it is by *coinherence* or *perichoresis*. We can see the ravages of balance when we look at the Trinitarian and Christological heresies that led to so much systematic formulation in the early church. Balance suggests an interchangability that, in the end, produces modalism. The insight of the Council of Chalcedon in 451 was that, in the matter of the two natures of Christ, balance does not suffice. It was the nature of heresy to try to balance the two natures. Both Ebionism and Docetism said balance could never be achieved under any circumstances and, therefore, one or other nature had to be eliminated. Apollinarianism attempted to balance by removing the spirit of man from Jesus so that the Spirit of God had somewhere to fit in. The ultimate balancing act was Nestorianism, which asserted that the two natures of Jesus could only mean that he was also two people 'glued together' (as it were).

The Christian theistic understanding of the ontological Trinity, then, directs us to the way ahead in the question of all relationships. Everything in existence has some point of unity with every other thing. Every thing in existence has some point of distinction from everything else. Unity *and* distinction form the structure of reality, and it is so because that is the ontological essence of God and the way he has made all things. This enlightens us about all aspects of reality as we try to understand relationships. The examination of the biblical data in their salvation-historical progression leads us to concerns about the relationship of the parts to the whole, including the relationship of the OT to the NT. Unity and distinction, along with their perichoretic relationship, also points us to the relationship of biblical, systematic, and historical theology.

One more point needs to be made. By its very nature, systematic theology involves a measure of abstraction in order to show the contemporary relevance of the revelation that was given within its redemptive-historical context. If systematics is divorced from this context it becomes a total abstraction. The gospel is not an abstraction but the proclamation of a once-for-all historic event within time and space. To de-historicise the gospel is to destroy it. This has happened in the moving of the one saving event to the continuous repetition of the mass in Catholicism, to the existential moment in Bultmannism, or to the timeless ethical ideal of Liberalism. Biblical theology is necessary to prevent this de-historicising of the gospel by anchoring the person and work of Christ

⁶ *Perichoresis* in Greek literally means to dance around in chorus, and the word has presumably been adopted to signify the interplay, coinherence or codependence of two or more theological realities.

into the continuum of redemptive history that provides the 'story-line' of the whole Bible. The only thing that can rescue systematics from such abstractions is biblical theology. In fact, systematic theology is plainly impossible without biblical theology. Biblical theology is the only means of preventing every biblical text having equal significance for Christians (e.g. we need it to sort out what to do which the ritual laws of the Pentateuch). It prevents us from short-circuiting texts so that we isolate them from their theological context and then moralise on their application to believers.

I would conclude by expressing the hope that this response to Carl Trueman's editorial would not be seen as merely reactionary. I intend it as a courteous reply that includes both endorsement of some of his main points and my own warning lest the new oppressor becomes the search for balance. I agree that there is a crisis in systematic theology. I disagree that it comes about because of some kind of imperialistic ascendancy of biblical theology. The lesson I try to get over to my students in Biblical Theology and in Hermeneutics is simply this: you will never be a good biblical theologian if you are not also striving to be a good systematic and historical theologian, and you will never be a good systematic theologian if you ignore biblical and historical theology. Between the various theological methods (we could add pastoral theology) there is not balance but the *perichoresis* of the hermeneutic spiral. Much more could be said about the relationship of the various theological disciplines, but that could be the subject of further discussion. Giving people in the local church a sense of the unity of the biblical account, and the diversity within the unity of its theology, should whet their appetites for the contemporary formulation of the theology in a systematic way that enables them to make the valid applications of God's word in their lives. They that learn *perichoresis* will dance with the joyful truth, but let him who thinks he balances take heed lest he fall.

The Last Word: The Mad Mirage of the Heart

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Temptation is often the subtlest enemy of truth. In the wilderness temptations of Jesus the Son, the core contest centred around the denial or erosion of trusting God the Father with the truth of how things really are. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book *Temptation* makes the point that for the Christian, what matters is how God deals with us in the hour of temptation. The divine paradoxes of discipleship are the ways God maintains *his* authorship of Truth. It's easy to forget that we lose our lives to keep them, we must die to live, the cross is public and the resurrection happens nearly unobserved. God's truth is just not something we would ever come up with on our own. The subtlety of temptation, as Bonhoeffer points out, is that, 'Satan does not fill us with hatred of God, but with forgetfulness of God.'

When faced with temptation, we have to remember what the truth is, what is really real. The reality is that the Christian life is often uncomfortable, inconvenient and plain hard even on the good days. His word, as well as his way, is not ours. And it's easy to be deaf to a hard word even if it is God's word. The tempter wants us to listen to a different, an easier, and more attractive word. Only as we abide *in Christ* can the Christian enter the obedience of Jesus and know deliverance from the evil that lurks on the other side of temptation. Remembering the dynamic depths of Jesus' experience is immeasurably helpful.

Jesus was led by the Spirit into a situation that only he could handle without sin. He stood in our place, identified with our humanity, and began the journey to the final battle of Golgotha. From his incarnation, baptism, *temptation*, death, resurrection and ascension, Jesus took our place to fully redeem our humanity.

The reality of the first temptation was to see if the Son would forget the goodness of the Father who gives bread and not stones. Can God really be trusted to be good? Satan tempted Jesus to take things into his own hands in the provision of good. *Turn these stones to bread, your Father would if he could, but he isn't! So, go ahead and do it yourself!* God the Father desired from Jesus the Son a faithful remembrance of who he was, the incarnate Word of God who spoke all reality into being. If that Word was denied or undone – if the Son had doubted goodness and had made his own bread,

would the cosmos have ceased to exist? Would the one who holds all things together as the Word of the Father deny the goodness of God to assuage his own hunger? The cosmos for a crumb. This is the hidden inequity of all temptation. But Jesus, true Son of the Father, remembered the Father's Word, said NO, and in due course, the good Father provided bread for his Son.

Father in heaven, lead us not into the temptation that forgets your goodness even when we are very hungry. Help us to trust you by faith to give us daily bread. Like Jesus, help us renounce to receive, to lose our lives, to hate our lives that we might be kept as yours forever.

If the first temptation was a test of the Father's goodness, the reality of the second temptation was a test of the Son's humility. Again, the evil one tempts Jesus to do something – *Throw yourself down! Make God jump through hoops of his own making!* Satan wanted to force God to keep his word through a feat of death-defying arrogance on the part of the beloved Son. For the evil one to prevail in such a deceptive power play would have meant the dethronement of the Almighty. This temptation echoes again at the foot of the cross, *Come down from there – prove you are the Son of God.* The coercion of God's promise would be the bondage of God. Would Jesus trust for the Father's exaltation and even be obedient unto death? The proof of Sonship, both in the wilderness and on the cross, was refusing rescue. And in the self-emptying humility Jesus, the Son secured the perfect freedom of the Father. In the embrace of weakness, the power of God prevailed.

Father in heaven, lead us not into the temptation of thinking we can manipulate your truth to make a point that vindicates or empowers us. Help us to have the mind of Christ, forsaking celebrity for the promised exaltation of the self-emptying life. Help us believe your Grace is sufficient in our weakness because it is grounded in the unrivaled freedom of your very self as Father, Son and Spirit.

In the third temptation Satan discards his reasonable disguises and, at the height of his attempts at seduction, makes his own offer of power and victory. Diogenes Allen in his book *Between Two Worlds* asserts that for the first time, Satan offers to do something for Jesus, something, indeed tempting. The tempter offers the Son in the wilderness what the Father refused him in the garden: another cup to drink. *All the kingdoms of the world for sale! Clearance-rack prices! Why not? Why pay top price for the same goods?* But, the deeper reality of the third temptation is that it was an offer to rule over a glittering graveyard, not the city of God. For the price of cheap worship, it is our souls that would be lost. If the Son had bowed his knee, if the Father had offered another cup, then God would not be Love. As the prince of this world Satan offers Jesus a kingdom without subjects, a world without his marvellous light, a throne

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without grace, an eternity without love. The offer is really a cheap kingdom, a cross-less kingdom. The goods, in fact are not the same, no matter how temptation tries to fake the labels. And Jesus knows this. Not only does the Son not bow, but in the only imperative directed at the devil in the wilderness temptations, Jesus commands Satan to leave. And he does.

Father in heaven, lead us not into the temptation of a cross-less discipleship that can grant an earthly kingdom that glitters for a season, but costs us more than we can imagine. Keep our knees from bending at any throne but yours. Help our worship to always include the cup of your suffering. Help us refuse the sweet seduction of lesser loves.

Helmut Thielicke in his book *Between God and Satan* calls temptation the 'mad mirage of the heart' because it offers us what we desire at the expense of reality. Satan's temptations are temptations because they look beneficial to us. And easier. And less costly. And, frankly, not bad at all. Blind to temptation, we love to make our own bread. Mindful of our own egos, we supply our own needs if God seems slow or neglectful. Forsaking kingdom costs, we applaud ecclesial celebrities who peddle the most popular proofs of God's power for a world addicted to the sensational. And our knees bow easily to worship tiny idols like style and preference, consumer satisfaction and a good reputation.

Our Father in Heaven, lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil! For yours alone is the kingdom and the power and the glory because Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by other kingdoms and powers and glories. And, the Word said NO. Remind us of this forever and ever. Amen.