

Themelios

An International Journal for Pastors and Students of
Theological and Religious Studies

Volume 28

Issue 3

Summer 2003

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Editorial: Boring Ourselves to Life

As I write, Philadelphia is enduring the worst snowstorm since 1996, with upwards of twenty inches of snow predicted to fall within the next twenty-four hours. While I hate having to spend time clearing the pavement outside my house I must say that I am absolutely delighted that the storm has given me the unexpected pleasure of having a day off work to take my family sledging.

Yet the storm has been instructive to me in more than just the area of my winter sport skills. One of the most amusing sights on the television in recent days has been that of the queues of people in the shops stocking up on winter essentials in case they are trapped in their homes for any length of time. Now, by 'essentials', I do not mean food, milk and other necessities. This is America after all; gargantuan consumption is virtually compulsory; and the average American refrigerator routinely carries enough supplies to feed the whole of Africa for a month, or the typical western family for at least a week. No, I'm referring to American essentials, and the queues I am speaking of are the lines of people at the local video stores who, the TV reporter informs me, are stocking up on movies lest they get trapped in their homes and become bored.

My initial response to this gem of information was to burst out laughing. Perish the thought that any of these people should be so deprived of prepackaged entertainment that they might have to read a book, or (horror of horrors!) actually talk to other members of their families. Yet, on serious reflection, I realise the phenomenon is a very telling one, underlining once again that we in the West have become a decidedly entertainment-based culture. With no problems regarding supplies of essentials, the greatest fear that we have at any time of potential crisis is that we might be deprived of being amused for a whole forty-eight hours.

The entertainment world is a dominant factor in our consumer society. As both Marxists and detectives in American pulp fiction well know, if you want to understand any given situation, you should follow the money. Thus, if you want to find out what is important in any given society, you should simply look to see where the money is—and there is surely no doubt where the cash is to be found in the West of today: pop stars, movie actors, sports figures—these are the people who earn the real money in our world. Love him or hate him, the President of the USA does basically shoulder responsibility for the safety and stability of the world as a whole—but he earns peanuts compared to even a modestly talented footballer or film star; and the British public regularly expresses outrage at the exorbitant pay-rises of industry chiefs (an outrage I share, by the way) while winking at the whopping salaries paid to teenage sport and pop stars—salaries which help to price event tickets out of the reach of the ordinary citizen—and the sickening photo-shoot fees paid to some sleazy celebrity getting married for the umpteenth time. It is a strange world where we begrudge the PM a six-figure salary while continuing to patronise magazines which pay himbos and bimbos hundreds of thousands of pounds for meaningless trash.

Why do we do it? There are probably numerous reasons, but a prime factor has to be the useful role that we see celebrities playing in our society. They entertain us, and that, we think, is a good thing, worth paying for—indeed worth paying more for than for good

government and better public services. Why do we think this way? One interpretation that is offered is that there is, in fact, a spiritual dimension to this culture of celebrity and entertainment. Sports figures, pop stars, celebrities—they offer us meaning and fulfilment, albeit vicariously, in a world where the old gods of traditional religions have failed. Thus, at its apex, this culture produces new messianic figures, such as Elvis or John Lennon and icons, such as James Dean, David Beckham, and Princess Diana. The deification of these figures in modern culture, it is argued, indicates that there is something innate in human beings that strives for transcendence, for something beyond the routine of everyday life.

That is one take on the phenomenon, and one that enjoys considerable currency in some evangelical quarters. There is, however, another way of approaching this matter, a way which receives its clearest articulation in the thought of the great French thinker, Blaise Pascal. Pascal lived in a world which was marked both by its incredible busy-ness and by its appetite, at least among the social elite, for pleasure and entertainment. Pascal categorised this phenomenon as *distraction*. Distraction is the production of entertainment for the purpose of taking one's mind off the deeper realities of life. In the famous paragraph in the *Pensées*, he asks why even kings have trivial entertainments organised for their amusement. He can understand, he says, why poor people might enjoy the odd dance to distract them from the miserable drudge of their daily lives, but why should a king, glorious, powerful, surrounded by proofs of his own greatness, need trivial entertainment? The answer is that, left to himself with nothing to distract him, he will think about himself and the reality of the death that awaits him.¹

Surely this is precisely what is going on in the contemporary culture of entertainment and celebrity. Why do we pay sports stars, actors, and the various airheads that populate the airwaves more than we pay our political leaders? We do this because they help to take our minds off the deeper, more demanding truths of life, particularly the one great and ultimately unavoidable truth: death. It is not just the entertainment industry that does that: the huge amount of money expended on the health industry in general and the cosmetic surgery industry in particular also point us towards the basic drive in society to avoid this one at all costs. As Pascal himself says, 'It is easier to put up with death without thinking about it, than with the idea of death when there is no danger of it.'²

Pascal goes further, arguing that not just entertainment, or distraction, subserves this greater end of self-deception; even the social and bureaucratic clutter of our everyday commerce in this world has a similar significance. This he describes not as distraction but as 'diversion'. Let me quote him at length on this:

From childhood onwards people are entrusted with the care of their honour, their property, their friends, and even with the property of their friends. They are showered with duties, the need to learn languages and exercises. They are led to believe that they will never be happy if their health, honour, and wealth, and those of their friends, are not in a satisfactory state, and that if one element is amiss they will be unhappy. So they are given offices and duties which keep them hectically occupied from daybreak.³

This ties in with distraction in that the two work together to fill the lives of men and women with ephemeral trivia so that, whatever time is left after such diversions is to be

1 Pascal, Blaise, *Pensées*, trans. Honor Levi (Oxford: World's Classics, 1995), 48–49.

2 *Pensées*, 49.

3 *Pensées*, 49.

devoted to entertainment and pleasure. To express the idea in modern form: once you have spent most of your day dealing with the nightmare that is the modern workplace, you get home and switch on your TV or go to the movies, being entertained or projecting some fantasy onto a celebrity figure. Then when you fear being trapped in your house by snow, for example, your first concern is to make sure that the supply of pre-packaged entertainment does not dry up, lest the boredom of your enforced isolation force you to think about your mortal condition. Only in this way can you avoid facing up to your own mortality. Pascal ends the passage with a phrase which, literally translated, says 'How hollow and full of excrement is the heart of man', meaning 'How we fill our lives with rubbish instead of reflecting upon real truths'. We would rather spend time and money on junk than spend a single moment thinking about where our lives are really heading.

Pascal is not, of course, saying that entertainment is wrong in and of itself, any more than hard work or concern for the wellbeing of one's family is illegitimate. Though he himself lived a fairly rigorous ascetic life, his point is not to outlaw all pleasure, but rather to criticise the use of entertainment as a way of distracting men and women from the realities of life. Pleasure and fun are good things; but when they become means to keep us from facing up to the truths of our creaturely existence, they are profoundly bad for us.

This approach puts a very different complexion on the modern world: the obsession with sex, with drugs, with celebrity worship, with weird and wonderful cults, and even with conspicuous consumption and shopping. These are not signs of some deep quest for spiritual meaning, of attempts to fill some religious void in lives that we somehow know are incomplete in and of themselves; rather than being hopeful signs of humanity's innate spirituality, they are in fact the latest attempts of humanity to avoid precisely any form of true spirituality. They represent not ill-informed striving after truth and meaning but pathetic efforts to pretend that we are not going to die and then to face the judgement. They are, in short, acts which seek to suppress the truth in unrighteousness and to avoid the claims of Christ, in whom is revealed the full reality both of God's judgement and his grace.

This is where boredom is so important. Stripped of diversions and distractions, individuals have no choice but to reflect upon themselves, the reality of their lives and their future deaths. Human culture has proved adept over the centuries at avoiding the claims of Christ and the truths of human existence revealed in him. The modern bureaucratic state, the instability and insecurity of the work environment, the entertainment industry and the consumer society in which our modern Western affluence allows us to indulge all play their part in keeping us from reflecting upon reality as revealed to us by God. Let us take time to be bored, to strip away from ourselves the screens we have created to hide the real truths of life and death from our eyes. Let us spend less time trying to appropriate culture for Christianity and more time deconstructing culture in the light of Christ's claims on us and the world around us. Only then will we truly grasp the urgency of the human predicament. Oh and by the way, if it snows again, don't rent a video; read a copy of Pascal's *Pensées*.

Did Paul Change His Mind?—An Examination of some aspects of Pauline Eschatology

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This article was one of a series of lectures, given at the Tyndale Fellowship Associates Conference at Tyndale House, Cambridge in June 2002.

I embarked on a study of Pauline eschatology having been provoked by a number of scholars' suggestions that Paul was inconsistent in a variety of areas, not least in eschatology. I wondered, if it was possible, as an evangelical, to say that Paul was inconsistent, or changed his teaching on various matters at certain stages in his life? Was it true to say that Paul developed in his thinking as far as his theology was concerned?

Thus I made a list of those matters on which various scholars claimed that Paul did in fact change his thinking.

Points on which scholars say Paul changed his mind

Discrepancy in details of events to occur before the parousia

Romans 9–11 may be compared to 2 Thessalonians 2:3–12. It seems that in the latter there is a somewhat pessimistic picture of events due to take place before Christ's return—life will get more difficult, a rebellion will take place and a 'lawless one' will be revealed (v. 2) who will engage in various wicked acts and deceptions (vv. 9–10) before Christ destroys him (v. 8).

However, in Romans 9–11, there is a rather more optimistic picture of events before the parousia. There is a positive view of the number of people to receive salvation, and in particular Israel's rejection of her Messiah is not final, and indeed 'all Israel will be saved' (11:26).

Did Paul expect the parousia within his lifetime, or after his death?

It would seem that in 1 Thessalonians 4:15–17 and 1 Corinthians 15:51–52, Paul expected the parousia to come quickly, so quickly that it would take place before his death. In 1 Thessalonians 4:15–17, Paul twice uses the expression, 'We who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord', which may be taken to mean 'we Christians who survive until the parousia'. A similar idea may be seen in 1 Corinthians 15:51f., where the 'we' that is emphasised in verse 52b ('we shall be changed') indicates that Paul placed himself among the survivors at the parousia.

However, in Paul's later epistles, it seems that he no longer expected to be alive at the second coming of Christ, but rather to die before it took place. Verses such as 2 Corinthians 4:12 ('death is at work in us, but life in you'), 5:1, 8 ('we know that if the

earthly building we live in is destroyed ... we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord') are said to reflect this way of thinking, as well as Philippians 1:21, 23, where Paul speaks of dying as 'gain' and of his desire to 'depart and be with Christ which is far better'. So now the apostle considers death before the parousia to be a real possibility, a perspective he did not seem to have prior to 2 Corinthians, and he now thinks that the parousia will no longer take place in the proximate future.

Discrepancy regarding the time at which the Christian receives the resurrection body

When did Paul think that believers would receive their resurrection body? Two passages which give information on this matter are said by some scholars to be inconsistent with each other. Thus in 1 Corinthians 15, it is clear that believers do not receive their resurrection bodies until Christ returns—see verses 22–26 (the order of the resurrection of the dead taking place is first Christ, then *at his coming*, those who belong to Christ—verse 23), and 51–52 (the dead will be raised imperishable at the last trumpet, i.e. at Christ's coming, and then receive the resurrection body)—compare also 1 Thessalonians 4:14ff.

However, in 2 Corinthians 5, verse 1 seems to say that it is at the moment of death that the heavenly body is received—there is no gap between death and the parousia during which the believer is disembodied. It is only by receiving the resurrection body at death that this state of nakedness will be avoided (v. 3). So for the individual Christian, it is at death that they will receive the building that God has provided, as soon as the present physical body is destroyed.

What is the intermediate state of the Christian dead?

In his earlier epistles, Paul seems to have described this state as one of 'sleep', thus an unconscious intermediate state. Christ will return to raise sleeping, unconscious believers to life again. This appears to be reflected in verses such as 1 Thessalonians 4:13, 15 ('concerning those who have fallen asleep in Christ'); 5:10 ('whether we are awake or asleep') and 1 Corinthians 15:18, 20, 51.

However, two sets of verses in Paul's later letters seem to give rather a different picture of the apostle's view of the intermediate state: 2 Corinthians 5:6–8 ('away from the body and at home with the Lord') and Philippians 1:21–23 ('to die is gain ... to depart and to be with Christ'). These verses seem to indicate that when believers die, they go immediately into the presence of Christ without there being any state of unconsciousness or 'sleep' at all.

The nature of events preceding the parousia in 1 and 2 Thessalonians

In 1 Thessalonians 5:1–10, it seems that the parousia will come suddenly and unexpectedly—like 'a thief in the night', whereas in 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12, it is clear that certain events have to take place *before* Christ returns (the rebellion, the appearance of the lawless one, etc).

Future/realised eschatology in respect of the believer's resurrection with Christ

It seems clear that the resurrection is a future event in 1 Corinthians 15:51–54; 1 Thessalonians 4:14–16 and Romans 6:4f. Colossians 3:1–4, however, seems to talk about resurrection as an event that has already taken place in the believers' lives ('you have been raised with Christ ... you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God'). Is there at least a different perspective on resurrection at this later stage in Paul's life?

Possible methods of resolving apparent inconsistencies

How have people handled these alleged discrepancies?

Theory of development (or change of mind)

If one is prepared to talk of 'development' in Paul's thinking, it is important to define how one understands this term. If it is taken to mean 'an increase in understanding', few would object to such a term being applied to Paul's theology. If, however, 'development' is meant to refer to a total change of outlook on Paul's part, involving acceptance of new ideas and the rejection of former beliefs as mistaken, then some would want to raise questions about 'development' being applied to Paul in this way.

Did, therefore, Paul modify or expand his thinking as his life proceeded? Did his ideas progress without the later ideas contradicting the previous ones, or did he at a later stage in his life modify or expand his thinking so as to hold different views which contradicted the earlier ones? This would seem to be an important distinction to bear in mind when considering development theories. Thus one writer says, 'Paul's theology was not formed and static, but open and developing throughout his ministry'.¹

This distinction is especially important to bear in mind when considering the work of someone like C.H. Dodd,² who argues that Paul is likely to have developed his thinking as he went along in his missionary life—and by this, he seems to mean 'change of mind', as may be seen in certain areas which Dodd outlines.

As far as the parousia is concerned, Dodd is of the opinion that Paul expected to be alive at Christ's return at an early stage in his missionary career reflected in what Dodd classifies as an earlier group of epistles (1 and 2 Thess., 1 Cor., 2 Cor. 6:14–7:1; 10–13), whereas in a later groups of epistles, he expected to die beforehand (2 Cor. 1–9, Rom., Phil., Col. and Eph.).

There is development in Paul's attitude to this world and its institutions

As far as the state is concerned, in 1 Corinthians 6:1–11, (written at an early stage in his Christian life), Paul has a comparatively negative view of the state, particularly the law courts and advises the Corinthians to have little to do with them (cf. vv. 1 and 2—it is a

1 C.L. Mearns. 'Early Eschatological Development in Paul: the Evidence of I and II Thessalonians', *New Testament Studies* 27, 1981, 154. On the issue of development in Paul's eschatology and various approaches, see especially L. J. Kreitzer, 'Eschatology', in *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters*, eds. G.F. Hawthorne, R.P. Martin and D.G. Reid, IVP, Illinois/Leicester, 1993, 260–61.

2 C.H. Dodd, 'The Mind of Paul: I; and 'The Mind of Paul: II' in *New Testament Studies* (Manchester: University Press, 1953), 67–82 and 83–128. Kreitzer comments that 'one cannot overestimate the seminal work by C.H. Dodd in this area', L.J. Kreitzer, *Jesus and God in Paul's Eschatology* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), 250, n. 22.

mistake to take grievances to court before unbelievers); however, in Romans 13:1–7, representing a later stage in Paul’s thinking, Paul is rather more positive in his evaluation of the state—all are to be subject to the governing authorities which have been instituted by God and are his servants—verses 1 and 4.

As far as marriage is concerned, 1 Corinthians 7 seems to have some reservations about its value—see verses 28, 29, 33–34, not least because at this stage Paul believed the parousia was near (vv. 29, 31); but in Ephesians 5:22ff., the institution of marriage is compared to that of Christ and his church, a high comparison. Thus Paul has at least changed his thinking on these matters.

Dodd is also of the opinion that Paul changed his mind on the time a believer receives the resurrection body (cf. 1 Cor. 15 and 2 Cor. 5:1–10—see above).

If it is the case that Paul has developed in his thinking on these matters, then an obvious question is why this took place. Dodd and a number of scholars³ subsequently, have suggested that it was an event which occurred in Asia which caused the apostle to change his thinking on various matters. This is described in 2 Corinthians 1:8–9. It seems Paul was in mortal danger here, and as a result of his almost miraculous escape from what seemed certain death, he underwent a spiritual crisis which transformed his eschatological (and other) thinking, as we see reflected in his later letters. So this harrowing experience (which is not easily identified but may have been a serious illness) made Paul realise that death was somewhat nearer than he had previously thought and caused him to think more carefully about the implications this had for belief in an intermediate state and the time of receipt of the resurrection body.

However certain points seem to modify somewhat the *prima facie* strength of this argument: it perhaps needs to be borne in mind that the danger of death referred to in 2 Corinthians 1:8–9 was certainly not the first time Paul had faced imminent death. Earlier epistles give the impression that Paul had on several occasions been in danger of his life in the period before 2 Corinthians 1—see e.g., 1 Corinthians 15:30–32. Further, it is doubtful if the events mentioned in 2 Corinthians 4:7–11; 6:4–10 and 11:23–33 refer only to the time shortly before the writing of 2 Corinthians. At no stage did Paul consider death to be an exceptional occurrence for the believer; as has been pointed out, the death rate in Paul’s day was not so surprisingly low that few if any of his fellow believers had died in the twenty-five years or so after Jesus’ crucifixion. Also the experiences mentioned in Acts 8:1 and 9:23f. (as well as those mentioned above) hardly indicate that Paul had any confident expectation of life. So dangers were a consistent part of the apostle’s life, and it seems fair to say that the possibility of death before the parousia existed for some time before the events described in 2 Corinthians 1:8f.⁴

Against this it might be said that the way Paul expresses himself in 2 Corinthians 1:8f. seems to indicate such a severe experience that this was the catalyst that made the apostle consider to a greater degree than before the question of the state of the believer after death, made him transfer the time the Christian receives the resurrection body from the

3 See M.J. Harris, ‘2 Corinthians 5:1–10: Watershed in Paul’s Eschatology?’, *Tyndale Bulletin* 22, 1971, 56f.; F.F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Free Spirit*, (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1977), 295, 300, 310.

4 See on these points, among others, R. Berry, ‘Death and Life in Christ’ *Scottish Journal of Theology* 14, 1961, 60f.; W.G. Kummel, *The Theology of the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1974), 239; B.F. Meyer, ‘Did Paul’s View of the Resurrection of the Dead undergo Development?’, *Theological Studies* 47, 1986, 384ff.; D.E. Garland, *2 Corinthians* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1999) 254f.

parousia to the moment of death, and forced him to reconsider his own relationship to the return of Christ. However we might ask whether personal experience would have granted to Paul insights which his pastoral concerns had failed to prompt. Was the apostle the sort of person to have one view when others' deaths were the issue, but another (more pleasant and congenial) view when his own death seemed near?

We may say then, that the change in Paul's personal circumstances reflected in 2 Corinthians 1:8f. has perhaps been given too much emphasis as being the cause of Paul's eschatological alterations of perspective.

So this view states that Paul's thinking developed, changed, progressed on these various matters in these particular ways. But perhaps there is another way of approaching these alleged inconsistencies, which reflects on them in a way different to that of development. One possibility is to consider whether a careful exegesis of certain passages helps to fit the verses together in a way that indicates that it is possible to see Paul's teaching fit together more coherently.

Alternative exegesis of relevant passages

Focussing on just three of the apparent inconsistencies mentioned above.

Paul's expectation of the parousia—in his lifetime or after his death?

A number of points are worth making concerning the earlier passages. Concerning 1 Thessalonians 4:15–17 and 1 Corinthians 15:51f., it appears quite possible to interpret these verses in a way other than that these passages indicate that Paul expected to be alive at the parousia. When the apostle used the first person plural to refer to believers, this does not necessarily mean he included himself. 1 Corinthians 6:14, 15 and 10:22 are examples of Paul classing himself with those he is describing without necessarily implying he is one of them. It also seems reasonable to say that in 1 Thessalonians 4:15, 17, where Paul is talking about two classes of believers (those asleep and those alive), as he was in the latter class when he wrote, it was natural for him to use the first person plural of himself and his fellow believers.

It further seems possible to take 'we' of 1 Thessalonians 4:15, 17 and 1 Corinthians 15:51f. in a future sense ('We who will be alive, who will survive'),⁵ or as hypothetical ('If we are alive, if we survive'). Also 'we' may well signify nothing more than a general designation, '“we”, insofar as we are permitted to experience this and insofar as this will be found to apply to us'.⁶ It may also be argued that when 1 Thessalonians 5:10 is taken with 1 Thessalonians 4:15, 17, the indication is that Paul held, simultaneously and in tension, the twofold possibility of his survival to Christ's return (1 Thessalonians 4:15,

5 Compare C.E.B. Cranfield, 'Thoughts on New Testament Eschatology', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 35, 1982, 506: 'it seems to me perfectly possible to take the "we" to mean "We Christians" (in 1 Thessalonians 4:17—"those of us (Christians) who are alive, who are left"); I.H. Marshall, *1 & 2 Thessalonians* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1983), 127: 'Here in the present passage (1 Thessalonians 4:15) there is really no difficulty in taking his words to mean "those of us who are alive". (We may well ask how Paul could have said, "those of us who are living then" shortly and succinctly without using the actual wording employed here)'.

6 See H. Ridderbos, *Paul—an Outline of Theology* (London: SPCK, 1977), 492. Ridderbos notes another example of this type of facultative sense in Romans 15:1.

17) or his death before that event (1 Thessalonians 5:10). One might further argue from 1 Thessalonians 5:1–4 that Paul taught the incalculability of the time of the return of Christ, and specifically claimed ignorance about its date. This would seem to add weight to an interpretation of ‘we’ as not necessarily indicating that Paul believed he would be alive at the parousia.

Thus it would seem that ‘we’ does not indicate a delimited hope; rather if it does not restrict the time of Christ’s return to within Paul’s life, it would seem a natural prelude to 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11. So it might well be argued that Paul awaited the parousia as an event which might take place at any moment, and so he reckoned with the possibility of being alive at that time, without necessarily thinking that this would definitely be the case at any stage of his Christian life. It might also be said that if Paul thought he would live to see Christ’s return, this would be to attribute to himself an immortality contrary to how he usually speaks of his own life and death (cf., for example, 1 Thess. 5:10; Rom. 14:7–9; 8:10f.; Phil. 1:22ff.; 2:17; 1 Cor. 4:11; 5:1ff.).

Perhaps we may conclude this point that while Paul may well have thought more on the possibility that he might die before Christ’s return in his later epistles, nevertheless he always thinks of the parousia as imminent throughout his life. It seems most likely that

‘Paul took note of the deaths which had taken place and perhaps also came to believe that his own death would happen earlier than at first seemed to him likely, than that he radically altered his opinion about the time of the parousia’.⁷

Absolute certainty concerning whether he would live to, or die before the parousia was something Paul would never have claimed at any stage in his life. Paul was certain that Christ would return, but a similar certainty concerning his own (or his contemporaries’) survival to that time was something he would never have claimed. Thus we may say that it seems reasonable to argue that Paul always entertained the dual possibility of survival until or death before the parousia throughout his Christian life.

Intermediate state of the Christian dead

One issue to be explored is the meaning of the term ‘sleep’ as used in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–15; 5:10 and 1 Corinthians 15:18, 20, 51. It could well be argued that this could be understood as a euphemism for death rather than as referring to a state of unconsciousness. A survey of OT, Intertestamental literature and Rabbinic writings indicates that the word ‘sleep’ was used in two main ways: to relate the certainty of resurrection, which was portrayed as a waking from sleep, and also simply to describe the dead with no thought of resurrection in view.⁸ This being the case, it would seem hazardous to deduce anything so specific as ‘unconsciousness’ from the use of ‘sleep’ for death.

Concerning Paul’s use of the term, it occurs eight times in his writings. While for most of them there seems no reason to say that the sense demands that ‘sleep’ should

7 C.K. Barrett, ‘New Testament Eschatology’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 6, 1953, 143 n. 2.

8 See on this topic, G. Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1961, 142–44; R.E. Bailey, ‘Is “Sleep” the Proper Biblical Term for the Intermediate State?’, *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 55, 1964, 162ff.; D.E.H. Whiteley, *The Theology of St. Paul* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), 262–69.

refer to unconsciousness rather than simply meaning 'to die', four instances seem to refer to the idea of a continuous condition of sleep, a continued state of being unconscious, rather than the fact of having died, a single act: 1 Thessalonians 4:13; 5:10; 1 Corinthians 11:30; 15:10. On the other hand, one might say that when Paul calls dead believers 'asleep', he appears to be looking upon their condition from a human point of view, as one looking forward to their resurrection. It also may be said that the condition of dead believers, who are said to be 'asleep in Christ', is intricately connected with their Lord who came alive from the dead. So 'sleep' is given a new context by the death and resurrection of Christ. However, the word is not meant to be an objective indication of the intermediate state of the dead believer. It may also be said that the force of the present tense in 1 Thessalonians 4:13 and 1 Corinthians 11:30 is that a continuous number of deaths keep occurring, in which case Paul's words do not support the idea of a continuous state of sleep.⁹

If these interpretations are accepted, there is no information about the intermediate state in these verses at all. It then seems reasonable to conclude that the word 'sleep' as used by Paul may aptly be taken as a euphemism for death and nothing more, and there is no need to see it as referring to an intermediate state of unconsciousness.

It also seems that an interpretation of 2 Corinthians 5:6–8 and Philippians 1:21–23 which sees these verses as referring to an intermediate state of conscious fellowship with Christ is by far the most likely way of understanding these passages. The following points may be noted: concerning 2 Corinthians 5:6–8, it appears unlikely that a time gap divides the 'being away from the body' from the 'being at home with the Lord'. Verse 6 would seem to imply that the state of being at home in the body and the state of being away from the Lord occur at the same time: immediately the believer dies and is therefore no longer in the physical body, there is no longer an absence from the Lord. Also, verse 7 portrays walking by faith and seeing the Lord face-to-face 'as two mutually exclusive and immediately successive states of Christian existence'. Death may end the Christian's walk of faith, but it brings immediate contact with Christ. Thus we may argue that in talking about the state of the Christian after death 'as one of dwelling in the company of the Lord', it seems most probable that Paul is thinking of a 'heightened form of inter-personal communion' between the believer and the Lord, a mutual fellowship.¹⁰

Concerning the meaning of 'to die is gain' (Phil. 1:21), it seems most likely that the gain Paul is referring to is the idea that death would bring him personally into a deeper state of fellowship with his Lord, and allow him to be with Christ in a way far superior to what was possible on earth. Living, in Philippians 1:21, which is equated with Christ, and dying, which is gain, are not compared and contrasted, but rather dying is a consequence of living. Living in the present for Paul meant being taken up with Christ, and because of this, dying could only mean more of the same thing, but then without any of the problems

9 See on these points, C.K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (London: A. & C. Black, 1971), 275; E. Best, *A Commentary on the first and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (London: A. & C. Black, 1977), 185; D.E.H. Whiteley, *Theology*, 268f.

10 See for these points (and the quotations), M.J. Harris, '2 Corinthians 5:1–10: Watershed in Paul's Eschatology?', *Tyndale Bulletin* 22, 1971, 45f. See also M.J. Harris, 'Paul's View of Death in 2 Corinthians 5:1–10' in R.N. Longenecker & M.C. Tenney (eds.), *New Dimensions in NT Studies* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 324 and Harris' *Raised Immortal: the relation between resurrection and immortality in New Testament teaching* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1983), 136f.

associated with living in the physical body.¹¹

Concerning verse 23, what Paul appears to be saying is that the very moment he dies, at that precise moment, he will be with Christ. Paul is not using resurrection terminology here—the contrast in these verses is not between present sufferings and future glory (as at 3:10f., 17–21), but between life and death.

A final indication that these two sets of verses indicate that Paul expected to find himself in the presence of Christ immediately after death is as follows: if Paul had contemplated being unconscious and inactive during the interval between his death and the parousia, how are we to explain his preference (2 Cor. 5:8) or desire (Phil. 1:23) to depart to Christ's presence? Even with all its difficulties, active conscious life on earth would doubtless have seemed preferable to a state of unconsciousness after death. It appears unlikely that Paul would have believed that Christians could have their union with Christ interrupted, even temporarily, by bodily death. Thus the apostle's knowledge that life in the immediate presence of Christ is far superior to earthly existence formed the ground of his preference for departure in 2 Corinthians 5:8 and of his desire for departure in Philippians 1:23.

So the alleged inconsistency on the intermediate state is best resolved by an alternative exegesis of the verb 'to sleep' in 1 Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians which argues that it does not refer to any intermediate state of unconsciousness, but rather is simply a euphemism for death. Thus Paul intends to make no statement on the intermediate state by the use of this term.

Time of receipt of the resurrection body

It seems clear that 1 Corinthians 15 does clearly teach that the resurrection body will be given to the believer at the parousia, a view which the vast majority of commentators hold to. However, while 2 Corinthians 5:1–10 is a much more difficult passage to get to grips with, a good case can be made for these verses referring to the parousia as the point at which the resurrection body is bestowed. In particular, the following points are important:

(1) The 'building from God', the 'house not made with hands' of 5:1 almost certainly refers to the resurrection body, for the following reasons: it would seem most natural to give to 'house' in verse 1b the same meaning as it has in verse 1a. Also, as there are several references to the physical body in 2 Corinthians 4 (see vv. 7, 10, 11, 16a), it seems most likely that 'the earthly tent/house' (5:1a) refers to the physical body than to any sense of corporate identity.

(2) The way the 'house' is described in 5:1 ('from God', 'a house not made with hands', 'eternal in the heavens') has direct parallels with the description of the resurrection body found in 1 Corinthians 15. 2 Corinthians 5:1, 2 talks about the 'house' being 'from God', a 'heavenly dwelling', to which we may compare 1 Corinthians 15:38 (God gives a body); it is spiritual (2 Cor. 5:1—'not made with hands')—compare 1 Corinthians 15:44, 46—a spiritual body; it is permanent and indestructible (2 Cor. 5:1—'eternal'), corresponding to the new body being 'imperishable' in 1 Corinthians 15:42, 52–54; it is 'heavenly' (2 Cor. 5:1) which may be paralleled with 1 Corinthians 15:40,

¹¹ On these points, see H. Ridderbos, *Paul*, 498ff.; F.F. Bruce, *Free Spirit*, 311ff.; A.T. Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 104; M.J. Harris, *Immortal*, 134.

48f. referring to heavenly bodies and those who are ‘of heaven’ bearing the image of ‘the man of heaven’. This close correspondence between the way Paul describes the resurrection body in 1 Corinthians 15 and his description of the ‘building’ in 2 Corinthians 5:1 would seem to be a good indication that the two should be identified.¹²

In arguing that 2 Corinthians 5:1 refers to death before the parousia, we may note the following: at death, the earthly tent-dwelling is ‘taken down’ and destroyed. This is not the type of language Paul uses to refer to those alive at Christ’s return. In the latter case he talks about transformation (cf. Phil. 3:21) which will involve a ‘putting on’ of the new spiritual body without the necessity of a prior ‘taking off’ of the old body (cf. 2 Cor. 5:2–4, 1 Cor. 15:51ff.). There will be no destruction of the earthly body of those still alive at the parousia, although it will be changed. It is fair to say that Paul is more personally involved in the question of death before Christ’s return in 2 Corinthians 5:1–10 than in his earlier epistles, but even so his assurance is similar to that of 1 Corinthians 15: if he does die, he knows that he has a resurrection body from God.¹³

This brings us to the question of the meaning of ‘we have’ in 2 Corinthians 5:1. I would argue that this should be taken as designating a future possession of the spiritual body at the parousia. It appears reasonable to take ‘we have’ as giving the sense of assured possession, a futuristic present used by Paul to express his certainty of gaining the resurrection body at the Lord’s coming. So convinced was Paul that this would be the case that he could speak of it as present.¹⁴

It also seems possible to interpret Paul’s use of ‘to be further clothed, ‘to put on over’ in verse 4 as indicating his desire to put on the heavenly habitation over the earthly tent at the parousia rather than at the moment of death. Paul says he groans because he does not wish to be unclothed, but to be ‘clothed upon’, to be further clothed, to put on one garment over another (v. 4). He appears to be saying that he does not wish to experience an interval of being unclothed, but that he should be able simply to put on his future heavenly body over the top of his present earthly body. It is hard to see how Paul could have thought of this taking place at death, for at death the earthly body is taken off. It is true that Paul’s groaning in verses 2–4 is a contrast to his previous confidence, but we would argue that it is the result of his desire to put on the new body over the present, earthly body, without death coming first.¹⁵

Paul also says in verse 4 that when the heavenly dwelling is put on, then what is mortal is swallowed up by life. These are very similar terms to those he uses in 1 Corinthians 15:54, and that chapter clearly indicates that it is at Christ’s return that this will take place. It is not unfair to say that the same would be the case in 2 Corinthians 5:4

12 On these points, see M.J. Harris, ‘Watershed’, 39f.; R. Gundry, ‘Soma’ in *Biblical Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 150; J. Osei-Bonsu, ‘Does 2 Corinthians 5:1–10 teach the reception of the resurrection body at the moment of death?’, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 28, 1986, 97, n. 24; P. Barnett, *2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 259f.

13 See on this, J. Osei-Bonsu, ‘2 Corinthians 5:1–10’, 82f.

14 See for this interpretation, among others, G. Vos, *Pauline Eschatology*, 188; H. Ridderbos, *Paul*, 501; C.K. Barrett, *The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (London: A. & C. Black, 1973), 151; R. Gundry, *Soma*, 150f.; A.T. Lincoln, *Paradise*, 63f.; R.P. Martin, *2 Corinthians* (Waco: Word, 1986), 104.

15 See on this, F.F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Corinthians* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1971), 202ff.; C.K. Barrett, *2 Corinthians*, 152f.; R.H. Gundry, *Soma*, 152; A.T. Lincoln, *Paradise*, 66; P. Barnett, *2 Corinthians*, 259f.; D.E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, 258.

unless there is clear evidence against this assumption.¹⁶

In considering the meaning of 'naked' in verse 3, a likely interpretation in the context seems to be that which refers it to the state of disembodiment which death before the parousia would bring for the believer. It appears that 'naked' is opposed to the idea of being clothed in verse 3, and synonymous with the notion of 'to put off, be unclothed' in verse 4, and where this clothing is seen as specifically referring to embodiment, then 'naked' quite naturally refers to the disembodiment which believers would enter upon at death. Paul argues that the object of the Christian's longing is not the stripping off of the body, but a new heavenly form of embodiment—the believer shrinks from a state of not being clothed. In verse 4, the groaning is connected with great oppression, and this is 'because we do not wish to be unclothed, but to be further clothed'. So there are two reasons for groaning: negatively, the dislike of the prospect of putting off the present body, and positively the desire to put on over it the heavenly body, which could only take place if the parousia occurred before death. Paul fears death because it would be a much happier event to survive to Christ's return; if he died first, he would have to spend some time 'naked', and then be raised up, whereas if he lived until the parousia, he would be transformed immediately.¹⁷

Death however, does have an attractive side for the believer despite the prospect of nakedness, and Paul is prepared to leave the physical body for the sake of being at home with the Lord (vv. 6–8). So if death comes to destroy the 'outward man', fellowship with Christ will continue, be much deeper, and will end with the spiritual body which God has prepared for the believer to receive at Christ's return. Thus death might mean temporary nakedness, but it would also mean freedom from the frustration of living in the earthly body which restricts the Christian's fellowship with Christ.¹⁸

An objection that is sometimes raised to this interpretation is that it means Paul had two contradictory attitudes to death within ten verses. At first he shrinks from the nakedness that death would bring, and then he says that if faced with the choice between death and remaining in the present body, he would prefer to die because this would mean being with the Lord. But it might be said that Paul was in two minds about death. In one sense death was an enemy; it would lead to a state of disembodiment. However death would also lead a believer into the Lord's presence even without resurrection, and communion would be enhanced since it would no longer be subject to the limitations of the physical body. Faced by death, Paul thinks of the realities of heaven. The temporary nature of the state of nakedness is shown by his assurance of the reality of the future heavenly body, and this makes death seem abnormal. Yet even if death destroys the physical body it cannot damage Paul's link with his Lord. This will continue through death, even though the earthly body does not, and eventually the resurrection body will be received at Christ's return. There will be individual blessedness at death, while the soul is disembodied until the parousia, but the total Christian hope is of something more than individual blessedness, since perfect fullness of life has to be corporate. Thus it is

16 See C.K. Barrett, 2 Corinthians, 256; A.T. Lincoln, Paradise, 66.

17 On these points, see C.K. Barrett, 2 Corinthians, 156; A.T. Lincoln, Paradise, 67; R.P. Martin, 2 Corinthians, 106ff.; B.F. Meyer, 'Paul's View of the Resurrection', 380ff.; J. Osei-Bonsu, '2 Corinthians 5:1–10', 91; P. Barnett, 2 Corinthians, 264f.

18 On this line of interpretation, see, among others, R.P. Martin, 2 Corinthians, 109ff.; V. Furnish, 2 Corinthians (Garden City: Doubleday, 1984), 301ff.; P. Barnett, 2 Corinthians, 268ff.; D.E. Garland, 2 Corinthians, 264f.

the parousia with its 'perfection of corporateness' given in the bestowal of the physical body to every believer for which Paul really longs.¹⁹

It might also be said that if Paul had undergone a complete change of mind in 2 Corinthians 5:1–10, it is hard to see indications of this in the passage. For example, regarding 'we have' (v. 1), the present tense seems inadequate evidence for suggesting a change in Paul's thinking. If Paul now wished to say that the resurrection body was to be received at death it would be more accurate to call this a complete contradiction of what he had previously taught, rather than a development from it. The specific order of events described in 1 Corinthians 15:23–26 would no longer be correct and the mystery described in 1 Corinthians 15:51ff. that at the last trumpet the dead would be raised imperishable would no longer be true. Yet there is no indication of such a complete break with what he had previously meant when the apostle mentions the resurrection of the dead in 2 Corinthians 1:9 and 4:14.

It would be fair to say that 'for we know' (2 Cor. 5:1) is an unlikely way of introducing a new teaching which has been made clear to Paul only recently. These words would seem rather to indicate that the teaching of 2 Corinthians 5 will have been known already to the Corinthians and will agree with Paul's previous teaching (which is that the receipt of the spiritual body is at the parousia).²⁰

Thus this alleged inconsistency on the time a believer receives their resurrection body is resolved by an alternative exegesis of 2 Corinthians 5:1–10 which interprets these verses in terms of the resurrection body being bestowed at the second coming of Christ, not at the moment of death.²¹

Conclusion

It has been argued that the method of solution which provides the most satisfactory way of resolving the three alleged inconsistencies that we have examined is an alternative exegesis of appropriate passages, and the conclusions we have reached provide us with a coherent picture of Paul's eschatological thinking on these matters. Thus in arguing that for Paul the parousia was always imminent, that he looked upon death as a possibility at all stages of his Christian life, not just from the time immediately before he wrote 2 Corinthians (although it seems that he considered death for himself more probable as time went on), it was natural for Paul also to consider the state of the believer between death and the parousia (which, we argue, he thought to be one of disembodied, conscious fellowship with Christ), and the events which would take place at Christ's return

19 See on these points, R. Berry, 'Death and Life in Christ', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 14, 1961, 67; A.T. Lincoln, *Paradise*, 69f.; R.H. Gundry, *Soma*, 152. Compare also G.E. Ladd, *The Pattern of New Testament Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 106f.

20 See further on this, M.J. Harris, *Raised Immortal*, 255 n. 4. Note also the comments of W.L. Craig, 'The Bodily Resurrection of Jesus', in *Gospel Perspectives—Studies of History and Tradition in the Four Gospels* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1983), 62ff.

21 For detailed treatment of 2 Corinthians 5:1–10, see especially R. Berry, 'Death and Life', 60–76; A.T. Lincoln, *Paradise*, 59–71; J. Osei-Bonsu, '2 Corinthians 5:1–10', 81–101; R. Gundry, *Soma*, 146–54; P. Barnett, *2 Corinthians*, 255ff.; D.E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, 253ff.; M.E. Thrall, *2 Corinthians I* (Edinburgh: T & T. Clark, 1994), 357ff. See also W.L. Craig, 'Paul's Dilemma in 2 Corinthians 5:1–10: a "Catch-22"?'', *New Testament Studies* 34, 1988, 145–47, where he argues that Paul was in a sort of 'Catch-22' situation, and the appearance of inconsistency 'arises out of the paradoxical situation in which Paul was placed and the Catch-22 decision with which he was confronted'.

(including the receiving by believers of the spiritual body), although one should also bear in mind that it was often the questions of, and the difficulties facing the Christians Paul wrote to, that have resulted in us having his views on these matters.

Thus we submit that the three alleged inconsistencies which we have considered are more apparent than real, and given an appropriate exegesis of the relevant passages, a basic coherence and consistency in Paul's writings on these matters is to be seen. In addressing altered situations in his own life and in the life of his churches (especially the Corinthian Church), Paul may use new imagery and apply further reflection, and particular situations may have evoked particular emphases in his teachings, but he does not go back on anything he has asserted in previous epistles. Paul's basic eschatological framework, which posits the dual possibility of the believer's death or the prior return of Christ, remains constant.²²¹

Carl Trueman, "Theology and the Church: Divorce or Remarriage. The John Wenham Lecture 2002." *Themelios* 28.3 (2003): 19-31.

Theology and the Church: Divorce or Remarriage? The John Wenham Lecture 2002

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This article was one of a series of lectures, given at the Tyndale Fellowship Associates Conference at Tyndale House, Cambridge in June 2002.

Introduction

The subject of this lecture, the nature of the relationship between theology and the life of the church, is of crucial importance at the current time and is highly appropriate for a lectureship established in honour of John Wenham who, in his day and generation, was one of the key figures in attempting both to make the academy more church oriented and the church more theologically informed. Such a task is a perennial one, for the simple reason that the breakdown of the theology-church relationship, like the breakdown of a marriage, is never straight forward nor is it simply a matter of technique. At heart, the

22 On these and other aspects of Pauline eschatology, see W. Baird, 'Pauline Eschatology in Hermeneutical Perspective, *New Testament Studies* 17, 1971, 314-27; A.C. Perriman, 'Paul and the Parousia: 1 Corinthians 15:50-57 and 2 Corinthians 5:1-10', *New Testament Studies* 35, 1989, 512-21; B. Witherington, *Jesus, Paul and the End of the World* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1992), 152-231. See also the detailed bibliography in *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters*, 268-69.

1 Paul Woodbridge, "Did Paul Change His Mind?—An Examination of Some Aspects of Pauline Eschatology" (2003): 1-18.

fact that the issue impinges directly upon the relationship between God and his creatures means that it is a problem with a profound moral dimension. Thus, today we need to apply ourselves to healing the breach with as much vigour as those who undertook the task in previous years; and we must also be aware that the solution is not simply a question of bringing the right technical skills to bear on the problem but also of examining our hearts and minds in the light of what God has told us in his Word, and done in the person of Jesus Christ.

My lecture will be divided into three basic parts. In part one, I will offer a brief analysis of how the breach between theology and church manifests itself; in part two, I will offer five theses for the academy, not as an exhaustive programme of reform, but as a suggested starting point or basic framework for pursuing reform; finally, in part three, I will offer five theses for the church which will aim to do a similar thing for our ecclesiastical bodies.

Grounds for Divorce

While the grounds for divorce between academy and church are no doubt complex, I will restrict myself today to a brief outline of the three issues which I suspect are the most fundamental. These are the opposition of knowledge and experience; the differing presuppositions of church and academy; and the differing agendas of the two.

Regarding the opposition of knowledge and experience, this perhaps manifests itself most commonly in comments such as ‘Well, so-and-so may know about God, but does he know God?’, and ‘Professors at universities and seminaries may have lots of fancy words, but I just have plain and simple faith in Jesus Christ’. This is not just the kind of thought we find among Christians in the pews: Martyn Lloyd-Jones gave eloquent expression to precisely this kind of thinking in his disparagement of theologians such as Charles Hodge whom he dismissed as having no interest in revival.¹ It is, of course, a small step from dividing knowledge and experience in this way to setting them in fundamental opposition to each other. Evidence that this is the case can be found in the myriad of doctrinally vacuous hymns and choruses which form the heart of much evangelical worship today, where the message often seems to be, ‘Never mind the doctrine, give me the experience!’ This in turn has the potential for the creation of what is basically a form of gnosticism, where the claims of the Christian are rendered invulnerable to criticism from outside by the fact that the one holding the beliefs has had a certain experience. Evangelicalism, with its stress on the necessity of the new birth and upon the cognitive effects of the Fall, is fertile soil for such gnosticism if the balance of biblical teaching on the relationship of knowledge and experience is lost.

On the other side, academic theology has often pursued a path which reduces the importance of experience to a minimum and makes everything a matter of technique—whether it be philosophical, grammatical, exegetical or whatever. This feeds straight through to the second point: the role of presuppositions. The academy, particularly as that academy has its agenda set by the secular university, can make no space for faith claims.²

¹ See D.M. Lloyd-Jones, *The Puritans: their Origins and Successors* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), 7–8.

² I am aware of the grand claims being made for postmodernism as opening up the university to faith perspectives. In my opinion, Christianity’s claim to offer a grand narrative of universal significance which,

Thus, the epistemological importance of faith has been eliminated with the result that the church can ask with some justification exactly what it is about, say. Christian biblical scholarship which makes it Christian. Is it simply that, all things being equal after the application of standard academic techniques, the Christian will opt for the conclusion which most comports with orthodoxy? Or does the Christian biblical scholars' stance as a Christian affect the way that he or she approaches the biblical text at the outset? If the church has a problem in overstating the importance of Christian experience, the academy arguably has a problem in the way that it tends to operate on a level playing field, where the connection between Christian commitments and attitude to the biblical text are not always apparent to those outside the scholarly community.

Finally, the agendas of church and academy are often poles apart. The church sees the conversion to Christ of those outside as its primary reason for existence. This in turn leads to certain impatience with complexities of doctrinal formulation which can be perceived as obstructing or obscuring the basic simplicity of the message and the task. The academy, meanwhile, has its own agendas in a world which just keeps on getting more complex as, under the spiralling weight of information, disciplines become more and more fragmented and less and less connected to each other. The old medieval and Reformation idea that theology pursued at the highest academic level was to terminate in a unified academic discipline focused upon the needs of the church is simply untenable in the current climate: the highly technical diversity of the academy is simply unsuited to giving students a unified theological and ecclesiastical vision.

This, then, is the briefest of summaries of the basic grounds for the current divorce. I wish now to move to more positive proposals for overcoming this situation.

Five Theses for the Academy

The academy must reform its vision of God

The first thing that the Christian academy must do is reform its vision of God. Only when academics realise that the God with whom they deal is the awesome creator, holy and righteous, yet also infinitely tender and merciful, that they will start to approach their calling with the necessary fear and trembling which it requires. God is not the object of theological study, in the way that a laboratory rat is the object of biological study—something to control, to dissert, to observe and analyse in a disinterested way. On the contrary, he is the subject of theological study, the one whose revelation of himself and whose gracious act of salvation in Christ make theology possible. In him we all live, move and have our being. Thus, all theological study must be conducted in conscious acknowledgement of and dependence upon God. Theologians are personally involved in, and dependent upon, him whom they study. That must shape our work at every level.

The academy must acknowledge the authority of Scripture

to maintain its own integrity needs to deny the validity of the alternatives, will not win it any friends even in the postmodern academy. In fact nearly a decade of teaching in British secular universities has convinced me that the major issue in university education is not postmodern epistemology but the alliance of free market policies, the interests of big business and an overarching pragmatism, a combination which serves more than anything else to restrict the kinds of research and discussion which takes place.

Acknowledgement of the authority of Scripture is surely basic to any theological work which claims the name of Christian and offers itself as in any way useful to the Christian church. To say this is not to circumvent the complex problems that surround issues of canon, interpretation and hermeneutics. It is to say, however, that the Bible, as the word of God, is unique in its relationship to God and in its function in the church, and that this must shape the methodological and material status it is given by Christian academics. To treat the Bible as any other piece of literature is a profoundly theological move because to do so involves an implicit denial of the Bible's own claims to theological significance. This is not to suggest that there is not much to be learned from textual, cultural and linguistic studies, but it is to say that the application of these approaches to the biblical text need to take into account the fact that the uniqueness of the Bible requires that such applications are not used to relativise the Bible's message. There is something presuppositional at work here: as Christians, the assumption that one God speaks through the one Bible is taken as basic, and this provides a basic hermeneutical framework for biblical interpretation. Thus, for example, the Bible's theological diversity can never be emphasised to the point where its basic theological unity, grounded in its divine origin and its central subject matter, is undermined. The Christian presupposes a basic theological unity which provides the framework for interpreting each verse within the context of the whole. Without the basic assumption of theological unity rooted in the relationship between God and Scripture, one is left with no basis for theological coherence other than the particular preferences of the reader.

The collapse in biblical authority is quite clearly evidenced in the academic world where systematic theology, as classically understood as a study of the doctrines of God, creation, redemption etc. has all but disappeared, to be replaced on the university curriculum with courses such as 'Theology and hermeneutics', 'Theology and Gender', and 'Theology and Politics'. Each of these courses is no doubt worthy in its own way. However, the real theological significance of any of these individual concerns can only emerge when they are set within the context of classic systematic theology as a whole. Here the big picture sets the agenda and brings the specific issues under the searching eye of a larger theological narrative. After all, can one understand gender issues without first coming to grips with God, creation, the Fall and the work of Christ? Or take hermeneutics as an example: can one engage in understanding language and Scripture without first coming to grips with issues of the speaking God, revelation, sin, Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit? This could be a vicious circle, of course: one cannot interpret the Bible without a grasp of who God is; one cannot know who God is until we have interpreted the Bible. I dare to suggest however, that understanding the basic message of the Bible is not as complicated as many scholars seek to make it. I shall have more to say about the abuse of the doctrine of Scripture's perspicuity in the church later, but would like to make the point here that, while there are many things that are difficult to understand (and we have Peter's own words as our authority for that), the central gospel message of the speaking God is pretty straightforward. Scholars can tend to overcomplicate things—partly because they of all people know that many things need to be nuanced—but this should not allow us to lose the basic simplicity of the gospel. Christ himself points out that if even wicked earthly fathers, when asked by their children for bread will not give them a stone, then how much more will God give the Holy Spirit to those who ask. Surely he is pointing here, not just to the great goodness of God, but also

to the basic perspicuity of language which exists in certain relational contexts such as that between father and child—even when allowing for the existence of moral depravity. From this he clearly points towards the close relationship between that perspicuity of language and the meaningfulness of God.

When scholars once again start to take these things on board—acknowledging its authority, and in accepting the basic clarity of its central message they will be doing in the realm of epistemology precisely what I have said they must do in the realm of ontology: acknowledging God as sovereign and humanity as dependent upon him. God is, in a sense, the word he speaks, and we cannot take either side of this equation seriously without doing the same to the other half.

The academy must acknowledge the effect of sin upon scholars

If taking God seriously will inevitably involve taking Scripture seriously and *vice versa*, it will also involve scholars once again re-examining human nature—the human nature in which they themselves participate—with a view to seeing how this impacts upon their work. One tendency in the academy which perhaps does more harm than we generally care to acknowledge is the effect of sin upon scholars themselves. This problem has been nicely put by Mark Thompson:

All too frequently in modern theology fallibility is attributed to the biblical text as a matter of empirical certainty while at the same time the theological constructs of the writer are presented without the slightest hesitation or acknowledgment of provisionality. The impression is given that only in the current generation have the practitioners of theology been able to escape the impact of the fall upon the human mind.³

If much modern philosophy from Marx, Nietzsche and Freud onwards has exposed the ways in which hidden agendas serve to manipulate the way we think and act, surely as Christians, committed to an understanding of humanity, even redeemed humanity, as flawed and sinful, we too should take seriously the need for self-criticism in our approach to all of life. This includes scholarly work, where we should subject ourselves to constant self-criticism and be acutely aware of the fact that it is not just, or even primarily, the authors of the texts before us who are in the game of manipulation and deception.

The academy needs to return to traditional trajectories of theology

One of the grounds for divorce which I mentioned earlier was the differing agendas between church and academy. It would be easy at this point to say that the answer is simply that the academy needs to adopt the church's agenda but I would suggest that that would not necessarily be a good thing, involving as it does the assumption that the church's agenda is itself in no need of correction. One of the obvious problems with this is that the church itself often seems to have great difficulty in defining its current agenda, for reasons which I will touch upon later. I would suggest at this point that a way to draw church and academy agendas back together is to return to the kind of theological

³ Mark Thompson, 'The missionary apostle and modern systematic affirmation', in *The Gospel to the Nations: Perspectives on Paul's Mission*, edited by Peter Bolt and Mark Thompson (Leicester: Apollos, 2000), 378.

trajectories along which theology in pulpit and academy was developed in the pre-modern era. These trajectories are to be found reflected in the great creeds and confessions of the faith. The Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed, the Belgic Confession, the Thirty Nine Articles, the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Lutheran Book of Concord—all of these documents represent the fusion of pastoral and theological reflection upon the faith. Moreover, the questions they address, the identity of Christ, the nature of salvation, the definition of the church etc, are all vital and perennial questions: and the creeds and confessions pursue these questions in a manner which is both ecclesiastical and intellectually rigorous.

Ironically, evangelicalism, for all its pride in its orthodoxy, has seldom spent a great deal of time reflecting upon the creedal and confessional heritage of the church, and its scholarly representatives have proved no exception to this general rule. They have preferred the modern penchant for novelty over any notion that the church may indeed have got certain things basically right over the last two millennia. A little theological humility might serve us well here.

If these are four theses for the academy, how about the church? What should she be doing to help overcome the rupture with the academy?

The Church must rethink her emphasis upon experience

This is a tricky one, for the simple reason that evangelical Christianity, at least in its best form, is committed to the idea of the centrality both of doctrine (something which can be given expression using a public vocabulary) and of the experience of God's grace in the life of the individual. The two things are formally separable and this means that the public distinctives of evangelicalism can be learned by those who lack the second, while the second can be claimed with no real grasp of the first. This has led, in some quarters, not simply to a fear that the truth might be preached through the mouths of those who are unbelievers but also that there can be a fundamental opposition between the two, the head and the heart, and that the latter, the heart, should therefore be given precedence. I want to be careful here, in that I do not want to be misinterpreted as saying that conversion is not a prerequisite for ministry. It most certainly is. What I do want to say is that the content and the efficacy of the gospel does not depend in any way upon the moral qualities or salvific status of the individual who brings the message. The early church debated precisely this issue in relation to the efficacy of the ministry of those who had fallen away during times of persecution and then returned for their old jobs when the persecution died down. It was decided then—and rightly so—that the Word of God was the Word of God, and not dependent upon the person bringing it to the church. To take any other position is surely disastrous as none of us can know for certain what is the state of anyone else's heart; it is only because the gospel concerns the promise of God revealed in Christ that we can have confidence in the efficacy of the message preached. To put it more bluntly: it is better to have the gospel competently preached by one who proves to be an unrepentant adulterer than to have it preached incompetently by one who has been born again, precisely because it is the word which is efficacious not the heart of the preacher.

This is perhaps putting it somewhat crudely, but it makes the point that the gospel is a message with content and not simply a case of one person communicating an experience to a group of others. That is, after all, the essence of old-fashioned liberalism—

Christianity is the feeling, not the doctrine, and theology is simply reflection upon religious psychology not upon the revelation of God.

This has ramifications for various aspects of church life, not least in the realm of attitude towards learning. How many times have you heard the comment, ‘Old Mrs Jones has walked with the Lord for fifty years and knows more of God than any professor with a PhD’. On one level, the comment might well be true—walking with the Lord in faith will get you into heaven in a way that mere possession of a PhD certainly will not. Nevertheless, when we grasp that the gospel is first of all a message, a proclamation of what God has done in Jesus Christ, and that experience comes as a response to that message, it is quite clear that a professor with a PhD may well have certain insights into that gospel message which Mrs Jones, for all her practical godliness, does not. Much of the anti-intellectualism which pours from pulpits in churches, from Reformed to charismatic, is the result of precisely this confusion between gospel as message and the believer’s response in experience. It is a confusion which has just enough appearance of truth to be superficially plausible while resting on a fundamentally skewed understanding of what the gospel actually is. Only when the church comes to acknowledge in both belief and practice that the gospel is a message, not a feeling or an experience, will such fuzzy thinking (and much else) finally be put to rest. Indeed, this brings me to my second thesis for the church.

The Church needs to revise her worship practices in the light of the above

Following on from the realisation that the gospel is an announcement, not an experience, the church next needs to revise her response to that announcement. This I see as striking home in three areas.

First, and most obvious, we need to reassert the centrality of the sermon as a part of worship, standing in positive relation to the songs sung and the prayers offered. If the gospel is an announcement of news, then guess what? It needs to be announced and pressed upon the gathered congregation, and that announcement itself needs to be understood as part of the worship of the church. Only as the gospel is declared can believers respond to it in the appropriate manner. Without this objective dimension, the singing of songs becomes little more than the working-up of raw and somewhat contentless emotion. Worship after all is not just the songs that are sung; it is the word that is heard, to which the songs should be an appropriate response. This has numerous implications. If for example, your church is one where you cannot tell what the exact relationship is between what is said on a Sunday and what is sung on a Sunday, then you have serious problems which typical worship-war debates about contemporary versus traditional styles and frameworks will not even begin to address. In addition, if preachers spend more time talking about themselves, or the latest cultural trends, or making more applications than they do in straightforward exposition of the text, then these are signs that the confusion of gospel and experience might well be infiltrating your worship and thus your whole vision of Christianity.

None of this should be read as an attack on Christian experience. It is simply pointing out that such experience is the result of the gospel, not the content of the gospel. To claim otherwise is to open the door to relativism. Once the gospel starts being presented primarily as that which brings such-and-such benefits, be they freedom from alcohol abuse or just emotional highs every once in a while, the distinctive particularity of

Christianity is lost. Islam also gives people self-respect, cleans up neighbourhoods, gives a sense of purpose; self-help programmes have brought many back from the brink of self-destruction to decent lives; and while Christianity gives me a sense of meaning and worth, so does ferret-breeding for some people. What then have I to say to the perfectly content ferret-breeder? Not a lot, if Christianity is primarily about feelings, whether of satisfaction, happiness or otherwise. I have Jesus; they breed ferrets. The result in both cases is happiness. So what's the difference? The difference lies not in the experienced effect but in the cosmic bottom-line: Christ is God acting to save for all eternity; ferrets are good only as temporary distractions from the deeper realities and concerns of life.

To reinforce this message, we need to think carefully about our church services. The Presbyterian tradition to which I belong looks back to the great documents produced in the 1640s as giving a good summary of what a Christian worship service should contain: the reading and the hearing of the Scriptures; the preaching of the Word; prayer (confession, adoration, intercession); singing (in the case of the Westminster Assembly, specifically of inspired materials—but that debate is for another day); and the administration of the Lord's Supper and baptism. That is not a bad summary, and one which focuses attention on the church service as held together by the content of God's Word, read, heard, and preached, to which prayer and singing are a response. Anything else is surely Schleiermacherian—an attempt to make human psychology and human experience the basis of worship. This will ultimately prevent the church speaking across cultures. When worship discussions focus on experience and style, then we are likely to reify the way which we do things and make it into some absolute by which all others must be judged. That is simply wrong, and makes indifferent matters (style and form) into something of the essence of worship. Let us focus on the simple, straightforward *message* of reconciliation in Christ, not our own experiences of church or whatever, as the core of our church worship and allow the message to find expression within the culture in which we find ourselves. Thus, when the church gathers to worship, let her think about what passages of Scripture are to be read and heard, what is to be said in the sermon, and what is to be sung; and let us make sure that the content of each of these elements stands in an obvious relationship to the content of others.

While none of this directly addresses the repair of the relationship between the church and her friends in the academy, it surely goes some way towards bringing the church back to a correct understanding of the place of experience in Christianity. In itself that will prevent precisely the kind of anti-intellectual crusades which are predicated on the idea that deep, theological knowledge can only impede spiritual progress. It will also reassure the church members who have dedicated their lives to the pursuit of the study of theology at the highest level that what they do is not necessarily trumped by the old lady who's walked with the Lord for fifty years. Both types of person make significant contributions; it is not an either—or, but surely a both—and.

As a final point in this section: this should also point the church away from an obsession with revival and conversion as the main agenda behind our church services, but do not misunderstand me. I am not saying that we do not want conversions; emphatically, we do. What I am saying is that the Sunday service of the church is primarily for the equipping of the saints for the work of being a Christian from Monday to Saturday. The church should be like a mother, nurturing us in our faith, giving us rest from the world and a tiny anticipation of what the fellowship in heaven will be like. On a practical level,

given that few unbelievers bother coming to church these days, an evangelistic strategy based primarily upon Sunday services is, humanly speaking, not a strong one. For all its faults with regard to content, the Alpha course has picked up on this problem and made significant contributions regarding the way forward for contemporary outreach. Sunday services should be focused more on equipping the saints. If outsiders attend our services they should be made welcome, and should be able to understand what is going on and being said—one might add, they should be able to see an obvious connection between what is read, said, prayed and sung; but accommodating them should not be the decisive priority in the service. In fact coming into the presence of God's people worshipping a holy God should be an unsettling experience for unbelievers. If you do not believe me, read and reflect upon the implications of 1 Corinthians 14:24–25.

The Church needs to acknowledge the role of tradition

We have all met them, the no-creed-but-the-Bible guys and gals. What they usually mean is while they have a creed (even if it is 'no creed'), they cannot be bothered to write it down and want to privilege their view of the Bible (the right one) over your view of the Bible (the wrong one). This is a difficult area, but I want to provoke you to think about this just a little with the following comments.

First, there is a sense in which all evangelicals have no creed but the Bible, in that we acknowledge only one ultimate epistemological source and criterion for judging statements about God: the Bible. Given this, the statement is perhaps not so much incorrect as misleading. It would be better to say, 'No definitive theological source but the Bible'. Nevertheless, in this sense I am happy to be a 'no creed but the Bible' man.

Second, there is a sense in which we all depend upon extra-scriptural creeds for our theology. As soon as we use the word 'Trinity', for example, we are using conceptual vocabulary which is not found in the Bible but which has been developed and defined by the church over time. Now, I would immediately want to argue that the language represents what Scripture teaches. But then, as soon as I claim that, I am doing no more than what the church has traditionally regarded the creeds as doing: that they offer a summary of, or a conceptual vocabulary for understanding, simply what the Bible teaches.

Why then is there the modern fear of creeds? It is of course part of the wider cultural disposition of modern Western society and is one of the key points of contact between the academic world and the evangelical world. While scholars, liberal and conservative, have developed a highly sophisticated biblicism which routinely discounts the thoughts and insights of the church over the centuries into the meaning of the biblical text, so evangelicalism has developed a crude and unsophisticated biblicism which routinely rejects (or, more often, simply ignores as irrelevant) the history of church and theology.

So what are the advantages that the creeds give us? First, they remind us that the Bible is not its own interpretation. It is not simply what the Bible *says* that is crucial but also what it *means*, and the only effective way to give public expression to that meaning is by the use of extra-biblical vocabulary and concepts. There is not a heretic in the history of the church who has not claimed to be simply believing what the Bible says, or who has not quoted biblical texts by the score to justify their position. When meaning is at stake, it is not enough simply to quote Bible verses; the overall theological context of those verses is also necessary, as is the deployment of extra-biblical vocabulary. I firmly believe in the sufficiency and perspicuity of Scripture, so I am not here saying that Bible,

on its own, is *meaningless*; rather, I am saying that it must be *interpreted*, but interpreted on *its own terms*. This act of interpretation necessarily involves the employment of language which is not found in the Bible and concepts which do not simply drop off its pages into our laps, but which have to be carefully formulated in the light of the whole of Scripture's teaching. As soon as we use extra-biblical language, as soon as we draw out the meaning of a passage, as soon as we explore the conditions which must hold true if a certain event is to have saving significance—as soon as we do any of these things, we move ourselves into territory which is, in one sense 'extra-biblical'. This is where the creeds come in: they are simply summaries of biblical teaching, using language and concepts which have been publicly endorsed by the church as orthodox throughout the centuries, thus providing an orthodox scheme and vocabulary for theological life. And this is where my second point about creeds becomes significant.

Creeds place us and our times in perspective. God's word contains precious promises about how he will lead his church into all truth. We know from the history of the church and from the current diversity among the Christian body that any notion of an automatic, quasi-mechanical relationship between God, God's truth and the public theological pronouncements of the institution of the church is simply untenable. All such statements coming from whichever church, need to be scrutinised by Scripture to see if they are biblically coherent. There is a sense, however, in which the pendulum has swung too far in the direction of an automatic hermeneutic of suspicion regarding historic theological creeds and tradition. Nowadays, it is more likely to be assumed that the church has generally got it wrong than that she got anything right. I recently commented to colleagues in reference to the views on justification and Christology being put forward by a leading British NT scholar that I was left wondering if this person, who identifies himself as orthodox, thought the church had managed to get anything right regarding the Bible over the last 1900 years. The attitude of the Reformers was very different: they rejected those traditions which were explicitly rooted in an understanding of the church as having new, revelatory powers after the closing of the canon, but they took very seriously the exegetical, theological and, above all, the credal tradition of the church and only modified or, as a very last resort, rejected it at those points where Scripture really did make it untenable. The difference is one of attitude and culture: they operated with a basic hermeneutic of trust, albeit biblically critical trust; too often today we operate with a basic hermeneutic of suspicion, perhaps for the most part uncritical suspicion. Yet, if we take the church seriously and if we take God's promises to the church seriously, such knee-jerk iconoclasm can only be a bad thing.

I might go further and say that the church needs more than a hermeneutic of trust towards the credal and confessional trajectories of the past. There is also a need for a hermeneutic of *humility*. As with the immature arrogance of those scholars who feel that their PhD on some few verses here or there in the Bible qualifies them to redefine orthodoxy *tout court*, so the church of today also needs to learn humility in relation to the past. When some credal formula or doctrinal position has been held by the church with vigour for some considerable time, the church of today should think very carefully before deciding to change it in any fundamental way. Our perspective is so limited; our moment in time so insignificant in the grand scheme of things; we therefore do well to see the church's creeds, confessions and traditions as giving us some perspective by which we may relativise ourselves, our contribution, and our moment in history. I have lost count of

the number of times I have heard church leaders declare that ‘the church needs to move beyond ...’ (add your own central tenet of the faith: the cross, the wrath of God, sin, the Trinity, justification by faith, the authority of Scripture—they have all been cited). Underlying such sentiments are not so much a hopeless naivete but rather a tragic arrogance, an arrogance which implicitly says that the church in the past did not really get the gospel and that only in the present day have we approximated some kind of doctrinal maturity. I would suggest that reflection upon the creeds and confessions of the church might well go some way to overcoming the chronological arrogance (to use C.S. Lewis’s phrase) which afflicts the church as it should also do in the academy.

As a postscript to this section—for both the church and academy—I put out a challenge I like to issue in class to students who are tempted to disparage the Nicene Creed. Given that this creed has served the church well for over a thousand years, one should be very careful before one abandons it; but if after reflection, one can come up with a formula which will deal with biblical material as effectively, will enjoy such wide acceptance in the church, and which will do the job just as well for the next thousand years, one should not be afraid to propose a new formulation. Strange to tell, I have yet to have any takers for that one.

The Church needs to realise that not all answers to questions about the Bible are that simple

If rejection of the witness of history and tradition is something that the academy and the church have in common, then the thing in which they most dramatically differ has to be the complexity or otherwise of the Bible. As noted above, the tendency in academic circles is to stress the ineradicable complexity of all biblical questions. This is a tendency which has been fuelled by the fragmentation of the discipline as a whole and by the kinds of literary-critical approaches which take a peculiar delight in scepticism about the stability of textual meaning. In the church, however, the idea that there are any complicated questions is often not countenanced at all. Even though Peter himself tells us that Paul wrote many things that are hard to understand, the idea that interpreting the Bible competently takes skill and training is alien to much of the evangelical world. I well remember giving a lecture at a British seminary on how the Puritans of the seventeenth century established high standards for ministerial education. At the end of my talk, I was challenged by one individual who saw that what I said was running counter to what he took to be the basic thrust of Paul’s pastoral letters, of the nature of saving faith, and of scriptural perspicuity. Of course, he read the relevant quotation from a translation of the Bible, implicitly conceding that none of these things made void the need for somebody, somewhere, to have a good grasp of the vocabulary, grammar, syntax and historical context of koine Greek. The certainty of faith and the perspicuity of Scripture were never intended to mean that all answers to everything were simple, any more than the idea of scriptural sufficiency was intended to mean that the Bible gives answers to all questions about life, such as what time the next bus arrives. Rather, they pointed to the fact that the Bible’s basic message was clear and easy to grasp by even the simplest of minds, a point to which the Reformers and Puritans held while at precisely the same time pursuing theological education and study at the highest level. The church needs to understand this once more. She has always faced complicated questions, once, these focused on the doctrine of God; now, perhaps, they focus on the relationship of one

culture to another, of how the church in the West, with all of her financial and educational resources, can both learn from and serve the church in the south and east.—A church with massive numbers and signs of great blessing from God, but with economic and intellectual dependence upon the north and west These are tough areas which demand careful and humble reflection and which cannot be resolved by simplistic claims to truth on one side or the other, claims which are, of course, more often claims to power than to truth.

These then are my brief theses for academy and church. I am probably naive in thinking that this lecture will make any difference. If, however, it helps just one person to start thinking about these issues, whether in agreement or disagreement with what I say, I think I will have gone some way to fulfilling the kind of mandate which the John Wenham Lecture carries with it.

Bellermaine E.A, ed., "Dialogue of Devils: Five Letters Found in an Eighteenth Century Folio Volume." *Themelios* 28.3 (2003): 19–39.

Dialogue of Devils: Five Letters Found in an Eighteenth Century Folio Volume

Edited by Miss E.A. Bellermaine †

These letters came into our hands after the recent death of Miss Bellermaine. She seems not to have noticed the chronological problems they contain: if her dating of the letters to the early years of the twentieth century is correct—and she is a world authority in this area—then the letters refer to numerous movements that were decades in the future when they were written. I can find no satisfactory explanation for this. [Readers may be interested that her work on the epistolary novel was completed shortly before her death and should appear from the Oxbridge University Press some time next year. Ed.]

Whilst on sabbatical in Oxford working on my monograph on the literary context of the epistolary novel (forthcoming), I came across the following letters in an old copy of the 'Infernal Conference: or Dialogue of Devils' by the Revd John McGowan (G. Keith, London, 1772). They show striking similarities to the so-called 'Screwtape Letters', which were edited by C.S. Lewis and, until now, widely considered to be fictional. The paper dates from immediately after the Great War and the handwriting also fits in the same period. The book, which is kept on closed shelves for old and valuable volumes, has only been withdrawn once in the last fifty years according to the college librarian who has been there since 1940. The letters comprise one half of a correspondence between Mouldred and his nephew Slitherous.

Edith A. Bellermaine, York, All Saints Eve, 1991.

My Dear Slithrous,

I cannot quite believe that the Lowerarchy has allowed you another theological student as a patient. After your last disaster I am surprised that you were not transferred to working in the Marmite factory. I am sure that they know what they are doing, but you failed so completely that apart from an impatience with the Parish Church Council and the occasional unnecessary, confidence-sapping (and generally incorrect) reference to 'what the Greek really means', your ex-patient is discharging a ministry that is damaging our interests most seriously. I am sure that after your previous effort you were given a thorough debriefing (and disembowelling), nevertheless your mother has asked me to write to you, and you know how persuasive she can be.

Full time theological education can be a most productive time for us, if it is used well. Beware though, it can be hugely damaging if not dealt with properly, as you discovered to your cost. If your current patient is not aware that studying academic theology in a British university can undermine his faith, then do your best to keep him ignorant. Some of our best servants are very pious in appearance, charming, friendly and hugely

knowledgeable, but have abandoned all real belief in the Enemy. You should suggest to your patient that it is these people that he wants to become like. This is easier if the Enemy's servants have boring voices, brown clothes, and tedious, rambling lectures, but you should be able to manage without these things.

The first and most important thing that you must do is to undermine his confidence in the Bible, and make him see his old beliefs as 'naive', 'simplistic', 'rigid' and 'fundamentalist'. (The Philology Department has made solid gains with these words, especially the last—for which I personally was responsible. As we are always saying, do not let the humans think about what the words mean: use them only for effect.) This undermining is most effectively done slowly and subtly. Have those lecturers who are fully ours (a disappointingly small number) ridicule his beliefs. Do not let them try to argue for their position, and do not let the patient realise that it is only in the last few hundred years that people have tried to argue that the Bible's words are not the Enemy's words. (If he does realise this, all is not lost. We have managed some academics very well and they now argue that the evangelical view of the Bible is a modern invention. However, do not let him read the footnotes, as the case falls apart in the sources.)

This reminds me of the second point—always encourage him to read modern accounts of the classic texts. You can do this in several ways. Either tell him he doesn't have time to read Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin or even the Bible, or tell him he wouldn't understand them if he did (this false humility is such a great asset). If he does read the original sources then he might start to notice that modern writers have particular fashions and agendas that dictate what they write, or even (and you must avoid this) that, although he is a minority in the department, he actually believes what the Enemy's servants have always believed. For this reason you should convince him that the most recent book is the best book. It works—they really are that stupid!

But *do not* let him read anything that supports his beliefs that is written by intelligent servants of the Enemy. Either keep him ignorant that these books exist, (tell him he has too much reading to do anyway), or make him embarrassed to read authors that his tutor hasn't put on the reading list and wouldn't agree with. Do something, but do not on any account let him discover the hundreds and hundreds of years of thought that have been produced by the Enemy's vile servants. If he does, then he will realise that we have no new tricks and many of the problems he comes across will have been discussed by someone at some stage. This is a disaster for us and, as I remember, how you failed with your last patient. Do not fail again. Try anything: let him be snooty about the old fashioned English or the long-winded way that many of the Enemy's servants used to write. Make him dislike the smell of old paper. Just do not let him read anything more than thirty years old. (Apart from anything else, if he realises how arbitrary and absurd the scholarly consensus was a hundred years ago, then he may begin to suspect the present scholarly consensus. This might even lead to critical discernment, which must be avoided.)

If he does start to read old books then there is only one cure that I know of. You must make him live in the past and try to fight the battles of the 4th or 16th or 19th centuries all over again. Now be very careful, most of the issues are the same, but the best way of dealing with them has changed a bit as he is living in a different culture. If, however he realises this, all is lost, but if you can keep him in the dark he will waste his time fighting errors into which no-one is in danger of falling. You should try to get him to copy the

aggressive tone of people like Luther and Calvin, but without any of their perception or understanding.

Do write and let me know more about him. I am especially interested as to whether he has been warned by his church about studying theology in a university.

Your Affectionate Uncle,
Mouldred

Well Slithrous,

I can't say that I envy you. I also begin to see why you were assigned this boy—it is so that when your punishment comes it will be far worse. So, he comes from a church where they have told him about studying theology and are not suspicious of him for doing so. His vicar actually took him out for tea and said that the next three years were a huge opportunity to grow in his understanding of the Enemy that he should not waste. The wretched creature even said that he would not be able to answer all the issues that came up at once and that he should keep a notebook of questions and not worry too much if he did not have all the answers at once.

There are nonetheless a few things that you can do. Firstly, you should try to muddle his mind with whatever fashionable theology is going about. Your mother says that he is one of the most dangerous types of evangelical. For this sort the best thing is to get them interested in some movement that claims to show that what the Bible really says is not what the church has always understood it to say. This is perilously close to the truth—the church does get it wrong, as the Reformers so unhelpfully pointed out. Fortunately though, many of their modern followers all too easily forget that the Enemy is not likely to have allowed all his servants to have mistaken views about him throughout all time. What you must do is take the truth that people do make mistakes, and use that to undermine your patient. When it comes to choosing a fashionable theology there are several that you could choose from. At the moment some of the most popular here below are Openness Theism (an astonishingly daring move, which only works because they no longer read their Bibles), or the 'new perspective' on Paul, which is even cleverer. It is one of the more recent (and successful) uses of the 'ancient context gambit'. (What I love about the ancient context gambit is that it is true in some ways—the Enemy likes his servants to take seriously the fact that the Bible was not written in sixteenth century Geneva or early twentieth century America—but we can use it for our purposes. You get them to pontificate about the 'original context' and then you suggest that they place it somewhere slightly obscure but just about credible—whether that is the Sumerian epic, Hellenistic mystery religion, or the literary world of first century Rome. You must be careful not to let these contexts shed any light on the text [as some of them can do], but these occasional small losses are more than made up for in the general loss of confidence in reading the text on its own which generally follows as a result.)

This sort of 'what the Bible really says' heterodoxy is generally championed by men who used to be evangelical but are no longer (though do not underestimate them, many of them are still in the Enemy's camp, and have the potential to undo a lot of our work). Once your patient has bought into some form of fashionable theology it becomes much easier to pull him further and further away from the Enemy, by persuading him that the NT does not really teach any of the central beliefs of the church after all. A good place to start is the cross. You can then move onto things such as the understanding they have of

who the Enemy is ('the word Trinity never occurs in the Bible and the idea is clearly the result of later Greek philosophical speculation'). This rarely fails and we have created some wonderfully effective false teachers this way.

Secondly, you should stop him reading the Bible and praying on his own. This is all the more enjoyable when combined with fashionable theology. The easiest way is to make him think that since he is studying the Bible all day—and what the Bible really says—he doesn't need to read it in on his own. (We have done very well in many places, as the biblical studies courses focus mainly on the secondary literature. This is a joy for us as we can persuade them that they need not keep reading the Bible 'since they are studying it all day anyway', when in fact they are not! It is delicious! Many of the fools think that the reading they do for their degree is all they need!). Later on, you can eventually stop him going to church and fellowship meetings altogether with the same argument, though don't try to do it all at once or he will notice. But do not let him read the Bible. It has the potential to undermine all the other tricks we have at our disposal.

I hope, for your sake, that you do better than last time.

Your Uncle,

Mouldred

You are a fool, Slithrous,

I would like to say that you were adopted, but your mother always was a stupid woman. Your 'good news' is nothing of the sort and unless you sharpen up soon you will suffer horribly. That your patient has not yet decided on which church to go to after a term appears to be what we want—encouraging church tasting is the basic text-book move whenever one of the Enemy's servants moves house—but look at what your patient is doing. He spent a month at a nauseous Baptist chapel and then the second month at an equally sick-inducing Anglican church. That is no good, and I have no doubt that in your next letter you will tell me that he has settled into one of them. What you want to encourage is the church-a-week mentality. I once heard one of their females say that she had been to a different church each week of her time in Oxford. She even had a web site which gave them marks out of ten for different aspects of the service! She had become quite a connoisseur, and is safely on track to Our Father Below. If your patient is not quite that stupid (and I admit, it is rare, but so much more delicious for it) you must have him choose a church for the worst reasons. For some reason, many of them like music (Oh the horror of listening to them sing. It turns my stomach to think of it), but you can use this well against them. Get them to think that 'since they are studying the Bible all day' (make them repeat this daily and especially when they begin to feel uneasy), they can go to a church with 'good worship' and very little else. This can either be modern, or ancient (we do as well out of the college chapels as we do from the modern-music-and-dancing-churches), it doesn't matter either way as long as they focus on unimportant things and never come into contact with decent preaching.

Your other good news is more promising, though you must use it properly. Your patient has been out with his friends from the hockey team and got drunk. This is no big deal in itself—although the Enemy does not like this (and was even vulgar enough to tell them) he lets them off if they are sorry. So you have to move quickly. Instead of him thinking that he is no different from the other servants of the Enemy who make mistakes and can move on. (Why does the Enemy let them off? I just don't understand it.) You

must convince him that he should be living a perfect life since it is his job to study theology. If he won't play the game of pretending to be perfect with its inevitable dishonesty and frustration, then you might persuade him into a more standard introspection and spiritual depression or tell him that, since he has messed up, he may as well get drunk again. If you opt for the 'repeat prescription' solution to sin then it is rather amusing to suggest that he uses his 'deeper knowledge' to excuse it. This is such fun to watch and we have been very good at it. You take the specific sin that they are going to commit (here drunkenness) and then you tell them that 'the New Testament was a document written in different culture thousands of years ago and we should not take its moral standards as normative for our contemporary, post-modern, secular, market-state, as this would be to fall into a naive and literalistic abuse of the Holy Scriptures'. (You note all the tricks: use long words that he doesn't understand and sweeping generalisations. Don't let it occur to him that the problem of living in a different culture from that of the New Testament has ever been experienced before, and at all costs do not let him remember that the Enemy and the things that please him have not changed. Make sure that he calls the Bible the Holy Scriptures too—he can feel more comfortable about his blatant disobedience if it is covered with a veneer of piety.)

You say that his friends are very debauched. This is not unusual (nor has it ever been), and is not good enough on its own. Do you not remember the way that, during that embarrassing episode they call the 'Incarnation' the Enemy himself used to mix with prostitutes and tax collectors? (I understand that the modern equivalent is politicians and lawyers.) The only way that you can make this situation of any real use to us is by making him think that he has to behave in the same way as they do or they won't accept him. This is not very advanced and I am sure that even you can manage it. Try to keep him away from those in the Enemy's service who are able to live among others in such a way that, not only do they not compromise, but they attract others to the Enemy and even tell them about him. Living in the world is something that the Enemy wants them to do and he helps them. Either make him a guilty, self-loathing drunkard or have him retire into a safe cocoon to drink weak orange squash and hot chocolate ('with Jaffa cakes and comfy seating') where he never speaks to those who are not already serving the Enemy. Either way you will make him largely ineffective.

Your Uncle,
Mouldred

My Dear Slithrous,

At last some genuine good news. You say that your patient has decided not to get involved with any of his church's small groups, and that he is avoiding the other servants of the Enemy in his college. This is wonderful, and—credit where credit's due—your line that he needed time 'to think about his course' was brilliant. You see that it is completely true. If he is to have any real chance of doing us any harm from his degree he will need to think things through. (Though naturally the conclusion that he needed to avoid other servants of the Enemy to do this is a complete *non sequitur*!) What you must do now, it goes without saying, is to stop him from actually doing this. You have not told me whether or not he is a thinker. If he is not, then the task is fairly easy as you can get him involved in a dozen different causes and wear him out that way. Many of the Enemy's servants rush around like clockwork mice, doing so much that they never have time or

energy to stop and work out what the most useful things to do would be and how they might be achieved. They still harm our interests, but not nearly as much as they might if they committed themselves to one or two things and stuck with them. If he is a thinker then you must make him go so deep in thought that he never returns to the surface and is either incapable of explaining things in a simple and helpful way, or is secretly scornful of those who haven't done the work for themselves. We have managed to immobilise a number of potentially dangerous scholars in this way.

The question in your most recent letter about whether or not we should be attacking his trust in the Enemy rather than wasting all this time on the Bible makes me wonder whether you have not started to believe your own lies. How else do you expect to undermine his trust in the Enemy if not through undermining his trust in the Enemy's words? Do put these soft thoughts out of your head. You may tell him that worrying too much about the Bible is bibliolatry and you can make jibes about the Father, the Son, and the Holy Scripture, but do not, for Hell's sake, start believing it yourself. I am very concerned that he is still reading the Bible. If you really cannot stop him, then get him to read his favourite bits again and again, preferably dotting around from one place to another without ever reading things through in order. In this way you can limit his resources to fight us and he will be much more vulnerable. You must persuade him not to read the whole Bible in a year as you mentioned he was planning on doing. Once he realises that it is not that much of an effort men he may never stop doing it. Tell him that he doesn't have time. With luck he will believe you, though if he thought about it for a second he would see how absurd that excuse is—he is doing a full time theology degree and doesn't have time to read the Bible! What is he doing? Fortunately most of them don't think. As I recall your last patient said that the Bible was the non-negotiable—like a brother or sister you just have to live with it—and he kept going back and rereading it. Remember what happened to him!

Try to get people around him to talk about 'surviving' his theology degree. With a bit of luck he will pick up on the muted hysteria of the advice. Encourage him to separate his degree from the rest of his life, then you can have the dual pleasures of him resenting the chance to learn more about the Enemy and at the same time losing confidence in what he knows already.

Your Affectionate Uncle,
Mouldred

My Dear Boy,

You are having a tough time of it, aren't you? Be assured that unless you do better things will get much worse for you. So, despite your best attempts to throw him off course he is staying faithful to the Enemy. You need to change tack for a while and instead of a direct attack you should use conservative, evangelical scholarship to undermine his faith. What you do is, instead of trying to turn him into a liberal, you have him set his agenda in response to liberalism. This way he becomes the mirror image of what he is trying to avoid and we do almost as well out of it. So if someone says that Daniel is second century we get him to spend all his time and energy proving that it was not. If someone says that Paul didn't write his letters, then the patient's whole career should be spent trying to prove that Paul did. This is not as enjoyable for us, but when you turn back to the direct attack they are often weaker because they have learnt to use

data to support what they want to say, instead of saying what the data says. Again, beware! We have to be prepared to make tactical losses with this strategy. His work on the date of Daniel, or whatever, may well strengthen his confidence in the Enemy and do us some harm. And these issues cannot be ignored very well by those of the Enemy's servants who are scholars and intellectually responsible. However, the real point of this way of working is that we shift his focus away from the Enemy's priorities onto an agenda over which we have control. In truth, no-one is really listening to him (apart from other conservative scholars): the academy dismisses him as a fundamentalist (that word again!) and the church was never really interested in the first place. We can hugely limit the damage done to us by believing scholars in this way. (By the way, have you noticed the subtle victory we have won over the word 'liberal'? In Western society 'liberalism' is very much a good thing. However, the Enemy's servants habitually use it to refer to unbelieving scholarship and the pale shadow of religion that results. This means that when they denounce 'liberalism' they are totally misheard by their contemporaries. The use of words like this is crucial to us, which is why my recent appointment to deputy head of the Philology Department is so very impressive. You, as I have said before, take after your mother when it comes to intellectual work.

Aim to work so that your patient's first question on reading a book is 'is it sound' (which normally means 'does it agree with what I think at present'), not 'is it dealing with the data fairly and in detail'. If you can make him feel threatened by detailed disagreement (from which he can learn a great deal) then he will opt for a shallow agreement (which will rarely teach him anything). He will also be on the defensive most of the time, which is a very good way of limiting his comprehension of the issues: he will read to refute rather than to learn. In a similar vein you should try to make him embrace every argument that supports his conservative conclusions—the weaker the better. Later, when the argument is shown to be wrong, he will doubt the conclusions he used it to support.

Do you see the common theme of all of this? If you cannot manage to change his mind, then change his focus. Not all of the Enemy's servants are equally dangerous. If you are having difficulty dislodging him from his convictions then help him to support his convictions, only do it so badly—with as much fudging of issues as possible—that you can later come back and, by demolishing the scaffolding, you can take down a lot of the edifice that it was supporting.

You must also teach him to see things in black and white. There are heroes (the people who agree with me) and villains (everyone else). Now, as you will be painfully aware there is a clear line between those who are ours and those who belong to the Enemy, but all human work is mixed. You must extend this black and white view into places where it is not appropriate. In time you can train them to accept everything that heroes say and reject everything villains say, regardless of whether it is right or not. This is not ideal as those seen as heroes often tell the truth, but not always. Again, the point of this ruse is more subtle than simply making him believe the wrong thing. If you can't confuse his doctrine you can create party spirit, or at least a reference to the hero in question rather than the text under discussion. I can never tire of saying it: Muddle their thoughts! Keep them away from the Bible! Do all you can to stop them thinking clearly! (In general, I find that the study of liturgy and religious art is especially useful on all these counts.) Your Affectionate Uncle, **Mouldred**

Simon Gathercole, "Redaction Criticism, Tradition-History and Myth in NT Theology: In Response to Georg Strecker" *Themelios* 28.3 (2003): 40–55.

Redaction Criticism, Tradition-History and Myth in NT Theology: In Response to Georg Strecker

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A monumental figure in NT scholarship, Georg Strecker is nevertheless relatively unknown to many outside of Germany. Now that his equally monumental *Theology of the New Testament* has been translated into English, he will no doubt become harder to avoid. In this brief assessment I hope to focus on the three areas of Strecker's literary approach, his historical approach, and finally, the theological dimensions of his treatment of the NT literature. All of these areas are of huge significance to NT studies today, both to students and scholars, and this brief treatment intends to highlight some of the problems with Strecker's approach to NT criticism, some which are relevant in particular to him, but some of which are much more common.

Strecker, formerly Professor of NT at the University of Göttingen, was until his recent death one of the grand old men of NT studies in Germany. He died before the completion of this *Theology of the New Testament*, but gave instructions to Friedrich Wilhelm Horn to complete it.¹ The finished work appeared in German in 1996, and has been translated by Eugene Boring. A foreword by Horn and a preface by Boring lead into the main text, which amounts to around 680 pages. There is a very brief introduction which, considering the size of the volume, is not really adequate to set the scene as far as the author's method and outlook is concerned.² The text itself is divided into six parts: the theology of Paul; an analysis of the 'tunnel period' between the birth of earliest Christianity and the composition of the Gospels; treatment of the Synoptics; John's Gospel and Letters (with Revelation); the 'Deuteropauline' letters; and finally the catholic epistles.

The Redaction-critical approach to New Testament theology

1 G. Strecker, *Theology of the New Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000).

2 Though he has written an article, unfortunately untranslated, which is probably equivalent to such an introduction. 'Die Theologie des Neuen Testaments', in Strecker, ed. *Das Problem der Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1975), 1–31, and reprinted in Strecker, ed. *Eschaton und Historie. Aufsätze* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979), 260–90.

Since Strecker does not explain his method in detail at the outset, in general it only becomes apparent en route. He follows what George Caird once called the 'lazy way' of doing NT theology, that is organising the material according to canonical books rather than thematically. Strecker's reason for this is that he wants to highlight the distinctive character of each author in the NT as a priority. He calls this approach a 'redaction critical' one, and Horn helpfully supplies a paragraph from an unpublished lecture by Strecker which fleshes this out:

This means that each New Testament writing is evaluated according to its particular theological conception so that the term 'theology of the New Testament' more precisely means the complex of theologies in the New Testament (vi).³

Furthermore, Strecker looks both at the final form of the various parts of the NT canon, and compares them, as well as looking for the historical development of various traditions which find their way into the NT:

The presentation of the theologies of the New Testament authors is thus to be done in such a way that takes account of their reception and interpretation of this earlier tradition (vi).

There are of course strengths to this approach: the distinctive perspectives of individual NT books are not collapsed together. The weaknesses, however, are also apparent. Strecker's book has the appearance not so much of a synthesis of NT thought, as an encyclopaedia of the different contents of each book. The section on Paul, the first part, is a two-hundred page book in its own right, but the references to Pauline thought elsewhere in the book are relatively sparse. This is par for the course in NT theologies of this kind. Strecker, however, exacerbates the problem by adopting a particularly hard-line redaction-critical approach, whereby it is the theological distinctives of each NT author which take centre stage, rather than what the various books have in common. There is a strong sense that, for example, when Matthew or Luke incorporate Markan material, it does not really belong to their own conception of reality. Similarly, when Mark adopts pre-Markan tradition, it is not really Markan. For example, he discusses Mark 10:45 (the Son of Man as a 'ransom for many') and 14:24 (Jesus' blood being 'poured out for many') and Martin Kaehler's emphasis on the importance of the atonement and passion for Mark. Strecker comments:

This [i.e. the atonement], however, is not a genuine Markan idea. Here a sharp distinction must be made between tradition and redaction, since the concept of the atoning death of Jesus belongs to the pre-Markan tradition, as can be seen from the two most important examples in Mark (362).

This is a very strange idea. Surely if one of the Gospel writers makes use of tradition, it is because it reflects his own view of Jesus? In the process of using Mark, Matthew and Luke make the Markan material their own. Not only is Strecker's approach a strange one in itself, but it also has far-reaching consequences in the broader construction of a NT theology.

This can be seen from Strecker's observation that the soteriological sense of the atoning ransom in Mark 10:45 documents a 'Pauline component' in the pre-Markan

³ Quoted from a paper delivered to the Society of New Testament Studies, Madrid, 28 July 1992.

tradition, and 'is related to the Pauline conceptual world' (355). When one steps back and looks at this in the context of Strecker's whole project, the result is surprising. The logic goes something like this. We know that Mark 10:45 and 14:24 come from the pre-Markan tradition of Jesus' death as an atoning ransom, which has become mixed with, among other things, Pauline elements. The atoning sense of Mark 10:45 is therefore not Markan, because what is truly Markan is that which is unique to Mark. Thus Mark and Paul have very different conceptions of the death of Jesus. The discrepancy between Mark and Paul is magnified exponentially. In consequence, the diversity of the books of the NT is a self-fulfilling prophecy. The same process continues later on: because Matthew does not develop Mark's theology of atonement at all, the atoning death of Jesus 'plays no larger role in Matthew than it does in Mark' (386). That is to say, it plays scarcely any role at all. All Strecker is interested in is the way in which Matthew introduces Mark's ransom saying in Matthew 20:28 with a different conjunction, and therefore uses the saying differently (388). The consequence of this is that there is considerable downgrading of the central core of what the NT authors all have in common. Or, to put it another way, there is a dangerous loss of emphasis on the Gospel.

Tradition-History

One of the major areas on which Strecker focuses is the so-called 'tunnel period', that is, the period in which traditions from Jesus and the earliest Christian communities were passed down, eventually to be incorporated into the Gospels and epistles. Since Strecker has rejected the approach of systematising and synthesising NT teaching, he delves instead into the backgrounds of NT traditions, assessing the role of the author in shaping the material, as well as the role of the earliest Christians shaping the material before the authors got their hands on it. In the case of the Gospels, it is the sayings of Jesus which are obviously the main object of study. There is also, however, a wide range of source material used in the epistles as well: early Christian hymns, baptismal liturgies, as well as, perhaps, the occasional saying of Jesus which does not appear in the Gospels.

Jesus-Tradition and the Gospels

We need to look at what in Strecker's approach is authentic and what is inauthentic in the Gospel traditions about Jesus. Here one faces the frequent problem whereby, by the standards of this reviewer at least, the scholar in question seems extremely sceptical towards great swathes of the Jesus tradition. Yet Strecker sees himself as reacting against the sceptical excesses of some of his predecessors. Strecker rightly criticises Bultmann's 'criterion of dissimilarity', whereby a saying attributed to Jesus is, in general, only to be considered authentic if it both contradicts Jewish teaching of the time and is different from the doctrine of the later Christian communities. Realising that this approach is far too reductionistic, Strecker devises a 'criterion of development':

This method understands the text analogously to the growth rings of a tree. The older a text is, the more it is surrounded or even overgrown by secondary traditional material. The more clearly such secondary tradition can be identified as formation of the Christian community, the more probably the original kernel of the tradition can be attributed to the authentic sayings of Jesus (251).

In a sense, therefore, the more elaborate traditions have become by the time of the composition of the Gospel, the more likely it is that there was once an authentic Jesus tradition which sparked off the whole process of creative addition. As one might suspect, this very much still leads to sceptical results.

Strecker places the burden of creativity upon the earliest Christian communities rather than Jesus himself. Although he is critical of William Wrede for assigning too much invention to Mark, Strecker does not go down the Schweitzer route and allow Jesus himself to have determined the earliest church's description of him as 'Messiah' (92). He even considers as inauthentic such sayings as that of the disciples not going through all the towns of Israel before the coming of the Son of Man (Matt. 10:23) and the statement 'there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power' (Mark 9:1 and parallels). Most scholars consider these authentic by the 'criterion of embarrassment', but Strecker consigns them to post-Easter tradition (329–30).

Pre-Pauline tradition and the epistles

We have seen that Strecker sees Pauline Christology as very much influenced by a pre-Christian Gnostic redeemer-myth, and he is likewise, throughout, concerned to identify genetic relationships between hellenistic thought and early Christian ideas. 1 Corinthians 8:6, with its language of Jesus' pre-existence and participation in the work of creation comes about 'within the sphere of influence of Stoic thought' (88). There is thus a diminishing of Paul's own creative reflection which follows the logic determined by the Gospel. Or again, Strecker displays great confidence in being able to recover various stages of the editorial process in the dark ages from Easter to the composition of the Gospels during which the tradition was passed down. For example, Strecker can reconstruct both the 'Word of the Lord' about the *parousia* that Paul received, and his changes to it in 1 Thessalonians 4:15–17 (212).

Myth and Kerygma in New Testament Theology

The themes of 'myth' and 'kerygma' are by no means new theological issues. There are, no doubt, numerous *Themelios* articles from the past on the subject. Yet for those who thought that Bultmannian theology was dead and buried, Strecker's *Theology of the New Testament* is a reminder that old habits die hard in the theological academy. Throughout the work, Strecker displays a concern to understand the NT within the framework of 'myth'. As a number of scholars who advocate a similar line have protested, this does not automatically mean that the NT is being regarded as in the same class as fairy-stories.

Myth and Christology

Two mythical frameworks from the Hellenistic/Ancient Near Eastern world are particularly prominent, and impact especially on Strecker's understanding of NT Christology. First, Strecker is a moderate advocate of the Gnostic-redeemer myth as having a significant influence on the development of NT thought. He is not (like, for example, Walter Schmithals) prone to seeing Gnosticism everywhere, but nevertheless does see the heavenly redeemer myth as particularly formative for Paul's thought-world.

The hymns of Philippians 2:5–11 and Colossians 1:15–20 describe a pre-existent figure who comes down to earth to bring salvation and then returns to God in heaven: thus for Strecker such passages clearly reflect the Gnostic myth which, at least to a limited extent, was alive and well in pre-Christian times (62).⁴

Second, Strecker draws parallels between the references to Jesus' designation as 'Son of God' in Mark and the Ancient Egyptian enthronement ritual, where the new king becomes a god (357–58). There are three stages in each case. The first is a rough parallel (Jesus' baptism being an Egyptian deification). The second, in my view, is fairly shaky (Jesus in the company of Elijah and Moses at the transfiguration corresponds to the Egyptian presentation of the king to the circle of the gods). The third, the enthronement ritual proper, is, however, the most shaky. Strecker half-heartedly raises the possibility that the proclamation of Jesus as the Son of God by the Roman centurion corresponds to this, but also notes that there is no real connection. He concludes, however, just as speculatively that the event corresponding to the Egyptian enthronement ritual is to be located in the now lost ending to Mark!⁵ 'In fact, the possibility is not to be excluded that the enthronement of Jesus as Son of God was declared in the context of a resurrection appearance to Peter' (358).

A good example of this can be seen in Strecker's discussion of Pauline christology. 'Paul's Jesus is not to be bracketed out of the realm of myth' (102). The pattern of Jesus' existence, that is, his humiliation and exaltation, is defined as a 'mythological scheme'. Also part of this mythological scheme is his being the 'image of God', which for Strecker is a 'Gnosticising manner of speaking', which also gives rise to understanding Jesus as pre-existent, and having been sent from God. Again, the enthronement of Jesus as sovereign over the whole cosmos, as in the conclusion to the Christ-hymn in Philippians 2:9–11, belongs for Strecker 'to the realm of myth, not the realm of logos' (102). However, it is highly questionable whether the *kerygma* can be separated off from its 'mythical' shell.

The theological function of myth

The background to Strecker's understanding of myth lies in his emphasis on the traditional Protestant *extra nos* (literally, 'outside ourselves'), whereby 'the saving event is not identified with an internal event in human existence but is grounded in something that happens external to human existence' (114; emphasis mine). Similarly, the communicative aspect of the Christ event is 'not something which human beings can say to themselves but something that can only be said to them' (370). Since the divine word, the *kerygma*, cannot be spoken of straightforwardly, it is necessary that it be clothed in mythical language which enables it to be understood, while preserving its own character as something in every sense outside of ourselves. When it comes to interpreting the NT, Strecker follows Bultmann in insisting that we must not see the mythical cultural baggage (such as the pre-existence of Christ) as essential to the *kerygma*, the message of the Gospel.

4 Similarly, this background shapes Strecker's interpretation of Johannine Christology (500).

5 Strecker is so confident of the contents of this lost ending that he goes on to assert that 'the lost ending of the Gospel of Mark was also unknown to Matthew', which thus enabled Matthew to come to his own conclusions about the resurrection appearances (366).

As it has traditionally with the Bultmann school, the inability to think about God and his activity in rational terms means that there is a focus on the mere fact of Jesus and the *kerygma*, and a dogmatic agnosticism about anything else that Scripture addresses concretely. Even Luke is brought in as evidence of the ‘thatness’ of the eschatological event (417).⁶ The *kerygma* for Strecker seems so elusive that it is practically speaking indefinable. The being of God is disclosed to humanity in the Christ event (116), but the extent of mythological language in the NT is so thorough that ultimately, the only function of language about God is to safeguard the idea of the *extra nos*. This is not done in abstraction from Christ, however: for Strecker, it is integral to this *extra nos* that God has established Jesus Christ as the eschatological sign for the world. Nevertheless, as noted above, one seldom gets from Strecker any sense of content to the Gospel which must be believed. Interestingly, when he comes to discuss the Pastoral Epistles, he skates over the issues so central there, such as the ‘deposit’, the body of sound doctrine to be passed down, which must be taught and guarded against those false teachers who contradict it.

Bultmannian-Lutheran theology (to which Strecker is very committed) is passionately concerned to emphasise that we are not saved by our own achievements. We cannot reinforce our faith with rational proofs, because that would give us a role in our own salvation. However, the same Bultmannian Lutheranism is committed to historical-critical research; and it is hard to avoid concluding that whatever Strecker intends, the end result of historical-critical tools is the identification of the mythical elements of NT teaching. Luther himself understood trust in God as simple faith in Jesus and in God’s written word. Strecker, however, is the most recent representative of an approach that, while attempting to deny human achievement, in fact lets it in through the back door. It is human reason, by means of secular historical methodology, which reveals what is to be believed and what is to be discarded as myth.

Myth and Resurrection

Strecker’s approach to myth has a particularly significant impact on his discussion of the resurrection of Jesus. The first problem is with the category of the ‘empty tomb’, which Strecker does not see in Paul. On this point, Strecker pits Paul against all the Gospels, where the concept of the empty tomb is clearly important: ‘He is risen; *he is not here*’ (Mark 16:6; Matt. 28:6; cf Luke 24:23, John 20:6–7). In spite of that Strecker is insistent that when it comes to the empty tomb, ‘we are not dealing here with an idea from the earliest period, for the motif expressed in this tradition only gradually took shape’ (107). He sees the Gospel writers as reflecting developments which occurred later than Paul. As a result of this Strecker gets himself into difficulties over Paul’s conception of resurrection.

The problem lies in Strecker’s reconstruction of Paul’s developing understanding of resurrection. First, he presumes that the pre-Pauline tradition does not say that the tomb is empty: Paul has no empty tomb ‘raw material’ that he received from other Christians (109). One might well ask, however, how it is that Strecker knows this. But Strecker’s treatment of the Pauline texts themselves is even more puzzling. Here he draws an

6 That is, the fact that Jesus lived and died for our salvation, rather than the how of salvation.

analogy between the general resurrection and the resurrection of Jesus.⁷ His treatment of 1 Corinthians 15 is confusing in that in one paragraph he affirms that the idea of the empty tomb is ‘excluded’ because the new body is ‘completely different’, since the old one has been ‘laid aside’ (which is not what 1 Corinthians 15 actually says.) Yet in the next paragraph, he notes that 2 Corinthians 5 ‘affirms that the earthly body will not be transformed, in contrast to the conception of 1 Corinthians 15, but rather it will be replaced’. 2 Corinthians 5:1–10 is of course a difficult passage for any exegete, but Strecker absolutises Paul’s position here.

As a result he runs into particular problems in his interpretation of Romans 8, where he says that the nature of the redemptive resurrection at the eschaton is ‘not only the redemption of the body, but also redemption from the earthly body’ (108). This seems to throw a spanner in Strecker’s exegetical works. The whole context of Romans 8:18–27 is the groaning of the cosmos and of the people of God, awaiting the adoption of God’s children. There is no hint of an annihilation followed by a creation *ex nihilo*; rather it is the opposite—the *transformation* of the present groaning reality into a future glorious reality.

In a similar vein, the fault-lines in Strecker’s exposition also lie in his over-emphasis on the non-physicality of Paul’s term *soma*. As Strecker notes, following Bultmann, *soma* can mean ‘person’, but it means physical body much more frequently and not least in 2 Corinthians 5:1–10. The main (related) problem is that Strecker does not sufficiently account for the tension in Paul’s thought between the continuity and discontinuity between present and future existence. The elimination of any bodily continuity does not do justice to Paul’s thought, and so the empty tomb cannot so easily be discarded.

So far the discussion has been confined to the exegetical arena. How is Strecker’s concept of the resurrection related here to myth? There are three important points. First, it is ‘the mythological scheme of the humiliation and exaltation of the pre-existent one’ which is the driving force behind the continuity of personhood between the Jesus who dies and the (same) Jesus who is raised. Secondly, the continuity of Jesus’ personhood expresses the unity of God’s saving activity in Jesus’ death and resurrection, ‘in which the eschatological “Yes” of God is spoken to humanity’ (110). Thirdly, the mythical expression is necessary, because ‘such a divine affirmation cannot be pictured in clear concepts’.

There are at least two problems which come to the fore here. First, if God’s saving act is the eschatological ‘yes’ of God, then it is God’s ‘yes’ only to a disembodied humanity, and at the same time, God’s ‘yes’ to human personalities which are just as corrupt and in need of redemption as human bodies. Second, it is perhaps revealing that Strecker sees the earlier verses of 1 Corinthians 15, where Paul brings forth witnesses to the resurrection as evidence of its authenticity, as in ‘fundamental contradiction’ to Pauline theology elsewhere (104). Paul, however, has more room for God’s activity in the material world, in history, than Strecker has. (Strecker follows Bultmann in asserting that

⁷ Here again, however, he reads Paul against the grain: ‘On the basis of his concept of the bodiliness of the future resurrection of Christian believers, Paul draws conclusions about the bodily resurrection of Christ’ (108). This is Paul’s reasoning in reverse, however. As Strecker notes elsewhere, in 1 Corinthians 15, ‘the hope for the resurrection of the dead is based on faith in the one who is already risen’ (272, n. 25).

‘Jesus rose into the *kerygma*’.⁸) And yet Paul wholly preserves the *extra nos*, the ‘otherness of God’, for God does not bring about salvation *from* humanity, but to humanity from the outside.

Conclusion

Strecker’s work is not only encyclopaedic in its coverage of NT material, but is also an extremely comprehensive guide to German scholarship of, in particular, the last forty years. (Strangely, Strecker is much less reliable when discussing scholars of past generations such as Reimarus and Albert Schweitzer.) There is very little engagement with Anglo-American works, though this is characteristic of German scholarship in general. But within these confines, not only does Strecker have a fine grasp on NT scholarship, he also displays enviable learning in the areas of Gnosticism and Hellenistic religion. (Jewish background, however, is treated very scantily.) There is no general bibliography at the end of the book, but short, very useful, bibliographies introduce each subject-section, and there is a concluding bibliography which deals with general issues principally surrounding ‘New Testament theology’. Just as there is no introduction to speak of (a mere eight pages), there is even less of a conclusion. The book ends with the treatment of the Epistle of James with no word to conclude the project as a whole. This anticlimax highlights the lack of focus on any *synthetic* theological work. The only real sense in which there is synthesis derives from the fact that the book is a kind of NT genome project: it attempts to account *historically* for every significant idea, in terms of its genetic origin and development.

There are other weaknesses: that Strecker treats Ephesians in a mere ten pages must be protested, considering the book is of such theological weight. Or from a different viewpoint, there is very little focus on the Holy Spirit throughout the book. Two pages on Luke’s presentation of the Spirit is one of the only treatments which goes beyond passing reference. Reading this book by Strecker does provide a window into how different German NT scholarship is by comparison to British and American approaches, and it is always useful to be reminded of that point. To many readers of this English translation, however, Strecker’s project will seem rather strange, and his historical reconstructions unconvincing and occasionally bizarre. Finally, his demythologising theological agenda is even less compelling than it was when it was put forward by Rudolf Bultmann.

⁸ R. Bultmann, ‘Das Verhältnis der urchristlichen Christusbotschaft zum historischen Jesus’, in Bultmann, *Exegetica. Aufsätze zur Erforschung des Neuen Testaments* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1967), 469.

Religion Without God: A Review Article¹

Douglas Groothuis

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The thesis of this highly polemical book by Ray Billington is that religion is better off without God and all its traditional Western accoutrements. To that end, the author—an External Examiner of Philosophy for the European Baccalaureate and the author of two previous books—explores the lineaments of non-theistic religion and mounts a case against all forms of theism, but particularly against Christianity. This review will prove inadequate to detail the book's plethora of contradictions, misstatements, and otherwise objectionable elements.

Billington makes many uncharitable and unduly hostile remarks against theism and Christianity, such as speaking of evangelical enthusiasm as 'religious masturbation' (138). One also finds many unsupported and even farcical statements such as, 'The Sermon on the Mount ... is, in fact, a magnificent description of the way of Zen' (129). However, Billington makes one insightful point worth noting: much of the religious consciousness of the world lacks the concept of a personal God that is taken so much for granted in the West. To make this case, Billington offers short treatments of nontheistic religion as found in nondualistic Hinduism, aspects of Buddhism, Taoism, and in 'profane religion'—cases of mystical experiences *sans* God occurring outside of traditional religious piety.

Billington proceeds on the assumption that 'God is dead' in the Nietzschean sense. The concept of a personal God has little purchase for contemporary thoughtful people (at least those like himself). He seems to think that the brute fact of the secularisation of the West presents reasons to abandon theism. Secularisation, however, is not a worldwide phenomenon (as the growth of third world Christianity evidences), and one cannot deduce a philosophical conclusion from cultural tendencies. One needs solid arguments for that. Unlike Nietzsche, though, Billington does not abandon religion entirely, but promotes 'religion without God'. He gleans eclectically a number of insights from several traditions, but seems particularly fond of Taoism, claiming that 'the *Tao Te Ching* is a book which expresses genuine religion more comprehensively than any of the scriptures produced by the Semites' (127), although is not taken as 'a religious icon'.

¹ Religion Without God by Ray Billington was published by New York: Routledge, 2002, 148 pp. with index

Arguments over the proper definition of religion are widespread and difficult to resolve. The task of finding the necessary and sufficient conditions for religion or of finding some ‘family resemblance’ between all religions—that eschews concern for finding an essential core as misguided—has occupied many scholars of religion. Billington provides a minimal essentialist definition.

The following [is] essential to religion: the expression of certain feelings, some form of meditation or contemplation, together with what may be termed a philosophical approach to the world and the understanding of one’s place in it; and the hint that these are likely to play more than a minor role in a religious person’s existence (15).

I agree that genuine ‘religion’ need not involve belief in God. Many of Billington’s other claims are disputable though. He argues that religion should be separated from any necessary attachments to the notions of: (1) a persona! God, (2) ‘historical or quasi-historical figures as religious icons’ (Buddha, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad), (3) holy texts taken to contain ‘absolute truth’, (4) and morality. I will limit my criticisms to four points related to Billington’s contentions concerning mysticism, monotheism, and morality.

First, Billington is quite dismissive of the positive arguments for monotheism (33–40). His presentation of theistic arguments is tendentious and clumsy, and he fails to note the significant work done in natural theology in the past few decades by virtuoso analytic philosophers such as Richard Swinburne, William Lane Craig, and J.P. Moreland. Versions of the cosmological, design, and moral arguments—among others—are flourishing. Billington does not engage these arguments, but ignores them. From another angle, the Reformed epistemology movement (led by Alvin Plantinga) argues that natural theology is not required for rational belief in the Christian God (although Plantinga himself has revived a highly sophisticated, modal version of the ontological argument). This significant, well-recognised, and well-documented research programme is entirely overlooked by Billington.

Second, Billington is incautious in his handling of the mystical elements of various religions. He merely asserts—rather than argues—that the nontheistic mystical elements of various religions are ‘higher’ than the theistic experiences found in many religious traditions (47). In the classic study *Mysticism: Sacred and Profane* (1957), R.C. Zaehner provided three distinct categories of mysticism: (1) nature mysticism (Wordsworth), (2) monistic (or nondualistic) mysticism, and (3) theistic mysticism. Billington seems to conflate the first two categories, while largely ignoring—or dismissing—the third as a live option. Billington’s thinking is an example of the ‘perennial philosophy’ approach that attempts to isolate an experiential or doctrinal core supposedly found in all religions (monism), which then becomes the normative principle for religious evaluation. Hence, the rejection of theistic mystical experiences as substandard by definition. (On this questionable approach, see W.T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* [1960] and Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy* [1944].)

Third, having unfairly rejected the positive case for monotheism based on theistic arguments and having marginalised the theistic elements of mysticism, Billington builds his argument for religion without God almost entirely on certain nontheistic mystical experiences. Here, too, he ignores a large body of philosophical arguments for theism that are based on *theistic* religious experiences. Especially noteworthy here is the work of Keith Yandell and William Alston. The fact is that the arguments for some cases of

theistic mysticism being veridical (or truth conveying) is much stronger than those made on behalf of nontheistic mysticism, which are critically flawed. One basic point must suffice.

Billington, like other perennialists, repeatedly claims that genuine mystical experience is ineffable (beyond thoughts, concepts, and language). Related to this, he is fond of the epigram from the *Tao Te Ching*: ‘The tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao; The name that can be named is not the eternal Name’ (81). Instead of describing a personal and relational being who is distinct from the one having the religious experience (as in monotheistic mysticism), the nontheistic mystical experience is said to be ineffable because the personality of the subject drops away into the nontheistic and nondualistic mystical reality, which eludes rational elaboration in principle. However, if the experience itself is incapable of being explained in conceptual and rational terms, it necessarily lacks any argumentative power. A rational argument requires coherent and factual premises that lead to a conclusion through some pattern of argument (whether inductive, deductive, or abductive). No such premises and no argument form are available for nontheistic mysticism if ineffability is invoked. Ironically, Billington criticises theistic concepts as too vague to be very meaningful (4) and then turns around and claims that nontheistic mystical experiences are entirely beyond rationality (58). This is surely inconsistent.

On the other hand, theistic mystical experiences (as well as other non-mystical kinds of religious experiences) can be used as evidence for belief in God since the object of the experience does not utterly transcend conceptuality or rationality. Moreover, the individuality and personality of the experiencer does not drop out of the picture, but remains intact. In other words, the subject-object relationship still holds, thus opening the door to coherent accounts of the experience. Consider the experiences of Isaiah (Is. 6:1–8) or Moses (Exod. 3) or the Apostle John (Rev. 1:12–18) in Scripture or a whole raft of theistic and Christian experiences through history. In each case, individuals claim to have encountered an awe-inspiring and transcendent Being who could, nevertheless be described conceptually in language. Under these conditions, there is no need to claim ineffability (however much mystery may remain). In light of this, one may argue that: (1) Many people have claimed to experience a personal and moral God. (2) A significant number of these claims are likely veridical if (a) the concept of God is coherent and (b) no defeaters are present which render the experience delusive. (3) The monotheistic concept of God is coherent and all of the purported experiences are not likely dispatched because of delusive elements. (4) Therefore (a), someone has experienced God; therefore, (b) God exists. This is not a stand-alone argument for Christian theism, but it can play a part in a larger cumulative case argument.

Fourth, Billington is most unconvincing (and alarming) when he argues that religion must move ‘beyond good and evil.’ Although, oddly he does not define himself as a pantheist (despite the fact that he endorses pantheistic mysticism), Billington agrees with pantheism that ‘all the moral castigation over the ages, made by preachers in God’s name, have been a total waste of breath’ (20). In the chapter, ‘Beyond Good and Evil’, he questions the meaningfulness of calling God ‘good’ and presents standard arguments for relativism.

Billington thinks that if we use moral categories in accessing revelation claims, this robs God of any intrinsic and original goodness. This does not follow. If God bestowed

us with a conscience (Rom. 2:14–15), then conscience can be used in evaluating the moral dimension of God’s special revelation in Scripture. Billington also presents a simplistic view of divine-command meta-ethics and then easily destroys the straw man by saying that on this account ethics would be either arbitrary (if based on God’s will) or God would be unneeded if the good is not identical with his will. He fails however to entertain the possibility of a *tertium quid* wherein what is good is rooted in God’s unchangeably good *character* which is made known through commands (knowable through conscience and special revelation) to his creatures who are created by God to flourish according to divine wisdom. Further, there are credible theistic accounts of meta-ethics that do not employ divine command theory, Billington ignores all of this.

Billington’s case for relativism relies on the old and oft-refuted diversity and dependence arguments. Since so many disagree on moral matters, there must not be any objective reality to it. Diversity destroys objectivity. This is a *non sequitur*. Some may simply fail to make proper judgements for any number of reasons. Diversity of evaluation does not logically imply that there be no fact of the matter. Is not love better than hate? Besides, there is basic agreement between cultures on core ethical principles, as C.S. Lewis noted in *The Abolition of Man*. Second, the dependence argument claims that since we derive our morality from our cultures, there is nothing more to morality than our contingent and historically situated culture. Yet we also derive our knowledge of mathematics and basic logic from our culture. But this fact of epistemological acquisition (truths come through cultural learning) does nothing to relativise mathematics or the law of noncontradiction on a metaphysical level. Moreover, Billington’s relativism is so potent that it undermines his central thesis that there is one genuine nontheistic religion based on nontheistic religious experiences. Consider his statement,

Every human being lives in a different universe from everyone else; so we should not be either surprised or dismayed that ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, ‘good’ and ‘bad’ have different connotations for different people (116; emphasis in original).

Yet Billington claims that one should abandon the objective categories of good and evil to develop moral and spiritual ‘maturity’. He frequently castigates religious moralists as the enemies of ‘mature’ religion, but in so doing, he covertly employs the very moral categories that he claims he has transcended. This is contradictory. On the same page where Billington states that we all live in different universes he writes of the need to avoid ‘crude and inhumane laws’ (116). In this, he moves beyond reason itself. He quotes Walt Whitman’s poem, ‘All is Truth’, to the effect that we should transcend any determinative concept of, or commitment to, truth itself. The poem ends thus:

And henceforth I will go celebrate anything I see or am
And sing and laugh, and deny nothing (117).

One who celebrates everything can condemn nor defend nothing. Truth and rationality await the mortician.

Billington’s attempt to advocate religion without God, Scripture, religious exemplars, objective morality, and even truth is a peculiar hybrid of anti-theistic zeal and mystical enthusiasm, but it fails to achieve anything close to a convincing argument.

The Last Word

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It's a New Week

In the 'yet and not yet' of Kingdom living it is often easy to get discouraged. Christians know the wonder of living in 'his marvellous light', and yet darkness deepens in our world. Christians have confidence in 'his strength perfected in weakness', and yet a soul-weariness often ends and begins our day. Christians embrace the Truth, and yet hope for the world gets lost in the sound-bite of daily life. The road to Emmaus is a long road even when walking with the living Lord.

Weary 'road-warrior' Christians are admonished by the Apostle Paul 'not to lose heart' because we are called to this life by God's mercy, God's grace, accompanied by God's people (2 Cor. 4:1, 16). Tony Campolo has popularised encouragement for Christians by the catchy expression, 'It's Friday, but Sunday's coming!' Dr Campolo attempts to cheer us along as we are crucified with Christ and yet live. I liked Campolo's maxim when I first heard it, but I like it less the more I think about it.

If I read the NT correctly, Friday is over, the Saturday of doubt and discouragement has been dispelled, Sunday's tomb is still empty. So, it must be a new week. And this new week in which we find ourselves still follows the tri-Pentecosts of the book of Acts. The Spirit of God is poured out on Jews, Samaritans, Gentiles, young and old, sons and daughters, all summed up, being in Christ—the new creation (Acts 2; 2 Cor. 5:17).

'The *new* creation', the recreation of a new week, a new people.

It is interesting to note that in the first week of God's creative work, the first six end with the declarative 'and there was evening and morning' (Gen. 1:5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31), but this phrase is pointedly missing from the seventh day. The seventh day does not end with concluding refrain of 'evening and morning'. The seventh day is set aside by God as 'holy'. In fact, this is the first use of this word in the Scripture. It's not a place or a people, not an idea or an icon, but *time* is the focus of what is declared holy by God. God's rest is holy, not a respite from weariness, not a needed recovery time from the work of creation. The triune God was not diminished in any way by his *creatio ex nihilo*. He created out of nothing, not out of himself. The seventh day was a holy day, a holiday to enjoy what was made, to bless all that had become.

So, how long was this ‘seventh day’? When do we hear the refrain of its ending? It is certainly worth pondering the continual invitation throughout the OT and in the gospels to enter into the sabbath rest of God. From the Mosaic rhythms of life and land, from the exilic anguish of remembrance in the prophets, to the personal invitation of Jesus, the invitation to this holy time of Sabbath blessing is extended to God’s people. How can this be a reality unless it existed in the reality of a continuing seventh day?

It makes some sense to me that all of salvation history, from the fall to the cross, would happen in the context of God’s persistent abiding with us because the Sabbath day was set apart for blessing and holiness. The day could not end with rebellion and sinfulness. No, the day would end when it was ‘the first day of the week’. ‘On the first day of the week, while it was still dark’ (John 20:1; also 20:19). ‘After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning’ (Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1). Is the resurrection of Christ the prelude to a new week of God’s renewed work of recreation? Is not the ascension of Jesus, the pouring out of the Spirit, the creation of a new community of God’s people in the church all a part of God’s new work—the beginning of what will become in the fullness of time, God’s new heaven and new earth?

No, it’s not Friday. Saturday is over. Sunday is triumphantly past. It’s a work week in the Kingdom of our God! God is at work recreating his heart’s desire from the rubble of our world. Dig in! Work hard! Don’t lose heart! Look and see what is missed by those without eyes to see ‘what cannot be seen’ (2 Cor. 4:18). It’s okay to ‘groan’ in our temporary burden of mortal life—God has prepared us ‘for this very thing’, to ‘walk by faith and not by sight’ in order to please him (2 Cor. 5:1–10). Let us not grow weary in doing what is right. We must work and not give up (Gal. 6:9).

When I love the work that I do, I can work long hours and not grow tired. When I am engaging my gifts, engrossed in a fascinating idea or challenge I cannot be distracted, I’m energised, focused: I’m precise and into the details to make sure it’s my best work. Work done in love might make me tired, but it never makes me weary. We need to remember that work existed before the Fall. It’s the Fall that made work into toil. In the yet, and not yet of kingdom’s here and coming reality, Christians need to be people who reclaim a measure of the joy of working well.

There is work to be done as God’s new people in this new week of recreation and the ‘love of Christ urges us on’ (2 Cor. 5:14). Eden’s glory and grief are behind us. ‘As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain’. For he says, ‘At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you. See, now is the acceptable time; see now is the day of salvation!’ There is coming a day when the God ‘who began a good work in us brings us to completion’ (Phil. 1:6), an eternal day in the new creation when work will fully know no toil, every tear is dried, and every knee is bowed. In the eternal sabbath of God, righteousness will finally be at home. Until then, we have good work to do.