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Editorial: Martin Luther

Martin Luther was born 500 years ago this year. There is probably no-one in the whole history of the Christian church after the apostles whose memory evangelical Protestants should be readier to honour than Luther. For if evangelical Christians are by definition gospel-people, to no-one was the recovery of the apostolic gospel in the early modern era more singularly due than to him. Historians stress that pre-Reformation Europe suffered from a surfeit of religion, not from a lack of it, and Luther blazed the trail in stripping away those myriad accretions of fearful piety which blocked out the radical simplicity of the Christian gospel. By far the most significant of the Ninety-five Theses was the sixty-second: 'The true treasure of the Church is the holy gospel of the glory and the grace of God.' Was there ever a theologian whose thought was so mastered by the good news for sinners in Jesus Christ?

Moreover, if evangelicals are by conviction Bible-Christians, perhaps the longest labour of Luther's life was his German Bible, and it was by a scholar's exegetical discovery that his fresh apprehension of the gospel laid its total claim upon him:

I had certainly been seized with a wondrous eagerness to understand Paul in the epistle to the Romans, but hitherto I had been held up—not by a 'lack of heat in my heart's blood', but by one word only, in chapter 1: 'The righteousness [*justitia*] of God is revealed in [the Gospel].' For I hated this word 'righteousness of God', which by the customary use of all the doctors I had been taught to understand philosophically as what they call *the formal or active righteousness whereby God is just and punishes unjust sinners*.... At last, as I meditated day and night, God showed mercy and I turned my attention to the connection of the words, namely—'the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written: the righteous shall live by faith'—and there I began to understand that the righteousness of God is the righteousness in which a just man lives by the gift of God, in other words by faith, and that what Paul means is this: *the righteousness of God, revealed in the Gospel, is passive, in other words that by which the merciful God justifies us through faith*, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.' At this I felt myself straightway born afresh and to have entered through the open gates into paradise itself. There and then the whole face of scripture was changed; I ran through the scriptures as memory served, and collected the same analogy in other words, for example *opus Dei*, that which God works in us; *virtus Dei*, that by which God makes us strong; *sapientia Dei*, that by which He makes us wise; *fortitudo Dei, salus Dei, gloria Dei*. And now, in the same degree as I had formerly hated the word 'righteousness of God', even so did I begin to love and extol it as the sweetest word of all; thus was this place in St. Paul to me the

very gate of paradise.¹

Thus the light of Scripture freed him from church dogmatics.

Yet Luther remains a tantalizing, almost infuriating theologian. Debate persists, of course, about some aspects of Calvin's teaching, but as often as not it takes its origin not in Calvin's obscurity but in his unwelcome clarity. But Luther is a sterner challenge to his interpreters. Even on so central an issue as the relation between law and gospel to expound Luther's understanding with rounded faithfulness is a demanding task. But this much can be said. If it is a test of fidelity to Paul's gospel that the expositor is liable to be misread as advocating antinomianism, then Luther was far more faithful to Paul than most modern evangelicals (who are more likely to be accused of the opposite error of legalism). To exalt the freedom of gospel grace was Luther's magnificent obsession, even at the risk of appearing to do despite to the law of God. Some may judge him to have erred, but if he did, he erred in the right direction, if we take our bearings from Paul.

Nor is it easy to do justice to a theological writer so given to paradoxes and opposites. On the one hand he could compose the tenderest of lyrics for the church's hymnody:

Take note, my heart; see there! look low:
What lies then in the manger so?
Whose is the lovely little child?
It is the darling Jesus-child.
Dear little Jesus! in my shed,
Make thee a soft, white little bed,
And rest thee in my heart's low shrine.
That so my heart be always thine.²

Not that Luther was one to let baby-worship banish the gospel from the manger—or from the font!

Yet less than a decade later he gave vent to the bitterest of his treatises against the Jews, *On the Jews and Their Lies*. As the Zurich churches commented on another of his anti-Jewish works, 'If it had been written by a swineherd, rather than by a celebrated shepherd of souls, it might have some—but very little—justification.'³ It stands in stark contrast to Luther's first writing on the subject, *That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew*, which had been welcomed by Jewish readers in 1523.

The older Luther is no doubt an unattractive figure. *Against the Roman Papacy, an Institution of the Devil* (1545) is probably not on the reading-list of any of the current RC-Protestant dialogues. Yet if its polemical fury muddies exegesis and transgresses the bounds of good taste ('this bishop of hermaphrodites and pope of Sodomists'), it is written out of a passion for the liberation of the gospel and the Scriptures. Even at his

¹ E. G. Rupp and B. Drewery, *Martin Luther (Documents of Modern History)*; London: Edward Arnold, 1970), pp. 5–6.

² From 'Vom Himmel hoch', in the translation of George MacDonald, the Scottish novelist and poet, *Luther's Works*, vol. 53: U. S. Leopold (ed.), *Liturgy and Hymns* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965), p. 291. Another, less idiomatic translation is to be found in the hymn 'Give heed, my heart, lift up thine eyes' included in many modern hymnals.

³ 'Quoted by M. H. Bertram in *Luther's Works*, vol. 47: *The Christian in Society IV* (1971), p. 123.

fiercest there is nobility in Luther's savagery. Let critics beware lest our distaste for such acrid controversy reflects the spinelessness of an age and of a church which on very few issues can declare, 'Here I stand. I can do no other' (which is strictly unhistorical but 'a true myth'⁴).

What Samuel Rutherford once said of himself could well be applied to Luther—that he was 'made up of extremes'. The contrasts abound—light and dark, lofty spiritual elevation and subterranean gloom, limpid simplicity and complex obscurity. One result is that Luther is never dull for very long. If Macquarrie maddens or Barth bores, read some Luther to rekindle your zeal for *gospel theology*. The theological student who never reads Luther is depriving himself of some of the most appetizing and energizing fare in the theological menu. There is something here for all interests and tastes, from the Reformation manifestoes of 1520, such as *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, to the classical simplicity of the *Shorter Catechism*, the devotional sensitivity of his exposition of the Magnificat, the provocation of *How Christians Should Regard Moses*, the insight of his *Open Letter on Translating* and the relentlessness of his defence of *The Bondage of the Will* against Erasmus.

But finally, Luther splendidly exemplifies the fallibility of all theologians. Evangelicals may be prone to idealize or even idolize the Reformers, and can be testy when they are faulted. But we do the cause of biblical Christianity no service if we stamp even a Luther or a Calvin with the mark of impeccability. Rather let Luther have the last word, before the emperor at Worms in 1521, after he had offered to recant if 'convicted by the testimony of Scripture or plain reason': 'I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted, and my conscience is captive to the Word of God.' *Coram Deo* he has his reward.

David Wright

⁴ Rupp and Drewery, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

The Identity of the Holy Spirit: A Problem in Trinitarian Theology

John Webster

[p.4]

1. The problem

Christian theology has been traditionally reticent in its talk of the Holy Spirit. In his *Letters to Serapion*, one of the classic texts of Christian pneumatology, Athanasius counselled restraint in view of the ineffability of the Spirit as one who entirely transcends the world of creatures.¹ Such restraint is, however, not simply the fruit of due modesty before the divine realities. It is also the result of the fact that Christian theologians have frequently experienced great difficulty in specifying exactly how the Spirit is to be differentiated from the other two divine persons. It has, moreover, often proved very difficult to mark out areas of the divine work which are the Spirit's special preserve. A very precise account of the identity of the Spirit has, in other words, not uncommonly eluded Christian thinkers. It has, furthermore, often been remarked that the development of the doctrine of the Spirit's divinity seems little more than a 'tidying-up' process which brought Christian beliefs about the Spirit into line with Christian beliefs about the Son or Word. If this judgment is true—and there are undoubtedly close structural parallels between the arguments used for the divinity of both Son and Spirit²—some would see it as underlining the difficulty (and even perhaps impropriety) of identifying the Spirit as a separate divine person.

In current theological debate, the need to identify the Spirit with some precision has become acute for two reasons. First, unease with trinitarian accounts of the being of God makes some suggest that 'Spirit' describes not so much the third Trinitarian person as the whole of God's being in its relation to man and the creation. Second, others more firmly rooted in the classical Christian tradition have so emphasized the Christological dimensions of the doctrine of the Spirit that the 'third person of the Trinity seems to be almost absorbed into the second. Neither trend offers a satisfactory account of the Spirit's identity. Yet the provision of such an account is a matter of some considerable significance,

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precisely because the way in which the Spirit is understood can make a radical difference both to the over-all shape of the doctrine of the Trinity and to an account of the relationship between God and the world.

2. God as Spirit

The work of the late Professor Geoffrey Lampe, culminating in his 1976 Bampton lectures *God as Spirit*,³ is the most weighty post-war English contribution to the doctrine of the Holy

¹ Athanasius, *Ad Serapionem* 4.1ff. Cf. T. F. Torrance, 'Spiritus Creator' in *Theology in Reconstruction* (London, 1965), pp. 209-228; G. D. Dragas, 'Holy Spirit and Tradition: the Writings of St Anathasius' in *Athanasia* vol. 1 (London, 1980), pp. 75-98.

² As a comparison of Athanasius' *De Incarnatione* and his letters *Ad Serapionem* would show.

³ Oxford, 1977. See further 'The Holy Spirit in the Writings of St Luke' in D. E. Nineham (ed.), *Studies in the Gospels* (Oxford, 1955), pp. 159-200; 'Holy Spirit' in *Interpreters' Dictionary of the Bible* 2 (New York, 1962), pp. 626-39; 'The Holy Spirit and the Person of Christ' in S. W. Sykes, J. P. Clayton (ed.), *Christ, Faith and*

Spirit. Lampe's fundamental contention is that 'Spirit' properly describes, not one of the three divine persons, but the whole activity of God in his relation to man: 'the Spirit of God', he writes, 'is to be understood, not as referring to a divine hypostasis distinct from God the Father and God the Son or Word, but as indicating God himself as active towards and in his human creation.'⁴ As a consequence, Lampe's conception of the Spirit is that of a general presence of God within the creation, such that he can speak of 'an incarnation of God as Spirit within every man as human spirit'.⁵ 'Spirit' is virtually co-terminous between God and man, and so the church may not regard itself as the exclusive location of God's Spirit; rather, it is the focal point of God's personal presence to all creation. Many of the same themes are taken up in the work of Maurice Wiles, who has suggested that 'Spirit' denotes the personal and relational nature of God as present to his creation: 'God as Spirit is God as present'.⁶ Or again, 'to know God as Holy Spirit is to know him as... the absolutely other entering into the most intimate conceivable relationship with man'.⁷

Both Lampe and Wiles resist the isolation of the Spirit as an identifiable distinct divine person. One effect of this resistance is the attempt to reformulate the doctrine of God in non-trinitarian terms. Since 'spirit' is not a divine hypostasis, and since Jesus Christ is most effectively described as the supreme instance of God's indwelling of human Spirit,⁸ Trinitarian formulae are less than adequate formulations of our apprehension of God.⁹ But quite apart from these implications for the doctrine of the Trinity, the consequences for the doctrine of the Spirit are such that the Spirit is understood in a general and cosmic context as God's immanence within his creation.

If such a pneumatology is unsatisfying, it is primarily because its account of the identity of the Spirit is too generalized. Partly this follows from its rejection of 'personal' language about the Spirit: 'Spirit' becomes a description of the quality of God's activity in the world rather than of a distinct person within God's being. But there is also here a failure to state how the Spirit is Christologically identified in the New Testament.¹⁰ The scope of language about the Spirit in the New Testament is distinctly limited and specialised; the broad use of 'Spirit' to denote divine immanence finds little New Testament warrant. 'So far from the Spirit's being cosmic in scope (as Christ, the *Logos* of God, is), the Spirit is scarcely mentioned except as among Christians and as the agent of the 'new creation'—the bringing of persons to new life in Christ.'¹¹ 'Spirit' in the New Testament is *Christologically identified*: it is located through Christ who is supremely endowed with the Spirit, who pours the Spirit upon the church after his exaltation, and to whom the Spirit testified. As G. S. Hendry suggests, 'the witness of the New Testament to the gift of the Spirit is soteriological and eschatological in character; when

History (Cambridge, 1972), pp. 111-130; 'What Future for the Trinity?' in *Explorations in Theology* 8 (London, 1981), pp. 30-37.

⁴ *God as Spirit*, p. 11.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁶ M. F. Wiles, *Faith and the Mystery of God* (London, 1982), p. 123; cf. pp. 117-29.

⁷ M. F. Wiles, 'The Holy Spirit in Christian Theology' in *Explorations in Theology* 4 (London, 1979), p. 68.

⁸ See *God as Spirit*, pp. 1-33, 61-175; 'The Holy Spirit and the Person of Christ'.

⁹ *God as Spirit*, pp. 206-28; M. F. Wiles, 'Some Reflections on the Origins of the Doctrine of the Trinity' in *Working Papers in Doctrine* (London, 1976), pp. 1-17.

¹⁰ On the close correlation between Christ and Spirit, see, e.g., H. Berkhof, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (London, 1965), pp. 13-29; J. D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* (London, 1975); G. S. Hendry, *The Holy Spirit in Christian Theology* (London, 1965), pp. 11-29; C. F. D. Moule, *The Holy Spirit* (Oxford, 1978), pp. 17-22, 38-42; E. Schweizer, *The Holy Spirit* (ET, London, 1981).

¹¹ C. F. D. Moule, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

the attempt is made to fit it into the framework of a conception that is cosmological and anthropological in character, it almost certainly loses something of its distinctiveness'.¹²

3. The Spirit of Christ

This very close correlation of the doctrines of the Holy Spirit and the person of Christ has been an especial characteristic of Protestant theologies of the Holy Spirit, though its roots are arguably deep in the patristic tradition.¹³ Such a refusal to envisage the Spirit in general or cosmic terms is, of course, bound up with a large-scale rejection of natural theology. A natural knowledge of God on the basis of the immanence of the Spirit within nature and man is ruled out since it is illegitimate to speak of the Spirit as a naturally-available presence of God to the whole creation. Knowledge of God is available only in Christ, and so 'we cannot speak of the operation of the Spirit in the world as if the Incarnation had not taken place,... or as if he may now operate as it were behind the back of Jesus Christ'.¹⁴

But more is involved than this, for to stress the Christological context of the spirit is to introduce a very definite conception of his work and of his place in the Trinity. With regard to his work, the Spirit's identity is defined by his role as the one who effects union between the believer and Christ. The Spirit is the agent of the subjective realization of Christ's objective accomplishment of salvation. The Spirit of Christ 'discloses *His* words and deeds, *His* Cross and *His* resurrection to us, as the divine reality bearing upon us, embracing us, giving to us',¹⁵ so that 'what is involved is the participation of man in the word and work of Christ'.¹⁶ In a memorable passage, Calvin argued that without the applicatory work of the Spirit, Christ remains 'unemployed',¹⁷ external to and not appropriated by the believer for whom he died. Thus the Spirit's work is defined in terms of his relation to Christ: he reproduces in the believer Christ's pattern of death and resurrection, in this way conforming him to Christ in baptism and sanctification¹⁸.

This understanding of the work of the Spirit as 'essentially subservient and instrumental to the work of the incarnate Christ'¹⁹ leads to a specific understanding of his place within the Trinity. One theme in classical western Trinitarian doctrine has been that of the Spirit as the 'bond of love' (*vinculum caritatis*) between the Father and the Son. Through the Spirit, Father and Son are compacted into loving unity. Such a conception clearly ties the Spirit very closely to Father and Son, sometimes to such an extent that it is difficult to see how he is personally differentiated from the first two persons, or to identify a sphere of operation which is peculiarly appropriate to him.

Much the same conception of the place of the Spirit lies behind the notion of the double procession of the

¹² *Op. cit.*, p. 16.

¹³ Cf. T. F. Torrance, *Art. cit.*, and especially A. Laminski, *Der Heilige Geist als Geist Christi and Geist der Gläubigen* (Leipzig, 1969).

¹⁴ T. F. Torrance, 'The Relevance of the Doctrine of the Spirit for Ecumenical Theology' in *op. cit.*, p. 230. For an argument the other way, see C. Raven's *The Creator Spirit* (London, 1927).

¹⁵ K. Barth, *Credo* (ET, London, 1964), p. 134.

¹⁶ K. Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (ET, London, 1949), p. 138. For a fuller statement, see *Church Dogmatics IV/1* (ET, Edinburgh, 1956), pp. 643-779.

¹⁷ J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* III.1.3.

¹⁸ Cf. here C. F. D. Moule, *op. cit.*, p. 33f.; D. B. Harried, *Creed and Personal Identity* (Edinburgh, 1981), pp. 85-97.

¹⁹ G. S. Henry, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

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Holy Spirit 'from the Father and the Son'. The so-called 'Filioque' clause is infamous as a cause of schism between east and west, and is frequently dismissed as abstraction or pedantry.²⁰ But, however regrettable, the controversy at heart concerns the way in which the Trinity is to be understood, and in particular how the divine tri-unity relates to the oneness of God. Western theology insists that the Spirit's origin lies in both Father and Son, in order to underline the community of function between the first and the second persons. To say that the Spirit proceeds from one person only would be to disrupt the primacy of the divine unity for our conception of the nature of God. Indeed, it is this sense of the unity of God which western theology has often struggled to safeguard. Eastern theologians, by contrast, emphasize the procession from the Father alone in order to retain a stronger conception of the triunity of God. To say that the Spirit proceeds from both Father and Son would be to compromise the fundamental plurality of God's being which is expressed in the proper distinction between Father and Son with regard to the origin of the Spirit.

The conception of the work of the Spirit and of his relationship to the other Trinitarian persons outlined in the western tradition attempts to state the Spirit's identity by conceiving of the Spirit in a Christological context. Yet it is precisely this attempt *Christologically* to identify the Spirit which in the end may make the argument less than satisfactory. The strength of this Christological definition of the Spirit is that it protects the identity of the Spirit from being generalized into a divine presence suffused throughout creation. The weakness of such an argument is that it may absorb the identity of the Spirit into that of the Son.

A first reason for this is that Christologically-orientated doctrines of the Spirit are not infrequently (though rarely intentionally) subordinationist, in that the Spirit is not possessed of the same fully divine status as Father and Son. If the Spirit's work is merely applicatory, then it is difficult to envisage him as having as full a place in the divine economy of salvation as the other persons. Or again, talk of the Spirit as the 'bond of love' between Father and Son is not fully personal language. As a result, the shape of the Trinity is not that of three co-equal persons but rather of 'two subjects and one "operation" or, perhaps, "quality"'.²¹

Second, a stress on the unity of the Trinity, which lies behind the Christological identity of the Spirit, often verges on the suggestion that the oneness of God is more fundamental than his threeness. In more technical language, Losky argues that western theologians emphasize the 'ontological primacy of the essence over the hypostases'.²² Barth's doctrine of the Trinity, for example, needs to be considered with caution here. By tying the Spirit so closely to Christ, Barth often seems to suggest that the triunity of God is less primordial than his unity, and that

²⁰ Lampe speaks of the *Filioque* controversy as 'a controversy about nothing real' (*God as Spirit*, p. 226); Moule describes it as 'one of the most deplorable chapters in the history of hair-splitting theology' (*op. cit.*, p. 47). The standard survey in English is still H. B. Swete, *On the History of the Doctrine of the Procession of the Holy Spirit* (Cambridge, 1876). For more recent comment, see V. Lossky, 'The Procession of the Holy Spirit in Orthodox Trinitarian Doctrine' in *In the Image and Likeness of God* (ET, Oxford, 1975), pp. 71-96; A. I. C. Heron, "'Who Proceedeth from the Father and the Son": The Problem of the *Filioque*' (*Scottish Journal of Theology* 24 (1971), pp. 149-66); L. Vischer (ed.), *Spirit of God, Spirit of Christ* (Geneva, 1981).

²¹ R. D. Williams, 'Barth on the Triune God' in S. W. Sykes (ed.), *Karl Barth. Studies of his Theological Method* (Oxford, 1979), p. 170.

²² *Op. cit.*, p.77.

'personality' is properly attributed to the one God rather than to each of the three trinitarian persons. Father, Son and Spirit are seen as 'moments' or 'modes' of the unfolding of a single divine subject, so that threeness threatens to be resolved into oneness.²³

Thus what starts as the attempt to protect the identity of the Spirit from dissipation into a general presence of God easily becomes itself a threat to that identity. To tie the Spirit too closely to the person and work of Christ is to underestimate that differentiation within the one divine life and thus to encourage the slow drift into modalism which is so common in western Trinitarian theology.

How can the problems be eased?

4. The identity of the Spirit

In the first place, there is a need to ensure a properly *pluralist* doctrine of the Trinity, one, that is, in which threeness is understood as fundamental to God's unity. Unity is a *relational* term when applied to God: the divine unity is not monadic, relationless and undifferentiated. Rather, it is organic and dynamic, expressed in the personal histories of the sending of the Son and the outpouring of the Spirit. 'The Divine unity is a dynamic unity actively unifying in the one Divine life the lives of the three Divine persons'.²⁴ Divine unity does not lie behind the threeness of God; rather, it is the event of the peace of the divine life between Father, Son and Spirit.²⁵

This will also involve careful specification of the notion of 'person' as applied to God. 'Person' is again to be conceived relationally: the person is not an autonomous subject but rather is constituted as person in relationship and dialogue. Understood in this way, the divine 'personality' or 'subjectivity' does not preclude relationship and differentiation; indeed, it is relationship. God's personality is God's relatedness to himself.

If God's triunity is thus understood as a personal, related society, then the danger of absorption of the Spirit into the person of Christ will be considerably lessened, precisely because God's being will be seen as fully plural. A pluralist understanding of God's being, moreover, will furnish the basis for understanding the distinct role of the Spirit in the divine economy, related to but properly distinguished from those of Father and Son. This will, in turn, serve to reinforce a sense of the distinct identity of the Spirit. Three areas of God's action which are properly to be attributed to the Spirit can be marked out.

First, the Spirit is the one who is sent out into the world through the church and who thus demonstrates that God's life is a life open to the creation. Because the Spirit is sent, 'the triune God is the God who is open to man, open to the world, and open to time'.²⁶ The Spirit is a protest against monadic conceptions of God in which the divine life is seen as 'a closed

²³ Some see Hegel in the background to Barth here: see L. Oeing-Hanhoff, 'Hegels Trinitätslehre' (*Theologie and Philosophie* 52 (1977), p. 378-407, especially pp. 395-9) and W. Pannenberg's two seminal essays 'Person and Subjekt' and 'Die Subjektivität Gottes und die Trinitätslehre' in *Grundfragen systematischer Theologie, Gesammelte Aufsätze 2* (Göttingen, 1980), pp. 80-95, 96-111.

²⁴ L. Hodgson, *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (London, 1943), p. 95.

²⁵ Cf. here K. Rahner, *The Trinity* (ET, London, 1970).

²⁶ J. Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (ET, London, 1977), p. 56.

triangle',²⁷ complete in the enjoyment of its own inner relationship and unconcerned to reach beyond itself into the history of the world.

Second, the Spirit is especially active in the mission of the church. In this, the Spirit's work is not merely that of ensuring the subjective appropriation of what was accomplished by the Son once for all in the past. Rather, we have here to do with 'a great new event in the series of

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God's saving acts. He creates a world of his own'.²⁸ In this he does not supplant Christ, but rather his work continues the work which God began in Christ, and derives its validity and effectiveness from Christ's once-for-all accomplishment. Thus in the Lucan writings, Spirit and mission are inseparable: the giving of the Spirit by the exalted Christ enables the mission of the church as the agent through which Christ's kingdom is extended.²⁹ This link between Spirit and mission is significant for two reasons. First, it prevents an excessive weighting of the Spirit's work towards the past work of Christ, emphasizing that that Spirit does not merely 'remind' the church of Christ but also continues this work through its agency. In this way, second, it ensures a sphere of salvation history which is proper to the Spirit.

Third, in the worship of the church the Spirit is operative with an activity which differentiates him from Father and Son. The theology of prayer indicated in such passages as Romans 8:15f., 26f. and Ephesians 2:18 suggests that in the prayer which the Spirit enables God 'hears his own voice'. In prayer, 'the Spirit's voice turns out to be ... the voice of God addressing himself from within man'.³⁰ Such a conception of the Spirit's work in prayer and worship immediately introduces a note of differentiation in our understanding of God's being, and so safeguards both the divine plurality-in-unity and the identity of the Spirit. 'The way in which our prayers are caught up into God's own self-address reveals the reality of a further internal relation in the deity.'³¹

The Spirit is the one in whom God moves beyond himself in provoking mission and worship. If this is true, then we are able to see that the Spirit has an identity of his own, though one essentially bound to that of Father and Son. and we are, moreover, enabled to see a little more clearly that our understanding of the work and person of the Spirit can provide the crucible of an entire understanding of the triune life of God.

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²⁷ P. J. Rosato, *The Spirit as Lord, The Pneumatology of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh, 1981), p. 135. Cf. J. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God* (ET, London, 1981), pp. 129-222.

²⁸ Berkhof, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

²⁹ See F. F. Bruce, 'The Holy Spirit in the Acts of the Apostles' (*Interpretation* 27 (1973), pp. 166-83) and especially G. W. H. Lampe, 'The Holy Spirit in the Writings of St Luke'.

³⁰ Moule, *op. cit.*, p. 81. Cf. G. Wainwright, *Doxology* (London, 1980), pp. 90f. This, of course, is why the *epiclesis* or invocation of the Holy Spirit in worship is of very great significance: see G. Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (London, 1945), pp. 292-302.

³¹ B. L. Hebblethwaite, 'Perichoresis - Reflections on the Doctrine of the Trinity' (*Theology* 80 (1975), p. 259).

Recent literature on the fourth gospel: some reflections

D. A. Carson

John's gospel continues to be the focus of much scholarly attention. Dr Carson, author of this survey article, who teaches at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in the USA, has himself written several significant articles on John's gospel and also a monograph on Johannine theology, Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension.

Students working on the fourth gospel have long been blessed with admirably detailed bibliographies to aid them in their research. Quite apart from the major commentaries (though at times Raymond Brown and Rudolf Schnackenburg come perilously close to unloading their card index systems into their commentaries!), it is difficult to imagine working without the nearly exhaustive list of entries compiled by Malatesta for the period 1920-65,¹ and the continuing bibliographical essays published by *Theologische Rundschau* (first by H. Thyen² and now by Jürgen Becker³). Two books in English have recently attempted to sketch in the current state of studies on John,⁴ and essays occasionally attempt the same thing by focusing more narrowly on select themes or scholars.⁵ One might almost suggest that in the wake of the convulsive productivity in Johannine scholarship over the past thirty years, the time had come for reflection and re-assessment, a pause to catch one's breath. Yet in addition, bibliographical essays on slightly adjacent areas – life-of-Jesus research, for instance⁶ – multiply the contributions to the study of the fourth gospel, as do continuing streams of articles in *Festschriften* and of specialized monographs.

The scope of this article is modest. The space and language constraints of *Themelios* require primary focus on English language contributions of recent years. I shall eliminate consideration of material on the Apocalypse, and almost all on the Johannine epistles, except where it has substantial bearing on the fourth gospel. I shall select representative articles from the last two or three years, and books from the last five or six years, aiming to be impressionistic rather than exhaustive, and discuss them under several headings before offering a number of summarizing reflections.

Commentaries

The day of full-length treatments of John's gospel has come to a pause: there is no recent English competitor to Brown, Lindars, Morris, Schnackenburg (all three volumes now available in English),⁷ Barrett and Bultmann, nor one just over the horizon. Nevertheless,

five developments deserve mention.

First, pride of place goes to the publication of the second edition of Barrett's justly famous commentary.⁸ Relatively little from the 1955 edition was changed, but about 100 pages of new material were added. In Barrett's own words, this commentary will seem to many to be old-fashioned;⁹ but in certain respects that makes the work more valuable, not less. Whatever a reader may make of Barrett's stance on historical matters (fairly radical – e.g. 'I do not believe that John intended to supply us with historically verifiable information regarding the life and teaching of Jesus, and that historical traditions of great worth can be disentangled from his interpretative comments'¹⁰), source critical questions (very conservative) or assessment of provenance (not a Palestinian work and not to be interpreted by Qumran), this commentary should take top billing for careful exegesis of the Greek text and for sane theological comment.

The second development is the publication of several very short 'overview' commentaries for laymen. For the most part these are so brief that serious students will learn little from them, and even the noun 'commentary' is not entirely appropriate. Entries in this class include Vanderlip,¹¹ whose gentle and slightly bland work surveys the major themes of the fourth gospel while skirting virtually every issue of consequence; Kysar,¹² whose five chapters and a conclusion constitute a lay introduction to mainstream modern criticism of the fourth gospel and to such themes as Johannine Christology, dualism, concepts of faith and eschatology; Smith,¹³ whose contribution to the series of Proclamation Commentaries provides an easy guide in three parts – introduction; exegesis of 1:1-18; 9; 16; and three interpretative essays; Perkins,¹⁴ whose slightly longer work runs through the entire gospel, largely as a popular synthesis of approaches and interpretations adopted by Brown and Schnackenburg; and McPolin,¹⁵ whose contribution to the New Testament Message series attempts roughly the same feat as Perkins' book, but with considerably less skill at synthesis.

Third, the third development is the publication (unfortunately only in German) of Karl Barth's 1925-26 lectures on John 1-8.¹⁶ In fact, this printed edition follows the 1933 revised form of the lectures as far as the beginning of John 7, and then follows the earlier form. The book is dated, of course, and very uneven in depth of coverage (e.g. 63 pages of a 420 page book are devoted to 7:1-8:11, whereas 151 pages are given over to the prologue).

Nevertheless there is a vitality here, a refreshing independence of thought, that cries out to be heard and respected. Barth insists, for instance, that although history-of-religions questions have their place, the crucial question that arises from the text of the fourth gospel is not its background but its *Johannine* meaning. He finds the Trinity not only taught in this gospel, but also the ultimate answer to the relativities of history-of-religion. The evangelist interests Barth much less than the author's sense of witness; and the resulting answers interest Barth so much that by his own confession he loses his taste for the technicalities of 'the Johannine question' (in the sense of modern scholarship). There are, of course, severe limitations to a work of this kind, especially one so out of date; but in addition to the countless flashes of profound insight, what we have is a book on its way to becoming *theological* commentary. That genre is all too rare today, so the model-in-progress provided by Barth is all the more important.

Fourth, two new commentaries have appeared in German. The first of two volumes by Jürgen Becker¹⁷ reveals a condensed, middle-level work of a fairly radical nature. More significant is the posthumously published work by Ernst Haenchen.¹⁸ This commentary was compiled and edited from unfinished manuscripts by Ulrich Busse, who elsewhere¹⁹ provides a biographical sketch of Haenchen, explains what manuscripts were left behind and what steps taken to edit them for publication (not unimportant, since in the published book 450 pages are devoted to John 1-12, and only 150 pages to John 13-21), and outlines how Haenchen's literary-critical and theological approaches to Johannine exegesis differ from those of Bultmann and Käsemann. Readers familiar with Haenchen's massive commentary on Acts will not be surprised by his methods of tackling John. Haenchen defends the existence of a well-developed, full-blown Gnosticism in the first century, and interprets the fourth gospel as if it were located somewhere on a line between the synoptics and Gnosticism – and rather closer to the latter end than to the former. Moreover, Haenchen discovers his own 'sources' (or rather, 'layers of tradition', since he thinks detailed source criticism of this book is impossible) and postulates various developments in the Johannine community, correlated in part with what he perceives to be discordant levels of Christology in the fourth gospel.

The fifth and final development in the area of commentaries is the recently published volume by Raymond Brown on the Johannine epistles. It offers important implications for the fourth gospel – so important, in fact, that I shall discuss Brown separately a little farther on.

Redaction criticism and the delineation of the Johannine community

Source criticism no longer maintains the centre of interest in Johannine research it once did. There are exceptions: one recent essay, for instance, basically accepts the source-material approach of Bultmann to John 5-7, and attempts some relatively minor modifi-

cations.²⁰ But this sort of work proceeds only by ignoring the detailed critiques of various source critical theories on John.²¹

Yet if simple source criticism is no longer in vogue, redaction criticism of the fourth gospel still runs from strength to strength; and by and large it is of the sort that makes many distinctions between source and redaction. In this sense source criticism continues apace; but ironically it is in some respects less disciplined than the slightly older source criticism it displaces, since much less is left to linguistic criteria (as in the justly famous work by Fortna²²) and much more to fairly subjective perceptions of shifts in theology or theme. The continued impetus for this work stands beyond the desire to retrieve snippets from sources or to discern literary levels: the drive is to sketch in not only something of the beliefs and setting of the Johannine community but also to trace out its history, and conceptual development.

An excellent example is the recent book by Tragan.²³ Tragan strongly defends the view that the gospel of John as we have it went through a series of major changes and alterations before reaching its final form, and that many of these may be identified by linguistic or theological *aporiae*. More, this process of development and accretion reflects developments in the Johannine 'circle'²⁴ or 'school'²⁵ and that John 10:1-18 constitutes a particularly valuable test case. In his view, the original Palestinian *marshal* is preserved in 10:1-2, with vv. 3-5 providing a first commentary on the *marshal*. Verses 7-18 constitute five distinct layers of explanation of the parable: vv. 7-8, representing the first explanation, identifies the figures of vv. 1-2 and reflects a blunt anti-Jewish polemic against all religious figures who fail to confess Jesus as the Christ; vv. 9-10, a second layer of explanation, does much the same as vv. 7-8, but now from a soteriological perspective; vv. 11-13, a third layer of explanation, does not identify the figures of vv. 1-2 but replaces them with those of shepherd and hiring, developing a pastoral parenthesis designed to prepare the Johannine community to withstand emerging heresy; vv. 14-15, 17-18, a fourth explanation, reflects advancing Christological developments regarding the relationship of love and knowledge between the Father and Jesus; and v. 16, the final addition, introduces the theme of loving unity at the church level. To all of these 'explanations', the redactor has added v. 6, reflecting his own strong anti-Pharisaic bias.

In this instance, the delineation of the development of Johannine Christianity is accomplished by the redaction critical analysis of one passage. Something similar is attempted in various tradition critical analyses of some individual pericope that occurs in more than one gospel.²⁶

Probably the most influential attempts to develop such sharp community delineations on the basis of redaction criticism are those of J. Louis Martyn. His first book on the subject is well known,²⁷ and cannot be described again here; but two of the three essays in his most recent book on this subject²⁸ demonstrate the same approach in operation. In 'Persecution and Martyrdom', Martyn

seeks to show that the Johannine community was at one time in its history a Jewish-Christian church whose members faced Jewish courts on charges of theological heresy. In the last essay of the book, 'Glimpses into the History of the Johannine Community', Martyn divides up the history of the community into three parts. The early period was characterized by a naive messianism still happily at home in the bosom of the synagogue. During this period some preacher in the group collected various traditions and homilies together into the Signs Source, a rudimentary gospel. During the middle period, the group faced expulsion from the synagogue (now wielding the *Birkat ha-Minim*), persecution and even martyrdom; as a result of the old understanding of salvation history became increasingly transmuted into an above/below dualism with Jesus and the community itself now being viewed as strangers 'from above'. The late period brought theological and sociological maturity to the Johannine circle, thus providing impetus to publish what we now call the gospel of John (though Martyn conceives of such publication in two editions). Damning the book by faint praise, one reviewer comments, 'Though some will stumble over the presuppositions which M. makes (e.g. the literary history of the Fourth Gospel is in effect a time-lapse photographic record of the social and theological history of the Johannine community), he will certainly not be faulted for lacking imagination.'²⁹

Not only books, but many articles as well attempt to reconstruct the Johannine community. Collins discerns something of the community's history by the crises she detects.³⁰ Gryglewicz does something similar by analyzing the different 'levels' of the pericopae which mention the Holy Spirit.³¹ Bassler distinguishes not Galilee and Judaea, but Galileans (=those who accept Jesus and his teaching) and Judaeans (=those who do not), a distinction then incorporated into a 'high-level reading' of the fourth gospel.³² Neyrey's analysis of John 3 – which he says focuses neither on Jesus as heavenly revealer (contra Bultmann), nor on baptismal materials (contra Brown), but on Johannine epistemology and Christology – is ultimately in service of the Johannine community;³³ and Painter believes he can detect something of the history of that community from the levels he detects in the farewell discourses (*sic*).³⁴ So also does Segovia, who in his treatment of John 15:1-17³⁵ argues that 15:1-8 shows that members of the community have either ceased to abide or are in danger of ceasing to abide as 'branches', and that the problem has arisen at least in part because of a Christological dispute in which Jesus is innovatively being represented as the true vine. The next verses (15:9-17), Segovia argues, demonstrate that this 'inner-Christian problem' also has an ethical dimension. In another essay,³⁶ Segovia attempts to prove the sectarian origins of Johannine Christianity by isolating a number of passages both in the 'first' farewell discourse (13:31-14:31) and in other parts of the fourth gospel (esp. 3:19,20; 7:7; 8:42; 12:43) which suggest to him that the community which brought them forth embraced a strong 'in/out' mentality. This encouraged the community to love those who are 'in' and reject those who

are 'out' – a perspective that betrays the mentality of a sect. This ill accords with the sense of mission in John's gospel; but passages in support of mission are assigned by Segovia to a different level of redaction. Still on the farewell discourse (but now reverting to a book, not an article), Woll³⁷ argues that the tension in John 14 between the fact that Christians have immediate access to the Spirit (reflecting a charismatic type of authority) and the fact that they do *not* have *unmediated* access to the Father is to be explained on the hypothesis that the Christians to whom the fourth gospel was addressed needed correction and restraint because of a too facile claim to direct access to divine authority. Even the primacy of Jesus was threatened; and so the evangelist countered by reinterpreting the charismatic traditions of his circle into a hierarchical system: Father-Son-Spirit-disciples. Looking at four discourses in John, Lindars³⁸ detects a substantial transformation of the traditional materials the evangelist inherited as the evangelist struggles to adapt Christianity to his own environment.

These are not much more than thumb-nail descriptions of random examples; but they raise questions of foundational importance. I shall return to some of those questions later. At the moment it is enough to observe that these studies claim to tell us little about Jesus and his teaching, and much about the evangelist and his community.

Questions of critical introduction

Most major commentaries, of course, and all major New Testament introductions, devote substantial space to questions of introduction. Critical orthodoxy is well served by the magisterial two volume work written by Koester.³⁹

In addition, however, there is an article literature that treats many aspects of critical introduction relevant to the fourth gospel. It is not possible in brief compass to mention every area treated in the literature; and in any case it is scarcely desirable to do so, since many of the entries would necessarily overlap with other questions (e.g. various redaction critical interpretations of the gospel of John⁴⁰). Not a few of these essays pick up on problems of perennial interest and unyielding complexity, and provide only plodding progress at best. Typically, they include questions of textual criticism,⁴¹ the precise significance of Papias in identifying the fourth evangelist,⁴² the identification and/or purpose of the beloved disciple,⁴³ the evaluation of alleged eyewitness material in John,⁴⁴ and much more.

I shall limit myself to identifying three areas that have received multiple treatments in recent literature. The first and most important (at least in terms of frequency) is the relation between John and the synoptic gospels. In the aftermath of books by Gardner-Smith⁴⁵ and Dodd,⁴⁶ the view that the fourth gospel not only preserves tradition quite independent of the synoptic gospels but is in fact so independent as to be uninfluenced by the synoptics (or, in the strongest form of the argument, by synoptic-type tradition) came to be almost universally

accepted. A few notable standouts, especially C. K. Barrett, remained; but their isolation was unenviable. The new position was embraced with quite radically divergent results. In the hands of a Brown, it became added justification for speaking of the Johannine community (or 'school' or 'circle') as a fairly independent group that had preserved its own Jesus-traditions, and whose heritage and development could to some extent be recovered. In the hands of a Morris, the same position bolsters the value of John as an independent historical witness, rather than as someone who has merely transformed an older tradition.

But now the critical orthodoxy is being assailed. The second edition of Barrett's commentary⁴⁷ finds him quite unrepentant, and elsewhere he has defended his stance in a little more detail.⁴⁸ Walker⁴⁹ compares the Lord's prayer in Matthew with John 17 and finds many points of comparison, then cautiously suggests these points argue not necessarily for literary dependence but at very least for some kind of dependence at the oral tradition stage. Lindars⁵⁰ reconstructs an Aramaic 'original' behind John 3:3,5 and traces it to Matthew 18:3; Mark 10:15; Luke 18:17. Maier⁵¹ has detailed the main themes common to Matthew and John. More comprehensively, Moody Smith⁵² has weighed in some detail the work of de Solages⁵³ and of Neiryck⁵⁴ on this subject, and has also written a suitably cautious survey article on the present state of the debate,⁵⁵ laying out the parameters of the problem in such a way that it becomes quite clear he does not think the issue is closed. Not all contributions in the area, of course, are equally convincing; but it is quite clear that this question will dominate a certain amount of scholarship on John for some time to come.

The second area is the emergence of a self-conscious attempt at hermeneutical innovation with respect to the fourth gospel. I shall say more about such innovation as it takes the form of structuralism (*infra*); but there are other innovations as well. For instance, Léon-Dufour, in his SNTS presidential address,⁵⁶ takes up a theme he had raised years earlier and makes a case for a symbolic reading of John, by which he means an interpretative approach which recognizes John has used language simultaneously reflecting and suitable to the deeds and actions of the historical Jesus, and reflecting the experience of the evangelists' readership. Used with great caution, Léon-Dufour's exposition and illustrations show considerable promise. On the other hand, Schneiders,⁵⁷ leaning rather heavily on an undisciplined form of the new hermeneutic, openly advocates 'the integration of the appropriation process into the exegesis itself'.⁵⁸ Again, she argues, 'The essential context for understanding the text [is] contemporary experience [italics hers], not the historical-cultural context of first-century Palestine.'⁵⁹ The result is that 'at least one meaning' for contemporary disciples of John 13:1-20, the footwashing incident,

lies not in an understanding of Christian ministry in terms of self-humiliation or individual acts of menial service but as participation in Jesus' work of transforming the sinful structures of domination operative in human society according to the model of friendship expressing itself in joyful

mutual service unto death.⁶⁰

The deep problem of this approach, apart from its debatable philosophical roots,⁶¹ is that it is at bottom self-defeating; for the application of Gadamer and Ricoeur (who insist that the meaning of a text is its meaning for me in my situation rather than something objective) to the text of Gadamer and Ricoeur would authorize one in my circumstance (since I want to shed something of the superb freedom with which they deal with meaning) to interpret their works as intentional ironies which actually underline and emphasize the importance of objective meaning. . . .

The third area is something of a scholarly minority report: the questioning of the validity of modern critical orthodoxy on John, the return to methodological questions and the cautious support of older interpretations that argued for such currently unpopular positions as the view that the fourth evangelist is none other than the apostle John. During the past quarter century, doubtless Leon Morris has been the mainstay in this area; but one of his recent essays⁶² returns to this theme, and admirably sets forth a model as to how John went about writing his book – an attractive alternative to the dominant voices of Johannine scholarship, and one that attempts (no less than theirs) to take account of the exegetical evidence. Other writers are still engaging in detailed polemics against Bultmann's source criticism⁶³ – unfortunately ignoring the fact that the debate has moved on somewhat during the last forty years. I myself have attempted to enter the lists at one or two points.⁶⁴ But I should hasten to add that this minority report is not the preserve of theological conservatives: John A. T. Robinson comes to mind as one notable (but certainly not the only) exception.⁶⁵

Use of the Old Testament

Interest in the way the New Testament writers – and not least John – used the Old Testament continues unabated. Numerous approaches are possible: examination of the relation between some New Testament passage and some particular form of text (e.g. LXX, targum, peculiar textual recension),⁶⁶ careful probing of how one Old Testament text may influence an array of passages in the New Testament book under scrutiny,⁶⁷ comparison of how an Old Testament text may be handled by two or more different New Testament writers,⁶⁸ reexamination of the quotation formulae used by a particular writer,⁶⁹ and much more. One scholar who has devoted much of his academic life to the study of the relationships between the Testaments has recently published another book on this theme; and in its pages, John 1:14-18 and John 2:17-22 receive special attention.⁷⁰ The field is wide open for further work; but students aspiring to such inquiry must make themselves competent in the languages and technical issues of *both* Testaments, wrestle with complex questions of form and literary genre, and struggle especially with the relationship between the particulars of an individual quotation and the generals of comprehensive explanatory theories. It is this latter relationship which urgently needs more work, not least in the fourth gospel.

Background of the fourth gospel

For decades a debate has been fought over the background of the gospel of John, or of some part of it (especially the prologue). Bultmann⁷¹ postulated a Mandaean form of Gnosticism, even though the *literary* remains of Mandaeism can be traced back no farther than the seventh century AD. Dodd⁷² offered a fairly comprehensive survey of the evidence and opted for a Hermetic background. The publication of the Dead Sea Scrolls convinced most scholars that John is far more Jewish, and perhaps Palestinian, than had generally been recognized; and this development served to diminish the influence of those who advanced Philo as the best example of an appropriate conceptual background. Ever popular is the view that John's Christology fits best into a wisdom trajectory. The debate has recently become more complex by the publication of the Nag Hammadi texts, which have prompted not a few scholars to return to some form of the Gnostic thesis.

The question is rendered difficult by two factors not always recognized. First, a great deal of John's language belongs to the almost universal symbolism of religion: light, dark, up, down, spirit, world, word and so forth. What this means is that verbal parallels are multitudinous and therefore easy to find in almost *any* religious literature; and so it is imperative to focus primary attention, in these debates over correspondences, on the question of *conceptual* parallels. Second, although everyone recognizes that John's principal *overt* source is the Old Testament, this point, though important, can be abused by those who fail to recognize that some Gnostic literature also quotes extensively from the Old Testament – as do Qumran, Philo, the Rabbis and so forth. Quoting from the Old Testament does not prevent Philo from moving in a conceptual world far removed from the heart of the Old Testament; and so quoting from the Old Testament must not be thought a guarantee that John is thereby *necessarily* safeguarded from, say, Gnosticism – even though in my view John's intellectual antecedents are best explained by Old Testament and Palestinian rootage and concern for 'contextualization' (to use the modern buzz-word of missiologists) of the Christian gospel in his own setting.

The debate, then, is far from over; and recent essays reflect the diversity of options and opinions. Williams⁷³ detects allusions in John to the cultic language of the Old Testament. De Vogel⁷⁴ compares love in the fourth gospel with Greek cosmic love. Philo has been advanced as the plausible explanation of John 8:56-58.⁷⁵ In a cautious essay, Evans⁷⁶ carefully compares parts of the Gnostic *Trimorphic Protennoia* with John's prologue and suggests that the best explanation for their verbal (and to a lesser extent, conceptual) similarities lies in a common dependence on Wisdom traditions and terminology. A great deal more discussion is still needed.

Exegetical studies

The heading for this section is potentially misleading, for

it may suggest to some extent that 'exegetical studies' rightly belong in a class by themselves, standing over against redaction criticism, critical questions, problems in identifying background, structuralism or one of the other headings. The truth is far different: most of the topics I have chosen as magnets around which to array my bibliographical entries properly overlap with other topics; and many of the articles and books mentioned in this essay could profitably be discussed under several different headings. But I group under 'exegetical studies' those contributions whose primary significance lies in the light they shed on the text itself, or, more precisely, on some well-defined passage of the text.

Perhaps pride of place should go to Ritt's lengthy treatment of John 17.⁷⁷ The first half of the work exhaustively reviews previous work on this chapter, and details the methods and tools to be pursued in this inquiry. These include structuralism, detailed lexicology, exegesis that is form-critically informed, and so forth. The rest of the book is a detailed linguistic, structural, and form-critical analysis of John 17, resulting not only in countless exegetical gems but also in a highly cogent demonstration of the essential unity of the chapter (Ritt thinks vv. 3, 10ab, and 12gh are the only possible glosses).

Many of the essays that properly belong to this section relate the exegesis of a verse or short passage to broader questions. One writer examines Jesus' trial before Pilate in light of Johannine theological emphases;⁷⁸ another relates 'the lamb of God' to various atonement theories;⁷⁹ and still another studies the healing miracle in John 9 to set up a typology of reactions to Jesus the Son of man.⁸⁰

The most controlled essays are those which attempt a careful exegesis of a particularly disputed passage, marshalling arguments for a specific interpretation. Not all are equally convincing; but the careful student usually finds 'harder' evidence at his disposal to enable him to enter into the debate than in the case of essays that treat, say, some reconstruction of the Johannine community. Thus, one writer provides a detailed examination of the significance of water in John 3:5, and concludes, probably correctly, that it picks up Old Testament imagery for renewal and cleansing.⁸¹ Another, less believably, argues that Jesus is the speaker of the words, 'Behold, the man' (John 19:5), uttered in reference to Pilate.⁸² One study attempts a new interpretation of that extraordinarily difficult passage, John 16:7-11;⁸³ and another offers a somewhat speculative translation of John 3:8.⁸⁴ The last two years alone have witnessed the publication of scores of articles along such lines.⁸⁵

Themes

If there are numerous books and articles that treat specific passages of the fourth gospel, so also are there many studies of Johannine themes. Nereparampil⁸⁶ begins with the temple-logion of John 2:19 (which describes Jesus as the new temple), but draws out the thematic connections between this passage and the rest

of the fourth gospel – the meaning of ‘sign’, the relationship between Jesus and the Jews, the significance of the resurrection. Schein⁸⁷ offers quite a different and rather popular book: his work re-evaluates the physical and geographical aspects of John, and provides maps, photos, various illustrations and a dozen appendices on the relevant archaeology. Another volume assesses the tension between God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility in the fourth gospel, comparing and contrasting the results with similar analyses of Old Testament and intertestamental Jewish backgrounds.⁸⁸ Numerous contributions are in the area of Christology⁸⁹ or sacramentalism.⁹⁰ Other writers strike off in independent directions, such as the one who has written on Satan in the fourth gospel;⁹¹ and the present editor of *Themelios* has surveyed the theme of Spirit and life.⁹²

Structuralism and the new literary criticism

There are few words more slippery than ‘structuralism’. On the one hand, the word can refer to the ‘surface structure’ of a text (or the study of it), and thus refer to a somewhat more sophisticated utilization of various literary flags than has been common up to now, even if there is little that is new in any particular step. The first major structuralist study on the fourth gospel along these lines was that of Olsson⁹³ on John 2:1-11 and 4:1-42, published almost a decade ago. Procedurally it was pedantic, self-conscious and heavy. The results were not startling, but basically confirmed what an intelligent reader would have deduced from the text in the first place. ‘Structuralism’ may also be an appropriate term to describe the analysis of the structure of the prologue⁹⁴ or of some more extended passage (most recently exemplified by the competent work of Simoons⁹⁵ on John 13-17).

But modern literary criticism, including structuralism, tends to delight not only in refusing to ask historical questions, but even in some cases in questioning the usefulness of historical inquiry, or in calling into question the legitimacy of such inquiry as a discipline no less important than that of structuralism itself.⁹⁶ The intellectual roots of these developments are too complex to be probed here; but the results are ironic. Many structuralists, precisely because they are focusing more attention on the text and less on highly speculative historical reconstructions, often emerge with interpretations remarkably similar to those espoused by conservative interpreters; but before the latter cheer, they should recognize that the cutting edge of structuralism dismisses historical considerations as fundamentally irrelevant. In other words, if conservatives in the past have sometimes clashed with their less conservative colleagues over precisely what happened and therefore over the trajectory of developing Christian theology, they may find themselves in fair agreement with structuralists over the descriptive features of the text, but then discover that these new colleagues dismiss historical questions lightly and therefore cannot possibly retain theological structures that are fundamentally compatible with those of the conservatives.

Of course, the situation is still very fluid, and I have somewhat idealized both the ‘conservative’ and the ‘structuralist’ positions; there are numerous mediating positions. But I remember that at the recent SBL meetings in New York (December 1982), one scholar read a paper presenting a structuralist approach to an Old Testament passage, and created a minor storm because, superficially at least, his resulting interpretation was virtually indistinguishable from a traditional, conservative one. His audience was somewhat exasperated, and pressed him as to whether he was retreating to a ‘fundamentalist’ stance. His response was revealing. Traditional critical approaches he largely dismissed as being fundamentally *incapable* of truly listening to the canonical text. Structuralist methods often *do* succeed in demonstrating a profound unity and coherence to a narrative which a slightly obsolescent criticism divides up into pieces and layers. But, he confessed, he did not want to be pushed: he was not yet ready to ask historical questions.

Literary criticism of this order has come slowly to the fourth gospel. But here and there contributions have been made: Dewey⁹⁷ has written a suggestive article that has implications for the structure of John as a whole, and Alfred M. Johnson, Jr., who has written extensively in the field of structuralism, and translated some of the works of the French pace-setters into English, has also written a doctoral dissertation on John, using a structuralist approach.⁹⁸ I suspect the deluge has not yet begun; but signs of rain multiply.

Raymond E. Brown

We already owe a debt of gratitude to Brown for his two-volume commentary on the gospel of John. That alone would have been enough to secure for him an honourable place in the annals of Johannine commentators. But in addition to that work and to many articles on the fourth gospel, Brown has written two other books which give him the premier place of influence among English language writers on John. The first is a relatively short piece that attempts to set out Brown’s reconstruction of the history of the Johannine community, the ‘community of the beloved disciple’.⁹⁹ The second is a monumental commentary on the Johannine epistles.¹⁰⁰ The latter runs in excess of eight hundred pages, and leaves almost no issue related to the exegesis and theology of the Johannine epistles untouched. It displaces Schnackenburg’s commentary as the most important resource in studying the Johannine epistles. Among the many results is that Brown’s influence on the landscape of Johannine scholarship has become so substantial that it calls for separate treatment.

When Brown wrote his commentary on John, he postulated that there had been five steps in the literary development of what we now call the gospel of John; but he was very cautious about detailing the life of the Johannine community from these postulated steps. Two factors have encouraged Brown to go much further. The first is his work on the Johannine epistles to which I have just alluded. These documents, he contends, clearly set

out a somewhat later period in the life of the community than does the gospel; so it is possible to sketch in a rough trajectory of development. The second factor has been Brown's close association at Union Seminary in New York with J. Louis Martyn,¹⁰¹ whose views Brown has largely come to share. Martyn, it will be remembered, advocates a two-level reading of the fourth gospel, an approach which (if valid) enables the reader to grasp something of the situation of the Johannine community from the surface of the text, since it is presupposed that the stories John presents include *both* a brief reference to the historical Jesus *and* a substantial description of what is understood by the evangelist to be a re-enactment in the experience of the community of Jesus' experiences.

Where Brown has gone beyond any of these individual steps is in his integration of them. He relies on his own five-stage *literary* development, the two-level approach of Martyn, and his own work on the Johannine epistles, and constructs a trajectory of the Johannine community. This reconstruction, Brown admits, is somewhat speculative at points. He candidly confesses that the best hopes he entertains are that sixty per cent of his reconstruction will be accepted by other scholars.

Accepted or not, it is important to see how his work must be distinguished from two other types of reconstruction to which it bears superficial resemblance: (1) It differs from ordinary critical reconstruction of a particular community in that the latter uses a document to discern the shape of a community more or less restricted to the time at which the document was being completed, whereas Brown is attempting to delineate the trajectory of the development of the community, made possible at the early end only by the sort of theory Martyn espouses. (2) Brown's approach differs from the doctrinal 'trajectories' of many scholars who attempt to reconstruct the stages of development of early Christian belief on the basis of redaction critical emphases in *different* corpora of the New Testament; for Brown is tracing out his trajectory on the basis of *one* corpus alone.

Brown understands the Johannine community to have gone through four phases. In the first, disciples of Jesus who had first been disciples of John the Baptist joined up with Samaritan Christians; and this union catalyzed the emergence of a high Christology and an anti-temple polemic. Evidence for this first phase is drawn primarily from John 1-4. These doctrinal developments ultimately led to the group's expulsion from the synagogue – presupposed, it is argued, by John 9. In Phase Two, the community consolidates its understanding and its identity, engages in various debates, and witnesses the writing of the gospel of John – which is, unfortunately, sufficiently ambiguous at certain crucial points that it becomes the focal point of new debates, this time within the community. This new strife characterizes Phase Three, the period of the Johannine epistles. The last period covers the final separation of the community into orthodox and gnostic camps.

Clearly, Brown has modified some of the positions he took in his commentary on John. For instance, he now

argues that John 1, with its numerous Christological confessions, reflects how Jesus was being preached in *other* Christian communities. The fourth evangelist, however, finds these approaches inadequate, and therefore proceeds to write his own gospel. In the same way, the image of the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven is not to be reserved for the end: John places it at the *beginning* (John 1:51), and argues in effect that he must begin where the other evangelists leave off, and build from there. This also explains why the temple cleansing is placed at the beginning of the gospel. (Elsewhere, I have suggested an alternative explanation for these phenomena.)¹⁰²

Some of Brown's understanding of the history of the Johannine community is surely correct. The fact that we have both a gospel and three epistles (though Brown does not think they were penned by the same *author*, but only that they sprang from the same *community*) provides us with at least a few controls not available to modern reconstructions of, say, the Matthean community. I think it reasonably clear that the anti-gnostic (or anti-proto-gnostic, if you prefer) polemic of 1 John erupts because some members of the church(es) to which John writes have been giving the fourth gospel an essentially docetic interpretation. In this, Brown is not innovative, but he is probably right.

But try as I do to be sympathetic with the detailed reconstructions of the Johannine community that Martyn and Brown see emerging within the gospel of John itself, I find myself unhappy with the sheer speculation, the unproved assumptions, the inferences drawn on evidence patient of twenty other inferences. I hope to weigh Brown's reconstruction with some care in a later article; but perhaps one or two examples may be helpful. I shall approach these through a series of questions. On what basis is it legitimate to read John 3 and detect end-of-the-first-century debates between church and synagogue, or to read John 4 and deduce that the Johannine community enjoys decentralized and charismatic worship practices? What evidence shows the events of John 3 and 4 to be so hopelessly anachronistic that they *cannot* refer to events in the life of Jesus? (Brown replies, for instance, that John 4 contradicts the synoptic picture of a Jesus who forbids ministry among the Samaritans [e.g. Matthew 10:5,6]; but does the context of such prohibition suggest the disciples were *never* to work in Samaria, or only that for the mission in question the disciples were to restrict themselves to Israel? And might not the synoptic record of this prohibition suggest redactional interest in *not* recording the successful ministry of John 4?) and if John 3 and 4 *do* refer to events in the life of Jesus, what authorizes us to detect a re-enactment of them in the life of the community? The kinds of evidence advanced by Martyn are incredibly subjective and flimsy; and methodologically, he does not seriously weigh his speculative proposal against other possible scenarios, but merely presses on to support his own theory.¹⁰³ Does the mere fact that the evangelist *includes* John 3 prove that his community is facing church/synagogue confrontation? Did the New Testament evangelists include *only*

material that bore close parallels to their own setting? Did they *ever* include material to inform readers as to what happened in the past, without trying to find detailed points of comparison with their own situation? Assuming that the evangelists write out of concern for their own situation, what evidence establishes that the focal point of concern is church/synagogue tension as opposed to the desire to instruct readers as to the nature of the new birth? And even if John's community is going through the throes of church/synagogue conflict, what evidence supports the view that John 3 or John 9 constitutes a description of that conflict, as opposed to providing a ground for church self-justification by appeal to the example of Jesus' conflicts – and *not* by detailed re-enacts of history at two levels? More fundamentally, why should it be thought that the fourth gospel reflects *community* theology? Why not instead speculate that the evangelist was trying to correct a drift in his conservative, Hellenistic Jewish, professing Christian readership back to an integration with the Jewish community – an integration which then happily excludes others, like Samaritans – and that the evangelist is seeking to correct the problem by going over the historical foundations again? In other words, what establishes for us that the gospel of John reflects the theology of the community, over against the theory that it reflects the theology of the evangelist who is trying to correct the community? And how much of this speculation is based less on evidence than on *a priori* reconstructions of the rise of Christian doctrine and the development of the Christian church that are not supported by any text but only by our reconstructions of the texts and of history – reconstructions which are then used as a Procrustean bed into which the texts are forced in order to glean the desired interpretation? The unavoidable circle suddenly turns vicious.

We may be thankful to Brown for forcing us to think through these issues afresh, while remaining rather sceptical about the cogency of many points in his reconstruction.

Final reflections

I have offered a number of evaluative asides in what is otherwise a fairly descriptive paper; and without wishing to repeat those evaluations, I would like to conclude with a few summary reflections on the current state of Johannine scholarship.

1. One reviewer of Haenchen's work, a reviewer best left unnamed, hails Haenchen's commentary on John as the first truly critical work on the fourth gospel since Bultmann. Such naive and partisan judgments aside, it appears fairly clear that history-of-religions approaches do not have the force or dominance they once did. The Nag Hammadi texts will doubtless slow this trend (it is no accident that James M. Robinson writes the Forward to Haenchen's commentary); but it is unlikely they will stop it.

2. Although there are many papers written on all kinds of exegetical conundra in the fourth gospel, the

driving force of mainstream Johannine scholarship is not exegesis but the redaction critical reconstruction of the community. Although I have learned much from reading such studies, I remain persuaded that this is fundamentally a false track – far too speculative, methodologically uncontrolled, and intrinsically incapable of meaningful verification. Nevertheless it will be around for a long time yet.

3. For better or worse, structuralism has not yet crested, and will doubtless receive more application to John in the years ahead, especially as scholars tire of treating (synoptic) parables and turn to other discourse material. I have already suggested something of the strengths and weaknesses inherent in these developments.

4. Certain critical problems will continue to attract a lot of attention, not least the relationship between John and the synoptic gospels, and the use of the Old Testament in the fourth gospel.

5. Some recent developments, especially those in a dominant position, must have a certain baleful influence on the church, however important the questions they raise. The ministry of the word is being short-changed. For years we have been told it is old-fashioned to speak of Christian theology, as opposed to Johannine or Pauline or Matthean theology;¹⁰⁴ now we are being told we cannot meaningfully speak of Johannine theology, but only of the theology of each layer of the Johannine tradition. The effect is two-fold. First, very little first-class, biblical, Christian theology is being thought about, constructed, written; we learn less and less of Jesus and more and more of Christian communities whose existence depends on uncontrolled speculation and whose alleged 'theologies' conflict fundamentally with other Christian 'theologies' – leaving as their heritage explanations born in sociology but void of transcendent truth claim. Second, I am concerned about the way the Bible should be handled in the churches. This focus on reconstructing the Johannine community's trajectory is quite transparently *not* the chief concern of the author of John and of the Johannine epistles. Doubtless there is a revered place for a little scholarly speculation; but when the arena of speculation becomes the driving force in a biblical discipline, one wonders how the Bible is to function in the church. Do we need a new priesthood, the true *cognoscendi*, to tell people what Jesus really did not say to Nicodemus? Do we simply explain that this reflects church/synagogue disputes about AD 80? And then what do we *preach*? That we should not enter into disputes? That the church and synagogue disputes will pass with time? That churches have always cherished their beliefs deeply? On what basis do we draw a conclusion and proclaim the word of God? Do we dare preach that unless a man is born again he cannot enter into the kingdom of God? I am not, of course, suggesting that biblical scholarship has nothing to teach the church, or that ignorant piety is to be preferred above informed piety. But as I read Martyn, for instance, not only do I observe the countless methodological fallacies, but I begin to wonder how I shall find what to preach next

Sunday. Why is it that I do not have that same problem when I read the text of the gospel of John itself?

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³Jürgen Becker, 'Aus der Literatur zum Johannesevangelium', *ThR* 47 (1982), pp. 279-301.

⁴Robert Kysar, *The Fourth Evangelist and His Gospel: An Examination of Contemporary Scholarship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1975); Stephen S. Smalley, *John: Evangelist and Interpreter* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1978).

⁵E.g. John F. O'Grady, 'Recent Developments in Johannine Studies', *Bib Theol Bull* 12 (1982), pp. 54-58; Urban C. von Wahlde, 'The Johannine "Jews": A Critical Survey', *NTS* 28 (1982), pp. 33-60. See also the article by R. Schnackenburg ('Entwicklung und Stand der johanneischen Forschung seit 1955') and another by J. Giblet ('Développements dans la théologie johannique') in M. de Jonge (ed.), *L'Évangile de Jean: Sources, rédaction, théologie* (BETL XLIV; Gembloux: Duculot/Leuven: University Press, 1977), pp. 19-44 and 45-72 respectively.

⁶E.g. W. G. Kümmel, 'Jesusforschung seit 1965: Nachträge 1975-1980', *ThR* 46 (1981), pp. 317-363.

⁷Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John*, vol. I (ET Kevin Smyth; New York; Herder and Herder/London: Burns and Oates, 1968); vols. II and III are available in English from Seabury (1981-82), which has now also taken over vol. I as well.

⁸C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (London: SPCK/Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978).

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¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹D. George Vanderlip, *John the Gospel of Life* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1979).

¹²Robert Kysar, *John, the Maverick Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1976).

¹³D. Moody Smith, *John* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976).

¹⁴PHEME PERKINS, *The Gospel According to St. John, A Theological Commentary* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1978).

¹⁵James McPolin, *John* (Wilmington, DE: Glazier, 1979).

¹⁶Karl Barth, *Erklärung des Johannes-Evangeliums (Kapitel 1-8): Vorlesung Münster Winter-semester 1925/26, Wiederholt in Bonn Sommersemester 1933* (ed. W. Fürst; Zürich: Zürich Theologische Verlag, 1976).

¹⁷*Das Evangelium des Johannes*. Kapitel 1-10 (Gütersloh: Mohn/Würzburg: Echter, 1979).

¹⁸*Johannes Evangelium: Ein Kommentar* (ed. Ulrich Busse; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1980).

¹⁹Ulrich Busse, 'Ernst Haenchen und sein Johanneskommentar', *EphTheolLw* 57 (1981), pp. 125-143.

²⁰Harold W. Attridge, 'Thematic Development and Source Elaboration in John 7:1-36', *CBQ* 42 (1980), pp. 160-170.

²¹Most recently, E. Ruckstuhl, 'Johannine Language and Style. The Question of Their Unity' in M. de Jonge (ed.), *L'Évangile de Jean: Sources, rédaction, théologie* (BETL XLIV; Gembloux: Duculot/Leuven: University Press, 1977), pp. 125-148; D. A. Carson, 'Current Source Criticism of the Fourth Gospel: Some methodological Questions', *JBL* 97 (1978), pp. 411-429.

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²³Puis-Ramon Tragan, *La parabole du "Pasteur" et ses explications: Jean, 10, 1-18: La genèse, les milieux littéraires* (Rome: Editrice Anselmiana, 1980).

²⁴Oscar Cullman, *The Johannine Circle: Its Place in Judaism, Among the Disciples of Jesus and in Early Christianity* (London: SCM, 1976).

²⁵T. Alan Culpepper, *The Johannine School: An Evaluation of the Johannine-School Hypothesis Based on an Investigation of the Nature of Ancient Schools* (SBLDS 26; Missoula: SP, 1975).

²⁶E.g. John Paul Heil, *Jesus Walking on the Sea: Meaning and Gospel Functions of Matthew 14:22-33, Mark 6:45-52 and John 6:15b-21* (AnBib 87; Rome: BIP, 1981).

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²⁸J. Louis Martyn, *The Gospel of John in Christian History. Essays for Interpreters* (New York: Paulist, 1978).

²⁹David E. Aune, *CBQ* 43 (1981), p. 138.

³⁰A. Y. Collins, 'Crisis and Community in the Gospel of John', *CurrTheolMiss* 7 (1980), pp. 196-204.

³¹Felix Gryglewicz, 'Die Aussagen über den Heiligen Geist im vierten Evangelium. Überlieferung und Redaktion', *SNTV* 4 (1979), pp. 45-53.

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³³Jerome H. Neyrey, 'John III - A Debate over Johannine Epistemology and Christology', *NovT* 23 (1981), pp. 115-127.

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³⁷D. Bruce Woll, *Johannine Christianity in Conflict: Authority, Rank, and Succession in the First Farewell Discourse* (SBLDS 60; Chico: SP, 1981).

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- ⁵⁹*Ibid.*
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- ⁶⁴D. A. Carson, 'Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel—After Dodd, What?' in R. T. France and David Wenham (eds.) *Gospel Perspectives II* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1981), pp. 83-145; *idem*, 'Understanding Misunderstandings in the Fourth Gospel', *TynB* 33 (1982), pp. 59-91; and *cf.* n. 21, *supra*.
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- ⁶⁷E.g. John V. Dahms, 'Isaiah 55:11 and the Gospel of John', *EQ* 53 (1981), pp. 78-88.
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Contextualization of theology

Martin Goldsmith

Expressions like 'the indigenization' or 'the contextualization' of theology are commonly heard today, but are frequently not understood at least in the west. In this article Martin Goldsmith of All Nations Christian College, an associate editor of Themelios, introduces this important area of study.

Introduction

The day of the narrow North Atlantic isolationism has passed. The churches of Asia, Africa and Latin America have come of age. They are no longer just weak 'daughter churches' dependent on mother churches and missions of the western world. In many cases these churches are considerably larger, stronger and more vibrant than their western counterparts.

No longer are the churches of the various continents isolated from one another. Travel possibilities plus a considerable movement of peoples are leading to a growing cultural cross-fertilization. Most nations today contain a growing influx of immigrant peoples – for work and study purposes as well as tourists for short periods.

Such trends add to the pressures for a more sensitive indigenization within the Christian church. Post-colonial churches insist (sometimes stridently) that all attempts to foist western forms of Christianity upon them be abandoned.

Indigenization in the past

For many years missions have talked much of the indigenization of the church. Men like Hudson Taylor insisted on locally related externals in matters of dress, food, *etc.* Nevius, Roland Allen and many of the early CMS leaders stressed the importance of national leadership for the church, as also self-support financially. More recently we hear the call for indigenization of church architecture and of worship patterns. This has linked in with the emphasis on homogeneous units and the desire for ethnic and cultural identity in the church – *e.g.* messianic synagogues, messianic mosques, *etc.*

It is only in the last few years however that many Christians have applied these principles to the question of biblical interpretation and theological expression. The

early Jesuit missionaries in Asia, associated with the missionary outreach of the Counter-Reformation, gave us a superb example in this matter in the late 1500s and early 1600s before they were suppressed in the infamous Controversy of Rites. Thus Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) saw the need to relate his theology to the Confucian context of the contemporary Chinese society. Likewise Robert De Nobili (1577-1656) struggled with the intricacies of Brahmin Hinduism in order to apply his message relevantly to that religious philosophy. He was the first non-Brahmin to see and read the Brahmin Vedic scriptures. We may well criticize the attempts of such men as Ricci and De Nobili, but we can only admire their scholarly missiological vision which many of us are only now in the 1970s and 1980s really emulating.

Evangelical traditionalism

Evangelicals in particular have been slower to see the need of contextualization than more liberal Christians. Evangelicals have such a strong emphasis on the unchanging nature of revelation and such a healthy fear of heresy that they sometimes hesitate to adventure boldly in their understanding of Scripture and in their theological expression. Their fears have been compounded by the fact that many of the pioneers of contextualization have not held on firmly to the absolute authority of the Word of God. A result of this has been that evangelicals who have often criticized Catholics for their adherence to tradition have themselves in many cases become tradition-bound in their biblical and theological interpretation.

In a recent visit to a theological seminary in Africa I was told by one of the students that he did not feel that one particular aspect of the westernized traditional theology taught at this seminary was true biblically. I happened to agree with him. On mentioning the student's comment to the principal I received a shocked reply: 'What right does a young student have to question our theology? We have worked this out over many centuries and it is the truth.' I wondered what Martin Luther would have felt about that! Of course we should respect and learn from the fathers of the church through the centuries, but every theological formulation must be under the judgment of Scripture; and every Christian has

the ultimate right to submit our teachings to the test of God's Word. This was also a basic principle of the Reformation.

There is a danger that our theological formulations and expressions have become the ultimate standard of biblical orthodoxy. We are sometimes accused by more thinking African and Asian Christians of merely using Scripture to bolster and prove our theology. Our theology stands above Scripture. The pre-Reformation Roman Catholic church did the same. They too had their set theological beliefs and the Bible was used to defend them. If any interpretations of the Bible contradicted these theological propositions, then the interpretation must be wrong! Evangelicals today can fall into the same trap. We happen to believe that most of what we maintain actually is biblical, whereas we may feel that pre-Reformation Catholicism erred in faith. The principle still holds true – the Bible must be free to judge even the most hallowed theological traditions.

Western philosophy

The pressures for a better understanding of the relationship between revelation and culture or contemporary philosophies are not only coming from the internationalization of the church. We are also faced with the significant impact of contemporary linguistic philosophies (e.g. structuralism) which obviously relate to the whole question of our practice of biblical interpretation. It is not accidental that hermeneutics has become a major theological battlefield in our day. Clearly this article cannot go into detail on the current debate with regard to hermeneutics – for a better understanding of this we shall need to study the secular writings of Saussure, Chomsky, etc. and the Christian studies on hermeneutics by Thiselton and others. These will need to be augmented by books on the relationship of gospel and culture.

The question today is not only the nature of the Bible as the Word of God. Of course we have on our hands a keen debate on such words as 'inerrancy' and 'infallibility' which determine the nature of the Bible. But we also struggle with the question of how we understand the Bible and relate to our particular society with its specific cultural, philosophical and religious movements.

1. Revelation and theology

In the context of our current debates it is dangerous to fail to distinguish between revelation and theology. As Christians we believe in ultimate truth which is found in the unchanging perfection of the Godhead, Father, Son and Spirit. He is the absolute truth which is neither comparative nor changing. We believe that God reveals himself. Ideally we should be able to find the perfect revelation of God in the creation and in man. Creation was declared to be 'good' – the adjective used to describe the very nature of God himself. Likewise man, the climax of creation, was made in the image and likeness of God, so that ideally we should be able to see God when

we see man. Sadly this form of revelation in nature and in man was spoiled by the fall and sin. As a result revelation of God in nature and in man became inadequate and corrupt.

From the outset of creation God had revealed himself perfectly through and in his active Word. Even the form of revelation in nature and in man was the outcome of God's Word – God spoke and it was. God's chosen method of revelation is by word. We believe that Jesus as the incarnate Word and the Bible as the written Word give us the absolute and perfect revelation of God.

Our rock-like assurance in an absolute and unchanging revelation of God must not blind us however to the fallibility of our human understanding of that perfect revelation. However much we seek to be objective and scholarly in our biblical interpretation we are constantly blinkered by our own inadequacies and by our particular backgrounds. Then too our theological formulations will also be fashioned according to our own context, which will likewise influence our teaching and preaching of the Word. We need therefore to make a clear distinction in our minds between the objective and absolute reality of the revelation and the human, contextual understanding and expression of that revelation from age to age.

a. *The Word in context.* God's Word is never in a vacuum. It is always wrapped in cultural form. We may contrast this with Islamic views of revelation. In Islam the Quran was written on a tablet in heaven by God. It was eternal and uncreated. God then caused it to descend through the prophet who plays no formative part in shaping its content. Muslims therefore emphasize that Mohammed was illiterate: he could not have written such a work as the Quran. Although critics may see all sorts of obvious links between the Quran and its cultural, historical and religious background in the Arabia of Mohammed's time, theologically the Muslim will still maintain that the Quran stands above history and culture. The prophet is like an honoured teleprinter.

Judaeo-Christian concepts of revelation differ totally from the Islamic. The written word clearly reflects the background of the human writer and may be considered theandric (to use an Orthodox term). Thus it would have been impossible for Amos to have written the gospel of Luke or *vice versa*. Both use the common language of their day. Both reflect the historical context of their particular age. Both relate to the religious, philosophical and cultural situations of their societies. The whole of the biblical revelation is acculturated.

What we say of the written word is equally true of the Word incarnate. Jesus is not some superhuman figure who bears no relationship to any historical context. He was a Jew of the first century. This is seen in his way of life, his message and his method of communication. The influence of Jewish thought and proto-rabbinics is a major element in Jesus' words. Contemporary Jewish attitudes to Samaritans and Gentiles come across strongly in his teaching. His teaching methods in the use of parables and stories as well as the inter-relationship of the visual sign and the verbal proclamation again reflects contemporary Judaism. As with the written word, so

also the incarnate Word is acculturated.

Bultmannian approaches have tended to stress the need to strip the message of its cultural accretions, as if the kernel of the true message were hidden in an envelope of meaningless historical wrapping. But when we seek to remove this historical wrapping, we actually find there is nothing left. The whole message is interwoven within its context. We need therefore to understand the Word *in* its context and then interpret it and reapply it *in* our context today. This is contextualization of theology and interpretation of the Word.

b. *Philosophical contextualization.* Not only is our understanding of the biblical revelation likely to be coloured by our own philosophical background, but also our formulation and expression of our belief must inevitably be bound by our philosophy. The particular example of our various concepts of time and history may illustrate this.

It is sometimes assumed by western writers that there are only two basic understandings of time and history. Such people claim that either one holds a 'biblical' straight-line view of history or one falls into the trap of a cyclical view of time. Actually there are other possible world-views. And it is questionable whether the Bible is uniquely restricted to a straight-line approach.

John Mbiti in his writings from Kenya (specifically the Akamba people)¹ seeks to show that at least some East African peoples see time as moving backwards. He claims that they view the life of man as progressing from the purity of the baby to the decline of old age and thence to being an immediately remembered ancestor. Ultimately we become long-since forgotten ancestors. We thus slip further and further into the past. Mbiti's views are hotly debated by scholars of African philosophy, but there is good evidence to suggest that at least some languages do share this approach to time. We then have to face the pressing question of how to relate our biblical teaching to this particular world-view.

Many writers have suggested that the Greek view of time was cyclical or perhaps spiral, whereas they see the biblical concept of time as a straight-line. It seems to me however that the Hebrew concept of time is rather event-centred. As with many non-European languages the Hebrew language is more interested in the completion or non-completion of an event than in its timing as past, present or future. Despite some modern linguistic philosophers I would maintain that language does reflect the philosophy of a people and therefore this aspect of the Hebrew language is important in our understanding of the Hebrew mind. In Hebrew thought an event may actually be in various parts which may happen at various stages of history. Thus the salvation event is at the Exodus, in the return from Babylon, in the life and death of Jesus and finally in the parousia. So it is that men like Cyrus were called the anointed or the Messiah. Likewise Jesus seems to see the judgment in AD 70 as one with the final judgment in his eschatological teaching sections (e.g. Mark 13). It is our totally straight-line view of history which makes us face difficulties in understanding

such passages of Scripture. But all our biblical interpretation and theology is done in the context of our view of time. It seems to me that the New Testament shows an interaction between the Hebrew event-conscious view of time and a Greek view which I consider to be more straight-line.

Our biblical interpretation and theology are also much influenced by western individualism. Some other cultures will see things more from the background of a group culture. Thus we in the west tend to see every biblical 'ye' as a collection of individual 'thous', whereas others may think of a 'thou' as just a small part of a conglomerate 'ye'. This will have significant influence on our whole theology of salvation, as also of the Holy Spirit. What does the New Testament mean when it talks of the Holy Spirit 'in us'? Does it mean that the Spirit indwells each individual – and therefore secondarily is in the church also? Or does it mean that the Spirit indwells the church – and then secondarily individuals who are closely linked to the church? Notice how this will affect our approach to the church and our membership of it.

It could be said that all theology is contextual. It must be, for all of us interpret the Bible through the spectacles of our philosophical background. And we then express our beliefs within the framework of those terms.

c. *Verbal contextualization.* Despite Goethe's cynical statement that words are given to man to conceal his thoughts, Christians maintain that God reveals by word and that men communicate verbally. Of course there is a constant danger that words are misused with the specific intent of non-communication. We have all seen too much of this in some church council statements. But as Christians we want our words to express the fulness of our biblical faith.

But communication is more a question of what people hear than of what we think we are saying. What therefore do our words convey? Take the word *Theos* (God). What did this mean to a first-century Jew? What did it mean to a Gentile of those days? What does 'God' mean to a Muslim? Or to a dechristianized Englishman? What word should we use for God in a Hindu or Buddhist context?

In any language we have to use existent words, bending them (to use H. Kraemer's expression²) to our concept of truth. It is not customary in the Bible to import totally new and foreign words because of a lack of adequate Greek terms. The apostles used current Greek terms with all their overtones of pagan Greek philosophy and religion, but tried to introduce new meaning into these words. But the words had to relate to the already accepted usage of them and the whole expression of the Christian faith had to be made to relate to existent beliefs. This pattern has been followed more or less by us all ever since.

Let us give an example. Some Indian theologians during the past hundred years have sought to relate the gospel to Hindu trinitarian concepts of the threefold *saccidananda* (sat-cit-ananda). Inevitably the three 'persons' (what do we mean by 'person' outside of its

ancient Greek context?) of the Trinity have been made to relate to traditional Hindu ideas of *sat/being*, *cit/truth* and *ananda/joy* or bliss. Followers of the great nineteenth-century theologian, Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya, tend also to relate this to non-dualist Hindu philosophy in which nothing has separate existence, but rather all is Brahman. This is the highest form of Hindu philosophy and Upadhyaya rightly realized that the Christian faith needs to relate to non-dualism if it is to appeal to higher caste Hindus and to religious leaders.³

All traditional Asian religious words have non-Christian significance, but we are bound to use words in the expression and formulation of our theology. The choice of particular words for incarnation, God, salvation or other key concepts already pushes us into a particular non-Christian philosophical and religious context.

d. *Contextualization in history.* We have already observed that all theology is contextual. All theology throughout history has been expressed within the context of current religious and philosophical movements. This contextualization inevitably adds to or subtracts from the biblical revelation.

The story begins in the early church. I find myself some times rather shocked at the way some Christians refer to the creeds of the early church as if they were the very revelation of God and therefore totally authoritative and perfect. It seems clear to me that these credal statements, though of great value and importance, are still ultimately man-made theological formulations which are contextualized and fallible. In his writings on Indian theological developments R. F. Boyd⁴ has rightly pointed out that the early creeds use pagan background Greek philosophy. They relate to the specific problems and questions of their time and give their answers in terms which may not relate adequately to the theological battles of a different age or background. Thus one may well question whether Chalcedon suffices for Indian struggles with a non-dualist Hinduism. Nor may the vocabulary and thought-forms of their Greek background suffice for ordinary Christians in Britain today who need their Christian faith to be expressed in terms related to modern British life and philosophy. It is no wonder that some of the sects make hay with their denial of the Trinity; many Christians today cannot understand this doctrine because it has been locked into an alien terminological and philosophical cage.

Greek thought was largely ontological rather than dynamic and active. Hebrew thought tends rather to the dynamic. Greek credal statements major on definitions of the internal *being* of God and his nature, while Hebrew takes greater interest in what God *does* in creation and salvation. The New Testament begins the process of contextualizing the Hebrew faith for an increasingly Gentile church. The history of the early church continues that process.

For many years evangelical leaders affirmed that doctrine and theology should only be halachic and therefore largely rejected the gospels and Acts as source books for theology. They were merely history! Today we

have realized that the writers of the gospels also had theological axes to grind. But our theological writing is still mainly in halachic form and haggadic theological formulations are less acceptable in the academic world. We immediately react by saying that Haggadah by its very nature lacks the requisite precision. But is that also cultural? Must all theology be precise in its definitions and formulations?

2. Revelation or situational theology?

Liberation theologians deliberately attack traditional theology for its non-situational objectivity, affirming that all true salvation theology should spring from existential historical realities. We are forced to face the question today of the relationship of theology to historical situations and to 'praxis'.

Perhaps there is a tendency for both sides to swing the pendulum to extremes. The conservative may react against situational theology which has no rock-like objectivity in truth and which has not ultimate revelatory value. He may therefore over-emphasize the fact of revelation issuing from God and being an unchanging and absolute truth, but in this emphasis he may lose hold of the relationship between ultimate objective revelation and current situational praxis. On the other hand, the liberation theologian may so over-emphasize the reality of God's actions in history and the incarnational aspect of revelation and salvation in praxis that he can lose sight of the absolute in that which is revealed by the unchanging God.

What is the biblical position? The normal pattern in Scripture is that credal statements and major doctrinal passages are given in a particular practical context. Thus the great Christological word in Philippians 2 comes out from the context of personal disagreements in the church and therefore the exhortation to be of one mind. So also the almost credal formulation of Titus 3:4-7 issues from the apostolic concern for obedience, submission and gentle courtesy. But it needs to be underlined that the existential situation does not determine the content of the faith; it merely earths it. Whereas the liberation theologian would argue for a theology which is formed by the historical situation of injustice, we would want to apply revealed and objective truth to living situations. The form in which our theology is expressed and the way it is applied will be determined by its situational context, but the basis of fundamental truth remains.

As we follow the development of theology into the middle ages we note the significant influence of Aristotle. Interestingly this is not only true of Christian theology in the person of Aquinas, but equally so in Jewish theology through Maimonides and in Muslim theology under Al-Ghazzali.

Even in the revival of biblical theology in the Reformation contextualization is obvious. The interpretation of the epistle to the Romans is a clear example. The Reformers expounded this great epistle to fit the battles of their day, particularly the fight against salvation by works in favour of a renewed emphasis on

justification through faith alone. None of us would query the validity of their struggles. None of us would want to question the truth of the foundational fact that we cannot achieve God's righteousness through our own works and our own merit. All of us would agree with the Reformation emphasis on faith. We would also agree that faith is important to Paul in Romans. But it is not clear that Paul's main concern in Romans is the same as the Reformers' main concern in their context.

In Romans Paul is answering the problems of his context. His main preoccupation was his calling to be the apostle to the Gentiles. Was it a valid and acceptable calling? Was it right for a follower of the God of Israel to engage in out-going proclamatory mission to Gentiles? Could Gentiles be Christians? If so, did they have to follow the Jewish Law and become like Jews. If Gentiles could become Christians just like Jews could, then what is the advantage in being a Jew (Rom. 3:1)? And has God forgotten his ancient covenants with his people? Are the promises of God revoked? It is in this context that Paul demonstrates that both Jews and Gentiles are under sin and need salvation (Rom. 3:9). Paul proceeds to show that justification is not through the works of the Jewish Law, for then it would be only for Jews (3:28,29). Justification is by the work of Christ received through faith – and anybody (both Jew and Gentile) can have faith. Sin is therefore international and justification is also universally available. What then is the advantage of being a Jew? What has happened to the old covenants? Paul answers these questions in Romans 9-11.

The Reformers' understanding of the New Testament is contextualized. When we come to the present day, it is easy for some of us to criticize some more liberal modern theological expressions for their surrender to current philosophical streams, but we have to say that evangelicals are equally involved in this process of contextualization. The very cerebral and 'objective' approach to theology in which we often rejoice may also be a form of contextualization. Traditional Jewish teaching always had two forms, Halachah and Haggadah. Halachah was the legal approach while Haggadah was more in story form or through historical events.

Dangers

The contextualization of theology always contains within itself the inherent danger that we lose hold of the objectivity of revelation. But that danger should not push us into the opposite danger of literalism or unrelated cerebral orthodoxy which fails the test of what liberation theology calls 'orthopraxis'.

Likewise an excessive emphasis on the context of our theology without adequate emphasis on revealed truth can lead to the twin evils of syncretism and universalism. B. Kato in his little book on African theology⁵ rightly points to these common pitfalls. Some theologians who stress contextualization have assumed that the context is already an integral part of God's revelation and have thus sanctified the local culture and religion. This approach is weak on sin and the demonic within every

culture and religion. Some have even suggested that African Primal Religion is the African equivalent of the Old Testament.⁶ The Gospel of the New Testament is therefore the fulfilment of the religion of traditional African life. This can be equally applied to Islam, Hinduism, etc. Some Gentile Christians are saying similar things with regard to Judaism,⁷ assuming that modern Judaism is the religion of the Old Testament and so is to be fulfilled in the New Testament of Jesus Christ without radical conversion. This of course ignores the reality of sin and fails to take account of the impact of the rabbis on contemporary Jewish faith. Non-Christian religion is thus sanctified as a divine means of revelation and even of salvation; hence the burning problem today of whether there is revelation or salvation within other religions. But this is too big a question to be debated in this article! We must however maintain the radical distinction between the Christian revelation and other religions. The biblical Scriptures are clearly against any naive syncretism which fails to see the demonic within the worship and religious systems of the religions.

It hardly needs to be added that the tendency to put other religions on a revelational par with the Old Testament as forerunners of the gospel can also lead to universalism. The pre-Christian Jew was surely saved through his faith in the religious forms and practices which God had given as introduction to the coming Messiah; some would therefore draw the analogy that likewise the African primal religionist or follower of other faiths is also given salvation in and through their non-Christian religion. But we can only say that such universalism is biblically highly speculative.

There are indeed dangers attached to the contextualization of theology. Nevertheless we are reminded that all theology will always be contextualized in some manner. The challenge is to stand firm by God's revealed Word and relate it carefully to our particular context – both parts of that sentence are vitally important.

Conclusion

The context in which theology is done is both socio-political and also philosophico-religious. Contextualized theology tends today to divide along these two streams.

a. *Socio-political.* The Latin American liberation theology is matched today by a deluge of political theological writings from all over the world. The American black theologian James Cone has played a major part in adapting liberation theology to the situations of American blacks and then beyond that to Africa.⁸ A growing volume of South African black theology is now emerging.⁹ In Europe too we are facing the issue of the relationship of the 'spiritual' gospel to our socio-political context and this has led also to the writing of politically oriented theological works. The tide of such opinion flows out to other lands also and it has become the accepted mode of current theological writings, particularly in those circles which are related to 'ecumenical' movements. Sadly one feels that much of the political theology produced in other African and Asian countries

is merely aping the fashion. It therefore becomes boringly repetitive. Nevertheless we have to take into account the reality and relevance of this whole movement to relate the Christian faith to its socio-political environment and to the needs of the poor.

b. *Philosophico-religious*. We need to reiterate that contextualization of theology does not only deal with socio-political realities. It also follows the pattern of the New Testament in seeking to express the faith in terms of the surrounding religious and philosophical environment. The Hebrew faith of Israel needed to be bent to fit the context of a Greek Gentile civilization. It now requires further contextualization to adapt to current English, Indian or African approaches.¹⁰ Our biblical

interpretation, theology and proclamation will reflect the world-view of our day and our culture. The burning question is always: which world-view will it reflect? Will we keep up to date philosophically or will we express the gospel in out-moded forms? And will we in cross-cultural mission export a European or North American understanding and expression of biblical truth and theology? Or can we stand with our brothers and sisters in every land and culture to encourage an indigenous approach to biblical interpretation, theological formulation and the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ? An insular approach to theological study, in which we recognize only North Atlantic theologians is no longer tenable.

¹See *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969) and *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background* (Oxford UP, 1971).

²See *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (Edinburgh House Press, 1938).

³See R. F. Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1969).

⁴*An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology and India and the Latin Captivity of the Church* (Cambridge UP, 1974).

⁵*Theological Pitfalls in Africa* (Kenya: Evangel Publishing House, 1975).

⁶See, e.g., K. A. Dickson and P. Ellingworth (eds.), *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs* (London: Lutterworth, 1969); E. B. Idowu, *African Traditional Religion* (London: SCM,

1973).

⁷See P. Goble, *Everything you need to grow a messianic synagogue* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1974).

⁸J. Cone, *Liberation - a black theology of liberation* (Lippincott, 1970).

⁹E.g. B. Moore, *Black Theology and the South African Voice* (C. Hurst, 1973); A. Boesak, *Black Theology, Black Power* (Oxford: Mowbrays, 1978)

¹⁰We rejoice to see a growing number of leading African and Asian theologians whose writings relate the biblical faith to the context of the religions and philosophies of their area - e.g. L. de Silva in Sri Lanka, Choan Seng Song in Taiwan, Kitamori in Japan, Upadhyaya and many others in India, Koyama as a Japanese missionary in Thailand, Mbiti in Kenya.