

# The Pacific Journal of Baptist Research

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## CONTENTS

*Steven R. Harmon*

James Wm. McClendon, Jr.'s Narrative Christology in  
Ecumenical/ecclesiological Perspective

1

*Stephen R. Holmes*

Beyond a Bath and a Book: Baptist Theological Commitments

11

*Scott Harrower*

A Relational-Historical "Limit Case" Proposal for Meaningful  
Discourse about God

25

*Dale Campbell*

Sin in Secular Ears: A Theo-Biblical and Sociological Doctrine  
of Sin in *Aotearoa* New Zealand

48

Reviews

61

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# JAMES WM. McCLENDON, JR.'S NARRATIVE CHRISTOLOGY IN ECUMENICAL/ECCLESIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

The reception of Baptist theologian James Wm. McClendon, Jr.'s proposal of a "two-narrative" Christology has focused on its relation to the Chalcedonian "two-natures" Christology. While not ignoring this question, this article addresses the ecumenical and ecclesiological implications of McClendon's Christology by turning to a pair of different questions. First, what does McClendon's seemingly non-Chalcedonian Christology look like when viewed through the lenses of the attention bilateral ecumenical dialogue has given to Christology as central to efforts toward confessing "one faith," in particular in light of the progress in overcoming the fifth-century Christological divisions made in the ecumenical dialogues between the non-Chalcedonian churches of the East and Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant churches during the past four decades? Second, what are the ecumenical implications of McClendon's suggestion of a link between his two-narrative Christology and ecclesiology? The article develops this suggested link by proposing the outlines of a narrative-Christological ecclesiology in terms of seven theses regarding what it might mean ecumenically for the church to embody the story of Jesus as a pilgrim people.

## I. McCLENDON'S NARRATIVE CHRISTOLOGY

The year 2014 marks the twentieth anniversary of the publication of *Doctrine*, the second volume in the *Systematic Theology* by Baptist theologian James Wm. McClendon, Jr. (1924-2000).<sup>2</sup> Following on the heels of the publication of a new edition of the three-volume work by Baylor University Press in August 2012,<sup>3</sup> this is an opportune occasion for reconsidering one of McClendon's most significant contributions: his proposal of a "two-narrative Christology."<sup>4</sup> And as McClendon was a North American Baptist theologian who pursued the majority of his career in California and thus within a Pacific Rim context, it is especially appropriate for this reconsideration to appear in the pages of the *Pacific Journal of Baptist Research*.

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this article was presented to a session on "Christology Today" in the Constructive Theologies section of the Southeast Regional Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Greenville, South Carolina, USA, March 15-17, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Doctrine* (vol. 2 of *Systematic Theology*; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Systematic Theology* (3 vols.; Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2012). The text and pagination of the original Abingdon Press edition and the new Baylor University Press edition are identical; the new introduction by Curtis W. Freeman included in the Baylor University Press volumes is paginated with roman numerals as frontal matter. Thus while the page references in the notes that follow in the present article are to the Baylor University Press edition unless otherwise noted, the page references apply to either edition.

<sup>4</sup> McClendon, *Doctrine*, 263-79.

Much subsequent reception of McClendon's proposal has focused on its relation to the Chalcedonian "two-natures" Christology that became the received criterion of Christological orthodoxy East and West. Since McClendon himself gave much attention to the weaknesses he perceived in the two-natures model and seemed to urge its abandonment, one of the lingering questions debated in the reception of McClendon's two-narrative Christology has been whether it is consistent with orthodox Christological formulations.<sup>5</sup> While not ignoring this question, this article addresses the ecumenical and ecclesiological implications of McClendon's Christology by turning to a pair of different questions not sufficiently explored heretofore. First, what does McClendon's seemingly non-Chalcedonian Christology look like when viewed through the lenses of the attention bilateral ecumenical dialogue has given to Christology as central to efforts toward confessing "one faith," in particular in light of the progress in overcoming the fifth-century Christological divisions made in the ecumenical dialogues between the non-Chalcedonian churches of the East and Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant churches during the past four decades? Second, what are the ecumenical implications of McClendon's ever-so-brief suggestion of a link between his two-narrative Christology and ecclesiology?

A brief introduction to McClendon is in order for readers who may be unfamiliar with his work. McClendon, who died in 2000, received his early Christian nurture and theological education in the context of the Southern Baptist Convention (the largest union of Baptists in the United States of America), among whom he served as a pastor and then professor of theology at the Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary in Mill Valley, California (near San Francisco). There McClendon experienced an early exile from his Southern Baptist community, terminated despite having tenure when he encouraged student involvement in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s efforts in Selma, Alabama. That experience proved to be fortuitous for the subsequent development of McClendon's thought. It led to a sojourn that involved visiting professorships in a series of institutions not connected with Baptists, especially Roman Catholic institutions. One of them, the University of San Francisco, dismissed McClendon for reasons connected with his public opposition to the Vietnam War. But in a subsequent visiting professor stint at the University of Notre Dame, his relationship with Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder contributed to McClendon's reclamation of his free church heritage even while the Catholic context led him to relate this heritage to the larger Christian tradition. Eventually he landed another tenure-track position at the Episcopal Church Divinity School of the Pacific in Berkeley, California and then taught until his death at the broadly evangelical Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. Along the way McClendon made an early contribution to the post-liberal narrative theology movement with his 1974 book *Biography as Theology*.<sup>6</sup> His magnum opus was his three-volume *Systematic Theology*, in which he sought to give voice to what he discerned as a distinctively Baptist way of doing theology—not only from the upper-case "B" Baptist tradition, but also from the broader free church tradition that he references as lower-case "b"

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<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Jonathan R. Wilson, "Can Narrative Christology Be Orthodox?" *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8, no. 4 (October 2006): 371-81, which answers the question posed in the article's title in the affirmative, *contra* critics of McClendon's proposal cited therein.

<sup>6</sup> James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Reshape Today's Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974); a revised edition was published by Trinity Press International in 1990.

baptist. This concrete community of reference led McClendon to write the first volume on *Ethics*, dealing with what it means for a community of disciples to walk together in the way of Jesus.<sup>7</sup> Since such a community must form disciples in this way by teaching what the church must teach to be a community of faithful disciples of Jesus Christ, he devoted the second volume to *Doctrine*. Such a community exists not for its own sake but to testify to the world, in its cultural and philosophical particularity, that salvation is found in Jesus and his way, so volume three dealt with the church's *Witness*.<sup>8</sup>

In the *Doctrine* volume, McClendon surveys three rival Christological models—the pre-Nicene Logos model, the two-natures model of the trajectory from Nicaea through Chalcedon, and the historical model influenced by the modern quest of the historical Jesus<sup>9</sup>—to which he addresses three “persistent questions” intended to probe their adequacy: first, “what right has Jesus Christ to absolute Lordship—the Lordship that Scripture assigns to God alone?”; second, “How can monotheists... tell the Jesus story as their own?”; and third, “how Christ-like... are disciples’ lives to be?”<sup>10</sup> McClendon finds the culmination of the two-natures trajectory in the Chalcedonian definition deficient especially in regard to the third question, asking whether that Jesus provides a paradigm for discipleship that disciples can really put into practice. Later he concludes, “Two-natures Christology has had its day, and we need not return to it save as a monument to what has gone before. All honor to Athanasius and Basil and Leontius, but they did not write Scripture, and it is to Scripture that we must return in fashioning our convictions.”<sup>11</sup>

Seemingly as a replacement for the two-natures Christology that since 451 has defined the orthodox centre for much of the church in its teaching about the person of Christ, McClendon proposes a “two-narrative Christology.”<sup>12</sup> In this account, one’s identity is located not in one’s classification according to abstract categories of “natures.” One’s identity is nothing other than one’s story. A person’s story in its totality and particularity is the thickest possible description one can offer of a person’s identity.<sup>13</sup> For Christ, this narrative identity is both twofold and singular. One might summarize what McClendon proposes along these lines, intentionally echoing the two-natures-in-one-person template of the Chalcedonian Definition. *The story of Christ fully encompasses and discloses the story of the Triune God, which is God’s*

<sup>7</sup> James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Ethics* (vol. 1 of *Systematic Theology*; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986). A second revised and enlarged edition of *Ethics* was published by Abingdon Press in 2002.

<sup>8</sup> James Wm. McClendon, Jr. with Nancey C. Murphy, *Witness* (vol. 3 of *Systematic Theology*; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000). For a helpful orientation to the *Systematic Theology* as well as the biographical context of its genesis and development, see Curtis W. Freeman, “A Theology for Brethren, Radical Believers, and Other Baptists: A Review Essay of James McClendon’s *Systematic Theology*,” *Brethren Life and Thought* 50, nos. 1-2 (Winter/Spring 2006): 106-15, revised and expanded as “Introduction: A Theology for Radical Believers and Other Baptists” in McClendon, *Ethics*, vii-xxxviii (Baylor University Press edition; also included as the introduction to the *Doctrine* and *Witness* volumes).

<sup>9</sup> McClendon, *Doctrine*, 251-63.

<sup>10</sup> McClendon, *Doctrine*, 194-95, and restated on p. 250.

<sup>11</sup> McClendon, *Doctrine*, 276.

<sup>12</sup> McClendon, *Doctrine*, 263-79.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. F. Michael McLain, “Narrative Interpretation and the Problem of Double Agency,” in *Divine Action: Studies Inspired by the Philosophical Theology of Austin Farrer* (ed. Brian Hebblethwaite and Edward Henderson; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 143: “If God is an agent who acts in the world so as to disclose divine character and purpose, then narrative is the appropriate form in which to render God’s identity.” Daniel L. Migliore cites McLain in connection with his own observations on the connection between narrative, identity, and revelation: “[O]ur identity as persons is often rendered in narrative form. If this is true of our self-disclosure to each other, by analogy it is also true of the self-disclosure of God.” D. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 37.

*identity. At the same time the story of Christ fully encompasses and discloses the story of humanity, which is our identity. Yet these two distinguishable stories, these two identities, are in Jesus Christ one indivisible narrative identity.* Below is McClendon's summary of his proposal in his own words:

Therefore we have these two stories, of divine self-expense and human investment, of God reaching to people even before people reach to God, of a God who gives in order to be able to receive, and a humanity that receives so that it shall be able to give. Together, they constitute the biblical story in its fullness. *And now the capstone word is this: these two stories are at last indivisibly one.* We can separate them for analysis, but we cannot divide them; there is but one story there to be told. Finally, this story becomes gospel, becomes good news, when we discover that it is our own.<sup>14</sup>

Notwithstanding McClendon's declaration that "two-natures Christology has had its day, and we need not return to it," I see his two-narrative alternative not as a replacement for Chalcedon but as an extension and enrichment of it. McClendon's Christology teases out additional implications of the incarnation beyond what could be expressed within the constraints of the Chalcedonian categories by re-reading the Council's insights in light of a new set of questions and categories that belong to a context other than the Hellenism of late antiquity—namely, the West after modernity. Just as McClendon compared the diverse historical atonement theories to the Jewish rabbinical midrashim that re-interpreted rather than replaced the biblical stories,<sup>15</sup> so we might regard McClendon's two-narrative proposal as a sort of midrashic re-interpretation rather than replacement of Chalcedon. Furthermore, McClendon's qualifications regarding the relation of the two narratives to each other correspond to those of the Chalcedonian Definition: the two narrative identities may be separated for analysis ("without confusion"), but they cannot be divided ("without division or separation").

## II. MCCLENDON'S NARRATIVE CHRISTOLOGY IN ECUMENICAL PERSPECTIVE

It is true that "to the objection that all this talk of twoness and oneness in narrative does not correspond very well to classic two-nature-in-one-being Christology," McClendon himself replied, "it does not."<sup>16</sup> Thus it might initially seem that McClendon's proposal is just as much of an ecumenical non-starter as would be the suggestion of scrapping Trinitarian faith, which is the minimal doctrinal basis for membership in the broadly inclusive World Council of Churches.<sup>17</sup> Yet there is good ecumenical

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<sup>14</sup> McClendon, *Doctrine*, 276-77.

<sup>15</sup> McClendon, *Doctrine*, 230-33.

<sup>16</sup> McClendon, *Doctrine*, 276.

<sup>17</sup> Affirmation of a basically trinitarian doctrine of God—one God who exists as three distinct persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—seems to be the implication of the basis adopted by the World Council of Churches at its Third Assembly in Evanston, Illinois in 1961: "The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the scriptures and therefore seek to fulfill together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit" (World Council of Churches, "Theological and Historical Background of the WCC Basis"; n.p. Online: <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/other/theological-and-historical-background-of-the-wcc-basis>).

precedent for considering the Chalcedonian two-nature Christology and McClendon's two-narrative account fundamentally compatible. The Vatican II Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio* allowed that differing doctrinal formulations, including the relation of Chalcedonian Christology to the Christologies of the non-Chalcedonian churches of the East, may be "mutually complementary rather than conflicting."<sup>18</sup> John Paul II's encyclical "On Commitment to Ecumenism" *Ut Unum Sint* likewise posited the essential unity of "different ways of looking at the same reality," offering as evidence that such is possible the common declarations on Christology signed by Catholic popes and patriarchs of non-Chalcedonian churches.<sup>19</sup> *Unitatis Redintegratio* and *Ut Unum Sint* may be Catholic documents, but they testify to what is an ecumenically shared recognition. Several bilateral dialogues between the non-Chalcedonian churches of the East and Protestant as well as Catholic and Orthodox churches bear this out: these include dialogues between the Anglican Communion and the Oriental Orthodox Churches, between the Eastern Orthodox Churches and the Oriental Orthodox Churches, between the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Oriental Orthodox Churches, between the Oriental Orthodox Churches and the Roman Catholic Church, and between the Roman Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East.<sup>20</sup> The following quotation from the "Agreed Statement on Christology" issued in 2002 by the Anglican-Oriental Orthodox International Commission is representative of what these dialogues have achieved in overcoming the Christological divisions of the fifth century, in this case between those who affirm the Chalcedonian Definition and the Monophysites anathematized by it:

[T]hose among us who speak of two natures of Christ are justified in doing so since they do not thereby deny their inseparable indivisible union; similarly, those among us who speak of one incarnate nature of the Word of God are justified in doing so since they do not thereby deny the continuing dynamic presence in Christ of the divine and the human....We recognize the limit of all theological language and the philosophical terminology of which it makes and has made use. We are unable to confine the mystery of God's utter self-giving in

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<sup>18</sup> Vatican II, "Decree on Ecumenism" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*), 21 November, 1964, § 17, in *Trent to Vatican II* (vol. 2 of *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*; ed. Norman P. Tanner; London: Sheed & Ward and Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 917. In context, the reference to "mutually complementary rather than conflicting" theological formulations has in mind ecumenical relations with the Eastern Orthodox churches.

<sup>19</sup> John Paul II, "Ut Unum Sint" (Encyclical on Commitment to Ecumenism, 25 May 1995), § 38; [cited?]. Online: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_25051995\\_ut-unum-sint\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25051995_ut-unum-sint_en.html).

<sup>20</sup> The reports and agreed statements from these bilateral dialogues are gathered in volumes of the *Growth in Agreement* series published under the auspices of the World Council of Churches Faith and Order Commission: Jeffrey Gros, Harding Meyer, and William G. Rusch, eds., *Growth in Agreement II: Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level, 1982-1998* (Faith and Order Paper no. 187; Geneva: WCC Publications and Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), 108-112 (Anglican-Oriental Orthodox), 187-99 (Eastern Orthodox-Oriental Orthodox), 291-94 (Reformed-Oriental Orthodox), 688-708 (Oriental Orthodox-Roman Catholic), 709-12 (Assyrian Church of the East-Roman Catholic); Jeffrey Gros, Thomas F. Best, and Lorelei F. Fuchs, eds., *Growth in Agreement III: International Dialogue Texts and Agreed Statements, 1998-2005* (Geneva: WCC Publications and Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), 2-11 (Eastern Orthodox-Oriental Orthodox), 33-38 (Anglican-Oriental Orthodox), 39-57 (Reformed-Oriental Orthodox), 190-96 (Oriental Orthodox-Roman Catholic), 197-205 (Assyrian Church of the East/Chaldean Church-Roman Catholic).

the incarnation of the divine Word in an ineffable, inexpressible and mysterious union of divinity and humanity, which we worship and adore.<sup>21</sup>

If recent ecumenical dialogue is able to recognize such diverse articulations of Christology as belonging to the one faith that the Christian church has in Christ, McClendon's non-Chalcedonian Christology should escape anathema as well. It may be that McClendon has successfully articulated in narrative terms rather more directly the essential event that other Christological formulations reference in less direct ways. Events like the incarnation, after all, *are* stories. Narrations of events have a more direct relationship to the events themselves; explanations of the events are more distant. Fidelity to the same first-order narrative that gives the community its identity may nevertheless yield differing second-order explications that are, in the words of *Unitatis Redintegratio*, "mutually complementary rather than conflicting." McClendon's narrative approach to Christology highlights the shared first-order narrative in ways that render differing explications less exclusive of one another; it might also be applicable to other doctrinal roots of the church's current divisions, but that possibility is beyond the scope of the present article.

### III. A NARRATIVE-CHRISTOLOGICAL ECCLESIOLOGY?

There is another feature of McClendon's Christology that has less obvious ecumenical implications. In the course of elaborating his two-narrative proposal, McClendon drops but does not develop the tantalizing hint that features of his Christology may be extended ecclesialogically. He writes, "*in resurrection light*, apostolic Christianity can be construed as the continuation of the Jesus story already begun."<sup>22</sup> The remainder of this article draws on McClendon's narrative Christology to make some constructive ecclesiological proposals regarding this "continuation of the Jesus story already begun." These proposals also draw from the ecumenically shared concept of the earthly church as a pilgrim community. That ecclesial orientation is embodied by the early monastic communities, and it is articulated in the Vatican II Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, which, in a chapter titled "The Eschatological Nature of the Pilgrim Church and Her Union with the Heavenly Church," insists that the church "will receive its perfection only in the glory of heaven."<sup>23</sup> It is intrinsic to the tradition to which McClendon's project seeks to give voice, for the free churches at their best are relentlessly pilgrim communities that resist overly-realized eschatologies of the church. Their ecclesial ideal is the church that is fully under the rule of Christ, which they locate somewhere ahead of them rather than in any past or present instantiation of the church. In the meantime this free church orientation is one relentlessly dissatisfied with the present state of the church in its pilgrim journey toward the community that will be fully under the reign of Christ.

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<sup>21</sup> Anglican-Oriental Orthodox International Commission, "Agreed Statement on Christology" (Holy Etchmiadzin, Armenia, 5-10 November 2002), in *Growth in Agreement III*, 36.

<sup>22</sup> McClendon, *Doctrine*, 272.

<sup>23</sup> Vatican II, "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church" *Lumen Gentium* (21 November 1964), § 48, in Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (rev. ed.; Northport, N.Y.: Costello Publishing Co., 1992), 407.

This applies also to the church's doctrinal formulations, considered revisable in light of "fresh light that may yet break forth from the Word."<sup>24</sup> McClendon's refusal to be bound Christologically by Chalcedon exemplifies this stance.

To suggest the systematic coinherence of Christology and ecclesiology is nothing new. The New Testament itself offers a Christological approach to ecclesiology for, as Paul Minear demonstrated in his book *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, the Pauline "body of Christ" is the central image that provides the interpretive key to the function of the ninety-six images of the church his book explores.<sup>25</sup> Karl Barth's theology of the church has been called a "Christological ecclesiology,"<sup>26</sup> and Orthodox theologian George Florovsky insisted that the church is the locus of "the continuing presence of the divine Redeemer."<sup>27</sup> But Barth and Florovsky simply echo something long established in the tradition. Augustine had cemented the connection in his memorable formula *totus Christus, caput et corpus*—"the whole Christ, head and body"—which he employed especially in his polemics against the Donatists who would divide the whole Christ.<sup>28</sup>

A Christological ecclesiology rooted in a narrative Christology in which the church continues the story of Jesus highlights the pilgrim nature of the divided church's journey toward the ecumenical future. I propose the following seven theses regarding what it might mean ecumenically for the church to embody the story of Jesus as a pilgrim people.<sup>29</sup>

*First thesis: The church's identity is the identity of Christ.* If the church is identified with the whole Christ as the body of Christ, the church's identity can be nothing other than Christ's identity. The divided church is a church that is separated from the fullness of its common identity in Christ. Its pilgrim journey to the ecumenical future progressively recovers this identity.

*Second thesis: The church's identity is the identity of Christ, which is the story of Christ.* If Christ's identity is most fully described in terms of his story, and the church derives its identity from Christ, then unless head and body are severed, Christ's story is the church's story, and thus its identity. The divided church is a church that has lost its unifying story. Its pilgrim journey to the ecumenical future entails a recovery of Christ's story as its own—as the narrative world in and out of which it lives, as the narrative in light of which it understands the world to which it bears witness.

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<sup>24</sup> These much-quoted words attributed to English Separatist John Robinson (1575/76-1625) in a farewell address delivered to the Mayflower Pilgrims at their departure from the Netherlands in 1620 are frequently offered as a concise articulation of this pilgrim hermeneutical stance toward received interpretations of Scripture. Robinson's address was recounted by Edward Winslow (1595-1655) in *Hypocrisy Unmasked: a true relation of the proceedings of the Governor and company of the Massachusetts against Samuel Gorton of Rhode Island* (1646). As scholarship on Robinson has noted, however, the quotation in question may be apocryphal; so, e.g., Timothy George, *John Robinson and the English Separatist Tradition* (NABPR Dissertation Series, no. 1; Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1982), vii.

<sup>25</sup> Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 221-49.

<sup>26</sup> Kimlyn J. Bender, *Karl Barth's Christological Ecclesiology* (Barth Studies; Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2005).

<sup>27</sup> George Florovsky, "As the Truth is in Jesus," *Christian Century* 68, no. 51 (December 19, 1951): 1459 (1457-59).

<sup>28</sup> E.g., Augustine of Hippo, *Sermo* 341.1.1 (PL 39:1493); ET, "Sermon 341: On the Three Ways of Understanding Christ in Scripture," in *Sermons 341-400* (The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, pt. III, vol. 10; ed. John E. Rotelle; trans. Edmund Hill; Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City Press, 1995), 19.

<sup>29</sup> While this article does not interact with his proposals, George Lindbeck has offered a narrative account of ecclesiology in his essay "The Story-Shaped Church: Critical Exegesis and Theological Interpretation" in *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation* (ed. Garrett Green; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 161-78.

*Third thesis: The church's identity is the identity of Christ, which is the story of Christ, which is the story conferred in baptism.* In baptism the story of Jesus' death and resurrection becomes the story of those who follow him (Rom 6:3-11), making them participants in a new story in which characters have new roles: because they have taken on Christ's story in baptism, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all ... are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:27-28 NRSV). The origin of the ancient rule of faith in baptismal confession underscores baptism's conferral of narrative identity. In the eventual forms of the "Nicene" (Niceno-Constantinopolitan) Creed, the baptismal confession of the Eastern Churches, and the Apostles' Creed, the baptismal confession of the Western churches, the rule of faith rehearses in brief the story in Christ told in full by the Bible. In baptism Christians embrace this narrative identity as theirs, and it embraces them. The divided church is a church that has not fully recognized this baptismal identity as one baptism into the one body of Christ. Its pilgrim journey to the ecumenical future involves the mutual recognition of baptism, for not to recognize a person's baptism "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt 28:19) is to deny Christ as that person's identity.<sup>30</sup>

*Fourth thesis: The church's identity is the identity of Christ, which is the story of Christ, which is the story of the Triune God.* The divine story that is the story of Christ is not the story of generic, abstract divinity, but the inescapably triadic story of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who has taken on flesh in Jesus Christ and given God's Spirit to the church in Pentecost. To repeat part of my summary of McClendon's two-narrative Christology: "The story of Christ fully encompasses and discloses the story of the Triune God, which is God's identity." This inescapably triadic divine story is the one that the church embraces and that embraces the church in its tripartite baptismal confession. Yet there is a proper distinction between the story of the creator and the story of the creature.<sup>31</sup> For the church as God's creature, Christ is the key to this distinction. As the one in whom "all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (Col 1:19 NRSV), Christ's story is directly the story of the Triune God. As the body that has Christ as head (Col 1:18), the church's story is derivatively the story of the Triune God. By virtue of its *koinonia* in Christ as Christ's body, the church has a participation in the life of the Triune God. This is the point at which Christology has an advantage over Trinitarian theology as the organizing principle of an ecclesiology. Ecclesiologies developed along the lines of social Trinitarian thought have contributed important insights regarding the ecclesial life that ought to be,<sup>32</sup> but the church's identity in the story of the Triune God does not come

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<sup>30</sup> Two documents offered to the churches as the fruit of decades of multilateral dialogue through the World Council of Churches Commission on Faith and Order have proposed possible pathways to convergence in mutual baptismal recognition: World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Faith and Order Paper No. 111; Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982); World Council of Churches, *One Baptism: Toward Mutual Recognition. A Study Text* (Faith and Order Paper No. 210; Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2011). For a Baptist perspective on the proposals of the latter document, see Steven R. Harmon, "One Baptism: A Study Text for Baptists," *Baptist World: A Magazine of the Baptist World Alliance* 58, no. 1 (January/March 2011): 9-10.

<sup>31</sup> A distinction McClendon makes in *Doctrine*, 275.

<sup>32</sup> E.g., Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (trans. Margaret Kohl; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981); Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society* (Theology and Liberation series; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988).

merely from the church's imitation of the mutuality that characterizes the Triune life.<sup>33</sup> The church's identity in the story of the Triune God comes from its participation in the life of the Triune God through Christ. The divided church has an attenuated Trinitarian identity because it is bodily diminished in relationship to its head. Its pilgrim journey to the ecumenical future requires taking up ecclesial practices that draw the church into deeper participation in the life of the Triune God. As the churches participate more fully in the life of the Triune God, the mutuality of the Triune God's oneness-in-distinct-otherness becomes more fully manifest in ecclesial life.

*Fifth thesis: The church's identity is the identity of Christ, which is the story of Christ, which is the story of our humanity.* Here the emphasis is on *our* humanity. McClendon's insistence that the story of Christ fully encompasses and discloses the story of humanity means that in Christ's humanity is the story of humanity as it ought to be—seen in the New Testament emphasis on the sinlessness of Jesus, or positively expressed as his “full faithfulness”<sup>34</sup>—as well as the story of humanity in opposition to God's intentions for human life. In regard to the latter, McClendon seems to follow Karl Barth in suggesting that the humanity that Jesus embraces is not unfallen humanity but humanity inclined toward sin—an inclination that Jesus shared in his solidarity with the human condition but which Jesus faithfully resisted at every stage in his human moral development.<sup>35</sup> When Christ's story as the story of humanity becomes the church's story, it is in this twofold sense. It discloses the church as it ought to be—the spotless bride of Christ. But it also exposes the church's distance from that in its existence in the eschatological tension between the “already” and the “not yet.” The church is a pilgrim community because of its earthly distance from its not-yet-realized goal—a distance that includes what Karl Rahner named as ecclesial sin.<sup>36</sup> Certainly the church's divisions and refusals to overcome them are among these ecclesial sins. The pilgrim church, whose narrative identity is that of Christ, shares especially in the story of sin-inclined humanity that Jesus's story encompasses. The church's pilgrim journey to the ecumenical future therefore involves owning its temporal identity as a penitential community, called to repentance for sins of division and its perpetuation.<sup>37</sup>

*Sixth thesis: The church's identity is the identity of Christ, which is the story of Christ, which is the story of all the members of Christ's body.* The way to the ecumenical future entails the recovery of the common narrative-Christological identity the church receives in baptism, but that does not require the relinquishing of the stories of divided communities in their historic and ongoing journeys. While denominational stories are in part stories of ecclesial sin, they also serve as bearers of the distinctive ecclesial gifts that are distributed

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<sup>33</sup> Miroslav Volf offers appropriate cautions regarding the pitfalls of rooting an ecclesiology or political theology in human imitation of the intra-trinitarian relations in his article “The Trinity is Our Social Program?: The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Shape of Social Engagement,” *Modern Theology* 14, no. 3 (July 1998): 403-23.

<sup>34</sup> McClendon, *Doctrine*, 273.

<sup>35</sup> McClendon, *Doctrine*, 262 and 273. Karl Barth, whose anticipations of a narrative Christology McClendon applauded, had also insisted that it is this sort of sinful humanity that Christ assumed. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2 (trans. G. T. Thomson and Harold Knight; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 151-55.

<sup>36</sup> Karl Rahner, “The Sinful Church in the Decrees of Vatican II,” in *Concerning Vatican Council II* (vol. 6 of *Theological Investigations*; trans. Karl-H. and Boniface Kruger; Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1969), 270-94.

<sup>37</sup> This point is forcefully argued by Ephraim Radner, *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1998).

throughout the divided church and that no one church completely possesses. In recognition of both dimensions of the stories of particular communions—ecclesial sin as well as ecclesial giftedness—the five-year international dialogue between the Baptist World Alliance and the Anglican Consultative Council gave significant attention to the sharing of local stories of Baptist communities, of Anglican communities, and of the local relationships between them.<sup>38</sup> The story of Christ includes such particular stories, for Christ is present in them. And if these stories belong to the story of Christ, they are the whole church's stories, too. The church's pilgrim journey to the ecumenical future involves the sharing of the particular stories that belong to the story of the whole church—as acts of confession, repentance, and reconciliation, and as acts of receptive ecumenism that receive as gifts from one another the missing pieces of the divided churches' stories.

*Seventh thesis: The church's identity is the identity of Christ, which is the story of Christ, which is the story of the eschatological community.* Story is inherently eschatological—a story goes somewhere. If it is a story, it has a plot, driven by conflict and resolution. The Johannine Jesus discloses a dimension of the conclusion to the church's story when in John 17 he prays for the visible unity of those who follow him. The story's plot is driven in part by the conflict of division, introduced already in the New Testament chapter of the story. The church's pilgrim journey to the ecumenical future takes place in the tension between the present conflict of division and the future resolution of visible unity. But because the church knows the story's conclusion, the church participates in the quest for Christian unity in hope, no matter how dismal the present prospects for visible unity may seem.

I do not know whether McClendon would endorse these theses outlining a narrative-Christological ecclesiology and its ecumenical implications, and I do not think that they necessarily depend on McClendon's distinctive Christology. But in ecumenical and ecclesiological perspective, McClendon's two-narrative Christology can both lend support to ecumenical convergences on Christology and inspire an ecclesiology that lends support to ecumenical convergence.

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<sup>38</sup> Anglican Consultative Council and Baptist World Alliance, *Conversations Around the World: The Report of the International Conversations between the Anglican Communion and the Baptist World Alliance 2000-2005* (London: Anglican Communion Office, 2005), 82-97.

# BEYOND A BATH AND A BOOK: BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL COMMITMENTS<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. INVENTING BAPTIST THEOLOGY

I recently wrote a little book entitled *Baptist Theology*.<sup>2</sup> It took its place in a series alongside volumes on Reformed theology, Anglican theology, Roman Catholic theology, Lutheran theology, and Methodist theology. I reflected as I wrote that volume that I felt at a distinct disadvantage compared to all my fellow authors: in every other case, the writer was being asked to summarize, perhaps to synthesize, an ongoing dialogue with at least some measure of shared methodology and agreed starting points. There are rich academic and ecclesial traditions of reflection on Anglican, Roman, Reformed, and Methodist theology; not so Baptist theology. To write a summary of Baptist theology was to invent the tradition before distilling it.

This is not to say, of course, that Baptists have not done theology—although we have few names who would rank amongst the great theologians, and fewer still who have been self-consciously “pan-Baptist” in their reflection, trying to think theologically in ways not just influenced by their own Baptist beliefs, but also somehow attentive and responsible to the breadth of lived faith of others who claimed the denomination “Baptist.” (By contrast, consider, say, Rowan Williams’ reflections on Anglican theology; he offers a creative and profound re-interpretation of a particular tradition of Anglo-Catholicism, and situates it in, sometimes tacit, dialogue with evangelical and broad traditions of Anglican theology. There are a series of interconnected academic dialogues in which he finds his own space.)

I say this not to claim particular merit for that essay—I am acutely aware of its failings—or to seek to excuse the failures in the book—or those in this paper—but instead to make clear that in what follows I am attempting a construction of a tradition, and that this construction is neither generally agreed nor tested by any developed academic debate. It is hesitant (even if my natural writing style is not) and it is deeply partial, in both senses of that word. Further, as will become clear, no Baptist body—not the Baptist World Alliance, nor any national or regional Union, Convention, or Association—has any ability to decide on a particular vision of what Baptist theology should be (it might *commend* a proposed vision, but that is

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<sup>1</sup> This is a revised version of a paper prepared for the first meeting of the bilateral dialogues between the Baptist World Alliance and the World Methodist Council. I am grateful to other participants for their helpful comments on the paper.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen R. Holmes, *Baptist Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2012). Most of the argument of this paper and, I think, all of the examples can be found in that book, as can an extensive bibliography on Baptist theology.

rather different). The account of Baptist theological commitments that follows has neither the force of tradition nor the backing of any competent ecclesial authority; the only power it may bring to bear on other any other Baptist believer or congregation is that of moral suasion.

## 2. POSSIBLE MODELS OF BAPTIST THEOLOGY

That said, there are of course some proposed models of what Baptist theology should be. Before proposing my own, it is appropriate to offer a survey of the possible options. One way of thinking about their variety is to construct a scale ranging from “maximalist” accounts of Baptist distinctiveness to “minimalist” accounts thereof. A “maximalist” account so stresses the difference of Baptist belief from all, or most, other Christian traditions as to create a major gulf: to use a geographical analogy, the proposal here is that Anglicans, Lutherans, Catholics, and Methodists are in various different parts of Europe; Baptists are in New Zealand. A minimalist account, by contrast, would stress the continuity and similarity of Baptist theology and practice to that of other Christian traditions. On this basis, we might group the various traditions of envisioning Baptist theology that I detect as follows:

### 2.1 Minimalist Models of Baptist Distinctiveness

The classic demonstration of a minimalist account of Baptist identity would be the Particular (i.e., Calvinistic) Baptist Second London Confession of 1677; this Confession was a fairly light revision of the Savoy Declaration, issued by English Congregationalists in 1658, which in turn was a revision of the famous (Presbyterian) Westminster Confession of 1646.<sup>3</sup> Some, at least, of the Congregationalists who prepared the Savoy Declaration had sat in the Westminster Assembly that produced the Westminster Confession; although that document affirmed presbyterian polity over congregationalist polity, there was certainly a sense of shared work. The Baptists were not present at Westminster, and the date of the Second London Confession may be revealing: it was issued in the middle of the persecution of nonconformists that followed the restoration of the English monarchy; when Baptists, Congregationalists, and Presbyterians alike faced the threat of imprisonment, and worse, for their ecclesial practices; finding ways of magnifying unity must have been attractive.<sup>4</sup>

That said, the 1677 Confession carefully locates Baptists as full members of a broader tradition of English nonconformity: a broadly shared Reformed and Calvinistic theological confession is constructed, in which there are differences over church order, which might be presbyterian or congregationalist; the relationship between church and state, and the proper mode and subjects of baptism. It is striking that, constructing the synthesis this way, Baptists and Congregationalists are on the same side on two of the

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<sup>3</sup> The text of the Confession can be found in W.L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1969), 241-95.

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the authors of the Confession are explicit that this is their purpose; see Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 245.

three substantive points of difference; Presbyterianism was by some distance the majority tradition in seventeenth-century English nonconformity, but this construction nonetheless embeds the (Particular) Baptists firmly within the mainstream of a nonconformist tradition.<sup>5</sup>

The habit of making common cause became entrenched in English nonconformity, with the founding of the Deputies of the Three Dissenting Denominations early in the eighteenth century representing one of the earliest formal trans-denominational bodies in British history, at least. The Second London Confession was adopted in America by the Philadelphia Association in 1742, and as a result became a central document in the development of US Baptist life. I am not aware of evidence that this was done with specific intention to stress theological continuity with Presbyterianism, but the fact remains that it did so, and it remained probably the most significant confessional document amongst US Baptists until the writing of the 1832 New Hampshire Confession of Faith.

In England there was a further impetus to this “minimalist” construction of Baptist identity in the Act of Toleration of 1689, which brought an end to the active persecution of (Trinitarian, protestant) dissenters; the Act required dissenting ministers seeking its protection to affirm their agreement to thirty five or thirty six of the *Thirty Nine Articles*, the confessional statement of the Church of England. (The excluded articles were those on church order and church-state relations; Baptists were in addition allowed to dissent from the Article on infant baptism.) The context of course was the immediate aftermath of the “Glorious Revolution” of 1688, and the basic anti-Catholicism which was a powerful driver in English history throughout the early modern period; nonetheless, by this decision Baptists become co-opted, even if willingly so, as another member of a broad protestant alliance.

This “minimalist” construction of Baptist distinctiveness has continued to find expression, particularly in pan-evangelical movements; insofar as evangelicalism has tended to downplay the importance of ecclesiology, Baptist ecclesiological distinctives are less of an impediment to finding a basic evangelical unity. Speaking very roughly, it would be the normal position for Baptists in the UK and Europe to locate themselves happily within a broader pan-evangelicalism; in the USA and elsewhere in the world the situation is rather more varied.

That said, the most visible expressions of this Baptist minimalism at present are probably from the US. A series of broadly Calvinistic pan-evangelical bodies have been coming to prominence (“The Gospel Coalition” is probably the most famous), and have attracted much personal support from leading Baptists, if not yet any significant institutional support from Baptist conventions or denominations. We see here a self-conscious locating of Baptist identity as a subset of a broader evangelical Calvinist (or “neo-Reformed”) theology. This identification would not commend itself generally to Baptists, but represents the far end of one way of constructing Baptist theology.

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<sup>5</sup> There are, it should be noted, changes to the wording of Westminster Confession made by the Savoy Declaration which have nothing to do with church order, and similarly there are a few changes made by the Second London Confession to Savoy. These soteriological changes are certainly interesting, but do not I think weaken my general thesis here, that the Second London Confession is a conscious aligning of the Particular Baptists with a broader Christian tradition.

## 2.2 Maximalist Models of Baptist Distinctiveness

The maximalist vision of Baptist identity, which stresses the difference between Baptists and all, or most, other groups, finds classic expression right at the beginning of the Baptist movement. Thomas Helwys, who pastored the first Baptist church in the UK, wrote a justly-celebrated book, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*.<sup>6</sup> The text is famous for its robust and uncompromising assertion of the principle of freedom of belief—of which more later—but that is not the main argument of the text, rather Helwys intends to show that every other “Christian” group in existence is apostate, beginning with Rome, but moving through the Church of England to the Puritans, the Separatists (“Brownism”), and even John Robinson, pastor of the sister congregation to Helwys’ church. On Helwys’ telling, Baptists are basically different from all others who claim the name “Christian,” a difference which is the difference between truth and error, salvation and perdition.

Arguably, the General (*i.e.*, Arminian) Baptist tradition that can trace its roots back to Helwys’ church maintained this more maximalist distinctiveness through the seventeenth century, although this judgement stands in need of considerable nuance. In the 1640s both General and Particular Baptists made common cause with millennial religious radical groups with revolutionary political ideas (Fifth Monarchists and Levellers, for example); into the 1650s both traditions moved to distance themselves from immanent millennial expectations and political radicalism, however, although probably the Particulars were more successful in making a complete break. General Baptist life was somewhat porous, although never sympathetic, to Quakerism throughout the century. In the last decade of the century, the role of a leader, Matthew Caffyn, accused of heterodox views on the Trinity was debated nationally, leading to a temporary split; the evidence concerning Caffyn’s actual beliefs is not unambiguous, but if he did indeed deny the Trinity then his vindication represents perhaps the earliest acceptance of trinitarian heterodoxy by a previously-orthodox denomination. (At the famous Salters’ Hall synod of 1719 the General Baptists mostly sided with the proposition that no confession of trinitarian faith that was not a repetition of biblical language should be required.)

Perhaps the purest and most carefully developed maximalist account of the distinctiveness of Baptist belief is the nineteenth-century American tradition of “Landmarkianism” (the name derives from an 1854 pamphlet by James M. Pendleton, entitled “An Old Landmark Re-set”). According to this tradition, the practice of baptism by the immersion of a confessed believer in water is central to the being of the church (and so it is necessary that those performing baptism must have themselves been baptized as believers by immersion). Landmarkian tradition constructs a line of alternative apostolic succession, common to various radical protestant groups, through which the true church, of baptized believers, may be traced back to the apostles. A classic statement of this position can be found in W.A. Jarrel’s 1894 text

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<sup>6</sup> There is a modern edition, Joe Early, *The Life and Writings of Thomas Helwys* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2009), 155-310; this is imperfect in a number of respects, however, and a facsimile of the original edition is to be preferred.

*Baptist Church Perpetuity* (which is still in print),<sup>7</sup> which begins by arguing that “church perpetuity” is a biblical promise, and so, given that the Baptist churches are the only true churches, it is necessary to suppose that there is an unbroken succession of Baptist churches in history (the minor premise here might be open to dispute...). Jarrel then traces the history of baptistic church life from the apostles to the rise of Anabaptism in the sixteenth century, his imagined line passing through Montanists, Novatians, Donatists, Paulicians, Albigenses, Paterines, Henricans, Arnoldists, and Waldenses. In treating each group he justifies classifying them as Baptist, and defends them, more successfully in some cases than others in my estimation, against the various charges of heresy or heterodoxy that have surrounded them.

The strength of this tradition at its height, around 1900, can be gauged by the story of the church historian William T. Whitsitt, who was forced to resign as president of Southern Baptist Seminary when he aroused the ire of the Landmarkian constituency by mentioning, correctly, in a historical piece that early Baptists practised baptism by effusion, not by immersion. The theological distinctiveness expressed within Landmarkian belief is, it should be said, not much greater than in other Baptist traditions, beyond this core conviction about baptism.

In contemporary Baptist life, however, a somewhat different maximalist model would be more common, finding its strength generally, but not exclusively, in Europe. On this account, Baptists find their true identity alongside Mennonites and other survivors of sixteenth-century Anabaptist radicalism in what is sometimes called (following James McClendon’s coinage) a “baptistic” tradition. Here there is a very distinct way of doing theology, focused on a conviction that Christian belief derives only from Christian practice, and indeed can only be understood by one active in Christian practice, and a conviction that the heart of Christian practice is peaceable living. On this basis McClendon began his three volume systematic theology with *Ethics*, and moved through *Doctrine to Witness*.<sup>8</sup>

In recent reflection, the focus on pacifism as the core of Christian ethics, and so of Christianity, within this tradition seems to have been strong. There is undoubtedly influence here from John Howard Yoder’s Mennonite vision,<sup>9</sup> but also (it seems to me) an appreciation of pacifism as a stance that visibly and decisively insists on the separate moral spheres of church and state. A developed and morally-serious pacifism, that is opposed to all coercive practices, is essentially impossible as a broad societal ethic, and so locates the church in a sphere of “holiness,” of inevitable distance from normal cultural practices.

### 2.3 Modified Maximalist Models of Baptist Distinctiveness

Obviously, there is considerable space between these two poles of “minimal distinctiveness” and “maximal distinctiveness,” and unsurprisingly most live models of Baptist identity fall somewhere in this middle space. It is perhaps not unreasonable, however, to map them as beginning with either a maximal or minimal model, and then modifying it. That is, some positions start with a stress on the difference of

<sup>7</sup> W.A. Jarrel, *Baptist Church Perpetuity* (Dallas, TX: 1894).

<sup>8</sup> James W. McClendon, *Systematic Theology* (3 vols; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986-2000).

<sup>9</sup> See particularly John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit agnus noster* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

Baptists from all other Christians, and then soften that difference, whereas others start with a stress on the essential unity of Baptists with other Christian believers, and then work to somewhat heighten the points of difference.

Probably most accounts of Baptist theology that follow McClendon's vision of a "baptistic" identity should in fact be classed as modified maximalist accounts, including McClendon's own. He proposes a broad family of radical Christianity, with its radical end being inhabited by groups such as the Hutterite Brethren, devoted to communal living, or the Amish, whose patterns of sociality and attitude to technology separate them decisively from mainstream culture. Considered like this, Baptists represent the moderate end of baptistic theology, standing in closer continuity to mainstream Christianity than any other baptistic group in theology, in historical engagement, and in ecumenical practice.

A fascinating recent attempt by Irish Baptists to brand themselves as "neither Catholic nor Protestant" is another example of this modified maximalism. In the context of a community profoundly divided over decades by Protestant-Catholic sectarian violence, they drew on a reclamation of the Anabaptist heritage, noting that Anabaptists were persecuted equally by Rome and by Reformers, and so claimed to stand uniquely as a Christian tradition which was outside of the particular conflict that was blighting their society. The attempt was largely unsuccessful, as I understand it (to the best of my knowledge there is no properly written history, so I am judging merely on the basis of various personal assessments I have heard/read), because the cultural pressure to classify groups as belonging on one side or the other was too strong to resist—Baptists were perceived to be protestants, whatever they claimed. It was an interesting experiment in reclaiming radical identity for missional purposes, however.

#### 2.4 Modified Minimalist Models of Baptist Distinctiveness

In ecumenical terms, the more influential presentations of Baptist theology are better described as modified minimalism. Recently, these include two proposals for Baptist identity which have both been developed (although in neither case exclusively) by Paul Fiddes. One, deployed in some national dialogues in the UK, focused on covenant as the organizing category of Baptist theology; in particular, the suggestion that an early Baptist idea of linking the covenant by which a local church was formed to the eternal covenant of grace, so that the former was the outworking in history of the latter, and they were, in effect, the same covenant, God's work of salvation, on this account, finds its application in the gathering of local churches. This is a radical vision in the sense that it finds such a central place for the local congregation, and it is an authentically Baptist vision: John Smyth, the founder of the Baptist movement, once asked "[i]s not the visible church of the New Testament with all the ordinances thereof the chief and principal part of the Gospel?" On the other hand, it is closely related to Puritan covenant theology, and so

is properly classed as a modified minimalism in terms of its construction of Baptist distinctiveness: Baptists, on this account, are Puritans with a twist...<sup>10</sup>

Fiddes' later account, which is influential in the recently-published report of the BWA dialogues with the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity,<sup>11</sup> stresses communion ecclesiology as an organizing principle for Baptist theology, and invites Roman Catholics to imagine their theology in similar terms. This is visibly a distinctively Baptist development of the recent Catholic tradition of *communio ecclesiology*, and so is again properly reported as a modified minimalism in my terms.

The very influential vision of E.Y. Mullins should be mentioned in this connexion also. In his *The Axioms of Religion*<sup>12</sup> he proposed six "axioms" that between them summed up Baptist theology:

1. The theological axiom: the holy and loving God has a right to be sovereign.
2. The religious axiom: all souls have an equal right to direct access to God.
3. The ecclesiastical axiom: all believers have a right to equal privileges in the church.
4. The moral axiom: to be responsible, man must be free.
5. The religio-civic axiom: a free church in a free state.
6. The social axiom: love your neighbour as yourself.

Mullins suggests two things concerning this list. The first is that it is all summed up in the core Baptist conviction of "soul competency," a doctrine which denies any possibility or necessity of an intermediary between the believer and God. This is not, Mullins is careful to stress, an innate competency, but a gift of grace. The second point is that in this construction Baptists are merely perfecting the basic genius of the Reformation; he narrates the history of Christianity since the Reformation as an ongoing conflict between a belief in the direct access of the soul to God—essentially, "soul competency"—and a belief that the soul's access to God is only possible indirectly. On this basis, it is reasonable to see Mullins' vision as a modified minimalism: Baptists, on his account, are the purest protestants, but not fundamentally different from other protestants.

My own proposal, worked out in my *Baptist Theology*, is also a modified minimalism. I suggest that, first, Baptists share all doctrines except ecclesiology with other Christians. Second, however, I suggest that the effects of our distinctive ecclesiology are much broader and far-reaching than has sometimes been suggested. To say "Baptists are evangelicals with a different practice of baptism and church government" is true, but misleading, because it misrepresents the extent of difference in theology and practice that our distinctive ecclesiology suggests. I argue—and I will work on this basis in the rest of this essay—that at the core of a Baptist vision is a dialectic between an intense individualism of the sort suggested by Mullins,

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<sup>10</sup> See various papers in Paul S. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2003) for developments of this theme.

<sup>11</sup> *The Word of God in the Life of the Church*; for the text and some responses see *American Baptist Quarterly* XXXI/1 (2012).

<sup>12</sup> E.Y. Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion: A New Interpretation of the Baptist Faith* (Philadelphia, PA: American Baptist Publications Society, 1908).

and an equally intense focus on local community—as Smyth said, the local, visible congregation is the “principle part of the gospel.”<sup>13</sup>

So, on the one hand, God alone is Lord, and God chooses to deal directly with every human person, and to hold every human person responsible for his/her response to God’s gospel call. No priest or king—or parent, or “godparent”—can answer for me; I must make my own response. On the other hand, God calls those who respond with repentance and faith to the gospel offer into a new society, the church, and into visible local manifestations of that new society. Local church membership is at the heart of Christian faith and practice.

These claims are both essentially ecclesiological (the individualism claim can be phrased essentially as a suggestion that the church has no mediatory role between God and each particular human being) and so my proposal for Baptist theology casts Baptists as protestants with a distinctive ecclesiology, but this distinctive ecclesiology has significant repercussions which separate Baptists from other Christians in faith and practice more than might be expected. In the next section I will outline those doctrines generally identified as Baptist distinctives and explore how they might be seen to arise out of this vision of Baptist theology, and the ways in which they are distinctive.

### 3. CORE BAPTIST DOCTRINES

#### 3.1 Biblicist and Communal Accounts of Authority

At the heart of Baptist distinctiveness is a particular view of authority. Baptist ecclesial practice is resolutely biblicist in a particular way, which we might denote “imitative”: Baptists have traditionally defended their core ecclesial practices on the basis of a repetition of New Testament practices. Baptism by immersion (for example) is remarkably untheologised in Baptist tradition; writer after writer insists simply that this is the biblical way of baptizing, and so it is the Baptist way of baptizing. This imitative practice makes ecumenical conversation difficult, of course; there is no purchase on the practice, no doctrinal analysis to be engaged with, simply a brute insistence that this is right.

It seems to me that this imitative form of biblicism is not merely a repetition of the claim to biblical faithfulness that every Christian denomination will make in some register. Nor, however, would I claim that it is uniquely Baptist; rather, it locates Baptists amongst a broad body of radical Christian practice sometimes denoted “restorationist,” in which the heart of biblical fidelity is not to believe what was believed in the New Testament church, but to do what was done there.

The most extreme example of this tendency within Baptist life is probably the “anti-missions” movement that arose in nineteenth-century America. The name refers not to a rejection of the work of evangelism, but to an opposition to mission societies—and indeed to all other Christian organizations that are not local churches. It found early classic expression in the Black Rock Address, an energetic and wide-

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<sup>13</sup> Cited in B.R. White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century* (London: Baptist Historical Society, 1983), 23.

ranging condemnation of everything that is not a local church. (Regarding “Theological Schools,” it announces “in every age, from the school of Alexandria down to this day, they have been a real pest to the church of Christ”; regarding “the modern missionary” we are told “[h]is leading motive, judging from his movements, is not love to souls, but love of fame”).

Alongside the basic imitative hermeneutic (which McClendon summed up simply as “This is that; then is now.”) there is a communal dimension to Baptist accounts of authority. In response to the fundamental question: how is the Scripture properly heard, how is its true meaning determined? Baptists have consistently answered, by the gathered community. The (local) church comes together to hear and interpret Scripture, and there is a particular promise of the Spirit that it is in this gathering that Scripture will be rightly heard and understood.

The sheer radicalness of this proposal should not be missed: to make the point by heightened contrast, the Baptist conviction is that forty barely-literate members of a church are a better interpretative community, and are more likely to understand Scripture well, than forty leading professors of Biblical Studies. (Of course, this is a return to protestant origins: precisely that example was put against Luther in *Exsurge Domine*—church tradition, the leading clerics, and the university professors all agreed that his Biblical interpretation was in error; so he should recant.)<sup>14</sup>

This is not to say that Baptists are opposed to biblical scholarship, or to receiving guidance from the wider church. The actual practice of church meeting is not a quiescent waiting for prophetic insight, but a conversation in which each member brings whatever gifts and insight—perhaps prophetic—God has been pleased to give to them.<sup>15</sup> Those who have theological training, or who have simply read widely and listened to good teaching, will bring that knowledge into the discussion, and it will/should be treated with proper respect—but the insight into God’s calling on the community that is only ever the gift of the Spirit is not a product of academic expertise, or of ordination to office, or of any other human qualification. The church deliberates together to hear the voice of the Spirit.

### 3.2 Believer’s Baptism by Immersion

Baptist practice of baptism can appear very distinctive, both in terms of mode and subject, to the point of potential incomprehension.<sup>16</sup> In fact, however, these practices when examined closely might be less distinctive than they appear. Starting with the mode of baptism, this represents an illustration of the imitative biblicism I described above: this is the way John, Jesus, and the apostles baptized, so this is the way we should baptize.

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<sup>14</sup> I develop this point in my “Baptists and the Bible,” *Baptist Quarterly* 43.7 (2010).

<sup>15</sup> See my “Knowing Together the Mind of Christ: Congregational Government and the Church Meeting” in Cross et al., eds., *Questions of Identity: Festschrift Brian Haymes* (Regent’s Park College, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> We recently as a family visited a Roman Catholic cathedral, and were shown its treasures, including a magnificently carved modern font, by a very enthusiastic guide; after she had left us, my twelve year old daughter took me aside and asked “So what is the big drinking fountain thing?”

Turning to the question of the subjects of baptism, the Baptist distinctive is not the baptism of converts on profession of faith; every denomination that maintains the sacrament of baptism would do that; rather Baptists are distinct in their refusal to baptize the infant children of fellow believers. In a context where virtually the entire population is at least nominally Christian—the whole of Europe and the USA until recently—the baptism of adults (or adolescents) is profoundly unusual and appears anomalous to members of churches that accept paedobaptism; in a missionary context it will be far less so.

Further, it should be noted that the decision to baptize only converts is one made by many protestant denominations, including many of the broadly Pentecostal denominations in Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa; there are areas or nations where most or all of the non-Catholic Christian traditions restrict baptism to believers, and so this practice is not a Baptist distinctive at all. That said, in most areas of the world it is a Baptist distinctive; I would suggest that the refusal to baptize infants represents a powerful illustration of what I have called the individualist theme in Baptist theology: it is an insistence that no-one, not my parents, not any sponsors, not my church community, can answer to God for me; God calls each human soul directly and personally.

### 3.3 Congregational Church Government

Baptists are committed to a congregational model of church government, which is to say that we believe that the local, gathered church is the primary ecclesial reality, and that the local church should be governed by communal discernment of God's will involving every member of the community in the process of discernment. If believer's baptism stresses the individualist pole of Baptist theology, congregationalism stresses the communal pole. The two, however, should not be separated: the proper result of immersion into water in confession of the triune name is immersion into the local community that confesses the triune name.

As noted above, there have been forms of Baptist theology that take this so seriously that they deny the legitimate existence of any ecclesial organization that is not a local church; a more moderate, but still authentically Baptist, position, that is rather easier to embrace in the context of BWA sponsored dialogue, is to insist that the local church will always be the primary ecclesial reality, and that translocal ecclesial bodies (including global alliances) have a representative and advisory role that may however never supersede or intrude on the ability and responsibility of the local church to seek its own understanding of Christ's call on its life. One would hope that, in a well-ordered and normal Baptist context, the decisions taken on serious matters by a representative body would be received with great respect by its several local congregations, and treated with great weight in their own deliberations—but their deliberations remain their own; the association, convention, union, or alliance (all common Baptist words for translocal fellowships) advises, it never commands. The most a Baptist association might do is choose to adjust its articles of association, so that churches who refuse to comply with a new decision are excluded from membership. Even a decision like this, however (and there are recent examples), would widely be viewed

as unacceptably coercive, somehow improper, too strong an attempt to influence the local churches' decisions.

On the basis of considerations like this, it is common to see or hear local Baptist churches described as “autonomous.” The accuracy of this description—and to this extent it is helpful—is that it stresses the total lack of central control over the churches, a point that non-congregational Christians can find it difficult to grasp. That said, theologically a Baptist church can never properly be described as “autonomous”; its law, its *nomos*, comes from Christ and Christ alone. Just as (as we shall see later) a Baptist concern for freedom of conscience is not an expression of interior sovereignty over self, but merely an insistence that Christ alone has the right to command belief, so the Baptist conviction about congregational government is at heart a belief that Christ rules in the church through his direct address through word and Spirit to local congregations, not mediately by way of Bishops or Councils. With due respect to the excellent service offered by many holders of the papal office, it is at the heart of Baptist belief that Christ has no vicar on earth.

All that said, the practice of association of local churches together in wider bodies is also natively Baptist. That those bodies have no power to command does not stop them having great wisdom to guide, and great usefulness in prosecuting shared designs. But a Baptist account of association goes beyond the merely pragmatic, or so I believe; the practice is so widespread and so apparently instinctive to Baptist churches, that some stronger account needs to be offered. Baptists see it as a duty to be in fellowship with all true Christians (even at our most sectarian, it seems to me that we have held to this principle, while simultaneously offering a woefully limited account of who might be encompassed in the class of “true Christians”...). If the requirement to be in membership of a local church is the first working out of this duty, the requirement for local churches who share the same faith to find an appropriate measure of love and unity with each other; this is the heart of the practice of association.

It is also, I suggest, the heart of a properly Baptist ecumenism. Insofar as a Baptist congregation can recognize another congregation as a true church of Jesus Christ, it has an ethical duty to be in fellowship. In many parts of the world this is now visibly worked out in local ecumenical practice, formal or informal, for which we may be thankful to God; given the particular account of congregational relationships sketched above it is almost certain that there are Baptist churches—perhaps particularly in the UK, where history has, as noted above, led to something of a willingness to set aside differences over baptismal practice—who in practice extend virtually the same measure of recognition to a local Methodist congregation as they do to other Baptist congregations.

What of ordained ministry? Three things should be said. First, in calling every member of the local congregation to take a share in leadership and church governance, to be involved in the mission of the church, and to minister for the common good within the congregation, Baptists do decisively relativize the distinctive role of ordained ministers. This has often been described as a “levelling down,” refusing any special role for the minister, but it may perhaps better be considered as a “levelling up”; a recent fine phrase (variously ascribed) describes the Baptist position as “the abolition of the laity.”

Second, however, Baptists have generally nonetheless had a practice of setting apart congregational leadership. Two broad patterns are in evidence: a bipartite pattern of pastors/elders and deacons, and a tripartite pattern of pastors, elders, and deacons. In each case the motivation for the practice is simple obedience to perceived New Testament church practice, as an application of the imitative biblicism I described above. These leaders have, as indicated above, no ability to command the congregation; they are called by congregational meeting and are bound to execute the decisions of the congregational meeting. Nor, generally, do they have roles to perform that are uniquely theirs: any member of the church may preach or preside at the Eucharist. That said, they are possessed of real authority by virtue of office (and one trusts by virtue of the character that led them being called to that office); if they cannot command the obedience of the congregational meeting, they should certainly command a respectful and serious hearing within that meeting's deliberations. Equally, the teaching ministry of the church, including its preaching, the conduct of its worship, including its Eucharistic celebrations, and the pastoral care of its members would normally each be under the guidance of the pastor(s) and or elders; and the practical running of the church and the disbursement of its finances would normally be the particular care of the deacons. To risk an analogy which has the potential to mislead, the various leaders function like business executives, with the congregation acting as shareholders: the ultimate ability to take decisions lies with the congregation, and it may choose to review and overturn any decision taken by the leadership, but the leadership in fact, and by virtue of gifting, expertise, and appointment, run the church day by day.

Third, the reader will have noticed that in all of this I have ducked the question of ordination. By the ecumenically-proposed definition of ordination in the Lima Text,<sup>17</sup> Baptists ordain all the leaders named over and also many others—Sunday School teachers; volunteer youth leaders; coordinators of food-distribution ministries; ... Indeed, as already noted, Baptist practices of baptism could be perceived as ordaining all church members on the standard definition. That said, this does not look like the practice of ordination exercised in other Christian traditions, in particular through being local and temporary (and, rather visibly, if also rather trivially, in not bestowing the style “Reverend” or the right to wear clerical vestments). Whilst some Baptist traditions have been happy with this and have eschewed more traditional-looking ordination (the Scotch Baptists for instance, who insisted on a plurality of elders with essentially no precedence amongst them), most have located within the pastoral role a particular “ordained” ministry. This has sometimes been understood merely functionally: a Baptist minister is the pastor of a Baptist church, and may style him/herself “Reverend” while occupying that office. (There are recent examples of Baptist pastors who, on moving from local church pastorate to an academic or denominational role, have refused any longer to use the clerical style.)

Most Baptists, however, seem to see something more significant and lasting in the practice of ordaining pastors, and allow that (for example) someone moving from a pastorate to an academic post remains an ordained minister. This is a deduction from practice: their name might remain on the list of ordained ministers maintained by the denomination, or they may be permitted still personal voting rights

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<sup>17</sup> World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry (Faith and Order paper 111; WCC, 1982)*.

at conventions, or, most simply, there will be no service of “re-ordination” should they later return to pastoral charge. All that said, the theological logic behind these practices is often fairly opaque: they seem to suggest that ordination confers some sort of indelible character, but, if asked directly, many (not all...) Baptists would hotly deny such a claim. Other proposals suggest the conferral of a representative role, and/or a measure of translocal recognition; there is, it is fair to say, little agreement on the point.

### 3.4 Freedom of Conscience

A commitment to freedom of conscience, already briefly referenced, would be widely held to be a Baptist distinctive. This is easily narratable in terms of the theological perspective I have been developing in this paper: Christ alone is Lord of the human heart, and alone has the right to command belief; and Christ's mode of exercising his Lordship is never to delegate it to human viceroys who may command with his authority, and never through coercive means. On this basis, then, no government or ecclesial authority may legitimately seek to impose or enforce belief. So Thomas Helwys, in a famous passage always (and appropriately so) quoted in this connection:

For we do freely profess that our lord the king has no more power over their [*sic*, Roman Catholics] consciences than over ours, and that is none at all. For our lord the king is but an earthly king, and he has no authority as a king but over earthly causes. If the king's people are obedient and true subjects, obeying all human laws made by the king, our lord the king can require no more. For man's religion to God is between God and themselves. The king will not answer for it. Neither may the king be judge between God and man. Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews or whatsoever, it does not appertain to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure.<sup>18</sup>

Two points are worth making here. First, Helwys, in the quotation above, and most of the classical Baptist accounts of freedom of conscience, assume, essentially, a totalitarian politics. That is, they work on the basis that the only significant threat to human freedom of belief, expression, and practice is the state, and so focus on denouncing the idea of an “established” (i.e. state-sponsored and supported) church and legislation that seeks to restrict or coerce religious belief and practice. (Roger Williams was particularly concerned that civic participation in the New England colonies imposed the saying of certain prayers; Isaac Backus fought a memorable campaign after American independence against the requirements of nonconformists to pay taxes, charges, and tithes to support state churches, cleverly focusing in on one charge that happened to be of the same monetary value as the tea tax that had sparked the revolution, and so on.) I would certainly not want to suggest either that any of this is wrong, or that state-sponsored denials of freedom of religion have ceased to be a problem; I have taught, albeit briefly, in China. I do want to insist that these various positions now appear inadequate, or (perhaps better) incomplete; in a

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<sup>18</sup> Helwys, *Mystery of Iniquity*, in Early, *Helwys*, 209.

world where power is more distributed than early modern totalitarianisms, the potential sources of threats to freedom of conscience must be expanded from merely the state and its religious arm, if any.

Second, it is worth exploring in slightly more detail one very influential twentieth-century version of this doctrine already noted, Mullins' development of the idea of "soul competency." There is a line of criticism of this idea that, although slightly unfair to Mullins (in that he recognized the problem and sought to guard against it) is helpful in exploring the theological logic of this Baptist commitment. The criticism focuses on the language of "competency"; while Mullins was clear that he was speaking of a possibility grounded in grace, not of some innate human ability, the language is too positive. Helwys' objection to the imposition of prayers and the practice of priests hearing confession was not based on a conviction that human beings could demand of God anyway, and that the priests and liturgies were an unnecessary imposition; rather it was based on the conviction of our utter incompetence in the face of the divine demand, which was not helped one iota by priests and liturgies. (This is particularly clear when Helwys discusses confession and absolution; he is utterly scathing about the idea that divine forgiveness of sin can be guaranteed by following a liturgical practice, or offered by a priest.) We have no access to divine grace save directly through Christ, and so Christ alone may command our beliefs and religious practices.

### 3.5 Visible Holiness

Baptists have routinely expected and demanded that church members would live according to higher ethical standards than those around, and have been active, sometimes perhaps over-zealous, in policing this expectation and demand. Of course, it is easy to find examples in history of Baptist churches straining gnats, or fragments of gnats, while swallowing camels, but the misuse of a belief does not render that belief false; historically, Baptists have been concerned for the visibility of practices of holy living amongst their church members.

The most interesting facet of this for our purposes is the account of how holiness is to be achieved. In brief, Baptists become holy together or not at all. The local church watches over each other in love, and so challenges, calls, and spurs each member to holiness. We see here again the complex interplay between individualistic and congregationalist impulses in Baptist theology as I am constructing it: each particular believer is to become holy, but the way they will do it is by active participation in the life of the local congregation.

## 4. BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

As I said at the beginning, the construction of Baptist theology is a task not so much uncompleted as almost unbegun. I propose that any adequate account will have to be able to narrate the importance of the various themes listed here, although it would be possible to add some more; I further suggest that the account I have offered at least adequately makes sense of these themes, and so deserves consideration as one possible mode of constructing Baptist theology.

# A RELATIONAL-HISTORICAL “LIMIT CASE” PROPOSAL FOR MEANINGFUL DISCOURSE ABOUT GOD

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## ABSTRACT

This paper argues that a particular kind of analogy is the proper linguistic mode for Christian discourse about God. This claim is based upon relational, historical, and contemporary philosophical insights.<sup>1</sup> The “relational-historical ‘limit case’” model entails a relational aspect in which the person who believes in God the Trinity has their mind and experience reconciled to God. This reconciliation opens people to appreciate the qualitative difference between God’s own life and human life, and thus to perceive reality and language in renewed manner. Such a reorientation requires the development of a theological approach to language which is attuned to the God known in Christ through the Spirit. This methodology will hence also be strongly historical as it looks to the history of God’s special revelation in humanly perceptible time and space. Whereas the relational aspect of a mind reoriented to God is the *formal methodological and perspectival basis* for a Christian model of God, historical special revelation from God is the *material basis* for a model of discourse about God. The relational and historical aspects of this model converge to the end that properties from the creaturely realm may be meaningfully applied to God. What is unique about the model presented here is that this analogical application of creaturely properties to God is possible only if the meaning of these properties is understood by means of a particular kind of univocity. This univocity occurs in the context of God’s work of accommodating his revelation to human capacity along a corresponding trajectory; one which corresponds to a “limit case” scenario.

The uniqueness of this model is that though it does employ forms of analogy and univocity, it does not pursue a Thomistic model of the analogy of attribution and its *a priori* metaphysical commitments. Neither does this work follow a univocal Scotist line in which that which is similar between creatures and God is univocal. What this model achieves over both these traditions is a greater appreciation for (1) the role and modes of special revelation, (2) the constraints placed upon discourse about God by its metaphysical and eschatological location. In addition, this model achieves (3) epistemic humility without disregarding what has been revealed to believers in personal experience and in Scripture. Finally, (4) the “limit case” aspect of this model has the explanatory power to capture much of the foundational Creator-creature genus distinction and its entailments for cross-genus communication.

## PRELIMINARY COMMENTS

A preliminary task to this proposal will be to outline two common types of analogy; this will be carried out in conversation with Aquinas’ seminal work. I shall argue that the substance of Aquinas’ theology claims that *all discourse about God is understood and applied analogically*. This study of Aquinas will underscore the interrelatedness of the ontological, epistemological, and linguistic presuppositions which underlie theories of discourse about God. In the light of selected issues raised by this survey of Aquinas’ work on analogy, I

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<sup>1</sup> Christian discourse is the sole focus of this paper.

shall propose a constructive model which allows for the appropriate deployment of analogy in Christian discourse about God.

#### UNIVOCITY, EQUIVOCALITY, METAPHOR, AND ANALOGY

Discourse *about* God arises out of the Christian interpretation and contextual re-articulation of God's self-revelation.<sup>2</sup> Positively speaking, discourse about God will be meaning-making and cognitive. Negatively, it tries to avoid the four pitfalls of agnosticism,<sup>3</sup> anthropomorphism,<sup>4</sup> over-claiming,<sup>5</sup> and the non-contextual use of language.<sup>6</sup> Proper discourse about God requires logical classifications which enable predication about God. These classifications are warranted for many reasons. I shall briefly review two of them: the scriptural and anthropological. The scriptural basis is that the Bible speaks of God in many ways including the claim that he is a Spirit as well as a rock. Is God simultaneously a Spirit and a rock? If he is a rock, then what kind of rock is he? A Spirit-rock? Clearly not all biblical language about God is intended to be interpreted literally. Thus, in order to make sense of, and to re-articulate the discourse within the Bible, Christians must distinguish between metaphorical, analogical, and other univocal uses of language. The different kinds of language apply to the language which is both found in the Bible and also in discourse that arises from the Bible. It would be a mistake to unthinkingly generalize from these facts that the character of all discourse about God must necessarily be of a certain kind. For example, it is false in my view to claim that because not all terms that describe God are to be taken literally; therefore all discourse about God is by nature analogical. In addition, it is also not true that the human lack of exhaustive knowledge about God necessarily entails the use of analogy for all discourse about God.

Careful use of language is also warranted for sound anthropological reasons. The anthropological foundation for analogical discourse is based upon the fact that humans are made in God's image. This

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<sup>2</sup> Therefore, human discourse about God humbly seeks to appropriate God's discourse and in turn construct consistent speech about him. Pope John Paul II wrote that its intent is "to speak in a true and meaningful way even of things which transcend all human experience." Pope John Paul II, Encyclical *Fides et Ratio* (14 September 1998) (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1998), cited in Francis J. Caponi, "Pale Analogies and Dead Metaphors: Some Recent Trends in Religious Language," *Horizons* 37, no. 1 (2010): 25.

<sup>3</sup> Agnosticism is here taken to include both ignorance and skepticism regarding comprehension with regards to what *can possibly* be said about God, what *is* said about God, and what this means.

<sup>4</sup> Anthropomorphism is that use of language whereby God is described as a property bearer in the same manner as a human is a property bearer. One problem with this view is that some anthropomorphic claims are simply not true—God does not actually possess a "strong right arm." Another issue is that anthropomorphism can be employed in subtle manner with the result God becomes a sophisticated projection of ourselves, and thus an idol made in our own image. The distinction between anthropomorphisms, anthropopathisms, and theopopathisms as expressed by Graham A. Cole is methodologically helpful on this point. Graham A. Cole, "The Living God: anthropomorphic or anthropopathic?," *Reformed Theological Review* 59, no. 1 (2000).

<sup>5</sup> Over-claiming is that activity of discourse whereby we claim things about God about which we have no or scant knowledge. This is the level of discourse which proposes "text-less" *theologoumena*—claims which have no basis in the texts of Scripture. In this case discourse about God can become as antirealist as are some non-cognitive and symbolic approaches to religious discourse.

<sup>6</sup> By the non-contextual use of language I refer to the use of language outside of its usual and most appropriate historical use and context. The consensus of many twentieth century philosophers of language was that the contextual use of language provides the most helpful parameters for its source, meaning, use and interpretation. When language is used outside of its natural semantic state, its meaning is subject to radical reinterpretation and redeployment.

provides an ontological platform by which humans can exemplify a communicable attribute in some limited degree of some communicable divine attributes. Hence humans can be those unique creatures who receive and interpret special revelation concerning God's own attributes. These anthropological grounds are extended due to the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity, who in being and word reveals aspects of the divine character and divine attributes.

For these reasons (the biblical and the anthropological) various linguistic means have been employed in the attempt to enable, or at least provide the grounds for, discourse about God. These include univocal and equivocal speech, metaphor, and various uses of analogy. These must be clearly defined and differentiated.

Univocal speech, or univocity, "indicates the identical application of a common name, or term, to two things."<sup>7</sup> That is, "the essence... of the things, as signified by the name, or term, is identical."<sup>8</sup> This approach allows for predication such that one feature evidenced in two different entities may have "a single meaning."<sup>9</sup> That is, when a term is applied to God and to humans it does not mean different things or even slightly different things. The term has a single meaning without remainder.<sup>10</sup> There is great resistance to this use of language for discourse about God in contemporary theology.<sup>11</sup> Stephen D. Long is one example of this opposition. He claims the use of univocal language in discourse about God can turn God into a "mythical creature who begins to resemble us."<sup>12</sup> For him, this is because in a "univocal account of language... God must take on the same features as humanity."<sup>13</sup> The outcome can be the "... re-paganizing... of God."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek theological terms: drawn principally from Protestant scholastic theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1985), 37.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. In this case the belief is that there is a proper one-to-one correspondence between what is said of a quality or attribute seen in creation on one hand and the being of God on the other. This entails a non-figurative relationship whereby univocity enables direct literal predication between people and God. Caponi has contested this model of predication with the suggestion that one cannot use literal as a synonym for univocity. This is because Caponi takes literal to refer to "the purpose of predication as the articulation of the judgement of the intellect" based upon the idea that "words are used to refer to concepts, concepts are used to refer to reality ... Intellect achieves knowledge through concepts abstracted from the real." For Caponi univocal predication is therefore, "proper" predication because "proper" refers to non-figurative language. See Caponi, "Pale Analogies and Dead Metaphors: Some Recent Trends in Religious Language," 35.

<sup>9</sup> "Univocus," in Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek theological terms*, 320.

<sup>10</sup> Univocity argues that there can only be one distinct meaning to a word, whether it is applied to creatures and to God. See further discussion in Caponi, "Pale Analogies and Dead Metaphors: Some Recent Trends in Religious Language," 38.

<sup>11</sup> Johnson, *Quest for the Living God*, 18. Cited in Caponi, "Pale Analogies and Dead Metaphors: Some Recent Trends in Religious Language," 33.

<sup>12</sup> D. Stephen Long, *Speaking of God: theology, language, and truth* (The Eerdmans Ekklesia series; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wililam B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2009), 15.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> In Long's opinion, the practice whereby people make "... God like us," is widespread: "... from staunchly Lutheran theologies that begin with the assumption that the cross must show us all things about God, to process and openness theologies to more popular forms of theology found in evangelical and liberal protestant preaching." Long continues: "All this is primarily a re-mythologizing of theology that sets itself against the Jewish and Christian tradition of the divine names, which first demythologized 'god.' But this reconception on God's names is a re-mythologizing that assumes our language signifies God just as it is. As Karl Barth and Henri Lubac taught us, the end result is that modern theology adopts Feuerbach's projectionist account of language." Ibid., 16. To my mind, these cautions have some merit, however, they only go so far. These arguments lack the distinction between finding "an adequate religious language" on one hand and the ability to describe God *in se* on the other. It may be true that

The desire to avoid univocal language and its application to God has led some to argue for an equivocal approach to discourse about the divine. Equivocity “indicates the use of a common name, or term, with reference to two essentially different and dissimilar things: equivocals have one name, or term in common, but no real resemblance.”<sup>15</sup> On this view God is wholly “Other” to humans, and thus “what we know and say about our world has no intrinsic relation to what we know or say about... God.”<sup>16</sup> An objection which this position faces is that its fundamental agnosticism places it at odds with the positive claims of creedal Christianity.

Whereas univocal and equivocal predications are both presently unpopular, metaphor is popular in many circles as the preferred mode of speech for discourse about God.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the suggestion has been made that we live in an age of “metaphormania.”<sup>18</sup> Metaphor is a form of non-literal predication. It is a “rhetorical figure” which transposes “a term from its original concept to another and similar one.”<sup>19</sup> Eberhard Jüngel illustrated both the preference for metaphor as well as its ontological foundations when he wrote: “Our language is worldly language, and has only worldly words which refer to and are predicated of worldly beings.” For him, this has great entailments for human God-talk, he continues: “The difference between God and the world, and indeed God himself, can only come to speech metaphorically. God is only properly spoken about when we speak of him metaphorically.”<sup>20</sup>

Analogy is an alternative to the use of univocal, equivocal, and metaphorical language. A general description of analogy is that it “indicates a certain resemblance between two essentially different things,

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we cannot describe God *in se*, however, this does not necessarily entail that Christians cannot speak of God meaningfully though not exhaustively. I shall argue that Christians may speak of God truthfully and meaningfully within the ontological bounds of what has been revealed and the purposes for which that revelation has taken place. Revelation of God’s life *in se* is not as great a concern in Scripture as is his character. Thus, the fact that human beings cannot comprehensively describe His inner life is not a barrier for an adequate language about the named God who accents his revelation in the economy of salvation.

<sup>15</sup> “Antepredicamenta,” in Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek theological terms*, 37.

<sup>16</sup> Gregory P. Rocca, “Aquinas on God Talk: Hovering Over the Abyss,” *Theological Studies* 54 (1993): 641. See Yandell’s most recent contribution to this debate: “On Not Confusing Incomprehensibility and Ineffability: Carl Henry and Literal Propositional Revelation,” *Trinity Journal*, 35.1 (2014): 61-74.

<sup>17</sup> Caponi, “Pale Analogies and Dead Metaphors: Some Recent Trends in Religious Language,” 28.

<sup>18</sup> Caponi, “Pale Analogies and Dead Metaphors: Some Recent Trends in Religious Language,” 26.

<sup>19</sup> Lionello Venturi, “Metaphor,” in *The Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Dagobert D. Runes (New York, NY: Citadel, 2001), 345.

<sup>20</sup> Eberhard Jüngel, “Metaphorical Truth,” cited in Roger M. White, *Talking About God: The Concept of Analogy and the Problem of Religious Language* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), 183. The definition of a metaphor may also be clarified in its contrast with that of analogy. The difference between analogies and metaphors is that whereas analogies “seem to be appropriate... metaphors involve a sense of surprise or initial incredulity.” For example, there is a parallel between wisdom seen in God and wisdom seen in people, so to say that “God is wise” does not seem to stretch language far past moderate realism. However, in the case of the statement “God is a lion,” there is no direct parallel between God and the lion, thus this is most likely a metaphor rather than an analogy. Alister E. McGrath, *Christian theology: an introduction* (Oxford, UK; Cambridge, Mass., USA: Blackwell, 1994), 138. The main problem that faces the use of metaphor is that without some kind of literal grounding, metaphor can only appeal to other metaphors by which to explain itself. In this case metaphor can ultimately lead to anti-realist claims. The isolated use of metaphor as the mode of religious language, aside from interaction with analogy and univocity, has questionable scriptural warrant and little fruitfulness for Christian theology, life and devotion. For this reason Caponi has argued for “an intimate relationship between metaphor and analogy, one in which their roles in religious speech remain broadly distinct yet inseparable, and in which the imaginative power and cognitive force of metaphor are only secured in a firm relationship with analogy.” Caponi, “Pale Analogies and Dead Metaphors: Some Recent Trends in Religious Language,” 37. One aim of this project is to pursue an integrated approach to discourse about God.

as signified by the use of a common... term, with reference to both”<sup>21</sup> At the outset it is important to note that the classifications of analogies has evolved over time, and different scholars use various words to describe the forms of analogy. Below I outline key types of analogical predication in line with contemporary usage.<sup>22</sup>

The earliest use of analogy involved that of proportionality. The original Greek usage was “to designate the four-term relation ‘A is to B as C is to D’” which is “... a comparison of two proportions or relations.”<sup>23</sup> Thus the analogy of proportionality relates to a parallel between the intrinsic properties of two things. What a property P is to X, so a different property D is to Y. A similar use was also applied in early Greek usage where A is to B as A is to C. This may be illustrated by the use of the term “source” as it relates to both “a point” and “a spring of water.” That is, a “... point is related to a line as a spring is related to a river”—both the point and the spring are a source.<sup>24</sup> These early Greek types of analogy presume nothing about the nature of the relationship between the two targets of reference—such as the point and the spring. The helpfulness of this for human discourse about God is that it enables the use of analogical language across genus types: it allows predication from the creaturely to the divine. This was especially important for Aquinas’ early use of analogy which was an attempt to solve some linguistic problems posed by his ontology. Indeed, throughout his life, a series of foundational ontological commitments continued to drive Aquinas’ view on suitable language for discourse about God. These are explored below.

The notion of causality is foundational to Aquinas’ theology. Causality establishes the divine-human relationship within the great ontological difference between primary and secondary causes. For Aquinas it follows that “no word when used of God means the same as when it is used of a creature.”<sup>25</sup> Hence a first reason for the analogical character of discourse about God is that secondary causes cannot exactly represent the attributes of a first cause.<sup>26</sup> This causality is not remote, it is one in which creatures participate in him. Though creatures do not share in the same species as God, there is a resemblance between them and God via analogy. Human resemblance to God is so “analogically, inasmuch as God exists by nature, and other things partake of existence.”<sup>27</sup> The communication of limited existence (*esse commune*) from God’s unlimited existence (*ipsium esse per subsitens*) to creatures is the basis for a “community

<sup>21</sup> “Antepredicamenta,” in Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek theological terms*, 37. A distinction may also be made between equivocity and denomination. For Muller, equivocity “indicates the use of a common name, or term, with reference to two essentially different and dissimilar things: equivocals have one name, or term in common, but no real resemblance.” However, denomination predicates an even greater dissimilarity between two named things: denomination “indicates an accidental or incidental relationship as a result of which the name of one thing is used to describe another.”

<sup>22</sup> Frederick C. Copleston, *A History of Philosophy: Volume 2: Medieval Philosophy - Augustine to Scotus* (London: Search Press, 1950), 356-58. Another mode of analogy is the analogy of imitation which appeals to the fact that some divine attributes may be reflected in and by creatures.

<sup>23</sup> White, *Talking About God: The Concept of Analogy and the Problem of Religious Language*, 8.

<sup>24</sup> “Medieval Theories of Analogy,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Revised, 11 September, 2009), n.p. [cited 10 August 2012]. Online: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/analogy-medieval/>

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *ST*, 1a, 13, 5, *Sed Contra*, 63.

<sup>26</sup> “Every effect that falls short of what is typical of the power of its cause represents it inadequately, for it is not the same kind of thing as the cause. Thus what exists simply and in a unified way in the cause will be divided up and take different forms in such effects.” Aquinas, *ST*, 1a, 13, 5, reply, 63.

<sup>27</sup> Aquinas, *ST*, 1.4.3, ad 3.

of analogy between God and creature.”<sup>28</sup> On the significance of causal participation for Aquinas’ position on analogy, Caponi writes: “This metaphysical vision forms the indispensable context for Thomas’ view of religious speech as grounded in the analogical perfections possessed essentially by God and through participation by creatures.”<sup>29</sup> This view argues for analogy, at the same time as disallowing any kind of univocal religious discourse which would presume the same expression of effects in God and people. Because God and creatures lack a common mode of existence: there is no “... *ratio* which is univocally *propria* to both creatures and God could be abstracted.”<sup>30</sup> The causal bond exists which between God and creatures paves the way for the *analogia entis*, the analogy of being, yet it is deployed at the same time as disallowing univocal predication.<sup>31</sup>

In tandem with his view of God as the (simple) first cause, Aquinas viewed God as the One who was uniquely the full expression of his own essence.<sup>32</sup> God is the pure act of his existence. Further, in God there was no potentiality to be moved or changed by another being.<sup>33</sup> The consequence of this for religious discourse is that God cannot be described in any way by means of language which is fitted to creaturely existence. By virtue of its nature, creaturely language cannot capture the full expression of the potentiality of being which stands behind contingent existence. This provides a limitation on applying language equally to beings who are of different ontological orders.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Aquinas, *Super Sent.* 1.24.1.1, ad 4, also *Prol.* 1.2, ad 2; *ScG* (*Summa Contra Gentiles*) I.31.2; *De potentia.* VII. 6, resp. cited in Caponi, "Pale Analogies and Dead Metaphors: Some Recent Trends in Religious Language," 42.

<sup>29</sup> Caponi continues: “He takes it as axiomatic that all agents produce things like themselves, and so creaturely perfections are applied to God not just as the cause of creation (we do not call God good simply because he causes created goodness), but as the exemplary cause of whatever limited perfections finite reality presents. Consequently, one speaks both properly and intrinsically in calling God “beautiful”—indeed more properly and intrinsically than in speaking of any creature, since God is beauty himself.” Caponi, "Pale Analogies and Dead Metaphors: Some Recent Trends in Religious Language," 43.

<sup>30</sup> Italics are Caponi’s. Caponi, "Pale Analogies and Dead Metaphors: Some Recent Trends in Religious Language," 43.

<sup>31</sup> For a discussion of the *analogia entis* as it relates to schools of Thomistic interpretation see the bibliographical summary of what Long calls “Resource Thomism.” “Opposing or Ignoring Metaphysics? Reflections on Kevin Hector’s *Theology without Metaphysics*,” presented at the Evangelical Theological Society Annual Meeting 2012, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 4.

<sup>32</sup>Aquinas writes: “For motion [motus, i.e., change] is nothing else than the reduction of something from potentiality to actuality. But nothing can be reduced from potentiality to actuality, except by something in a state of actuality. Thus that which is actually hot, as fire, makes wood, which is potentially hot, to be actually hot, and thereby moves and changes it. Now it is not possible that the same thing should be at once in actuality and potentiality in the same respect, but only in different respects. For what is actually hot cannot simultaneously be potentially hot; but it is simultaneously potentially cold. It is therefore impossible that in the same respect and in the same way a thing should be both mover and moved, i.e. that it should move itself.” (*ST* I.q2.a3)

<sup>33</sup>Aquinas argues as follows: “The first being must of necessity be in act, and in no way in potentiality. For although in any single thing that passes from potentiality to actuality, the potentiality is prior in time to the actuality; nevertheless, absolutely speaking, actuality is prior to potentiality; for whatever is in potentiality can be reduced into actuality only by some being in actuality. Now it has been already proved that God is the First Being. It is therefore impossible that in God there should be any potentiality.” (*ST* I.q3.a1)

<sup>34</sup> One way of highlighting the significance of Aquinas’ ontological foundations for semantic theories is to contrast his view with that of Duns Scotus who was working from different ontological premises. Unlike Aquinas, Duns Scotus’ divine ontology did not include a basic metaphysical impediment for applying creaturely language to God. This is because Scotus centered God’s ontology on his infinity. Cross, *Duns Scotus on God*, 91-98. As Scotus puts it: “if an entity is finite or infinite, it is so not by reason of something accidental to itself, but because it has its own intrinsic degree of finite or infinite perfection.” *Ordinatio* 1, d. 1, pars 1, q. 1-2, n. 142 [cited 10 July 2012] Online: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/duns-scotus/#DivInfDocUni>. Duns Scotus’ logic is summed as follows by Ginther: “... if God’s being is really the cause of our own being, there must be some univocity between the two, so

For Thomas, the radical dissimilarity between God and creatures meant that if any perfection is common to both, it must be present in them in wholly different manners.<sup>35</sup> For these reasons, whereas Aquinas argued for an analogy of proportionality in his early work such as *de Veritate*, he later turned to the use of the analogy of attribution.<sup>36</sup>

The analogy of attribution insists upon an asymmetrical relationship between the targets of predication. The analogy of attribution insists that one target is primary, whereas the other is secondary.<sup>37</sup> This use of analogy is especially fitting in cases where predication is sought between a material and a spiritual reality.<sup>38</sup> This distinction between the material and the spiritual is amplified by the fact that there is no sense of equality between them when the spiritual reality is the cause of the material one. For this reason the use of the analogy of attribution was more in line with Aquinas' later work than was the analogy of proportionality. The later work of Aquinas required a mode of discourse which more strongly reflected the linguistic implications of his stress upon the creaturely causal participation in a simple God who is pure act. The analogy of attribution is particularly fitted to this task as it enabled him to apply

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that human beings can speak of God's nature in a direct manner. This did not deny any transcendental attributes of God, nor did such a position ever affirm that God is wholly knowable in this life; rather, Scotus and others assumed that the relationship between God and his creation allows such understanding of his nature, but divine revelation was still necessary for humanity to have meaningful relationship with God." Ginther, "God," 74. This meant that language can refer to both God and to creatures with the proviso that God has the predicate to an infinite degree. Cross, *Duns Scotus on God*, 91-98. Scotus' theory of univocity is an example of a theory whose metaphysical foundation allows "objectivism to ensure the truth of ... speech." Long, *Speaking of God: theology, language, and truth*, 17. For the significance of "being" for underlying both the finite and infinite and thereby providing a platform from univocity between God and creatures in Scotus' thought, see Peter King, "Scotus on Metaphysics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Duns Scotus* (ed. Thomas Williams; Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 2003), 18-21. The central methodological point of departure of my model from Scotus' is that it draws univocal language from the speech and actions of God in the history of salvation whereas Scotus draws his use mostly from the creaturely realm with less of a focus on salvation history.

<sup>35</sup> For Aquinas "God has no genus," *ScG*, 1, 25, cited in White, *Talking About God: The Concept of Analogy and the Problem of Religious Language*, 102. and as such is absolutely remote to human beings. Te Velde sums the implications as follows: there is "no way of isolating a core of commonness, to be expressed in a univocal concept, which would be neutral in both and precede their causal relationship." Rudi A. te Velde, *Aquinas on God: the 'divine science' of the Summa theologiae* (Ashgate studies in the history of philosophical theology; Aldershot, Hants, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 102.

<sup>36</sup> In this work, Aquinas provided the example of two related proportions: "six has something in common with four because six is two times three, just as four is two times two." Aquinas, *de Veritate*, 113. Cited in White, *Talking About God: The Concept of Analogy and the Problem of Religious Language*, 82. The fact that Aquinas' view on analogy changed over the course of his life is remarkable given that in his earlier work he had found the analogy of attribution wanting. Aquinas, *Commentary on Boethius' 'De Trinitate'*, 23, cited in White, *Talking About God: The Concept of Analogy and the Problem of Religious Language*, 83.

<sup>37</sup>According to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, the analogy of attribution involves "a relation between two things, of which one is primary and the other secondary. Thus 'healthy' was said to be an analogical term when said of a dog and its food because while the dog has health in the primary sense, its food is healthy only secondarily as contributing to or causing the health of the dog. This second type of analogy became known as the analogy of attribution, and its special mark was being said in a prior and a posterior sense (*per prius et posterius*)." The analogy of attribution was the most common in medieval theology. "Medieval Theories of Analogy," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Revised 11 September, 2009), n. p. [cited 10 August 2012]. Online: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/analogy-medieval/>. Thomas' broad description of analogy is that it is a "...way of using words [which] lies somewhere between pure equivocation and simple univocity, for the word is neither used in the same sense, as with univocal language, nor in totally different senses, as with equivocation." The several senses of a word used analogically signify different relations to some one thing. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae: Latin text and English translation, introductions, notes, appendices and glossaries*: 1a, 13, 5, reply, 66-67.

<sup>38</sup> Hunter Guthrie, "Analogy (in Scholasticism)," in *The Dictionary of Philosophy* (ed. Dagobert D. Runes; New York, NY: Citadel, 2001), 18-19.

analogy across two types of unsymmetrically related beings where God has clear ontological priority and supremacy. For the later Aquinas, discourse about God could not presume the symmetrical relationship entailed by the analogy of proportionality.<sup>39</sup>

Thomas' major distinction between primary and secondary causes was strengthened by his view on divine simplicity. Simplicity entails the unity of the perfections in God as compared to their distinction-in-complexity which is evident in human beings. The simplicity of God and hence the unity of the perfections within God as deployed by Aquinas disallows a strictly realist account of univocal language for God and human beings.<sup>40</sup> In Aquinas' view, God is described in the Bible as having many attributes, and any attribute must be understood in concert with the other attributes.<sup>41</sup> A further implication of God's simplicity is that God has no "aspects"—this belief contributes to Aquinas' thesis that by his very nature God resists description by means of creaturely language. Thus for Thomas, when "wise is used of a man, it so to speak contains and delimits the aspect of man that it signifies, but this is not so when used of God; what it signifies in God is not confined by the meaning of the word, but goes beyond it..."<sup>42</sup>

Aquinas' linguistic conclusion as an outcome of his use of the analogy of proportionality is that humans have a "loose" (*incompactae*) language by which to refer to God. This language is loose to the point

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<sup>39</sup> In this use of analogy human predicates have a related meaning when applied to creatures and to God, yet a difference remains in place because these predicates apply firstly (and beyond human comprehension) to God and secondarily to humans. White, *Talking About God: The Concept of Analogy and the Problem of Religious Language*, 83. Thomas and Gilby, *Summa theologiae*: 1a, 4.2; 1a 13.3 ad 1; 13.5; 13.6. "But we cannot in the same way say that God is like a creature, just as we do not say that man is like his image, although the image is rightly said to be like him. All the less proper, moreover, is the expression that God is likeness to a creature. For likening expresses a motion towards likeness and thus belongs to the being that receives from that which makes it like him." *Summa Contra Gentiles* I, ch. 29, 139, cited in White, *Talking About God: The Concept of Analogy and the Problem of Religious Language*, 99. In his *Summa Contra Gentiles* Aquinas brought together causal participation, the fact of creatures being made in the likeness of God and his belief that ordinary language applied to God refers to him primarily and people secondarily. He wrote: "... it is more fitting to say that a creature is like God rather than the converse. For that which is called like something possesses a quality or form of that thing. Since, then, that which is found in God perfectly is found in other things according to a certain diminished participation, the basis on which the likeness is observed belongs to God absolutely, but not to the creature. Thus, the creature has what belongs to God and, consequently, is rightly said to be like God." Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* I, ch. 29, 139, cited in White, *Talking About God: The Concept of Analogy and the Problem of Religious Language*, 99. Aquinas also stated that in this second use of analogy "... we have a primary use of the word to apply to one thing, and secondary uses where we call other things by that word because of their relation to that thing; thus... in the case of the word healthy, we straightforwardly describe cows as 'healthy,' we can also talk of a climate as 'healthy,' but only because, say, it promotes health in cows." White, *Talking About God: The Concept of Analogy and the Problem of Religious Language*, 7. Here Aquinas was concerned "to maintain that we can use words to mean more than they mean to us—that we can 'try to mean' what God is like, that we can reach out to God with our words even though they do not circumscribe what he is.... The point of this seems to be that when you 'try to mean' God's goodness by using the word 'good' of him, you are not straying outside its normal meaning but trying to enter more deeply into it." Aquinas, *ST*, 1a, 12-13, Appendix 4, 106-07.

<sup>40</sup> Thus Aquinas wrote statements such as he believed that "[i]t is impossible to predicate anything univocally of God and creatures." Aquinas, *ST*, 1a, 13, 5, reply, p. 63. Albert Patfoort, "La place de l'analogie dans la pensée de S Thomas d'Aquin: analogie, noms divins et 'perfections'," *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 72, no. 2 (1992).

<sup>41</sup> Aquinas provided a human-divine contrast to prove his point. "when we say that a man is wise, we signify his wisdom as something distinct from other things about him – his essence for example, his powers or his existence. But when we use this word about God we don't intend to signify something distinct from his essence, power or existence." Aquinas, *ST*, 1a, 13, 5, reply, 65.

<sup>42</sup> Aquinas, *ST*, 1a, 13, 5, reply, 65.

that: "... the less determinate our names are and the more general and simple they are, the more appropriately they may be applied to God."<sup>43</sup>

In sum, Aquinas' view was that all discourse about God is analogical. This includes the following beliefs:

- (a) There are no human language terms for creatures that can be applied literally to God's substance.<sup>44</sup>
- (b) There is no term T such that "God is T" and "I am T" are true where "T" is employed in a univocal manner.<sup>45</sup> Thus,
- (c) Despite the fact that some terms about God apply properly to him such as "goodness" and "life" we do not know what these ultimately mean.<sup>46</sup>
- (d) The agnosticism about what ordinary words have as their true referent applies even once one takes the hypostatic union into account.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Aquinas, *ST*, I.13.11, *Response*.

<sup>44</sup> Aquinas wrote the following in the *Summa*, 1.13, 2: "Therefore we must hold a different doctrine- viz., that names signify the divine substance, and are predicated substantially of God, although they fall short of a full representation of him. Which is proved thus. For these names express God, so far as our intellect knows God from creatures, it knows him as far as creatures represent him. Now it was shown above (Q. 4 A. 2) that God possesses in himself all the perfections of creatures, being himself simply and universally perfect. Hence every creature represents him, and is like him so far as it possesses some perfection: yet it represents him not as something of the same species or genus, but as the excelling principle of whose form the effects fall short, although they derive some kind of likeness thereto, even as the forms of inferior bodies represent the power of the Sun. This was explained above (Q 4, A.3) in treating of the divine perfection. Therefore the aforesaid names signify the divine substance, but in an imperfect manner, even as creatures represent it imperfectly."

<sup>45</sup> Aquinas, *ST*, 1.13, 5, *reply*, "Univocal predication is impossible between God and creatures."

<sup>46</sup> Aquinas, Thomas, *ST*, 1. 13, 2, *reply obj*, 3. "We cannot know the essence of God in this life, as He really is in himself; but we know him accordingly as He is represented in the perfections of creatures; and thus the names imposed by us signify him in that manner only." Further, this relates to names applied to God. He writes the following in *ST*, 1. 13, 3, *reply*, "... as to the names applied to God, there are two things to be considered - viz., the perfections which they signify, such as goodness, life and the like, and their mode of signification. As regards what is signified by these names, they belong properly to God, and more properly than they belong to creatures, and are applied primarily to him. But as regards their mode of signification, they do not properly and strictly apply to God; for their mode of signification applies to creatures." However, this must be qualified by what Aquinas says after these comments when he addresses the question "Whether what is said of God and of creatures is univocally predicated of them?" His answer begins as follows: "Whatever is predicated of various things under the same name but not in the same sense, is predicated univocally. But no name belongs to God in the same sense that it belongs to creatures; for instance, wisdom in creatures is a quality, but not in God. Now a different genus changes an essence, since the genus is part of the definition; and the same applies to other things. Therefore whatever is said of God and of creatures is predicated equivocally."

<sup>47</sup> In his *Commentary on John*, Aquinas writes the following: "And just like one of us who wants to be known by others by revealing to them the words in his heart, clothes those words with letters or sounds, so God, wanting to be known by us, takes his Word, conceived from eternity, and clothes it with flesh in time ... Therefore, the Father is known in the Son as in his Word and proper image." In the same section he also states: "Now since every created word is some likeness of that Word, and some likeness, though imperfect, of the divinity is found in everything, either as an image or a trace, it follows that what God is cannot be known perfectly though any creature or by any thought or concept of a created intellect. It is the Word alone, the only-begotten Word, which is a perfect word and the perfect image of the Father, that knows and comprehends the Father." Cited in Long, *Speaking of God: theology, language, and truth*, 204. Best case ressourcement of Aquinas would highlight the significance of God's self-revelation via the hypostatic union—including how it is built into the structure of the *Summa*, Long writes: "... if we do not recall the discussion of the *prima pars* when we read through the Christological questions of the *tertia pars*, they will lose their poignancy. The Christological developments in the *tertia pars* render intelligible the articles of God's 'attributes' in the *prima pars*, and the language Thomas develops to speak of God in the *prima pars* points to the climax of our tending toward God, which comes to us in Christ, who is the 'way' to God." Long, *Speaking of God: theology, language, and truth*, 200. Long is correct to make the claim that if these parts of the *Summa* were held together then the

A detailed critique of the particulars of Aquinas' use of analogy for religious discourse is beyond the bounds of this work.<sup>48</sup> However, a higher order critique of the use of analogy presented above is possible.<sup>49</sup> In my opinion, several points are worth highlighting.

First, there are problematic issues which arise from Aquinas' basic ontological presuppositions about the identity of God. Though this issue is not limited to Aquinas,<sup>50</sup> his metaphysical *a priori* greatly affect, and are reflected in, his work on analogy. Thus, for Aquinas, "analogy is more than a conception of language; it is a metaphysical doctrine."<sup>51</sup> Aquinas' basic ontology, which may not have much affinity with Scripture's presuppositions, clearly drives his use of analogy. Is this problematic? Kevin Hector's recent work would claim that any metaphysical *a priori* for theology which is not grounded in "ordinary social practices" is problematic.<sup>52</sup> However, Long has helpfully clarified the point that it is only certain kinds of metaphysics which are problematic for theology and divine discourse. The problematic ones are those that

hypostatic union would be central to a Thomistic view of language about God. What Long has stated makes sound theological sense, however, to my mind, Aquinas himself does not make this connection clear enough. In the first parts of the Summa, Aquinas does not strongly refer the reader towards the christological work which is to come. This *which is precisely why Long's work is so significant*. His ressourcement of Thomas is what we call "contemporary Christological Thomism." Further research will hopefully develop Long's insights along these lines. For example, Long's view entails that the *analogia entis* is founded upon the fact that God becomes incarnate, therefore the Christian knows something of both humanity and divinity, thus this hypostatic union is the true *analogia entis* thus provides the basis of speech about both true God and true humanity. This raises a number of important questions: for example, what is the significance of this for *general revelation about humanity and its sinful state*?

<sup>48</sup> Some points to note briefly include the following. For example, the conclusion that *there is no term T such that "God is T" and "I am T" are true and "T" is employed in a univocal manner* is false. There are terms T such that "God is T" and "I am T" are true when kind relativity is taken into account. First, it is not true that a difference in genus between two things disallows univocal predication at all times. Secondly, there are statements that are literally true of people and God. Some terms are true of God and for us. For example, "can count to 4," "know they are not a prime number," "can move a 10 pound object." Because these actions are carried out in different ways does not mean that there is no term T which is such that God is T and I am T is true. It is a mistake to require that "moving an object," for example, is different when applied to God and to us because it is done in a different way. Aquinas' proposal largely rests on the view that the *meaning* of terms is kind-relative. A simple example will disprove this. If we take the term "exists" we can apply it meaningfully across kinds. That is, we can take "exist" to be univocal and have no degrees. For example, there are terms T such that "God is T" and "I am T" are true and "T" is employed in a univocal manner. Furthermore, humans may univocally apply some properties such as "omniscient" and "omnipotent" to God as literal ascriptions. These can then be used univocally with respect to persons and to God, for example, consider the following two propositions "God is omnipotent" and "I am not omnipotent." In both these phrases, "omnipotent" means the same thing.

<sup>49</sup> To place this work in its contemporary context, we note that for Caponi, the use of analogy in contemporary theology is hampered by the following issues: (a) a lack of clarity regarding the differences between metaphor and analogy, (b) the slight attention given to their connections, (c) their conflation, (d) the treatment of analogy as non-literal speech, (e) a false contrast between metaphor and analogy (in which the latter creates meaning solely through partial likeness rather than through metaphors' dynamic tension of likeness and unlikeness), and (f) profound misinterpretations of Thomas Aquinas' thought. Caponi, "Pale Analogies and Dead Metaphors: Some Recent Trends in Religious Language," 35.

<sup>50</sup> Kevin Hector begins his *Theology without Metaphysics* with the following statement on metaphysics and its influences on Protestant theology: "... although we moderns may want to avoid metaphysics, we have a hard time doing so." Kevin Hector, *Theology Without Metaphysics: God, Language and the Spirit of Recognition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 2.

<sup>51</sup> John F. Johnson, "Speaking of the Triune God: Augustine, Aquinas, and the Language of Analogy," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 67 (2003): 224.

<sup>52</sup> Thus he writes a "therapy for those in the grip of metaphysics. This is not a therapy for metaphysics itself. Hector rejects correspondentism and constructivism. His proposal relies on non-metaphysical practices (which are explanatorily primitive) within a pneumatological-pragmatic approach. Hector, *Theology Without Metaphysics: God, Language and the Spirit of Recognition*, 37, 66.

condition revelation.<sup>53</sup> In my view, the metaphysical conditioning of special revelation is one powerful consequence of Aquinas' *a priori*. Thomas' views on divine simplicity, essence, and causality have a muting effect on Scripture's witness to who God is.<sup>54</sup> Therefore, Aquinas' ontology has negative consequences for discourse about God which aims to be consistent with the relational and historical grounding of God's special revelation.<sup>55</sup>

Secondly, there are methodological flaws which pose logical and linguistic problems for the use of the analogy of attribution. The analogy of attribution is either inconsistent or a case of circular understanding. First, one can argue that the analogy of attribution is inconsistent in that if the basis for the analogy of attribution is taken to rest on causation; this presumes a univocal approach to causation.<sup>56</sup> On the other hand, if causation is interpreted analogically, then analogy is being explained by analogy which is "a good example of circular argument."<sup>57</sup>

Thirdly, the use of the analogy attribution fails epistemological and linguistic criteria for discourse about God. Though this kind of analogy makes positive affirmations for God, there is only a "related meaning" between what they refer to in creatures and what they refer to with respect to God. What this related meaning is, is not clear, nor can it be made clear by other analogies.<sup>58</sup> Therefore, it appears that the stand-alone use of analogy cannot meet the epistemic criterion of whether or not descriptors for God can be known.<sup>59</sup> This issue is a fundamental problem in the use of the analogy of proportionality in particular. The problem is that whereas in mathematics there is a clear relationship between what 2 is to 4 and what 8 is to 16, this does not hold with reference to this kind of religious language for God. This is because in

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<sup>53</sup> Stephen D. Long, "Opposing or Ignoring Metaphysics? Reflections on Kevin Hector's *Theology without Metaphysics*," presented at the Evangelical Theological Society Annual Meeting 2012, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Thus there is no principle objection to the use of metaphysical resources in Christian theology. Indeed, Christian theology is served by ontological/metaphysical concepts which comport with Scripture and allow the restatement of these truths in such a way that they are meaningful and meaning-making. In this way the transition can be made from scripturally harvested analogies to conceptual analogies.

<sup>54</sup> In fact, the charge may be made that his selection of simplicity as the key to God's being is at odds with a "Personalist" ontology which may stand in a closer relationship to Scripture.

<sup>55</sup> Another consequence of Aquinas' ontology is that it yielded an epistemology which conflated our inability to know God exhaustively with an inability to speak of him with precision from what has been revealed. Ultimately, Aquinas' basic premise is that it is "the knowledge we have as creatures... enables us to use words to refer to God", Aquinas, *ST*, I.13.1, *resp.*

<sup>56</sup> "Terms can be ascribed to God analogically because God is the cause of all things. But how is 'cause' used in this case? If cause is used in a literal sense, we have claimed that all language ascribed to God is analogical –based, however, on one univocal ascription, God as cause. This is precisely the univocal approach..." Dan R. Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language: Sign, Symbol and Story* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1996), 26.

<sup>57</sup> Stiver continues: "Richard Swanbourne flatly concludes that this traditional form of the analogy of attribution is contradictory." Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language: Sign, Symbol and Story*, 26.

<sup>58</sup> The question this raises for us is how to understand the "related meaning" between a human predicate and its application to God. How do we uncover this "related meaning" when meaning is primarily related to God, and we have the epistemological problem of not have access to this knowledge? On Aquinas' model when one uses everyday language to refer to "good" with reference to a creature, one knows that this is merely a secondary and imperfect form of good. This raises a very large problem, because if a word has God as its primary referent, yet this God is unknown and the cause is only ever described imperfectly, then how would one know that what one sees in a creature is "good" in the first place? Surely this raises epistemological questions about Aquinas' religious discourse and places his proposal under a dense cloud of agnosticism.

<sup>59</sup> Jan Muis, "Can Christian God-Talk be Literal?," *Modern Theology* 27, no. 4 (2011): 597. See also Jan Muis, "Die Rede von Gott und das Reden Gottes. Eine Würdigung der Lehre der dreifachen Gestalt des Wortes Gottes," *Zeitschrift für Dialektische Theologie* 16, no. 1 (2000).

religious discourse the formula contains too many unknowns—if what God is is unknown as well as if the true meaning of predicates applied to God is unknown, then the formula is so incomplete as to be of little use. That is, in the equation “good (x) is to God what good is to humans” we do not know what good is or what God is. Thus, “we have two unknown terms, which means that the proportionality is useless.”<sup>60</sup>

A similar problem presents itself in the use of the analogy of attribution. This use of analogy primarily refers to the extrinsic qualities (and their effects) of one partner in the analogical relationship. This may be illustrated with reference to the Sun and some stones which are heated by it. According to the analogy of attribution, the Sun is hot and the stones are hot. However, the Sun is defined as hot only in the sense that it has the property of heating stones. So when one says the Sun is hot and the stones are hot via an analogy of attribution, this is limited to talking about the extrinsic operations of the Sun which cause heat in stones. The Sun has the property of heating stones, but does not necessarily have this property of heat inherently. Though the casual relationship may indicate that perhaps the Sun has the property of heating another object, one moves beyond the analogy of attribution if one is to state anything about the intrinsic properties of the Sun.<sup>61</sup> The final, yet fundamental, problems which must be addressed are that neither the use of the analogy of proportionality or of attribution can meet the linguistic criteria that (1) knowledge of God’s properties be adequately expressed “by one of the standard terms for these properties”<sup>62</sup> and (2) precise reference targeting.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language: Sign, Symbol and Story*, 27. The solution to explain the analogy of proportionality via meaning derived from the analogy attribution, proposed by Mascall, also fails on account of explaining analogy by virtue of analogy. Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language: Sign, Symbol and Story*, 27-28.

<sup>61</sup> White, *Talking About God: The Concept of Analogy and the Problem of Religious Language*, 101.

<sup>62</sup> Muis, “Can Christian God-Talk be Literal?,” 597.

<sup>63</sup> Both Duns Scotus and the recent work by Brodie inform my perspective here. Scotus wrote: “Things are never related as the measured to the measure, or as the excess to the excedent unless they have something in common... When as it is said ‘This is more perfect than that,’ then if it be asked ‘A more perfect what?’ it is necessary to ascribe something common to both, so that in every comparison something determinable is common to each of the things compared. For if a human being is more perfect than a donkey, he is not more perfect *qua* human than a donkey is; he is more perfect *qua* animal.” Scotus, *Opus Oxoniense*, Bk. 1, dist.8, par.1, q.3, Vatican Edition, Vol. 4, 191. Cited in Alexander Broadie, “Duns Scotus and William Ockham,” in *The Medieval Theologians* (ed. G. R. Evans; Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 253. Broadie comments on the significance between the determinable and the determinant in this Scotus thought: “the term ‘animal’ signifies any and every animal whereas ‘human animal’ animal signified more determinately, since the phrase only those animals that are human. It is *qua* animal that the human is more perfect than the donkey *qua* animal. Let us then say that God is more perfect, even infinitely more perfect than human beings are. We are then asked ‘A more perfect what?’ or ‘More perfect *qua* what?’ and reply ‘*Qua* wise being.” Broadie, “Duns Scotus and William Ockham,” 253-54. What the provision of a sortal category such as *qua* animal or *qua* wise being achieves is that it allows for predication with the same sense to occur within a limited set of coherent referents. That is, with respect to X we can say T of God and T of human beings. This form of comparison “implies univocity.” Broadie, “Duns Scotus and William Ockham,” 254. Broadie continues: “This is not to say that God and humans are wise in exactly the same way, or even in much the same way. It is to say instead that if we cannot form a univocal concept of wisdom under which we can bring both God and humans, then we are wholly unable to compare humans with God in respect of wisdom and conclude that God’s wisdom is greater, even infinitely greater, than ours. I assume that we can make the comparison in question. In that case we can form a concept of something, wisdom, which we can predicate of God and humans. We can also make these predications more determinate by saying that God has wisdom to an infinite degree and we have it to a finite degree only. But that God’s is infinite and ours is finite does not prevent it being the same thing which is infinite in one case and finite in the other. What has just been said about wisdom can be said also in respect of the other intellectual perfections that are traditionally attributed to God.”

In sum, a Thomistic use of the analogy of attribution in religious discourse faces objections on ontological, linguistic, and epistemological grounds. These issues can be compounded by metaphysical *a priori* as seen in Aquinas' case.

## A RELATIONAL-HISTORICAL MODEL

What follows is a constructive counter argument to that of Aquinas above, and it shall be made in three stages. First, its relational foundation; second, its historical dimensions; and third, an outline of a limit case model which sets the ultimate parameters for speech about God. The relational foundation is the model's *methodological and perspectival basis*: our epistemological and ontological location as God's images who have been reconciled into a covenant relationship with him. The second aspect of the model is God's special revelation in salvation history and its appreciation by the believer. These form the *material basis* of the proposal. Thirdly, the notion of a "limit case" as a helpful heuristic tool which clarifies how one can maintain a model which speaks strongly in a certain direction with respect to its object, whilst also strongly restraining what is said for ontological reasons.

### The Relational Aspect

Christian discourse arises from God's revealing and reconciling intent expressed in the establishment of a relationship with particular covenant partners. He is the acting subject who establishes this relationship with people. This relationship is an interpersonal I-thou dynamic whereby he aims to dwell with and within his people. This relationship is far richer than a mere relation whereby he is related to people primarily by, for example, creation or causation.<sup>64</sup> The Scriptures present us with a relational account of knowledge which "is to be exhibited primarily by participating in... relationship."<sup>65</sup> *The particularity of God's relationship with the Christian places the use of religious language within a definite perspectival context.* This is the framework of salvation history and a mind reconciled to God. This is evident in Pauline theology. Paul's relationship with Jesus "... involved recourse to public truths and events, yet it also involved a change in perspective that the new relation to Christ brought about."<sup>66</sup> Thus, in "... the middle of a passage explaining the nature and motivations of his ministry, Paul writes that 'even though once we knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in this way (2 Cor. 5:16).'"<sup>67</sup> Paul intertwines the historically grounded knowledge of Christ with its subjective experience and epistemological effects in the

<sup>64</sup> See Barth's the *Analogia relationis* in G. Deddo, *Karl Barth's Theology of Relations: Trinitarian, Christological and Human: Towards an Ethic of the Family* (New York: Lang, 1999). See Chris Tilling, *Paul's Divine Christology* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 74.

<sup>65</sup> Hurtado, God, 37. Cited in Tilling, *Paul's Divine Christology*, 65.

<sup>66</sup> Tilling, *Paul's Divine Christology*, 268.

<sup>67</sup> Tilling continues: "The change in those included in this 'we' is associated with a developing relationship with Christ, and it brought about new insight into the event of Christ's death, and affirmation of Christ's resurrection." Tilling, *Paul's Divine Christology*, 268.

believer. Indeed, Paul develops his Christology *in relationship with the historical Christ* rather than from a technical perspective “from above,” “from below,” or “from the event.”<sup>68</sup>

Thus, human discourse about God is re-shaped relationally within the context of reconciliation to the God who acts decisively in history. This discourse about God is at its best when its *functional metaphysical a priori* takes God as its primary referent. God is revealed in salvation-history and the story of our own salvation. In this way, Christian discourse about God and his works will assume as its ontological presuppositions the facts of God’s existence and his saving work of re-creation. God’s work of recreation in particular transforms the Christian mind. Paul’s prayer is for the renewal of our minds (Rom 12:2), this renewal is contrasted with the patterns of thinking which conform to the fallen state of affairs in the world. The renewal of our minds means that the Christian develops a new “theological instinct.” Thomas F. Torrance writes the following on the development of a theological instinct: “What really counts in the end is whether a person’s mind is radically transformed by Christ and so spiritually attuned to the mind of Christ, that he/she thinks instinctively from the depths of his mental being in a way worthy of God.”<sup>69</sup> This means that both our reason and our language for God will be “baptized.”<sup>70</sup>

This theological instinct means that the Christian’s theological and thus linguistic methodology and content will engage in “scientific theology” which takes the disclosure of God as an objective reality as its starting point.<sup>71</sup> The disclosure of God will require that the study of his revelation, and the language used to speak of the judgements and claim that arise from this, be contoured according to what is disclosed. Hence, Christian language for God is *a-posteriori* to his revelation of himself and the renewal of the Christian mind so that the mind might appreciate it. The language appropriate for God-talk in this light will include an analogical aspect. It will also be doxological language which operates within a unique devotional life in which language for God and human imagination are stretched.

However, this “stretching” only goes so far. The relational dimensions of Christian discourse about God highlights the fact that the devotional aspects of the divine-human relationship includes the use of religious language which meets the linguistic criterion of providing understandable terms for the God who receives our faith, worship, and prayer. Thus, the devotional aspect of a relationship with God requires univocal language to refer to God meaningfully whereby God’s properties (such as goodness, mercy, and love) “can be expressed by one of the standard terms for these properties.”<sup>72</sup> This is evident in the particular “form of life” in which religious discourse is employed. As described in the OT, an Israelite’s form of life required referential precision. The Shema (Deut 6:4), was recited daily by devout Jews as follows: “Hear, Oh Israel, The Lord is our God is one Lord.” The response to the one God is a whole-life

<sup>68</sup> Italics are Tilling’s. Tilling, *Paul’s Divine Christology*, 268.

<sup>69</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, “The Reconciliation of the Mind: A Theological Meditation on the Teaching of St. Paul,” in *Theology in the Service of the Church* (ed. M. Alston Jr. Wallace; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 203.

<sup>70</sup> He continues: “Either you think from out of a mind centred in God through union with the mind of the Lord Jesus, or you think from out of a mind centred in yourself, alienated from God and inwardly hostile to the Truth incarnate in the Lord Jesus, that is, in a way that is finally governed by the unregenerate and unbaptized reason.” Torrance, “The Reconciliation of the Mind: A Theological Meditation on the Teaching of St. Paul,” 203.

<sup>71</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *A Scientific Theology* (3 vols; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

<sup>72</sup> Muis, “Can Christian God-Talk be Literal?,” 597.

devotion which requires meaningful words as predicates applied to God. The verses which immediately follow the Shema outline this as: “You shall love the Lord your God alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you arise” (Deut 6:5-7).<sup>73</sup> Hence, God’s self-revelation provides one of the criteria for Christian religious language, it has a precise referent who requires that he be named according to his self-revelation.

In addition to the criterion of precise religious language, Christian God-talk recognizes that the God who reveals himself in relationship to his people has a qualitatively different life to that of his people. Therefore, relational language for God will require some tempering. For example, despite the “givenness” of God in his revelation, the Lord is the one who reveals himself in the form of a theophany. The One who gives the Shema leads his people as a cloud of fire and smoke (Exod 13:21-22). These revelations make clear the fact and significance of the Creator-creature distinction: “... theophanies are understood to be temporary manifestations of God... God is understood to be different and distinct from his creation (i.e. holy), he is in no means limited by it (1 Kings 8:27; Ps. 139; Amos 9:2-4).”<sup>74</sup> When a theophany occurs, it is always understood that God is “by no means fully contained by the form the theophany takes when he accommodates his presence to the structure of creation.”<sup>75</sup> Thus, though God’s personal presence is revealed in theophany, it remains the case that God has accommodated his presence into our spheres of comprehension in time and space while remaining significantly unknown even to his covenantal people. Propp illustrates this by the suggestion that “... God inhabits a polydimensional realm that here and there extrudes into our three-dimensional space as a *projection*, just as a circle is the two dimensional projection of a sphere onto a plane.”<sup>76</sup>

Devotional life in the New Testament also accounts for the dynamics of language to cope with the relational parameters of knowing God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That is to say that NT believers and those that followed them had to trust and speak of the one who is vastly different to creatures.

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<sup>73</sup> For the Israelites therefore, the God over creation is “...the stand alone God without rival (Deut. 6:4-5)... So important is this claim that it is to become the heart of Israel’s religious pedagogy (6:6-9). Culture shows its values in what must be passed on to its children.” Graham A. Cole, “God, Doctrine of,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. K. J. Vanhoozer et al; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 259-63. The nature of the human response to the name of God is exemplified by Moses in Exod 34:8, where he bows down and worships and then people are committed to walk God’s ways. Thus there is a twin focus on the greatness of God’s name and the call to be his people living his way. This is repeated in instances such as Pss 20 and 23 for example, people are to trust in God’s name as they walk his ways, expecting that he will act righteously for his own names’ sake.

<sup>74</sup> Mark F. Rooker, “Theophany,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (ed. T. Desmond Alexander, David W. Baker, and John H. Walton; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 859-60.

<sup>75</sup> Rooker continues: “Thus when he appears in theophanies he in essence limits himself to specific and particular forms within the context of the creation he made. Theophany should be regarded as one of the means whereby God reveals himself to humanity. Whereas God’s special revelation may be divided into the broad categories of word and deed, God’s revelatory deeds occur as either theophany or miracle. A theophany is a form of divine revelation wherein God’s presence is made visible (or revealed in a dream) and is recognizable to humanity.” Rooker, “Theophany,” 859-60.

<sup>76</sup> He continues his “geometric analogy” by stating that “...While not comprehending the whole essence of divinity, these projections are nonetheless full manifestations within our frame of reference.” He states that his analogy is “inspired by Plato’s cave” (Republic 7.514-17, 532). William Henry Propp, *Exodus 19-40: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary (The Anchor Bible; 1st ed.; New York: Doubleday, 2006), 687.*

Trusting in God who revealed himself (in Christ) and following the ways of the known God is a key theme in Paul's "relational monotheism."<sup>77</sup> In the New Testament Paul's relationship to God in Christ included a devoted lifestyle which presumes very select and comprehensible discourse about God.<sup>78</sup> This devotion is remarkable as it is carried out in praise for the God whose one-ness is such that it includes the Father, Son, and Spirit. At the same time, the very names "Father," "Son," and "Spirit" are understood as analogies within the devotional life of believers.<sup>79</sup> Naturally, a human relationship with a God who is the Trinity will require patterns of thought and language which acknowledge the qualitative difference between God's life and our life. This relational context for the knowledge and discourse about God suggests that some form of the analogy of attribution may be in order for the application of creaturely predicates to God.

The inclination towards the analogical application of human language to God is furthered by the eschatological nature of Christian knowledge. The strict application of human language to God is restrained by an eschatological caveat which tempers the scope of the application of creaturely predicates to God. Though NT Christ-devotion requires discourse about God in which predicates for him have univocal meaning, its application to God is limited due to our eschatological locatedness because the nature of the believer's relationship to God occurs within an eschatological horizon which anticipates that a fuller revelation of God is to come. Thus univocal language about God is resisted and analogical language for God finds a natural home in eschatologically-oriented devotion. In this context the Holy Spirit enables the believer to engage in discourse about God in such an imaginative manner that it can include both the "already but not yet" of the inaugurated Kingdom of God. The use of analogy is appropriate in this situation. The "already" of Christian discourse is secured by the ontological, epistemological, and linguistic aspects of historical revelation which are relationally appropriated by the believer. However, Christian discourse must also include the "not yet" of our eschatologically situated special revelation. The use of analogy seems fitting to the restraint required by the eschatological horizon of human discourse.

The historical aspect of the relational-historical model for discourse about God is next. Historical revelation provides the clear divine referent for "who" has disclosed his name to Christians. In addition, it

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<sup>77</sup> Tilling, *Paul's Divine Christology*, 72. Paul not only speaks of the "relation between believers and the risen lord.... By using the sort of language and themes which Second Temple Judaism used to speak of the relation between Israel and YHWH," (Tilling, *Paul's Divine Christology*, 72), but speaks of this relation in such a manner that it necessarily includes devotion as an aspect of this relationship. In 1 Cor 8:1-6, Paul contrasts the relational core of OT and NT monotheism with the intellectualized knowledge of the Corinthian church. The contrast is powerfully stated in 1 Cor 8:1-3 where the intellectualism of the Corinthians is set against what Paul calls "love for God." Paul's redeployment of the *Shema* in this relational context allows him to critique the "monotheistic 'knowledge'" of the Corinthians by outlining his relationally "necessary" monotheistic knowing love for God. Moreover, he includes Christ into his pattern of relationship by relating him to the central text for Jewish prayer and the maintenance of relationship between Israel and Yahweh. Tilling, *Paul's Divine Christology*, 91.

<sup>78</sup> This included: "Paul's ultimate goals and motivations, this explicit Christ-devotion language, the passionate nature of this Christ devotion, the language contrasted with this devotion, the presence and activity of the risen Lord, but also the absence of Christ, and thus the Lord's presence though the Spirit, the communications between the Lord and believers, and the various ways Christ was characterized and the depiction of the scope of his lordship." Tilling, *Paul's Divine Christology*, 255.

<sup>79</sup> Mark Weedman, "Augustine's *De Trinitate* 5 and the Problem of the Divine Names 'Father' and 'Son,'" *Theological Studies* 72 (2011).

reveals the referent's standards and patterns for the use of that name in the context of relational devotion. The historical nature of the revelation of God's identity provides the univocal meaning to the language he offers as the basis for Christian discourse about himself.

### The Historical Aspect

The revelation of God in history has powerful ontological, epistemological, and linguistic entailments.<sup>80</sup> God presents himself to his covenant partners as with a proper name—Yahweh.<sup>81</sup> He is not the “God of the *omni's*” from book 12 of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. Importantly, God has a self-given name which he defines by his actions. His name is the central focus of his self-revelation. Graham Cole writes, it is “... more than... a convenient designation... in the canon the divine name refers to the very nature of God ...”<sup>82</sup> Epistemologically speaking, the name of God functions as the foundational antecedent referent in God's self-disclosure. It is the point of reference which grounds the revelation that will follow. What the name of God means is given meaning in a “storied” form which employs various means of communication.<sup>83</sup> The means which these stories employ include verbs to refer to God's activity;<sup>84</sup> he will be described by adjectives;<sup>85</sup> and other nouns which “name and characterize” him.<sup>86</sup> This suggests that religious discourse should employ various means to communicate who God is and not be overly reliant on one mode of discourse for God such as analogy.

The Exodus narratives provide the foundational revelation of God's name. Though this is initially revealed in an “open ended” fashion, it is subsequently filled out by historical actions which reflect his

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<sup>80</sup> Finally, biblical language is descriptive and designatory, *controlling as well as informative*. Because the revelation of God's name is descriptive and not just designatory, the revelation of His name can be taken as revelation of himself. This means that human language about God should primarily conform to the testimony of who God is based on the testimony of Scripture (Jesus manifesting the Father's name in John 17). Extra biblical language may help us express the biblical witness more clearly, however, the controlling ideas for our language about God should be the biblical ones because they are the primary designating and informative basis of the doctrine of God.

<sup>81</sup> The particular name *Yahweh* is foundational for a “whole bible” biblical theology of the identity of God because the OT employs this name as the most precise identifier of who God is. Furthermore, the Greek translation of Yahweh, *Kurios*, as applied to Jesus serves as the basis for early Christian devotion to Jesus as divine (1 Cor 8:6).

<sup>82</sup> Italics are Cole's. Graham A. Cole, "Exodus 34, the Middoth and the Doctrine of God: The Importance of Biblical Theology to Evangelical Systematic Theology," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 12, no. 3 (2008), 32. Scobie concurs, for him it is “*an expression of [God's] essential nature.*” Charles H.H. Scobie, *The Ways of Our God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 108.

<sup>83</sup> Graham Cole writes: “The living God of scriptural presentation... is not deity in general. This God has a name and stories that explicate that name. Creation stories, revelation stories, redemption stories, and judgement stories are just a few of them.” Cole continues, and supplies an impetus for a new way of carrying out biblical theology; “The older method of proof texting in the use of scripture needs to give way to a method of contextualized affirmation. With this approach, the text appealed to would be placed in its context in its argument in its book, and in the canon in the light of the flow of redemptive history.” Cole, “God, Doctrine of,” 262. The revelation of God occurs “through story or statute” rather than “a systematic analysis.” Rooker, “Theophany.”

<sup>84</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology: An Introduction* (vol. 1 of *The Library of Biblical Theology*; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), 145.

<sup>85</sup> Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology: an introduction*, 213.

<sup>86</sup> Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology: an introduction*, 229. These nouns include: (1) *'elohim* and related terms for God/gods, (2) *yhwh*, which is a proper noun “Yahweh, the Lord,” (3) *'adonai* which means “my Lords.” Baker, “God, names of,” 359.

nature.<sup>87</sup> The expansion of the name of God follows the revelation of his name. In the encounter around the burning bush, Moses asks God what his name is. He asks God for a name which will be the basis of his religious discourse. Moses said to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' What shall I say to them?" (Exod 3:13).

God's response is that he is "I am who I am," therefore Moses is to say to the people of Israel, 'I AM' has sent me to you" (3:14). God's name is henceforth fundamental to Moses' religious discourse and to Israel's devotional way of life. This is the antecedent referent whose meaning will be clarified by God's interactions with humanity. The initial revelation of God's name is immediately followed by the divine self-designation of "the Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob." Thus, the identity of God is given specificity which limits the referent range as to whom God might be. The limitation entailed by this specificity secures the epistemological basis for discourse about God because it is specific as well as accessible to people. In Exodus 20:2 the verse preceding the Decalogue, key characteristics of God are revealed.<sup>88</sup> Here God identified himself as Yahweh the Saviour: "I am the LORD [YHWH] your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."<sup>89</sup> The earlier self-designation as "I am who I am" is expanded in Exodus 33:19 to "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious."<sup>90</sup> The divine self-designation is expanded again, and given a normative form in in Exodus 34:6: "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the Fathers on the children and the children's children to the third and fourth generation." This is a passage which is a "representative or perhaps even normative expression of Israel's stock of adjectives for speech about Yahweh."<sup>91</sup> These adjectives for Yahweh are drawn upon throughout the OT<sup>92</sup> and the NT.<sup>93</sup> Importantly, the revelation of the name of God provides fitting descriptors for

<sup>87</sup> Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 355. Cited in Cole, "Middoth," 27.

<sup>88</sup> Rooker, "Theophany," 363.

<sup>89</sup> Baker, "God, names of," 363. It is preferable to understand Yahweh to include "he causes to be/become" in "he is/becomes/will be." This is due to (1) his aseity and creative power, and (2) how it is written out in Greek and Akkadian in particular reveal that its root is a Hiphil not a Qal. Rooker, "Theophany," 362.

<sup>90</sup> Stephen Dempster, "Exodus and Biblical Theology: On moving into the Neighbourhood with a New Name," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 12, no. 3 (2008): 19.

<sup>91</sup> Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: testimony, dispute, advocacy*, 269. Cole states: "In Old Testament times, that coming into focus [of God's identity] in general terms is nowhere more evident than in the theophany on Sinai as described in the book of Exodus... it is Exodus 34, which especially brings the living God into sharper relief—albeit not in such a way as to leave mystery behind." Cole, "Middoth," 24.

<sup>92</sup> Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: testimony, dispute, advocacy*, 215. He also writes the variegated, rich and awesome revelation of God's name leads us to agree with the conclusion that the "ultimate testimony to Yahweh concerns Yahweh's incomparability...." Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: testimony, dispute, advocacy*, 228.

<sup>93</sup> This description of God "is the nearest Scripture comes to giving a list of the attributes of God," and is reflected at least in part throughout the Bible (Num 14:17-19; Pss.103:6-14; 145:8-9; Joel 2:12-14; Jon. 4:12; John 1:17 and 2 Cor 13:14)." Cole, "God, Doctrine of," 262. However, only God's back is revealed, and yet this awesome display leads Moses to plead for forgiveness! Dempster points out that "... if this is just the back of God—what must the front be like! That is a lingering question not completely answered in the text." Dempster, "Exodus and Biblical Theology: On moving into the Neighbourhood with a New Name," 19.

God which can be known and understood by human beings.<sup>94</sup> This is the epistemological basis for giving meaning to creaturely predicates as they relate to the divine name.

In Exodus ordinary and general words have taken on particular significance: “non-referring, indefinite descriptions” such as “I AM” and “Lord” have become “definite and referring descriptions” by being aligned with very specific actions in history.<sup>95</sup> Words such as “faithfulness” are given meaning by the committed saving actions of God which have accompanied his use of this term. The meaning of the term “faithfulness” is specific and based in history. A narrational frame of reference provides the framework for the meaning of terms. Each term thus has a limited range of meaning which corresponds univocally with God’s specific and unique actions. The same phenomenon is at work in the NT, Jesus is described as “Immanuel”—God with us (Matt 1:23). That Jesus is God means that he “fills out” what God is like beyond the OT descriptions. He does this beyond compare: because he is God, Jesus is able to “exegete” the Father for his people (John 1:18).

The revealer of the name, God, expects his followers to inherit these descriptions as the meaningful basis for their religious discourse, just as Moses and Jesus and the early church did. The expectation is that when a word such as “faithful” is given meaningful content, this content will not be lost when it is applied to God. Therefore, any use of analogy in religious discourse cannot lose the essential meaning of a word if God has defined the meaning via words and referential events in this world. This is a key point in our constructive work: the successful use of analogy must retain the historically based meaning of a word. So there is no valid use of analogy in the absence of either direct or indirect historical referent.<sup>96</sup>

Does the discussion above entail that the historically contingent meaning of a term is univocally applied to God in religious discourse? No it does not.<sup>97</sup>

In Exodus 33, God prepares Moses for a revelation of himself. God is answering Moses’ request to see his glory. God responds positively to the request to reveal his identity. However, he does so in a manner which challenges Moses’ assumption that power-glory would be God’s overriding attribute. “Show me your glory,” asks Moses. God replies that instead of showing forth his glory, he will instead only allow a partially hidden Moses to see his back as he makes his goodness pass before him.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Muis, "Can Christian God-Talk be Literal?," 597.

<sup>95</sup> Hector, *Theology Without Metaphysics: God, Language and the Spirit of Recognition*, 161.

<sup>96</sup> This is especially pertinent with reference to creedal language. A particular point of interest for extending the model presented in this paper is the usefulness of our approach for constructive theological terms which have indirect historical referents. For example, consider the use of the homoousion with reference to the person of Jesus Christ. Is the homoousion understood and applied as an analogy? If so, is the distinction between a linguistic and a conceptual analogy required? In either case, what is the significance of the fact that the precise language employed *points to* history rather than is being drawn from the plane of salvation history? If a lack of direct historical reference is a problem, then how are we construct theological language to refer to God, which is not found in the Bible such as “Trinity”? We keenly await the fruits of this research.

<sup>97</sup> Hector, *Theology Without Metaphysics: God, Language and the Spirit of Recognition*, 165.

<sup>98</sup> Though the interpreter can never be free from metaphysical assumptions which are extraneous to the Bible, my hope is that the primary ontological presupposition for religious discourse is God in the terms by which he describes himself. The name of God is repeated frequently in the OT, climaxing in the book of Isaiah with the God’s own promise to redeem the people of God himself. This is seen in the servant songs beginning in Isa 42. Isa 42:8 “I am the Lord, this is my name, I give my glory to no other.”

The fact that God's revealed attributes are not the ones Moses expected, and that Moses must be hidden in a cleft and only see the "back" of God suggests that Christian religious discourse must have recourse to conceptual tools to handle the fact that revelation from God is selective, partial, and accommodated to Moses and his creaturely condition. This story points in the direction of securing Christian discourse about God via a theology of accommodation. The narrational suggestion for a notion such as accommodation is strengthened by the fact that the name of God is understood anew in the NT. Graham Cole writes that the:

coming of Jesus requires nothing less than a reconfiguring of the divine name. Disciples are to be baptized now in the one name of God, which is Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:18-20). The divine oneness –so prominent in the earlier Testament and reaffirmed by Jesus in this very Gospel account –is now seen as complex in its nature (cf. 19:17 and 28:18-20). The story of the one God now involves Father stories, Son stories and Holy Spirit stories in ways that so overlap as to underline the reality of the oneness and yet preserve the internal distinctiveness.<sup>99</sup>

The doctrine of accommodation claims that God deliberately alters his behavior and the complexity of the content of his message by modifying it to the ability of people across time.<sup>100</sup> God's revelation is appropriately "scaled-down" to human capacity.<sup>101</sup> Thus Calvin wrote that: "God cannot be comprehended by us except as far as He accommodates Himself to our standard."<sup>102</sup> Calvin expands his understanding of accommodation with an illustration of how both "words and patterns of thought" must be altered according to the intended audience.<sup>103</sup> A key illustration is:

...as nurses commonly do with infants, God is wondrous in a measure to 'lisp' in speaking with us...Thus such forms of speaking do not so much express clearly what God is like as accommodates the knowledge of Him to our slight capacity. To do this He must descend far beneath His loftiness.<sup>104</sup>

The analogy of the nurse involves two aspects: the modified content of a message revealed on behalf of the nurse, and the ability to understand on behalf of the baby.

These aspects of accommodation enable world-specific meaning for divine properties corresponding to the revelation of God's name. Thus accommodation assumes a correspondence in which divine property descriptions such as goodness, holiness, mercy and love are the same as these

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<sup>99</sup> Cole, "God, Doctrine of," 260.

<sup>100</sup> On God's behaviour in particular see J. Balsarak, "The God of Love and Weakness: Calvin's understanding of God's Accommodating Relationship with His People," *Westminster Theological Journal* 62, no. 2 (2000).

<sup>101</sup> Ford L. Battles, "God Was Accommodating Himself to Human Capacity," in *Readings in Calvin's Theology* (ed. D.K. McKim; Grand Rapids: Baker Book Company, 1984), 25-29.

<sup>102</sup> Calvin, *Comm. Ezekiel*, Ez. 9:3-4, cited in William C. Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 56.

<sup>103</sup> Placher, *Domestication*, 56.

<sup>104</sup> Calvin, *Inst.*, I.13.1; II.6.4, 2.10.6; *Comm. Romans* 1:19, cited in Placher, *Domestication*, 56. See also, John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (vol. 20-21 of *The Library of Christian Classics*; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), I.14.3; I.14.11; I.16.9; I.17.12ff.

properties found in “entities, events, and actions in our created world.”<sup>105</sup> The supreme example of accommodation is the Incarnation. The revelation of appropriate descriptors for God’s character via the incarnate Son and the way in which Jesus used religious language assume a univocal meaning for some terms employed in Christian religious discourse about God. Thus, the doctrine of accommodation carefully binds the meaning of particular words for God’s properties to this world and to the abilities of his people. This prevents the simple transposition of univocal language from the creaturely realm to the being of God.

Questions naturally arise if this is the case. How can Christians believe, live, and worship in that tense space created by what is revealed in tandem with an awareness of its incompleteness? The illustration of the nurse finds its natural partner in a robust theology of the work of the Holy Spirit in the believer. It presumes illumination which is the work of the Holy Spirit by which the promises of Christ are “both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts.”<sup>106</sup> The Spirit underwrites “the efficacy of the divine self-disclosure; the divine power that enables human appropriation.”<sup>107</sup> This appropriation is not aimed at exhaustive knowledge, rather it is that people be moved to a humble and assured trust in him despite recognizing the limitations of language for God.<sup>108</sup> Therefore, there is no need to “de-accommodate” the message God has revealed in order to access the truth.<sup>109</sup> The Spirit enables the believer to live in trusting confidence and with an illumined religious imagination or “creative reason” in which accommodation stretches referential range and appropriation.<sup>110</sup> This enables a creativity which is “the ability to produce work that is both novel (i.e. original, unexpected) and appropriate (i.e. useful, adaptive concerning task constraints).”<sup>111</sup>

Given the truthfulness of the accommodated revelation from God, does this mean that those creaturely property descriptions must then be applied to God by maximal extrapolation? Shall we follow Scotus on this? Doesn’t this smack of a form of projectionism? How can we avoid falling prey to anthropomorphism and making God an idol after ourselves? The notion of a “limit case” scenario for the

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<sup>105</sup> Muis, "Can Christian God-Talk be Literal?," 597.

<sup>106</sup> Calvin, *Inst.*, III.2.7

<sup>107</sup> Philip Walker Butin, *Revelation, Redemption, and Response: Calvin's trinitarian understanding of the divine-human relationship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 58.

<sup>108</sup> Calvin, *Inst.*, III.2.14; III.2.16; III.2.10; III.6.4; III.2.7

<sup>109</sup> This is consistent with the Johannine presentation of the validity of the testimony of God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. In fact, the silence of the Holy Spirit on many matters is a warning against speculation: "... in prattling with His very silence proclaims how sober should be our intellectual approach in such high mysteries." John Calvin, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to John, vol. 17* (22 vols.; trans. William Pringle; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989), 1:7.

<sup>110</sup> By creative reason is defined as "...the mental faculty that is able to generate conclusions (about causes and effects) on the basis of reasons and hence makes comprehension possible." Munzinger, "Creative Reason and the Spirit: Identifying, Evaluating, and Developing Paradigms of Pneumatology," 350, n. 46. Munzinger cites the work of Wolfgang Welsch, *Vernunft: Die zeitgenössische Vernunftkritik und das Konzept des transversalen Vernunft*, (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1995). On the complex of reason, revelation, experience and their synthesis in religious language and claims see the recent work by Jan Rohls, *Offenbarung, Vernunft und Religion: Ideengeschichte des Christentums, Band I* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012).

<sup>111</sup> Albert and Runco, "A History of Research on Creativity," 3. Cited in Munzinger, "Creative Reason and the Spirit: Identifying, Evaluating, and Developing Paradigms of Pneumatology," 350, n. 47.

application of creaturely language and attributes to God may be helpful in preventing both projectionism and anthropomorphism.

### Limit Cases

A helpful way forward is provided by the notion of “limit cases.” Applying creaturely properties to God via analogy where these analogies are given meaning via univocal revelation in history can be taken in the context of “limit cases.” Limit cases allow for meaningful, yet restrained, referential language for God from his attributes revealed in our world.

An example of a limit case is the “0” found on a speed dial. The reading “0” on a speed dial draws a limit to speed without actually being a speed. In the same way, so God’s attributes are related to the continuum of our attributes without belonging to the same category as ours. That is, his attributes are not merely the highest in a scale of particular attributes, but are actually beyond the maximal expression of an attribute revealed in history. They relate to the property as the bounds and final direction of these properties. This may be illustrated further as follows: “A series of polygons, with a progressively greater number of sides, becomes ‘rounder and rounder’ and closer and closer to a circle. A circle then, is that to which such a progressive series points, or ‘implies,’... but a circle is the limit case, not the limit simpliciter, of a series of polygons.”<sup>112</sup> Employing a “limit case” scenario for the conceptual boundary for the analogical *application* of univocally understood creaturely predicates to God is extremely helpful. Creaturely properties applied to God in a limit case scenario will be applied with the confidence that these properties really do point towards the properties of God. The direction of the claims is right on, even if their ultimate expression in the being of God is not only beyond our powers of conception but beyond our ordinary use of terms. More positively, because this accommodation is grounded in historical works which are also experientially apprehended, the trajectory of claims made from the revelation of God in history with reference to creaturely properties present in the images of God and the incarnation of Jesus is secured by a limit case scenario. The ultimate limit case is the *logos asarkos* who took on flesh to be one person in whom the two natures are united yet not confused. As such the *logos asarkos* activates the life of Jesus such that he is the ultimate “limit case” for Christian God-talk.

On this model, anthropomorphism is avoided. Does this leave the believer under a shadow of agnosticism? No it does not, because the *meaning* of predicates which God has applied to himself in relation to his work in this world is grounded in a reality which is comprehensible to, and can be univocally described by, human beings. The historical-relational nature of Christian knowing and speaking is based upon a clear divine referent for who God is, and a form of devotional life which accompanies belief. Together these provide sufficient ontological, epistemological, and linguistic bases by which to anchor Christian discourse in univocal meaning. This means that our vision of God will be undercut by

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<sup>112</sup> Gwen Griffith-Dickson, *The Philosophy of Religion* (London: SCM Press, 2005), 73-74

the horizon of God himself as the “limit case” for our language about himself. Rather, Christians can be confidently clear as to its referent, and his character in particular.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this work has made the claim that creaturely properties may be ascribed to God by analogy in a “limit case” setting so long as their meaning is understood univocally. There are three facets to our model. Firstly, the person-to-person self-disclosure of God establishes the *methodological and perspectival basis* for the Christian use and investigation of language about God. Secondly, special revelation from God in history provides the *material basis* in our space and time from which comprehensible claims and terms about God can be articulated meaningfully with respect to their object. This discourse is carried out in a devotional-relational context such that language and its imaginative use are re-envisioned and extended by the renewing work of the Holy Spirit. Thirdly, the notion of a “limit case” is a helpful tool which clarifies that one can maintain a model in which one can speak strongly in a certain direction with respect to its object, whilst also strongly restraining what is said for ontological and epistemic reasons.

# SIN IN SECULAR EARS: A THEO-BIBLICAL & SOCIOLOGICAL EXPLORATION FOR COMMUNICATING THE DOCTRINE OF SIN IN AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

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## ABSTRACT

Sin, and forgiveness of it, is an essential component of the Gospel of Grace. This essay seeks to discern how well the doctrine of sin is being communicated in *Aotearoa* New Zealand. To this end, the first section offers a brief summary of the doctrine in Scripture and its significance within contemporary theology. The next section listens to responses to the doctrine outside the Church, first those seen generally in the language, legislation and psychology within secular culture, and then more specifically in a recent small study surveying Non-Religious New Zealanders (NRNZs). The final section offers suggestions for improved communication of the doctrine under the headings: Resonance, Rejection, Restatement, and Relationship.

## INTRODUCTION

*"Know the Gospel. Know Culture. Translate."*<sup>1</sup>

*"...let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger." (Epistle of James)*<sup>2</sup>

What do non-religious people in *Aotearoa* New Zealand think about sin? Do they hear what we think we're saying when we talk about sin? According to Shannon & Weaver's well-established theory, communication is incomplete without a feedback loop.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, this piece of research is fundamentally a listening exercise which aims to complete this communicative loop: to simply discover what non-religious people in general, and Non-Religious New Zealanders (NRNZs) in particular, think about both the topic of sin and human nature, and about what they've heard from Christians about sin. It is hoped that the collection of perspectives represented, the data gleaned, the observations gathered and the suggestions proposed will combine to aid Christians in the task of communicating the Gospel in general, and the doctrine of sin in particular, within *Aotearoa* New Zealand. If we are to communicate well, we must listen well.

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<sup>1</sup> Compass Foundation, n.p. [cited 19 November 2013]. Online: <http://www.compass.org.nz/nz>.

<sup>2</sup> Jas 1:19b, NRSV.

<sup>3</sup> Claude Elwood Shannon, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois, 1949).

The Compass Foundation (Australia/New Zealand) has developed the useful slogan quoted above, which, in addition to suiting our theme of communication, will be borrowed for the three major sections of this essay. Section one, “Know the Gospel,” will consist of a brief tour through the doctrine of sin in modern theology. Section two, “Know Culture,” will listen to voices both from a global literary perspective, and also from a local mixed-methods study of NRNZs. Section three, “Translate,” will offer considerations for better communication of sin under four headings: Resonance, Rejection, Restatement & Relationship.

## KNOW THE GOSPEL

*“For the Christian church...to ignore, euphemize, or otherwise mute the lethal reality of sin is to cut the nerve of the Gospel.”*  
(Cornelius Plantinga, Jr.)<sup>4</sup>

*“Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned.”* (The Epistle of Paul to the Romans)<sup>5</sup>

## Sin in Biblical and Theological Perspective

Sin language both implicitly and explicitly permeates Scripture. The imagery that biblical writers use for sin is diverse. It is a weight or burden to be carried, and a debt to be repaid.<sup>6</sup> In the Old Testament it is described as deviation, rebellion, and burden of guilt; in the New Testament as deviation, sinners, debt and absence of righteousness.<sup>7</sup> It is idolatry.<sup>8</sup> It is the “culpable” attacking (actively) or abandoning (passively) of “shalom.”<sup>9</sup> Fundamentally, to sin is to try to be more than or less than simply human: “Authentic human existence involves living in and for the image of God while fully aware that one comes from the dust. When this polarity becomes imbalanced in either direction, one falls into sin.”<sup>10</sup> James Dunn locates precisely this theme of missed humanness in Paul’s use of the term *hamartia* in Romans 5:12-8:3, where sin is “that power which makes human beings forget their creatureliness and dependence on God, that power which prevents humankind from recognizing its true nature, which deceives the *adam* into thinking he is godlike and makes him unable to grasp that he is but *adamah*.”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 199.

<sup>5</sup> Rom 5:12 NRSV.

<sup>6</sup> Gary A. Anderson, *Sin: A History* (London: YALE University Press, 2010), 15-42.

<sup>7</sup> Derek R. Nelson, *Sin: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London/New York: Continuum, 2011), 18-31.

<sup>8</sup> Alistair McFadyen, *Bound to Sin: Abuse, Holocaust and the Christian Doctrine of Sin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 125.

<sup>9</sup> Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*, 197.

<sup>10</sup> Mark E. Biddle, *Missing the Mark: Sin And Its Consequences in Biblical Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 75.

<sup>11</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2006), 112.

Sin, then, is not a minor theme in Scripture, but is “the crucial inner-worldly reality” shaping the tone and trajectory of the whole Bible.<sup>12</sup>

Sin is just as essential for all Christian theology as it is to Christian Scripture. While it is both possible and common for sin to be communicated poorly, to fail to communicate it *at all* is to fail to communicate the Gospel. Cornelius Plantinga Jr. says it well: “without full disclosure on sin, the gospel of grace becomes impertinent, unnecessary, and finally uninteresting.”<sup>13</sup> One of the challenges of Christian theology is to hold in tension the external and internal factors behind human sin. Extremes in either direction end up shifting the blame for sin onto others, whether those who comprise the culture we inhabit, or those who supply the genes we inherit. On the one hand, sin is not entirely a matter of our *nature*. However vulnerable human nature is, sin is not so inevitable that we are “hard-wired” toward it.<sup>14</sup> However transient, our ability not to sin (*posse non peccare* in Augustine) is why Plantinga Jr., for example, distinguishes between *evil* (both in nature in general, and human nature in particular) and *sin*, for which we are “culpable.”<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, neither is the fault entirely on the *nurture* side. Yes, social pressures shape our behaviour, but we also participate with and form habits that align with these pressures.<sup>16</sup> Theologically speaking, therefore, human nature is a mixed bag. Stated one way, though we are glorious bearers of God’s image, we are just as gloriously ruined by sin. Stated in reverse, though we are thoroughly “ruined,” we still at least partially bear the divine image.<sup>17</sup> No sector of humanity, even the worst sinner, is entirely devoid of Common Grace, which, whilst not regenerating us, “preserves and enhances” human nature.<sup>18</sup> Again, the other side of this coin is that sin also reaches to all sectors of humanity. D.A. Carson summarises, “every expression of human culture simultaneously discloses that we are made in God’s image and shows itself to be mis-shaped and corroded by human rebellion against God.”<sup>19</sup>

In this whistle-stop tour of the modern doctrine, we have seen how significant sin is, both to the Christian Scriptures and to modern theology, which seeks to retain appropriate tension and balance in its accounts of it. But how theologians formulate the doctrine is one thing, and how it actually gets communicated to everyday people is quite another. So then, how is the doctrine of sin *actually* being communicated? And, just as crucially, *how is it being heard and received?* We turn now to listen to culture.

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<sup>12</sup> R.R. Reno, “The Doctrine of Sin,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 748–49.

<sup>13</sup> Plantinga, *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be*, 199.

<sup>14</sup> Terry D. Cooper, *Sin, Pride & Self-Acceptance: The Problem of Identity in Theology & Psychology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 38, 158.

<sup>15</sup> Cornelius Plantinga, *Engaging God’s World: A Christian Vision of Faith, Learning, and Living* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2002), 51; See also Plantinga, *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be*, 18–27.

<sup>16</sup> Cooper, *Sin, Pride & Self-Acceptance*, 84–85; James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom (Cultural Liturgies): How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2013), 140–41.

<sup>17</sup> Mark R. Talbot, “Learning from the Ruined Image: Moral Anthropology after the Fall,” in *Personal Identity in Theological Perspective* (eds. Richard Lints, Michael S. Horton, and Mark R. Talbot; Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2006), 176–77.

<sup>18</sup> Plantinga, *Engaging God’s World*, 58.

<sup>19</sup> D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2012), 49.

## KNOW CULTURE

*“The Christian focus is overwhelmingly on sin sin sin sin sin sin sin. What a nasty little preoccupation to have dominating your life.” (Richard Dawkins)<sup>20</sup>*

*“The process of secularization... has produced a growing deterioration of ethics, a weakening of the sense of personal and collective sin, and a steady increase in relativism.” (Pope Francis)<sup>21</sup>*

The first half of this section will briefly observe how the doctrine of sin fares in secular culture. This will be followed by listening to the responses from a local study of NRNZs who were asked about human nature, behaviour, and responsibility, and to restate and evaluate what they had heard from Christians about sin.

## Sin in Secular Culture

Sin-language has shifted incredibly. Sin is seen as a shame—not to *commit* a sin, but to obsess over, or more shameful, to miss out on! In the above quote, retired zoologist and global spokesperson for anti-religious sentiment, Richard Dawkins, calls sin a “nasty little preoccupation to have dominating your life.” Locally, a *NZ Herald* column teases readers to “Thank God for Deadly Sins.”<sup>22</sup> “Sin-sational” experiences and consumer products are “deliciously and enticingly ‘naughty.’”<sup>23</sup> Western culture, including *Aotearoa* New Zealand, increasingly sees itself as religion-free, “secular” and yet still “spiritual.”<sup>24</sup> In New Zealand, “poets, artists and writers have become our ‘theologians’ as they express and articulate our identity and spirituality.”<sup>25</sup> As another *NZ Herald* opinion columnist skilfully observes, the new cultural “spirituality” is “practical and personal. It’s more about stress reduction than salvation, more therapeutic than theological. It’s about feeling good, not being good.”<sup>26</sup> Sin is seen less as an important matter to debate and more as a divisive topic to avoid. Sin-talk is seen as pessimistic, arbitrary, inapplicable and judgemental.<sup>27</sup> Sin-language has been replaced by “ethical concern.” In the workplace, for example, instead of using the

<sup>20</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008), 285.

<sup>21</sup> Pope Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation, Evangelii Gaudium Of The Holy Father* (Vatican: Vatican Press, 2013), 54.

<sup>22</sup> Noelle McCarthy, “Thank God for Deadly Sins,” *New Zealand Herald* (15 March 2008). Cited 30 May 2013. Online: [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/opinion/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=466&objectid=10498270](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/opinion/news/article.cfm?c_id=466&objectid=10498270).

<sup>23</sup> Chris J. Duthie-Jung, “Sin in a Secular World,” in *A Thinker’s Guide to Sin: Talking About Wrongdoing Today* (ed. Neil Darragh; Auckland, NZ: Accent Publications, 2010), 20.

<sup>24</sup> Lloyd George Geering, *In Praise of the Secular* (St. Andrew’s Trust for the Study of Religion & Society, 2007), 45–54.

<sup>25</sup> Paul Morris, “Who Are We? New Zealand Identities and Spirituality,” in *New Zealand Identities: Departures And Destinations* (ed. James Hou-fu Liu; Wellington, NZ: Victoria University Press, 2005), 251.

<sup>26</sup> Cathrin Schaer, “The Modern Search for Spirituality,” *New Zealand Herald* (29 July 2000). Cited 21 May 2013. Online: [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/cathrin-schaer/news/article.cfm?a\\_id=48&objectid=145956](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/cathrin-schaer/news/article.cfm?a_id=48&objectid=145956).

<sup>27</sup> Nelson, *Sin*, 3-9.

language of “sin,” people are corrected for, and expected to correct, their “misconduct” or behaviour that is deemed “abusive,” “inappropriate,” or “unfair.”<sup>28</sup>

This popular secularisation of language is accompanied by the political secularisation of legislation. Increasingly non-religious societies treated wrongdoing not as religious “sin” needing increased repentance and righteousness, but as moral “crime” needing better laws and enforcement of them.<sup>29</sup> Sin is only “addressed as crime and its existence is very much in doubt in the secular society.”<sup>30</sup> Globally and locally in New Zealand, secularising trends have been accompanied by privatising trends, making religion into an entirely personal matter.<sup>31</sup> Voters thus increasingly rejected “previous constrictions on their personal behaviour” and insisted on law-makers “giving them the secular legislation they wanted.”<sup>32</sup>

As if the displacement of sin from language and legislation didn’t make the connotations of the word negative enough, some psychotherapeutic voices have been critical of sin. The complaint is that “organised religion” has created “clients who feel depressed, guilty, inferior, or jealous,” and see themselves as “sinful or wicked persons rather than imperfect persons.”<sup>33</sup> Although this fear of self-esteem-shattering religious sin-talk reflects the modern “belief in the innate goodness of the self,” some (not all) forms of modern psychotherapy seem to take quasi-“religious” forms where the “therapist-priest” gives salvific revelations of the “true person” cloaked in the unconscious.<sup>34</sup>

#### Listening to Non-Religious Voices

In the rest of this section, we will listen to non-religious voices from a small, local, mixed-methods study of NRNZs, including university level neurologists who were asked an additional question specific to their field.<sup>35</sup> The questionnaire was divided into two parts, the first on human nature, behaviour, and responsibility, and the second on recollections of and responses to the Christian doctrine of sin. We will review the responses to these parts in the same order.

#### *NRNZs on human nature, behaviour, and responsibility*

Participants in the local study were asked if human nature is good, bad, both, or neither. Just under half (the largest category) of these “non-religious” participants responded by saying “both,” quite likely

<sup>28</sup> Neil Darragh, “The Problem with Talking About Sin Today,” in *A Thinker’s Guide to Sin: Talking About Wrongdoing Today* (ed. Neil Darragh; Auckland, NZ: Accent Publications, 2010), 16–17.

<sup>29</sup> “Sin,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (ed. F.L. Cross and Elizabeth Livingstone; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1515.

<sup>30</sup> Mark Jones and Peter Johnstone, *History of Criminal Justice* (Philadelphia, PA: Elsevier, 2011), 138; Man Kei Ho, *Suffering, Obedience and the Origin of Sin* (Maitland, FL: Xulon Press, 2010), 18.

<sup>31</sup> Rex J. Ahdar and John Stenhouse, eds., *God and Government: The New Zealand Experience* (Otago, NZ: University of Otago Press, 2000).

<sup>32</sup> Kay Carmichael, *Sin and Forgiveness: New Responses in a Changing World* (Surrey, U.K.: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2003), 55.

<sup>33</sup> Paul A. Hauck, “RET and the Assertive Process,” in *Using Rational-Emotive Therapy Effectively: A Practitioner’s Guide* (ed. Michael E. Bernard; New York: Springer, 1991), 216.

<sup>34</sup> Cooper, *Sin, Pride & Self-Acceptance*, 14, 23.

<sup>35</sup> For methodological notes on this study, the entire study with full response data and interview transcripts (excluding all person-specific data) can be accessed online at <http://www.fruitfulfaith.net/essays>.

unaware of their agreement with theologians like Carson (quoted above). A significant number gave responses to the effect that we are “neither” good nor bad, at times explicitly or implicitly negating that a qualitative valuation could, or even should, be placed upon human nature. This makes sense in a modern scientifically enamored context where mechanistic accounts of human behaviour, from neurology, biochemistry and evolutionary sociology, are increasingly seen as providing a *full* account of human nature.<sup>36</sup> In order to know what humans are, quantitative “facts” are all we need; qualitative “values” are a matter of taste.

Another question asked whether the causes of “bad” behaviour were internal (“nature”), external (“nurture”), both, or neither. The overwhelming majority, (72%) recognized both external causes (culture, “nurture”) and internal causes (choice, “nature”), also likely unaware of their agreement with theologians like Cooper (quoted above). A few respondents gave the “neither” response to this question, also signaling a hesitance for qualitative valuation. For these NRNZs, just as human *nature* can or ought not be valued qualitatively, so also for human *behaviour*. If the quantitative methodologies of the hard sciences are the only or best tools for studying human behaviour, then explaining guilty feelings will be restricted to showing that we *can* feel guilty, rather than whether or not we *are* guilty. Human capacities for awareness, mind and metacognition “give rise to the human capacities for shame,” which are then “open to social construction” (or in practice, a matter of opinion).<sup>37</sup> Very few respondents viewed bad behaviour as caused exclusively externally (“nurture”). This reflects a movement away from John Locke’s famous Enlightenment proposal in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* that the human mind was a *tabula rasa* (blank slate).<sup>38</sup> For Locke, sin was possible, but as a result of “social and especially economic conditions,” and not due to being “born in original sin and into a fallen world.”<sup>39</sup> Following this, it was assumed that “any tendency toward evil within us can be eliminated,” thus making the doctrine of original sin appear unnecessary.<sup>40</sup> Locke’s notion of the *tabula rasa*, however, now finds itself up against modern evidence that an “identifiable portion of our behavior is genetically influenced.”<sup>41</sup> Likewise, only one respondent credited internal causes (“nature”) for bad behaviour. In light of this mix of responses, most respondents might agree with John Barry’s conclusion that the phrase “It’s only human nature isn’t it,” “serves to both explain and close any discussion,” assuming that human nature “just *is*,” and that nothing can be done to alter it.<sup>42</sup>

One question was designed specifically for the interviews with neurologists: Do mechanistic accounts of behaviour make the concept of moral responsibility unnecessary? Neurological studies

<sup>36</sup> Ron Vannelli, *Evolutionary Theory And Human Nature* (New York: Springer, 2001), 91–93; See also Janet R. Richards, *Human Nature after Darwin: a Philosophical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>37</sup> Paul Gilbert, “Evolution, Social Roles, and the Differences in Shame and Guilt,” *Social Research* 70, no. 4 (2003): 1226.

<sup>38</sup> Kenneth L. Campbell, *Western Civilization: A Global and Comparative Approach, Since 1600* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2012), 70.

<sup>39</sup> Charlotte Dormandy, “The Flowering of the Romantic Spirit,” in *Spirituality and the Secular Quest* (ed. Peter Higbie Van Ness; New York: Crossroad, 1996), 171, 193–4.

<sup>40</sup> Cooper, *Sin, Pride & Self-Acceptance*, 45.

<sup>41</sup> Harald E. L. Prins, Bunny McBride, and Dana Walrath, *Cultural Anthropology: The Human Challenge* (Belmont, California: Cengage Learning, 2010), 132.

<sup>42</sup> John Barry, *Environment and Social Theory*. (London: Routledge, 1999), 193.

showing causal correlation between brain damage (specifically to frontal lobe) and decreased moral ability have raised questions about moral responsibility.<sup>43</sup> Some even question whether or not with “more and more compelling mechanistic accounts of behavior, societies will come to view wrongdoers as mere ‘victims of neuronal circumstances.’”<sup>44</sup> Both neurologists answered this question with a negative response. One qualified the “no,” by distinguishing explanation of and responsibility for behaviour, saying they are “two different things,” but they are “not completely separate.” Being “mentally delayed” may indeed affect “concepts of what’s good [and] what’s wrong,” but this would not be the case for “a normal person capable of thinking... capable of putting things together.” For the other neurologist, “a sense of moral responsibility to yourself and to the people around you” is essential to being “a worthwhile human being.” Mechanistic understanding does not take away “the sense of wonder... chance... free will and control... certainly not the sense of responsibility.” In these views, both of these non-religious neurologists are unconsciously in accord with believing scholars, like Richard J. Coleman, who argue against the philosophical assumptions of an “empirical reductionism” that would claim a full account of human nature and behaviour simply because “neurological signals can be detected” in subjects feeling guilt or shame.<sup>45</sup>

#### *NRNZs on statements from Christians about sin*

After the above questions concerning their own views on human nature, behaviour, and responsibility, the study participants were then asked to reproduce, in their own words, what they have heard from Christians about sin. They were then asked to say what they found the most and the least agreeable, and from whom or from where they heard these statements.

Attempting to recall and restate the Christian view of sin, many referenced the Bible, the “will of God,” what “God says” or what is immoral or wrong, for example, “Doing what the bible [*sic*] tells you not to do...” Respondents made consistent reference to notions of being “born” a sinner, for example “some intrinsic, inescapable state of ‘dirtiness’ inherited at birth.” There were several references to understandings about how sin relates to what is necessary (belief in or forgiveness by Christ) to be saved or to go to heaven instead of hell. Others took the opportunity to supply evaluative (negative) comments; for example, “Fear-mongering,” and another: “Flawed. It fails on so many levels.” Several made complaints about inconsistency of interpretation, and hypocrisy. There were a few quite specific “sins” that were listed, for example: “being gay,” and “sex outside of marriage.” There were a few comments about how sin is a heuristic tool or axiom, which is shaped by societal influences, and in turn plays out within society, for example that sin is “Influenced by culture, a useful way of founding society and creating a community.”

<sup>43</sup> Warren S. Brown, “Neurobiological Embodiment of Spirituality and Soul,” in *From Cells to Souls - And Beyond: Changing Portraits of Human Nature* (ed. Malcolm A. Jeeves; Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), 60.

<sup>44</sup> Nita A. Farahany, “Law and Behavioral Morality,” in *Evolution and Morality* (ed. James E. Fleming and Sanford Levinson; New York: NYU Press, 2012), 130.

<sup>45</sup> Richard J. Coleman, *Eden’s Garden: Rethinking Sin and Evil in an Era of Scientific Promise* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 218, emphasis original.

It is impossible to know how hard they tried, but when it came to recalling statements that they found *most agreeable*, the largest category of respondents stated that they couldn't think of any examples, thus implying that everything they've ever heard from a Christian about sin was bad. Several recalled statements that broadly reflected that not sinning is better for society, with one saying "If sins as put forward by god [*sic*] were abided by, the world would be a better place." Others agreed with sentiments such as "love the sinner, hate the sin," the "golden rule," that "Sin can be forgiven and forgotton [*sic*]," and the notion that "We all sin." Three responses agreed with liberal statements by Christians who apparently said that sin "doesn't exist."

As for statements that were the *least agreeable*, there were no less than fifteen references to "hell," with nearly half (seven) of these accompanied by the word "fire" or "burn"; for example, "Frankly there is nothing more ridiculous than eternal hell. ...God will forgive a pedophile but he will send to eternal hell the local doctor who is not Christian!!!" Given the controversy this year in New Zealand over same-sex marriage legislation, it is no shock that there were several references to views on sexuality and marriage, in particular homosexuality, with some specifically referring to gay marriage. Quite a number objected to statements that they thought reflected unfair or illogical standards; for example "The vicarious redemption offered by the Christian faith gives individuals a loop hole to act in the most indefensible manner and then have their obligations and accountability removed from them." Four lamented the notion of being born sinful, and three disliked the need to accept, believe in, or be forgiven by Jesus. A few focused not on the doctrine, but on the behaviour of Christians, such as unforgiveness, judgementalism and hypocrisy.

The *sources* for both the agreeable and the disagreeable statements neatly divided into three groups: "Personal" (family, friends, co-workers, etc.), "Pulpit" (preachers or church services), and "Public" (internet, books, etc.) and the disagreeable statements included one additional category, "Proselytizers" (street preachers). "Personal" sources were the top category for both agreeable and disagreeable statements.

#### "Jabs": An Observation of Respondent Tone

An unexpected finding from the study that is especially relevant for our theme of communication was the number of significantly sarcastic or dismissive comments that respondents made, which were called "jabs." A corresponding scan for significantly generous or affectionate comments ("compliments") yielded only one in the entire study. When the jabs were categorised according to the stated worldview of the respondents, and corresponding "jab-rates" for each calculated, those who identified as "atheists" had the highest jab-rate, followed by "agnostics." "Spiritual" and "non-religious" gave no jabs at all.

## TRANSLATE

*“To be honest, as a humanist I don't much like the idea of sin. But given the choice of being powerless in the face of God or an impotent client of a therapist, I side with the Church.” (Frank Furedi)<sup>46</sup>*

*“...the really important thing in the communication process is not what is said, but what the listener hears.” (Charles H. Kraft)<sup>47</sup>*

If we are going to better communicate the Gospel, in particular the doctrine of sin, we have our work cut out for us. Here we will consider various points of relevance between the findings outlined above and the Christian task of communication of the Doctrine of Sin. They will be framed in four categories: Resonance, Rejection, Restatement, and Relationship.

## Resonance

As we saw, there are several areas where NRNZs hear and *resonate* with what Christians say about sin. Firstly, it is not insignificant that such a strong majority had a personal view that wrongdoing was caused by both internal and external factors, meaning that most do *not* simply push wrongdoing onto external causes. In this we can see a willingness to admit (in Plantinga's terms) our “culpability” for the wrong they have done, even if it will be difficult to find agreement on what is right or wrong, and why.

Likewise, few NRNZs believe that human nature is either wholly “good” or wholly “bad,” meaning there is openness, at least in some, that we are not simply good victims of bad circumstances, nor will they continue to use the blame-shifting line “it's only human nature.” All of our means of communicating the Gospel, whether art, billboard, print, tract, sermon, conversation, or otherwise, must avoid extremes here. We are not so “good” that sin is a cultural accident, and not so “bad” that sin can be simply blamed on our genes.

A third point of resonance would be that basic societal no-nos, the Golden Rule, and even the ten commandments (no doubt in most cases holding the overtly theological first commandment lightly) are seen in a positive light by at least some NRNZs. This no doubt is coloured by a secular conviction that “religious sins” against God are inconsequential compared to “real crimes” against humanity. However, it is worth remembering that in Scripture, to sin against another part of creation (human or non-human) is to sin against its Creator (e.g. Matt 25:31-46). The Bible is concerned with “social justice” from cover to

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<sup>46</sup> Frank Furedi, “Making a Virtue of Vice,” *The Spectator* (12 January 2002). Cited 31 May 2013. Online: <http://www.accessmylibrary.com/article-1G1-82481131/making-virtue-vice-world.html>.

<sup>47</sup> Charles H. Kraft, “What You Heard Is Not What I Meant,” in *Culture, Communication, and Christianity: A Selection of Writings by Charles H. Kraft* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2001), 177.

cover.<sup>48</sup> Not only do secular people make “horizontal” sins a priority—apparently the God of Scripture does also.

## Rejection

Of course, with resonance, there is clearly also a strong *rejection*. However, here also we need to ensure that we do not give them unnecessary cause to reject the Gospel we’re communicating because of the *way* we communicate it. One of the difficulties arises from the significant diversity of views on specifics. The whole of the Gospel can often be rejected due to one objectionable part. This of course doesn’t mean we conveniently delete these parts—far from it. At the very least it does mean that care must be taken with statements about these parts.

For example, statements about the specific topic of “hell” were the top category of rejected statements. Many of them seemed to reflect a narrow exclusivism, which is not the only Christian understanding of ultimate human destiny. Whatever view is taken (i.e. exclusivism, inclusivism, etc.) the conviction that Jesus is the exclusive source and means of salvation does not necessitate statements that can sound as though the final destiny of every single person is (or can be) known—as though we were omniscient.<sup>49</sup> At the very least, it is commendable for statements on this topic to be characterized by both Christ-centred conviction and awareness of other views in the Church. As a general rule, opinion is not changed in quick-exchange contexts (single conversation, or many online formats) but instead is usually a longer process.

Another topic demanding careful discussion is sexuality—most of all, homosexuality. Homosexuality in particular is both a divisive and global topic, and the brief mention here may risk being simplistic.<sup>50</sup> Nonetheless, our study showed many NRNZs are sensitive to the topic, so rather than ignoring or evading the issue, we should develop a more considered posture. As with “hell,” the most fruitful approach and language will be informed, and compassionate, as well as from a place of conviction. Like many areas of mission, this will not be easy.

In our communication, we can be arrogant and brash, as will be some we communicate with. The number of “jabs” can be a signal that some reject the doctrine with such emotion that discussion may

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<sup>48</sup> See Stephen Mott, *Biblical Ethics and Social Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 2011).

<sup>49</sup> For a basic introduction to the topic, see Gabriel Fackre, Ronald H. Nash, and John Sanders, *What About Those Who Have Never Heard?: Three Views on the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995); for a recent history of Christian versions of Universalism, see Gregory MacDonald, *All Shall Be Well: Explorations in Universal Salvation and Christian Theology From Origen to Moltmann* (Cambridge: James Clarke Lutterworth, 2011).

<sup>50</sup> For two recent treatments (more or less representative of both “sides” of this issue) see Gordon Preece and Michael Bird, eds., *Sexegesis: An Evangelical Response to Five Uneasy Pieces on Homosexuality* (Sydney: Youthworks Publishing, 2012); and Patrick S Cheng, *From Sin to Amazing Grace: Discovering the Queer Christ* (New York: Seabury Books, 2012). Several resources specifically for resourcing and enhancing dialogue have also been produced, for example Philip Groves, *The Anglican Communion and Homosexuality: The Official Study Guide to Enable Listening and Dialogue* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2008). An affirmative view of homosexuality will of course be welcomed in a modern secular context, so (as this is not an essay on this particular in-house discussion) the suggestions to follow will reflect the “traditional” (conservative) view, which (in addition to being the view of the present author) reflects the majority position of delegates at the 2013 “Gathering” of NZ Baptists, who also voted to establish a “working group” to determine NZ Baptist policy for pastors and churches on same-sex marriages.

prove unfruitful. Prolonged attempts to debate people into agreement with the Gospel often (if not always) do more harm than good. Sin is an inescapable offense to human pride, and it will never be popular. However, it is our responsibility to ensure that they are in fact rejecting the *rightly-offensive Gospel*, as opposed to either being repulsed by an *overly-offensive messenger*, or being merely refreshed by a *non-offensive message*.

On the one hand, we must not *add to* this offense, by being offensive ourselves. Some of the respondents seemed to be rejecting offensive forms of communication. The infamous behaviour of the Westboro Baptist Church (not least their equally infamous website “GodHatesFags.com”) is a notorious example of an approach that seems to maximise the offensiveness of their forms of communication in order to ensure their validity (“Oh well, Jesus did say the world would hate us, didn’t he?”).<sup>51</sup> On the other hand, we must not *take away from* the offense of the Gospel. One also thinks of invitations to receive Christ that are light on repentance from sin and heavy on how much converts will “get” by being a Christian. The study even included respondents who approved of statements from ministers who had preached that sin “doesn’t exist.” To take sin out of our message or to retain it in a “softened” form is to compromise the integrity of the message itself.

## Restatement

If it is not obvious by now, the differences in style, content, tone and wording of the doctrine require us to continually work at *restating* the doctrine. As we have already seen, it is a distortion of the Gospel to try to make the message about human sin sound either harder (to provoke a response from fear) or softer (to provoke a response from relevance). American Episcopalian Bishop John Shelby Spong provides a convenient example of the “soft” end of this spectrum, using “victim” language of humans. For Spong, we were not “created good only to fall into sin,” but rather are “victimized by the unfinished nature of our humanity.”<sup>52</sup> Similarly, for local Anglican Glynn Cardy salvation is *not* about “individual sins being ‘cleansed by the blood of Jesus.’”<sup>53</sup> We must resist the temptation to assume that these voices are deliberately seeking to water-down or deny the Gospel. No doubt, these “soft” perspectives stem from a genuine concern for people, and are likely to be a response to overly aggressive or “hard” approaches that use manipulation, fear and guilt to “convert” people. However, because the Gospel does indeed declare humanity equally and universally guilty of sin, we dare not drift into the ditches of either playing up or merely pacifying the guilt that the Gospel of Grace simultaneously exposes and expiates. As local theologian Neil Darragh helpfully points out, there is a difference between what he calls “disabling” guilt, feeling guilty for things one is not responsible for, which does more harm than good, and “enabling” guilt,

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<sup>51</sup> A doctoral dissertation observes dynamics and mechanisms of “social control” using Westboro Baptist Church as a test case; see Todd Powell-Williams, *Social Control and the Westboro Baptist Church: Fuel to the Fire?* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Carbondale, 2008).

<sup>52</sup> John Shelby Spong, “Reforming Christology: He Did Not Die for My Sins!” *Human Quest* (December 1999): 7.

<sup>53</sup> Glynn Cardy, “Sin in the City: a St. Matthew’s Perspective,” in *A Thinker’s Guide to Sin: Talking About Wrongdoing Today* (ed. Neil Darragh; Auckland, NZ: Accent Publications, 2010), 50.

which helps people face their real sin, and thus progress toward wellbeing.<sup>54</sup> And in the light of the Gospel, human wellbeing is found not when victims have their guilty feelings relieved, but when sinners have their guilt removed. Following this critique of going “soft” on sin and sinners, it of course needs to be said that the whole church, not just the “soft” parts, needs to give careful attention to its sin-language. According to Marsha Witten’s study of Southern Baptist and Presbyterian sermons, even in these supposedly “harder” churches, sin is deflected, weakened and sympathized with.<sup>55</sup>

Again, in our statements about the human condition, we need a “both/and” tension. No human is so devoid of common grace that they are without worth, dignity and rights; and no human is so “good” that their sin has not affected their relationship with God, others, self, and the created order. Communicating a Gospel with sin and forgiveness right in the middle of it can remind us that Jesus said that we are sent like sheep among wolves (Matt 10:16). We should take heed of his advice, then, to be “wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” We are not *wise* when we add to the offense of the Gospel, and we are not *innocent* when we take away from it.

## Relationship

Fourthly and finally, the results evidenced the importance of *relationships* between Christians and NRNZs. It is not insignificant that the top category of sources for both the positively and negatively viewed statements were personal: friends, family, acquaintances, flatmates, or other contacts. One interviewee spoke highly of a friendship with a Christian friend that they “loved to bits.” The Gospel has always been shared through everyday personal relationships. The better these relationships, the better space we have to not only share our views but to listen to theirs. Some respondents supplied lengthy answers to the questions, which (along with the willingness to simply participate in the research) could indicate a simple desire to be heard. All the more reason to be “quick to listen” (Jas 1:19b NRSV).

## CONCLUSION

This study was primarily a theologically informed listening exercise, and whilst it was not representative of all NRNZs, the responses yielded clear and at least somewhat representative categories to consider. We observed both resonance and rejection, and offered some basic and clear points of implication for communication between Christians and NRNZs, most notably to make the most of our restatements of the doctrine and of our relationships with them. Though unpopular, unfashionable and for some untenable, sin is still an intelligible concept in our world. More than that, it is an essential component of the Christian Gospel, which doggedly insists that we are not all that we were meant to be or can be through the grace and transformation found in Christ. Let this message be rejected on its own terms, and

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<sup>54</sup> Darragh, “The Problem with Talking About Sin Today,” 16, emphasis in original.

<sup>55</sup> Marsha G. Witten, “Preaching About Sin in Contemporary Protestantism,” *Theology Today* 50, no. 2 (1993): 243; Marsha G. Witten, *All Is Forgiven* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

not by the fault of those who communicate it. To this end, the more deeply we are immersed in this Gospel, and the more patiently we listen to culture, the more effectively we will translate between the two.

## Reviews

JOHN H. WALTON AND D. BRENT SANDY. *THE LOST WORLD OF SCRIPTURE: ANCIENT LITERARY CULTURE AND BIBLICAL AUTHORITY*. DOWNERS GROVE, IL.: IVP ACADEMIC, 2013. (320PP.) [ISBN 978-0-8308-4032-8; DIGITAL 978-0-8308-6498-0]

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Lost worlds can be dangerous places, as Jurassic Park showed its viewers. Nevertheless, the excitement of stepping back into the past remains a compelling vision—not to mention a necessity for those who wish to understand the Bible, written as it was within the ancient world.

John Walton's first *Lost World* book took readers back into the realm of ancient cosmology. In this new volume, co-authored by D. Brent Sandy, readers are invited into the world of oral-dominant cultures. Walton and Sandy set out to show modern readers of the Bible the cultural gulf that lies between the literary-dominant world we live in and the oral text forms that dominated ancient societies. As they do this, they explore the theological issues around biblical authority.

Their introductory-level book is intended particularly for evangelical readers. Evangelicals have often found it easier to see predatory dangers rather than long-hidden wonders in accounts of the origin of the Biblical texts that place them in their ancient context, and have tended to defend the canonical form of the text as having been created in a literary form by a modern-style author (eg. see Oswalt, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction & Commentary* [Downers Grove: IVP, 1993]).

Walton and Sandy attempt to persuade evangelical readers to accept two main ideas: that the literary texts we encounter in the Bible originated in oral forms, often via a long process where no simple parallel exists with the modern conception of single author and single archetypal literary text (pp. 17–38); and that this first proposition does not remove the divine authority and inerrancy of the Bible (pp. 263–282). The book's authors are explicit in their commitment to the 1978 Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (p. 12).

The book is structured around a series of short chapters, each presenting a single proposition, such as “Exact wording was not necessary to preserve and transmit reliable representations of inspired truth” (pp. 167–182). This form gives prominence to the steps in the authors' argument but makes for a rather fragmented reading experience. The propositions have been categorised by subject (Old Testament, New Testament, The Biblical World of Literary Genres, and Concluding Affirmations), but in the longest section, on the New Testament, the propositions are of quite varying types: some are fairly uncontroversial historical observations, such as proposition 5 on the way elements of hearing-dominant

culture affected Greco-Roman literature (pp. 77–86), while others are more innovative and theological in nature, such as the suggestion in proposition 10 that Jesus commissioned his followers to “proclaim truth in oral forms” (pp. 128–142). This more innovative material relies less on existing scholarly material and is somewhat limited by its context and audience to a statement of ideas rather than a developed argument. In the instance just mentioned, the chapter could have benefited from a methodology allowing the authors to distinguish between the degree to which Jesus merely *reflected* the textual norms of the world he participated in, and was *intentionally commissioning* a particular model of proclamation as a culture–transcending norm.

In general, this reviewer felt that the New Testament section of the book was the weakest, although this reflects in some measure the strength of the Old Testament chapters. The first proposition in the Old Testament section, and indeed in the book, is that “Ancient Near Eastern societies were hearing dominant and had nothing comparable to authors and books as we know them” (pp. 17–29). This point is fairly easy to demonstrate about the world ancient Israel inhabited, and has significant implications for theories about the formation of the Hebrew canonical text (not to mention providing a useful context for considering the variant text-forms observable in some of the Judean desert documents and the Septuagint), but would be quite false to assert about the Greco–Roman world in which the New Testament originated. Books and authors did exist in the Greco–Roman world, and while the terms “book” and “author” meant something different in Greco–Roman times to their modern meaning, they are comparable. The admirable attempt to draw together the oral–dominant features of both the Old and New Testaments does not give adequate weight to the differences.

For example, the discussion of the Gospels notes the relatively recent work of Burridge on the Gospels as *bioi*, but does not give adequate weight to the fact that (if one accepts Burridge’s conclusions, as the authors do) the Gospels were constructed in a literary form. The existence of an oral prehistory to the material used to construct the Gospels ought not to obscure the difference between a literary–textual gospel where the text-form was largely fixed within the lifetime of those who wrote (not spoke) it, and some of the prophetic books such as Jeremiah where the text–form was still in flux at the time of Jesus, or Isaiah where much of the text is believed to have originated some considerable time after Isaiah of Jerusalem’s lifetime. Nor should the likely oral performance of the letters be allowed to obscure the fact that the letters were not the eventual literary product of an oral developmental process, but a literary form admirably suited for an oral–dominant culture.

*The Lost World of Scripture* is most successful in its description of ancient near–Eastern oral–dominance in relation to the Old Testament, and in demonstrating that the evangelical preoccupation with authorship and contemporary composition of literary texts is both anachronistic and unnecessary for a trusting approach to Scripture. The pre–commitment of the authors to inerrancy will no doubt be of great value in bringing this important topic to a wide range of evangelical readers, who might otherwise be suspicious of

some of the conclusions the authors arrive at—although the risk is that Walton and Sandy’s nuanced version of inerrancy might be unrecognisable to non-scholarly members of that constituency.

Walton and Sandy are to be commended for giving significant time and thought to the theological implications of their propositions. Lost worlds are attractive to explorers for the wonders to be found there, and this book has the potential to help a wider audience find the joy of a scholarly *and* trusting reading of the Bible, rather than merely seeing the dangers of modern scholarship.

JOHN TUCKER. *A BRAIDED RIVER: NEW ZEALAND BAPTISTS AND PUBLIC ISSUES 1882-2000*. INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL STUDIES, VOL. 5. BERN: PETER LANG, 2013. (364 PP.) [ISBN 9783034313728].

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Patient readers must wait until the conclusion of this important study to understand the significance of “braided river” in the title. Drawing on a history of New Zealand art by Hamish Keith who suggested that “the great braided Rakaia that meanders across the shingle plains of Canterbury” provides the perfect metaphor for New Zealand culture, John Tucker argues that the New Zealand Baptist movement similarly has “not been limited to one stream ... it has flowed along many different channels, taken many different courses” (p. 333). His view, based on his PhD thesis, is that whilst the majority of Baptists in New Zealand have abstained from debate of public issues altogether, other streams have understood the church’s mission more broadly. The analysis of these tributaries that made this ‘braided river’ and the careful discussion of various issues that have (more or less) attracted Baptist attention makes for a significant contribution to Baptist history in New Zealand, although the interest and relevance of this book will extend to all students of global Baptist and evangelical thought.

The role of the churches in political and social debate is a well canvassed theme and there is much here that will stimulate this discussion. Tucker first summarises the English Baptist attitudes on these issues since these were influential in the colonies, and then addresses three questions (pp.16–17). First, to what extent did New Zealand Baptists attempt to reshape their society through public debate? Second, what were the forces that influenced involvement in public debate and in particular, how significant were the wider cultural and intellectual changes? Third, what did Baptists achieve? Did they make any significant contribution to public debate in New Zealand?

Wisely, Tucker does not seek to cover every public debate that interested Baptists. Debates about sabbath observance, film censorship and the like are not reviewed. Rather, ten topics are selected from across the period in order to illustrate how Baptists have engaged in public debate. The rich resources of the national denominational press and valuable archival collections are examined closely. The

challenge for anyone wanting to understand Baptist views on controversial themes is not to be underestimated. Tracking a way between debates and formal resolutions emanating from Baptist Union assemblies or appointed committees and individual Baptist voices, even of trusted leaders, which may not represent the whole community is complex. Given Baptist ecclesiology, which emphasises the search for discernment within the gathered community, to discover 'the' Baptist position on any controversial issue is notoriously problematic.

Tucker follows a clear structure in each chapter. The issue is placed in world and New Zealand context, the response of other churches in New Zealand is examined, parallels and influences from other Baptist groups and evangelicals are traced and then the local Baptist responses, both official and individual, are analysed.

On some questions the consensus among New Zealand Baptists was striking. Thus the crusade against prohibition (1882–1930) showed a largely unanimous condemnation of alcohol although attempts to achieve prohibition failed. As is the case throughout his book, Tucker notes comparisons with Britain and Australia, though these are not normally suggested as direct causes of New Zealand attitudes. Parallels do not necessarily reflect influence. The role of dominant and vigorous leaders like J. J. North in the early campaigns is emphasised and this provides a dramatic contrast with later periods when no such advocate for social justice issues had a similar impact. A growing and more complex religious scene meant that Baptists attracted what Tucker calls "conservative refugees from other denominations" and helped produce a denomination with little awareness or interest in historic Baptist concerns.

Successive chapters are devoted to attacks on the gambling industry (1890–1940) and "the struggles of labour" (1882–1919). Humanitarianism and an evangelical hatred of sin and evil forces, tinged with a sectarian suspicion of Catholicism, motivated much Baptist activity. Some radicals such as North, J.K. Archer and W.S. Rollings struggled with complex issues but a more conservative stream avoided controversy and stressed a more individualistic and pious approach to social justice questions.

During the era of the Great Depression (1920–1939) several theological currents dragged Baptists away from engagement with social justice. For example, there was theological controversy centred in a fear of 'modernism' by 'fundamentalists' whilst a fascination with premillennial theology diverted many from tackling social ills. Some Christian Socialists, such as A. H. Collins, showed another approach although Baptists, like most other denominations, struggled to relate their message to the fearful disasters of the depression years.

Sadly, the churches generally were slow to defend conscientious objectors in the period 1899–1945. Pro-war sentiments dominated even though the Baptist heritage of religious freedom might have been expected to prompt a greater defence for religious objectors against war.

The second half of the book is devoted to more contemporary issues such as New Zealand's Defence policy (including the Vietnam war and nuclear testing in the Pacific), the racism and rugby debates (1960–85) and the even more controversial questions of attitudes towards abortion law reform and the homosexual law reform debates of the 1970s and 80s. Here the tensions and divisions were

striking and Tucker has a sure touch in placing these developments in context. These chapters offer a convincing interpretation of the changes that have come in New Zealand Baptist life during these decades.

The concluding chapter reviews Baptist attitudes during the 'New Right Revolution' 1990–98. His basic conclusion is that Baptists had become "uninformed, unconcerned and uninvolved" in the crucial issues of society. The Public Questions Committee and its experienced chairman Angus Macleod despaired of any real interest, judging that the Assembly had become more of an inspirational type of gathering and that no questions of a deliberative or divisive nature were welcomed. Political conservatism led to a relegation of religion to a purely private sphere. The charismatic renewal movement and the emphasis on American pragmatism such as in Church Growth principles led to "the demise of the Baptist social conscience." By the end of the century, Tucker concludes, social services conducted by the denomination and community ministries by local congregations had "all but supplanted social action and public debate" (p. 335).

For this reader the Australian references were of great interest and prompts (again) the reflection that Baptist scholars across the Tasman have much to share and learn from each other. This volume is one of a series of contributions by Baptist scholars under the editorship of Keith Dyer of Whitley College, Melbourne and the publishers are to be congratulated for this initiative. Several individual Baptists have exercised considerable influence in both countries and common problems have prompted similar developments. Tucker's critique of how New Zealand Baptists have changed extends to more than public issues and should also prompt critical questioning by Australian leaders of developments in their various states.

*SILENT WITNESSES: LESSONS ON THEOLOGY, LIFE AND THE CHURCH FROM CHRISTIANS OF THE PAST.* BY GARRY J. WILLIAMS. EDINBURGH: BANNER OF TRUTH, 2013. (264 PP.) [ISBN: 978-1848712171]

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Dr Garry Williams (Director, The John Owen Centre, London Theological Seminary) explains on the book sleeve that "... (this) book tells the story of a selection of figures from the Christian past, witnesses whose lips have now fallen silent, but who yet speak through their writings and their stirring stories of their lives." With Church history a growing academic discipline, and many evangelical pastors seeking to reconnect with divines from earlier periods, this is a timely addition to the bookshelf. Williams is passionate about Church history and has a strong desire to communicate this passion to all Christians, regardless of whether they are pastors, academics or lay believers.

It is interesting to note that the author acknowledges that not everyone will be enthused by the studying of historical figures and that many people's perceptions of history are coloured by experiences of

school lessons. However, in a skilful attempt to overcome potential scepticism on behalf of some readers, he uses a fascinating argument to try and convince such readers of the benefits of studying Church history by arguing that reading Church history is effectively finding out about one's own ancestors, one's own family. After all, Christians living in the twenty-first century are spiritually untied with believers of the past, however long ago they may have walked the earth. As a Baptist historian I do not need to be convinced myself, but hopefully this excellent argument will win over doubters and I commend Williams for using it.

When looking to learn lessons from notable Christian figures of the past, there is always a danger of looking at them as 'superhuman', infallible people, and any associated publication merely becoming a hagiography. The author deserves credit for reminding readers that all who are featured in the book, however prominent they may be in the annals of Church history, were sinners just like the rest of humanity. He is not shy from showing readers the humanity and the failings of these illustrious figures. John Calvin, who features in three separate chapters (the author noting on p. 113 that he is a Calvinist), and is often placed on a pedestal by Calvinist theologians, is portrayed as very godly but sickly man who struggled with trials and tribulations, and was concerned about death being around every corner. Similarly, there are descriptions of periods where Martin Luther was greatly disheartened by the ingratitude of his congregation. Preaching, in the view of Williams, was a "hardship" for Luther, who "felt the oppressive work of the world and the devil in the way his preaching was received" (p. 191). As a final aid to help readers avoid idolatry and hero worship, the author emphasises that they are not called to be the people who are featured in the book, but are called to be the people God wants them to be.

The book itself is divided into three main sections, entitled "On the Essentials," "On the Christian Life," and "Primarily for Pastors and Elders." Each section contains a small number of chapters where important issues or doctrines are examined, and lessons drawn from the lives of key Christian figures of the past. This structure ensures clarity and will help those who feel only specific sections are of benefit to them, or those who wish to dip 'in and out' of the book.

The first section, entitled "On the Essentials" examines the key doctrines of the Christian faith and how these were arrived at by Fathers of the Church. Doctrines and themes which are examined include the cross and the person of Christ and importance of the Word of God. It can be easy for us, living in the twenty-first century, to take key tenets of the faith for granted, but this book is a helpful reminder that many of them had to be fought for against a swathe of heresies and confusion. The Council of Chalcedon (the subject of Chapter Two) is a key example of this; where the great thinkers of the day sat down to resolve the fundamental debate between the thinkers of Alexandria and Antioch as to who exactly Jesus Christ is.

The second of the three sections, "On the Christian Life," is a helpful attempt to draw lessons from the everyday lives of believers. It is particularly interesting to note Chapter Ten, which gives an overview of the life of businessman John Laing—a far less famous name than the other subjects of the book. Laing worked hard to instil a strong Christian ethos into his construction company, which still thrives today over thirty years since his death. He was extremely generous to his employees and to various charitable causes and, despite all his work commitments, was actively involved in the leadership of the

church he attended and in evangelistic endeavours. How Christians act in the workplace has become quite a big topic over the last decade with numerous books and Bible studies written on the subject. Those interested in the subject could do a lot worse than examine the life of John Laing.

The final section is entitled, “Primarily for Pastors and Elders.” Here Williams looks to draw lessons for modern pastors and elders from the pastoral, preaching and church leadership experiences of Calvin, Luther and Nicholas Ridley. What shines through from these men is their godliness, their forensically thorough knowledge of the Bible and their incredible hard work. Luther’s opinion that only those who can understand the original languages of the Bible should be allowed to preach will jar with some readers, as will Williams’ discussion of worship styles in Chapter Eleven, “Priorities for the Church,” however it is good that these potentially controversial issues are not glossed over.

Sadly there is no Baptist presence in this publication, which is a shame. Perhaps had a section on ‘mission’ been included, which would have added another interesting dimension to the book, then William Carey, as founder of the first Baptist Missionary Society, would have been a clear choice for inclusion, or maybe Billy Graham for the impact he made taking “the Word” to the world.

Whilst the book is written in a fairly informal and at times conversational style, it is certainly not a lightweight publication. Chapter Seven, “Loving God with all your heart: The Puritan Psychology”, is a complicated read and requires a great deal of patience and perseverance, but overall, Dr Williams deserves credit for compiling this interesting little book which gives a good insight into some key figures in Church history, the lives they lived and the battles they fought.

SUE PATTERSON. WORD, WORDS AND WORLD: HOW A WITTGENSTEINIAN PERSPECTIVE ON METAPHOR-MAKING REVEALS THE THEO-LOGIC OF REALITY. BERN: PETER LANG, 2013. (251 PP. + X.) [ISBN 978-3-0343-0230-2; DIGITAL 978-3-0353-0516-6].

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Sue Patterson is an astute philosophically minded theologian. Her latest book displays an intelligence that is alert to the usefulness of a Wittgensteinian paradigm for a deeply *theological* account of reality. Indeed, metaphorising as understood within a language-game theology becomes that “by which we come to know new aspects of reality” as “seen to be revelatory” (p. 234). Patterson demonstrates how linguistic meaning as a product of use informs our knowledge of reality, especially with regard to how knowledge of reality is enhanced by an account of metaphorical truth.

The metaphorical character of truth—moving with and beyond Eberhard Jüngel—is, in Patterson’s hands, developed in a metaphysically fruitful way. This is arguably the most important point her book makes. Her insistence at every major juncture of the argument that “no perspective is exempt

from an implied metaphysics” subverts the agnosticism that prevails in some descriptions of language’s function and of language games themselves (p. 163). Linguistic practices are epistemically basic, but those practices themselves are not metaphysically basic. It is the practices that enable us to indwell by grace what is real. Accordingly, what is real takes up metaphor—making in the service of unfolding its inner logic. Patterson’s text is written in the service of describing how language about the real—the triune God—cannot be divorced from its use, metaphors themselves displaying something of the theological character of reality as revealed by the Trinity.

Patterson’s text is divided into four parts. First, she argues in Part One for a Wittgensteinian foundation for language. “The game *is* its rules; the rules are enacted, lived” (p. 37). It follows, then, that nonlinguistic reality—God—“is accessible only through our contact with it via language” (p. 47). The use of language—pragmatics—becomes a foundation “for semantics” (p. 53). Understanding of language for God comes about via its use. That is the burden of her argument in Part Two. Patterson is critical of voices like that of the late Colin Gunton for separating language and world and thus arguing “the activity of metaphor-making is ontologically prior to the metaphorical statement itself” (p. 67). On the contrary, Patterson would have us recognize that metaphorical statements need to be metaphorized. “The truth of a metaphor is a function of its fit with reality as mediated by the language-games practised in our forms of life” (p. 111). In Part Three, she unfolds the extent to which “metaphorical truth makes conceivable the inconceivable and thus gives birth to new concepts” (p. 141). The metaphor is a kind of move that provides access to what is transcendent. In a manner reminiscent of Jüngel, she notes that God’s coming to the world is one in which God is said to come to speech. In Part Four, she discusses, following Gunton in part, how metaphor “can have a revelatory function” (p. 161). Such a notion follows upon her basic conviction that God “must be immanent in human religious forms of life” (p. 169). That is, to be sure, a strong claim; but it is true, I think, when one appreciates God’s self-revelation as “both *event and content*” (p. 184). Revelation takes up particular forms of linguistic discourse—in particular, metaphor—so as to communicate truths about itself that could not be spoken of otherwise.

In sum, I found this book to be quite an education. As a systematic theologian, I am not very conversant with forms of philosophically inclined theological discourse that takes seriously the way in which Christian faith not only generates a form of life but also language especially suited to teaching and fostering indwelling of its great truths. God does not look aghast at language but takes it (especially metaphorising) up thereby rendering it revelatory within a language-game theology. Where I found the book to be somewhat more perplexing is with respect to its “dated” feel. The author acknowledges that it was originally written as a doctoral dissertation. That in itself is not the problem, however. Where I struggled at points with Patterson’s presentation is in terms of how it would be received today. The bibliography more or less ends with works consulted in the early 1990s. There is therefore nearly a generation of reflection that is left out of the conversation. How would, for example, some of the author’s proposals been modified, if at all, by what others have said in the later 1990s or the 2000s, especially those working within a broadly Jüngelian paradigm? The learning is wide and deep, but it does feel at times as if

it would have benefitted from engagement with some more contemporary voices. That revelation implies a profound gain to language, that it is indeed in revelation incorporated “from its very beginning into the being of God,” is a salutary point (p. 202). Metaphorising is used by God so as to unfold dimensions of reality hitherto unseen. Patterson’s book, reservations about the dated character of the some of the scholarship notwithstanding, is an asset to philosophical and systematic theologians who would recognize that a theological ontology cannot isolate itself from language games but must rather learn to take the relationality implied therein as basic.

CAROL M. KAMINSKI. *WAS NOAH GOOD? FINDING FAVOUR IN THE FLOOD NARRATIVE*. LIBRARY OF HEBREW BIBLE/OLD TESTAMENT STUDIES 563. LONDON: BLOOMSBURY T&T CLARK, 2014. (223PP.) [ISBN 978-0-56702-716-0; DIGITAL 978-0-56735-781-6]

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Many scholars have noted the apparent tension between Noah’s finding favour and his righteousness, a tension that becomes more evident when one notes that in other contexts *kben* (“favour”) is often glossed with “grace”, a theologically loaded term that for Protestants connotes *unmerited* favour.

Carol Kaminski’s recent monograph suggests that God’s grace to Noah is theologically and temporally prior to Noah’s righteousness. Noah does not escape the flood because he is righteous, but because he is the recipient of God’s unmerited favour.

Kaminski begins with a helpful survey of interpretation, highlighting the thematic prevalence of grace in primeval history, even though the term *kben* itself only occurs in 6:8. She distinguishes between source-critical approaches to the text, which tend to highlight the dissonance between verse 8 and verse 9, and literary and canonical readings, which tend to look for a coherent theology that can encompass both verses. Kaminski concludes the chapter by asserting that the literary and canonical approaches ought to have primacy, a choice she says is, “not simply a matter of preference—it is a deeply held conviction” (p. 23).

The second chapter is devoted to demonstrating that 6:5–8 ought not to be read primarily as the introductory verses of J’s flood narrative, but are in fact part of the conclusion to the *toledot* of Adam and closely connected to 6:1–4. For example, the “seeing” of the sons of God in 6:2 is mirrored by the “seeing” of YHWH in 6:5.

This naturally leads into the argument in chapter 3 that 6:1–8 is a summary section concluding with God’s verdict about the universality of human evil throughout primeval history. In other words, YHWH’s verdict in 6:5–7 is not an observation about the increase of human evil in the flood generation, but a

description of the whole course of human behaviour he has observed so far. The significance of this conclusion is that Noah, too, is included in YHWH's judgement about universal human depravity.

In chapter four, Kaminski argues that Noah's "finding favour" in 6:8 "does not mean that Noah is exempt from human depravity, but from divine judgement" (p. 105). She highlights that an inferior "finds favour" in the eyes of a superior, and also argues that the expression can convey the idea of unmerited favour. The many texts in the Hebrew Bible which connect good behaviour with divine favour ought not to be read as if the good behaviour of a person creates an *obligation* for God to show favour. As a result, God's favour, when given to a commendable person, is not in fact merited. In Kaminski's view, the thematic importance of grace in the primeval history now finds explicit support in the unmerited favour shown to Noah, who is included in YHWH's judgement that all humanity is depraved.

The apparent tension this raises with 6:9 begins to find a resolution in chapter five, where Kaminski goes on to suggest that the idea of *tsedeq* ("righteous") in 6:9 is not that Noah's good behaviour contributed to God's election of Noah. As has often been pointed out, *tsedeq* primarily connotes faithfulness to a covenant. Kaminski sees the covenantal context where Noah is described as a *tsadiq* man as God's command to build the ark.

In chapter six, Kaminski further argues that the description of Noah as *tsedeq* in 6:9 functions as an advance notice of the verdict that will be pronounced in 7:1. The verdict in 7:1 does not give the reason for Noah's finding favour in 6:8, but is a verdict on Noah's obedience subsequent to his finding favour. This is a significant point, as in 7:1 (unlike in 6:9) God commands Noah to enter the ark *ki* ("because") he has been seen to be righteous.

Kaminski concludes that prominence ought to be given to God's unmerited favour to Noah, rather than to Noah's obedience, as the reason Noah escapes the fate meted out to the rest of depraved humanity. Noah's righteousness is not his general piety, but his specific obedience to God's command to build the ark, subsequent to the grace God shows him in election.

One weakness in Kaminski's argument is that she depends heavily on identifying the "sections" of the text. She begins to resolve the tension between 6:8 and 6:9 by assigning verse 8 to one "section" and verse 9 to a subsequent "section". Sections become the exegetical key, rather than sources.

Kaminski is right to highlight the significance of the *toledot* structure of Genesis, and is also right to note that the lack of a *waw* at the start of 6:9 gives prominence to the structural break for this is a point often overlooked in source-critical readings. However, on her reading, the editor of the text expected readers to base their interpretation of 6:9 on a particular exegesis of 7:1, instead of making the (natural?) connection with the immediately preceding verse. The fact that a new section does begin in 6:9 does not remove the textual proximity of 6:8 in the present form of the text, a proximity that Kaminski would surely agree cannot be accidental.

Secondly, Kaminski helpfully notes the many connections with the creation narrative and human disobedience, but on her reading we are left with the rather strange conclusion that human disobedience was the cause of divine judgement in the garden but Noah's exception from divine judgement in the flood was unrelated to obedience.

Thirdly, while Kaminsky rightly points out that *matsab kben* can involve unmerited favour, the lack of merit needs to be demonstrated from the context. All that can be confidently asserted about the expression in Noah's case is that it refers to a relationship between an inferior and a superior.

Fourthly, while *tsedeq* does denote covenant faithfulness, the text does not specify Noah's precise covenantal setting. As John Goldingay notes, all humans share a broader covenantal obligation to piety. The text never limits Noah's faithfulness to the narrower covenantal setting of God's commands to build and go into the ark (see John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology, Volume Two: Israel's Faith* [Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006], 522).

Finally, Kaminski sets up too strong a dichotomy between those she repeatedly describes as "source-critical scholars" and those using a literary or canonical approach. As she notes in her review of interpretation, some scholars who use the tools of traditional source-critical classification of the verses in question give prominence to divine grace, and some scholars using a literary reading understand Noah's righteousness to be a reason for his escaping the flood.

Despite those weaknesses, Kaminski has provided a stimulating and helpful discussion of the relationship between divine favour and Noah's righteousness. She is persuasive in arguing that too little prominence has been given to Noah's inclusion in human depravity and to YHWH's gracious election of Noah.

Similarly, she rightly considers the relationship between verses in the canonical form of the text to be worth careful attention. Unlike those distracted by apparently dissonant theologies in pentateuchal sources, she has noted a theological coherence in the primeval history that is governed by the thematic significance of divine grace, and her emphasis on the literary structure of the final form of the text provides useful insights.

To this reviewer, though, the overall conclusion on the issue of Noah's merit before God is unjustified. Kaminski notes that Noah's "obedience to God's command to build the ark results in a 'righteous' verdict", but then asserts that "this is not to be identified as moral *goodness*" (p. 191 emphasis hers).

But the description of Noah's virtue is not limited to *tsedeq*. He is also described as *tamim* ("blameless" or "perfect"), a term which is much rarer, and then as walking with God, which is only otherwise applied to Enoch. Taken together, we find an extraordinary description of Noah's character, and as in much of the Hebrew Bible, exemplary piety is connected with divine favour without the Reformation issue of meritorious works being directly addressed. Protestant readers of the flood narrative are perhaps tempted to suffer an *Anfechtung* by proxy through Noah. Kaminski's argument that Noah does not merit God's salvation from the flood springs from asking a Lutheran question of a text that is unable to give her a clear answer.