The Present and Future of Biblical Theology

— Andreas J. Köstenberger —

Andreas Köstenberger is senior research professor of New Testament and biblical theology at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina. He also serves as the editor of the Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society.

In his influential address, “Discourse on the Proper Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology, and the Right Determination of the Aims of Each,” Johann Philipp Gabler (1753–1826) lodged the programmatic proposal that scholars ought to distinguish between biblical and systematic theology. In his lecture, delivered at the University of Altdorf in 1787 (the year the Constitutional Convention met in Philadelphia), Gabler urged his colleagues to place their theological edifice more overtly on a scriptural foundation: “There is truly a biblical theology, of historical origin, conveying what the holy writers felt about divine matters.” Gabler claimed that a biblical theology conceived along these lines would provide the historical and rational scientific framework enabling systematic theology to relate biblical truths to contemporary life and thought.

At its core, Gabler’s distinction between biblical and systematic theology marks an important foundation stone to this day. Biblical theology is essentially a historical discipline calling for an inductive and descriptive method. We must carefully distinguish between biblical and systematic theology before we can accurately describe the theology of the biblical writers themselves. Some of us may find this to be a truism hardly worth stating. But as a survey of the last decade of biblical-theological research will show, the need to (1) ground biblical theology in careful historical work, (2) conceive of the discipline as essentially inductive and descriptive, and (3) distinguish biblical from systematic theology continues to be relevant, even urgent, if the discipline is to continue its viability.

1 This article is a revised version of plenary addresses given at the Southwest and Southeast regional meetings of the Evangelical Theological Society in Fort Worth, TX and Wake Forest, NC, both in March 2012, respectively. The address as originally given at the Southwest regional ETS meeting will be published in a future issue of the Southwestern Journal of Theology.

2 The Latin title was Oratio de iusto discrimine theologiae biblicae et dogmaticae regundisque recte utrisque finibus. For an excellent summary of Gabler’s contribution, see William Baird, History of New Testament Research, Volume One: From Deism to Tübingen (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 184–87.


4 For a brief analysis of Gabler’s address and its relevance for the present discussion, see Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 9–10.

5 For a useful treatment of the history and nature of biblical theology, see Peter Balla, Challenges to New Testament Theology: An Attempt to Justify the Enterprise (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998). More briefly, see
What follows surveys the present state of biblical theology, gauged by a selective survey of evangelical works produced during the past decade or so. Then it discusses ramifications of this survey for the future of the discipline.

1. The Present State of Biblical Theology

In one of his many important contributions to the subject, D. A. Carson remarks that how one navigates the tension between Scripture's unity and its diversity is the “most pressing” issue in biblical theology. Our challenge is “Mapping Unity in Diversity.” Virtually all evangelical biblical theologians start their work with the assumption of essential biblical unity. Most also realize that, within this unity, Scripture displays a certain amount of legitimate diversity. The challenge is how to come to terms with this interplay between unity and diversity. In what follows, I look at recent biblical-theological works under four rubrics: (1) classic approaches; (2) central-themes approaches; (3) single-center approaches;
and (4) story or metanarrative approaches. Each of these seeks to navigate the unity-diversity question in its own distinctive way (though there are commonalities as well).

1.1. Classic Approaches

First in our taxonomy of biblical theologies is what G. K. Beale recently called “the classic approach.” This classic approach involves studying first the message and theological content of individual biblical books, followed by an attempt at synthesis tracing overarching themes across various corpora.


An example of this model is the reference work New Dictionary of Biblical Theology, edited by T. Desmond Alexander and Brian Rosner. Rosner defines the task of biblical theology in the introductory article:

Biblical theology is principally concerned with the overall message of the whole Bible. It seeks to understand the parts in relation to the whole and, to achieve this, it must work with the mutual interaction of the literary, historical, and theological dimensions.

10 Cf. Gerhard Hasel, New Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978). In his section on methodology in NT theology, Hasel lists four approaches: thematic, existentialist, historical, and salvation history. Under basic proposals toward a NT theology, he discusses NT theology (1) as a historical-theological discipline, (2) based on the NT writings, (3) presented on the basis of books and blocks of material, and (4) presented on the basis of longitudinal themes. Edward W. Klink III and Darian R. Lockett, Understanding Biblical Theology: A Comparison of Theory and Practice (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), identify five types of biblical theology along a spectrum reaching from “more theological” to “more historical”: (1) Biblical Theology as Historical Description (James Barr); (2) Biblical Theology as History of Redemption (D. A. Carson); (3) Biblical Theology as Worldview-Story (N. T. Wright); (4) Biblical Theology as Canonical Approach (Brevard Childs); and (5) Biblical Theology as Theological Construction (Francis Watson).

11 For a helpful assessment of the discipline almost two decades ago, see D. A. Carson, “Current issues in Biblical Theology: A New Testament Perspective,” BBR 5 (1995): 17–41, originally an address delivered to the Institute of Biblical Research. After noting the need for definitional clarity, Carson suggested the following valid approaches to biblical theology: (1) the theology of the whole Bible, descriptively and historically considered; (2) the theology of the various biblical corpora or strata (e.g., OT and NT theologies); and (3) the theology of a particular theme across the Scriptures. He also urged the use of the following criteria for biblical theology: (1) it should read the Bible as a historically developing collection of documents; (2) it should presuppose a coherent and agreed-upon canon; and (3) it should utilize an inductive approach to the individual books and the canon as a whole, making clear connections among the various corpora, and calling all people to a knowledge of the living God (pp. 27–32).

12 G. K. Beale, “A New Testament Biblical Theology: Interview by John Starke,” available online at http://thegospelcoalition.org/book-reviews/interview/A_New_Testament_Biblical_Theology. Actually, Beale says that a number of “classic New Testament theologies . . . conduct a consecutive theological analysis of each New Testament book within its corpus, usually in the canonical order of each corpus, and then draw up a final comparison of each of the theological emphases of each of the books. In so doing, at the end of the project sometimes a major theological thrust is attempted to be found” (e.g., Marshall’s New Testament Theology identifies mission as such a thrust, which Beale does not find comprehensive enough).

of the various corpora, and with the interrelationships of these within the whole canon of Scripture.  

It is only in this way that we can properly account for what God has spoken to us in the Scriptures. In summary, Rosner defines biblical theology as theological interpretation of Scripture in and for the church. More specifically, "It proceeds with historical and literary sensitivity and seeks to analyze and synthesize the Bible's teaching about God and his relations to the world on its own terms, maintaining sight of the Bible's overarching narrative and Christocentric focus." With this definition and analysis in place, the rest of the dictionary proceeds accordingly.

1.1.2. Scott J. Hafemann, ed., Biblical Theology: Retrospect and Prospect

Another edited work that contributes to the discussion of properly characterizing the discipline is Biblical Theology: Retrospect and Prospect, featuring selected addresses from the 2000 Wheaton Conference for Theology. In the first chapter, the editor, Scott Hafemann, discusses the issue of canonical unity and diversity. He believes that, in moving forward, scholars should focus on three central realities. First, they should look at each book of Scripture independently and take it on its own terms while affirming the unity of the structure of the Bible. Second, they should come to terms with the eschatological nature of the Bible, with the first and second coming of Christ serving as the midpoint and endpoint of redemptive history. Third, biblical theology must be rooted in history, lest we replace the message of Scripture with our own experience. These three basic affirmations serve as general principles keeping interpreters grounded as they pursue their biblical-theological work.

Later in the volume, Paul House offers a helpful perspective on the method of working toward a coherent biblical theology that does justice to the text of Scripture. He begins by affirming that canonical

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16 Two additional introductory articles deal with the NT use of the OT and the relationship between the Testaments. Both authors stress the continuity of the Scriptures without neglecting its diversity. Craig Evans avers, “One of the most important assumptions underlying the NT’s use of the OT is that of fulfillment and continuity. . . . This means that Christian biblical theology must take fully into account the theology of the OT and never develop NT theology apart from it” (“New Testament Use of the Old Testament,” 79–80). Graeme Goldsworthy concurs: “Understanding the relationship of the two Testaments involves understanding that the God who has revealed himself finally in Jesus has also revealed himself in the OT in a way that foreshadows both the structure and content of the Christian gospel” (“Relationship of Old Testament and New Testament,” 89).


biblical theology requires a unitary reading strategy of the OT and NT canon that allows the Bible to be treated as one book of Scripture. Second, this unitary reading should proceed on a book-by-book basis in order to derive the specific message from each piece of writing. Third, this analysis should lead to the identification and collection of vital central themes allowing an overarching synthesis. Fourth, there must be a commitment to intertextuality, that is, to discerning instances where later passages in Scripture refer to earlier texts. Fifth, interpreters should treat major biblical themes as they emerge from the whole of Scripture. Sixth and finally, biblical theology ought to have as its goal the presentation of the whole counsel of God in various settings. Thus biblical theology has the potential of encouraging believers toward understanding and applying the coherent message of Scripture to their lives and ministry.

1.1.3. Assessment

The strength of the classic approach is that it takes into consideration the contribution of each individual book in the canon of Scripture while at the same time seeking to discern major themes across the canon. Another strength of this approach is that it allows specialists in various fields to contribute. As biblical and theological studies become increasingly specialized, collaborative work is a growing necessity.

A potential weakness of the classic approach is that unless book-by-book analysis and the identification of scriptural themes are related to Scripture's larger storyline, the needed synthesis remains incomplete. While positing a single center is precarious (which I seek to demonstrate below), the scriptural metanarrative provides a promising avenue of exploring the biblical writers' message, which involves unity as well as diversity.

1.2. Central-Themes Approaches

Many have taken one important aspect of the classic approach to biblical theology, the quest for major scriptural motifs, and sought to orient the whole Bible around a few central themes that can be traced across the canon.


One of the most prolific, and in my judgment most successful, biblical-theological works of the past decade exhibiting a central-themes approach is Charles Scobie's massive work *The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology*. Discussing the history, definition, and task of biblical theology, Scobie believes, “If progress is to be made in the study of Biblical Theology, the question of definition is clearly crucial.” Scobie sides with many others in the field in maintaining that biblical theology is “the

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21 Ibid., 3. Scobie believes that necessary presuppositions for a coherent biblical theology include “belief that the Bible conveys a divine revelation, that the word of God in Scripture constitutes the norm of Christian faith and life, and that all the varied material of the OT and NT can in some way be related to the plan and purpose of the one God of the whole Bible” (p. 47).
theology contained in the Bible, the theology of the Bible itself.”

Moreover, Scobie proposes what he calls an “intermediate biblical theology,” contending that biblical theology is a bridge discipline between the historical study of the Bible and the use of the Bible as authoritative Scripture by the church. Scobie further suggests that biblical theology ought to be fundamentally concerned with the horizon of the text and as such should attempt to overview and interpret the shape and structure of the Bible as a whole. Along these lines, he writes that his own work “will seek the unity and continuity of Scripture, but without sacrificing the richness of its diversity. It will focus not on exegetical details but on the broad interrelationships between the major themes of the Bible, and above all on the interrelationship between the Testaments.”

In seeking to delineate the structure of biblical theology, Scobie cautions that scholars avoid imposing alien conceptual patterns onto Scripture and instead allow the structure of their biblical theology to arise from the biblical material itself: “The structure that is proposed here is one in which the major themes of the OT and NT are correlated with each other.” In Scobie’s approach, “Each theme is first traced through the OT. Although on the one hand the material is discussed with an eye to the way [in which] the theme is developed in the NT, on the other hand, every effort is made to listen to what the OT says on its own terms.”

Thus, Scobie believes that the procedure that seems to offer the most promise and the least risk of distorting the biblical material is identifying a limited number of major biblical themes, grouped around associated subthemes, and tracing each theme and related subtheme(s) through the OT and into the NT, following the scheme of proclamation, promise/fulfillment, and consummation. These themes, isolated in interaction with various centers that have been proposed through the course of the discipline, are broken up into four categories: (1) God’s order; (2) God’s servant; (3) God’s people; and (4)

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22 Ibid., 5. See also the discussion of the work of Adolf Schlatter in §2.1.

23 This intermediate biblical theology contrasts with what Scobie describes as (1) integrated biblical theology, which, prior to Gabler’s address, did not distinguish between what the Bible “meant” and what it “means,” and (2) independent biblical theology, which is a biblical theology dominated by historical criticism and pursued in radical independence from the church (see ibid., 7–8).

24 Ibid., 47. Scobie speaks specifically to the distinctiveness and relationship between the Testaments in relation to biblical theology. As for the OT canon, Scobie acknowledges the Christian stance regarding its importance: “[Christians] see in the [OT] the record of the period of preparation and promise that culminates in the Christ event. It is that Christ event, and not the Torah, that constitutes the supreme revelation of God for Christians . . . . Thus, whatever may be the case historically, theologically for Christians it is the Christ event that closes the canon of the Old Testament” (p. 55). Regarding the NT canon, Scobie again asserts, “BT is not concerned with the details of the complex process of the development of the canon of the NT. But it is vitally concerned with the theology of the canon. From a theological point of view it is clear that the all-important factor in the closing of the canon of the NT was the belief that the Christ event constitutes the supreme, unique, and final revelation of God” (p. 57).

25 Ibid., 91–92. In this regard, Scobie anticipates the work of G. K. Beale (see §1.4.3).

26 See ibid., 93.
God's way. Engaging with biblical theology in this fashion allows one to trace demonstrably important themes across the canon with a view toward analysis and synthesis.

1.2.2. Scott J. Hafemann and Paul R. House, eds., Central Themes in Biblical Theology

As mentioned in note 8, Scott Hafemann, subsequent to the publication of his edited work Biblical Theology: Retrospect and Prospect, partnered with Paul House to edit a sequel: Central Themes in Biblical Theology: Mapping Unity in Diversity. This book attempts to “explore biblical themes that contribute to the wholeness of the Bible.” In this regard, the volume moves beyond a classic approach to a central-themes model. The contributors share three convictions regarding scriptural unity. First, the Bible is a unity because it is the word of God, who is a unified and coherent being. Second, biblical theology should seek not only to unpack the content of Scripture but also to establish the conceptual unity of the Bible as a whole as it unfolds in human events. Third, doing whole-Bible theology should be a collaborative effort owing to the complexity of the discipline. Once again, as with the works already discussed, we see specific principles guiding these authors in delineating the unity and diversity characterizing the canon.

Perhaps most pertinent to the task at hand is Roy Ciampa’s essay on the history of redemption. He states that a central-themes approach to Scripture “seeks to uncover the biblical authors’ own understanding of the events and their significance within the unfolding narrative context in which they are found.” Ciampa agrees with those who have argued for a creation-sin-exile-restoration motif and seeks to trace this pattern throughout the various corpora of Scripture. In so doing, Ciampa argues that the main structure of the biblical narrative consists essentially of two creation-sin-exile-restoration structures whereby the second of these, which is national in nature (seen in the Israel narrative), is embedded within the first, which is global (seen in the Adam-Eve narrative and its accompanying consequences). The national creation-sin-exile-restoration pattern serves as the key to the resolution of the plot conflict of the global structure, and in the interplay between these two structures, God’s kingdom intervention and promises are rightly understood. This essay thus contributes a useful application of biblical theology demonstrating the saving purposes of God throughout the canon.

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27 See ibid., 94–99. Scobie’s chart on page 99 helpfully illustrates these major categories and how they fit into the rubric of proclamation, promise/fulfillment, and consummation.


30 See ibid., 16–18.


32 For an example of a biblical theology that engages with this theme as the integrative motif for understanding the whole of Scripture, see C. Marvin Pate et al., The Story of Israel: A Biblical Theology (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004).

1.2.3. Assessment

Central-themes approaches can be helpful in tracing important motifs across the canon, but the organization of these central themes still requires further synthesis, in particular in relation to Scripture’s overarching storyline. Hafemann’s discussion of the covenant structure or Ciampa’s treatment of the creation-sin-exile-restoration theme both constitute attempts to provide such a metanarrative framework in an effort to relate these central themes to one another. The central-themes approach is a useful component of biblical theology if one recognizes the place of central themes within the framework of the macrostructure of the entire canon.

1.3. Single-Center Approaches

Over the course of the discipline, there have been scholars who have sought to identify a single center of Scripture that constitutes the major theme around which the entire canon revolves. In effect, therefore, the single-center approach selects one from among a number of central themes and designates it as the sole center of biblical theology. The fact that such an approach is fraught with considerable difficulty at the very outset has not kept at least one scholar in recent years from exploring the notion of a central organizing theme within the scope of biblical theology.\(^{34}\)

1.3.1. James M. Hamilton Jr., God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment

In his publication *God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology*,\(^{35}\) James Hamilton, as suggested by the title of his work, endeavors to show that God’s glory in salvation through judgment serves as a biblical center, that is, as a particularly prominent theme that holds the canon together. Hamilton states the purpose of his book as follows:

> The purpose of this book, quixotic as it may seem, is to seek to do for biblical theology what Kevin Vanhoozer has done for hermeneutics and David Wells has done for evangelical theology. The goal is not a return to an imaginary golden age but to help people know God. The quest to know God is clarified by a diagnosis of the problem (Wells), the vindication of interpretation (Vanhoozer), and, hopefully, a clear presentation of the main point of God’s revelation of himself, that is, a clear presentation of the center of biblical theology.\(^{36}\)

Hamilton contends that the saving and judging glory of God\(^{37}\) is the center of biblical theology and as such is the primary theme uniting all of Scripture.

\(^{34}\) See Hasel, *New Testament Theology*, 140–78. See also Carson, “NT Theology,” 810: “The pursuit of the center is chimerical. NT theology is so interwoven that one can move from any one topic to any other topic. We will make better progress by pursuing clusters of broadly common themes, which may not be common to all NT books”; and Andreas J. Köstenberger, “Diversity and Unity in the New Testament,” in *Biblical Theology: Retrospect and Prospect* (ed. Scott J. Hafemann; Downers Grove: IVP, 2001), 154: “the search for a single center of the NT should be abandoned.”


\(^{36}\) Ibid., 38.

\(^{37}\) While my focus here is the general methodology of deriving a particular theology of the Bible, it is important to understand what exactly Hamilton means by his phrase “God’s glory in salvation through judgment.” He asserts that God’s glory refers to the weight and majestic goodness of who God is, as well as the resulting fame.
Hamilton describes his methodology as follows. First, he sets out to pursue a biblical theology that highlights the central theme of God's glory in salvation through judgment by describing the literary contours of individual books in their canonical context with sensitivity to the unfolding metanarrative. Hamilton believes that this metanarrative presents a unified story with a discernible main point or center. In defining a center in biblical theology, a crucial part of his methodology, Hamilton states, with reference to Jonathan Edwards,

> If it can be shown that the Bible's description of God's ultimate end produces, informs, organizes, and is exposited by all the other themes in the Bible, and if this can be demonstrated from the Bible's own salvation-historical narrative and in its own terms, then the conclusion will follow that the ultimate end ascribed to God in the Bible is the center of biblical theology.

Thus one can identify the center of biblical theology by identifying the theme that is prevalent, even pervasive, in all parts of the Bible and that serves as its ultimate end. Hamilton claims that this theme will be the demonstrable centerpiece of the theology contained in the Bible itself. Hamilton then moves into textual analysis, seeking to demonstrate the centrality of God's glory in salvation through judgment in the Torah, the Prophets, the Writings, the Gospels and Acts, the New Testament Letters, and Revelation.

or renown that he gains from the revelation of himself (see ibid., 56–57). Regarding the latter part of the phrase, Hamilton suggests, "salvation always comes through judgment." Israel was saved through the judgment of Egypt; believers are saved through the judgment that falls on Jesus; and people repent of their sin as prophets and apostles vocalize the truths of God's justice: "All of this reveals God as righteous and merciful, loving and just, holy and forgiving, for his own glory, forever" (p. 58).


Anticipating the objection of some scholars who believe that a center is not attainable, Hamilton responds, "In spite of the judgment of these respected scholars, it must be observed that their statements do not seem to take into account one theme that has only recently been put forward as the center of biblical theology: the glory of God . . . . Anticipating the charge that it might be too broad to be useful, I am sharpening the proposal to focus specifically on the glory of God manifested in salvation through judgment" (pp. 52–53). For a brief survey of other proposed centers in OT, NT, and biblical theology, see James M. Hamilton Jr., "The Glory of God in Salvation through Judgment: The Centre of Biblical Theology?" *TynBul* 57 (2006): 65–69. See also idem, *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment*, 52–53.


Ibid., 139–269.

Ibid., 271–353.

Ibid., 355–441.

Ibid., 443–559.

Ibid., 541–51.
1.3.2. Assessment

While it is instructive to see how Hamilton delves into the exegetical details to substantiate his thesis, the feasibility of trying to find a single center for the entire biblical witness remains fraught with difficulty. In the end, Hamilton’s proposal fails to convince because it proves unduly monolithic and frequently appears to be artificially imposed onto individual writings (e.g., Esther, Proverbs, Song of Solomon, Matthew, Philemon). As a result, the canon of Scripture in its entirety is unable to bear the weight of “God’s glory in salvation through judgment” serving as a single center. As D. A. Carson wisely observed with regard to single-center approaches, “How shall one avoid the tendency to elevate one book or corpus of the NT and domesticate the rest, putting them on a leash held by the themes of the one, usually the book or corpus on which the biblical theologian has invested most scholarly energy?”

At closer scrutiny, Hamilton’s center seems to work best in the prophetic literature, which is replete with oracles of salvation and judgment. The opening chapters of Genesis, on the other hand, are discussed only briefly. Strikingly, God’s glory in creation is at best subsidiary in Hamilton’s center, and thus the bookends of biblical revelation do not receive the prominence they deserve. Another potential weakness of Hamilton’s proposal is that he uses pivotal terms such as “glory,” “judgment,” or “salvation” in multiple senses and then moves back and forth between various definitions of these key terms to establish his single center. “God’s glory in salvation through judgment” may well be one of Scripture’s central themes, perhaps even one that was underappreciated prior to Hamilton’s work, but calling this theme the “single center” of Scripture overstates the case because it excludes other important themes such as God’s glory in creation and new creation.

In light of such difficulties (and more programmatic underlying concerns noted below), the concluding verdict of Gerhard Hasel’s monograph New Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate, written decades ago, still stands:

47 See Stephen Dempster’s appreciative review of Hamilton’s work: “Book Review: God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment,” 9Marks Articles and Reviews, available at http://www.9marks.org/books/book-review-gods-glory-salvation-through-judgment. Dempster states, “All our best efforts can be described as seeing through a glass darkly. The fact that no theological centre has been found does not mean that there is none. . . . While God and his word are inerrant, all our theology partakes of errancy. As Hamilton has come back from his quest, in stressing the glory of God in salvation through judgment he has certainly pointed us all in the right direction.”

48 Carson, “NT Theology,” 810. As we see further in §1.4.3, G. K. Beale is therefore wise to eschew the notion of a single center in favor of tethering his proposal to a broader construct: the biblical storyline. This allows Beale to see a red thread running through the scriptural narrative without being equally vulnerable to the charge of being monochromatic and reductionistic. See the discussion in ch. 6 of G. K. Beale, A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011); and idem, “Interview”: “I do not attempt to see a central theme in NT biblical theology,” Beale continues, “On the other hand, I don’t think the NT is composed of multiple themes that are merely unrelated to one another. I try to sail a middle course between these two perspectives.” It should be noted, however, that few evangelicals would say that the “NT is composed of multiple themes that are merely unrelated to one another.” For this reason, Beale’s claim to steer a “middle course between these two perspectives” is a bit curious.

49 See pp. 53, 70–74.

50 See the seven senses in which he uses the phrase “God’s glory in salvation through judgment” on pp. 58–59.

51 Cf. the similar critique by Gentry and Wellum, Kingdom through Covenant, 12: “We do not deny that ‘salvation through judgment’ is a theme of Scripture, even a major one, but we will not defend the assertion that it is the theme to the neglect of other themes.”
The variety of problems to which scholars have pointed in their discussions of the center of the NT, one that functions as “a canon within the canon” and serves as material principle of canon criticism, are apparently insurmountable. An approach to NT theology that seeks to be adequate to the totality of the NT cannot afford the arbitrariness, subjectivity, and reductionism inherent in the choice of a selective principle in the form of a center either from without Scripture (tradition) or from within Scripture on the basis of which value judgments are made with regard to the content of Scripture as a whole or in its parts.52

1.4. Story or Metanarrative Approaches

While the single-center approach has some obvious flaws, a related centering model is the metanarrative approach to biblical theology. This approach does not identify one theme as the central idea but argues that there is an overarching metanarrative that unifies the Scriptures.

1.4.1. T. Desmond Alexander, From Eden to the New Jerusalem

One fairly recent exemplar of such an approach is T. Desmond Alexander’s From Eden to the New Jerusalem: An Introduction to Biblical Theology.53 In this work, Alexander, one of the editors of the New Dictionary of Biblical Theology (see §1.1.1), seeks to explore the unfolding canonical trajectory of Scripture. In so doing, Alexander grounds his attempt to describe the content of the biblical metanarrative in the conviction that the word of God is a unified story: “Produced over many centuries, the differing texts that comprise this library are amazingly diverse in terms of genre, authorship and even language. Nonetheless, they produce a remarkably unified story that addresses two of life’s most fundamental questions: (1) Why was the earth created? (2) What is the reason for human existence?”54

Alexander’s overall method is thematic in nature as he seeks to demonstrate (similar to the central-themes approach) that several overarching motifs essentially unify and hold the Bible together. In defense of this approach, he asserts,

There is something of value in seeing the big picture, for it frequently enables us to appreciate the details more clearly. The scholarly tendency to “atomize” biblical texts is often detrimental to understanding them. By stripping passages out of their literary contexts meanings are imposed upon them that were never intended by their authors. I hope this study goes a little way to redressing this imbalance, for biblical scholarship as a whole has not articulated clearly the major themes that run throughout Scripture. Since these themes were an integral part of the thought world of the biblical authors, an appreciation of them may significantly alter our reading of individual books.55

In a unique fashion, Alexander takes as his starting point the two final chapters of the book of Revelation, in the conviction that these chapters sustain a distinct connection with Gen 1–3 and that these two portions of Scripture frame the entire biblical narrative, providing the reader with an overarching

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52 Hasel, NT Theology, 177–78.
54 Ibid., 10.
55 Ibid., 11.
framework for what the Bible is seeking to communicate throughout. In this way, the reader looks at the end of the story to make better sense of the beginning, and in so doing traces a theme from its point of departure to its fulfillment in Christ and ultimately its consummation in the New Jerusalem. Alexander recognizes that while “there are limitations to this approach, it is nevertheless one way of attempting to determine the main elements of the meta-story.” Thus the study is not exhaustive but rather suggestive, seeking to outline some of the main themes running through Scripture. The contours of Alexander’s book adhere closely to the standard approach of summarizing the overarching narrative of the Bible in terms of creation, fall, redemption, and new creation. While Alexander does not tease out every detail of his proposal, his work serves as a helpful guide to some of the most significant themes in the Bible and the canonical weight they carry in our interpretive efforts.

1.4.2. Graeme Goldsworthy, Christ-Centered Biblical Theology

Another instance of a story or metanarrative approach is Graeme Goldsworthy’s new book Christ-Centered Biblical Theology: Hermeneutical Foundations and Principles. Goldsworthy seeks to contribute a measure of coherence to the discipline by formulating a biblical-theological schema in accordance with the work of Donald Robinson and Gabriel Hebert. He begins by pointing out some of the difficulties involved in defining the essence and nature of biblical theology. He defines biblical theology as “the study of how every text in the Bible relates to every other text in the Bible” and as “the study of the matrix of divine revelation in the Bible as a whole.” He further refines the definition by stating that biblical theology is the study of how every text relates to Christ and the gospel. Goldsworthy also links his proposal with salvation history, underscoring the importance of biblical revelation and its unified progression. In understanding Christ to be at the center of biblical theology, Goldsworthy seeks to show how the incarnation of Jesus is the link between the Testaments and at the center of God’s plan begun at creation and to be completed in the new creation, epitomized by God’s presence with his people. In keeping with this Christ-centered understanding, Goldsworthy posits the kingdom of God, “defined simply as God’s people in God’s place under God’s rule,” as the central theme in Scripture.

56 Although Alexander sees direct parallels between Gen 1–3 and Rev 20–22, he notes that one finds significant progression as well as elements of continuity and discontinuity as the canon moves toward its completion (see ibid., 14).
57 Ibid., 10.
58 See the above discussion of Roy Ciampa’s chapter in Central Themes in Biblical Theology.
60 For an elaboration of Robinson’s impact on Goldsworthy, see ibid., ch. 10.
61 Ibid., 39.
62 Ibid., 40.
63 See ibid. Goldsworthy also helpfully notes that the degree to which a given scholar holds to the authority and inerrancy of Scripture will affect their approach to biblical theology.
64 See the discussion of salvation-history approaches in Hasel, NT Theology, 111–32.
65 See ibid., 56–75.
66 Ibid., 75.
Unlike some of the other authors we have considered, Goldsworthy does not spend much time discussing method—though he affirms that there are a number of different approaches to the task of biblical theology—but instead focuses on demonstrating what he believes is the essential structure of biblical revelation to be captured by biblical theology, properly conducted. Goldsworthy urges that an exegete’s presuppositions must be taken into account as he or she approaches the text. With this in mind, Goldsworthy asserts, “Given our evangelical presupposition of the unity of Scripture with its central focus on Christ, we should expect that the different acceptable approaches will reflect that unity.” The methods for conducting this kind of biblical theology include careful thematic or word study; contextual studies of individual texts, books, or corpora; OT or NT theologies; and theologies of the whole Bible as canon. All of these investigations, Goldsworthy asserts, are performed in order to edify the people of God and to help them grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ.

1.4.3. G. K. Beale, A New Testament Biblical Theology

A final work following a story or metanarrative approach to biblical theology is G. K. Beale’s recent tome A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New Testament.72 Beale asserts his purpose: “My attempt in this book is not to write a NT theology, but rather a NT biblical theology.”73 Beale’s distinctive approach to biblical theology is to identify the storyline that unfolds as one moves from the OT to the NT. In so doing, he engages in the exegetical analysis of key words, crucial passages, OT quotations, allusions, and prominent themes in order to elaborate on the main plotline categories. This specific approach to NT biblical theology, according to Beale, is “canonical,” “organically developmental,” “exegetical,” and “inter-textual.”74 In this way, Beale is seeking to set his work apart as unique from the proliferation of NT theologies that have appeared in the last century.75

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67 This may be partly because Goldsworthy has already been developing his biblical-theological approach to the text in previous works. See, e.g., Graeme Goldsworthy, According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible (Downers Grove: IVP, 2002).
68 See Goldsworthy, Christ-Centered Biblical Theology, 217.
69 Ibid.
70 See ibid., 217–27.
71 Ibid., 227.
73 Ibid., 19.
74 See ibid., 19–33, for further details on this summary. Hamilton takes issue with these items being distinctive and unique in the world of NT theology. He maintains, “It may be that Beale’s book incorporates more of the things that he enumerates here than other New Testament theologies, but the difference is one of degree not kind. . . . My point is that New Testament theology is a subset of biblical theology, and adding the word biblical to the title and then laying out the ways one seeks to combine existing approaches and bring in unique emphases to contribute to the discipline does not mean that one is doing something different from what everyone else writing in the field has done. . . . So I do not want to minimize the real contribution Beale’s book makes, but again, the difference between his book and other NT theologies is one of degree and emphasis not kind. Perhaps Schreiner’s work is closest in terms of outlook, method, and conclusions, but Thielman’s perspective is not that different, and N. T. Wright is at least moving in a similar stream.” See James M. Hamilton Jr., “Appreciation, Agreement, and a Few Minor Quibbles: A Response to G. K. Beale,” Midwestern Journal of Theology 10:1 (2011): 66–67.
Rather than postulating a center, Beale seeks to identify a particular storyline arising from the Scriptures that can serve as a point of reference. His primary thesis is that in order to understand the NT in its richness, one must have a keen acquaintance with how the biblical authors viewed the end times since this topic forms an essential part of the NT story. Building on this thesis, Beale delineates the specific ways in which the OT and NT articulate this kind of narrative. The OT storyline that Beale posits as the basis for the NT storyline is this:

The Old Testament is the story of God, who progressively reestablishes his new-creational kingdom out of chaos over a sinful people by his word and Spirit through promise, covenant, and redemption, resulting in worldwide commission to the faithful to advance this kingdom and judgment (defeat or exile) for the unfaithful, unto his glory.

He follows this with the storyline of the NT, showing the transformation of the OT storyline:

Jesus’ life, trials, death for sinners, and especially resurrection by the Spirit have launched the fulfillment of the eschatological already-not yet new-creational reign, bestowed by grace through faith resulting in worldwide commission to the faithful to advance this new-creational reign and resulting in judgment for the unbelieving, unto the triune God’s glory.

In this way, one can see in a brief description the way in which the OT is the basis for the NT storyline while at the same time being subject to transformation by the NT. By working from a reconstructed storyline of the OT and the NT, Beale sets himself apart from the classic and central-themes approaches and significantly advances the field both formally (in terms of method) and materially (in terms of content).

1.4.4. Assessment

In contrast to single-center approaches, Beale wisely avoids speaking of a “center” in his biblical-theological proposal, attaching significance instead to the OT storyline as modified and transformed in the NT. This is certainly creative and very likely more satisfying than a rigid application of a book-by-book approach (though care should be taken that the overall storyline does not completely crowd out more minor motifs). Beale’s approach also seems preferable to a more heavy-handed procedure in which a writer posits a center that he subsequently tries to validate by tying it to the message of every individual biblical book.

Nevertheless, a couple of concerns may be noted. First, making the biblical storyline central runs the danger of marginalizing biblical material that is not central to the metanarrative of Scripture but nonetheless present in the canon. Its inductive and descriptive nature and its ability to synthesize not only major but also minor motifs is one of the greatest strengths of biblical theology. Care should be

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76 See ibid., 35.
77 Ibid. Beale’s summary of the OT storyline bears some affinities with Hamilton’s “single center.”
78 Ibid.
79 For a helpful review that is both complimentary and critical, see Hamilton, “Appreciation, Agreement, and a Few Minor Quibbles,” 58–70.
taken not to lose sight of minor (or not too minor) motifs simply because they do not seem to relate directly to the central storyline of Scripture.

Second, and related to the first, is a doctrinal concern. Evangelicals such as Beale believe that it is every word of Scripture that is inspired, not merely the biblical storyline.\(^{80}\) If so, what in practice helps us to avoid privileging the biblical storyline (as construed by us) to the extent that less prominent portions of Scripture are unduly neglected? Here we must take care not to be similar in practice (though not in theory) to the approach of scholars such as N. T. Wright (not an inerrantist) in his work *The Last Word* or German content criticism, which has also had a notable impact on the work of some British and other evangelicals.\(^{81}\)

### 2. The Future of Biblical Theology

What insights can we derive from this all-too-brief survey of recent contributions to the discipline of biblical theology? Several observations may be noted. On the whole, it is evident that the discipline has come a long way in the last decade or so. G. K. Beale’s recent work, in particular, shows a level of sophistication and creativity that is impressive and bodes well for the future of biblical theology. On the shoulders of foundational efforts such as the *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, the compendium *Biblical Theology: Retrospect and Prospect* edited by Scott Hafemann, and programmatic studies such as T. Desmond Alexander’s *From Eden to the New Jerusalem*, a new generation of scholars will be able to produce biblical theologies that are theoretically responsible, methodologically nuanced, and theologically refined.

In terms of content, there seems to be an emerging consensus that stresses christological and eschatological fulfillment (whether in terms of creation-new creation, consummation, or restoration). Several of the works we surveyed contend that Christ is the center-point and pivotal figure of redemptive history. What is more, the underlying conviction in virtually all of these works is that the Bible constitutes a unity and therefore also exhibits a unified theology.

Despite these similarities, however, there are still significant differences among the biblical theologies written during the past decade. Most importantly, the question of definition of biblical theology requires urgent reassessment. Some recent works are more rigorously inductive while others proceed from a systematic or confessional framework in exploring the teachings of Scripture. Also, the specific proposals made by various scholars differ as to what the theology of the Bible actually is and how it coheres. In part, this is a matter of setting different emphases or privileging a particular overall framework, whether the glory of God, eschatology, salvation history, or some other central topic, not to mention the importance of hermeneutics.\(^{82}\)

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\(^{82}\) On which see Köstenberger and Patterson, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation.*
2.1. The Definition of Biblical Theology

On the question of definition, Adolf Schlatter provided the following classic formulation of the nature of biblical theology over a century ago:

We turn away decisively from ourselves and our time to what was found in the men through whom the church came into being [i.e. the NT writers]. Our main interest should be the thought as it was conceived by them and the truth that was valid for them. We want to see and obtain a thorough grasp of what happened historically and existed in another time. This is the internal disposition upon which the success of the work depends, the commitment which must consistently be renewed as the work proceeds.83

This kind of definition can serve as a standard by which we measure the biblical-theological work we produce in order to ensure that we are staying within the parameters of the field. Before addressing our own questions, we must first listen to the OT and NT writers and documents in order to understand the message of the Bible on its own terms, in its own language, and in its original cultural, historical, and ecclesial contexts.

Note also that Schlatter, similar to Gabler, distinguished between biblical theology and systematic theology when he urged a separation between the “historical task” of New Testament theology and the “doctrinal task” of dogmatic theology.84 This shows that Gabler was not alone in urging this distinction but that later scholars such as Schlatter reiterated the strong need for this distinction without necessarily endorsing Gabler’s larger theological program. What this makes clear is that the distinction between biblical and systematic theology does not hinge on the specifics of Gabler’s proposal in his address as if some of its inadequacies somehow disqualify the legitimacy of the distinction between biblical and systematic theology as such.85

2.2. The Distinction between Biblical and Systematic Theology

Another continuing need is that scholars give careful consideration to the unique characteristics of biblical theology in relation to other fields, particularly systematic theology. David Clark asserts that each particular discipline—biblical theology, systematic theology, historical theology, and so-called practical theology—“is a microperspective that limits its view of the object of study to a particular

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83 Adolf Schlatter, *The History of the Christ* (trans. Andreas J. Köstenberger; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 18. Gentry and Wellum also offer a helpful summary definition of the discipline of biblical theology: “The hermeneutical discipline which seeks to do justice to what Scripture claims to be and what it actually is. In terms of its claim, Scripture is nothing less than God's Word written and as such, it is a unified revelation of his gracious plan of redemption. In terms of what it actually is, it is a progressive unfolding of God's plan, rooted in history, and unpacked along a specific redemptive-historical plot line primarily demarcated by biblical covenants. Biblical theology as a hermeneutical discipline attempts to exegesis texts in their own context and then, in light of the entire canon, to examine the unfolding nature of God's plan and carefully think through the relationship between before and after in that plan which culminates in Christ. As such, biblical theology provides the basis for understanding how texts in one part of the Bible relate to all the other texts so that they will be read correctly, according to God's intention, which is discovered through human authors, but ultimately at the canonical level. In the end, biblical theology is the attempt to unpack ‘the whole counsel of God’ and ‘to think God's thoughts after him,’ and it provides the basis and underpinning for all theology and doctrine” (*Kingdom through Covenant*, 15–16).


85 See further the interaction with Hamilton in n. 89 below.
aspect or dimensions of the whole. In other words, there is a unity of the theological disciplines in that they all contribute to a proper understanding of the larger macroperspective of Scripture, providing unity to the individual pieces by constituting them as a “symphonic theology.” While Clark’s comments are helpful, one must be careful to avoid blurring the lines between the disciplines so as to allow them to contribute to the Christian faith in their own distinctive ways.

Seeking to navigate the tension between an inductive and a preconceived conceptual approach, Hamilton affirms that biblical theology is inductive in nature but cannot be divorced from one’s existing theological framework:

> Our biblical-theological understanding will line up—implicitly or explicitly—with our systematic conclusions. This cannot be denied, and it should be embraced, with the two disciplines of biblical and systematic theology functioning to further our understanding of God and his word. . . .

> Some today are referring to biblical theology as a “bridge discipline” that connects exegesis and systematic theology, but we can also view biblical theology, systematic theology, and historical theology as equal tools, each of which can be used to sharpen our exegesis and theology.

Whatever the merits of Hamilton’s proposal, however, clearly this is no longer biblical theology in the vein of Gabler’s distinction. According to Hamilton, “the reality is that all these methods are used in teaching Christians, which makes them all dogmatic theology.” In accentuating the ecclesial thrust

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89 Hamilton, *God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment*, 46–47. Vern Sheridan Poythress makes similar sentiments: “One must get one’s framework of assumptions—one’s presuppositions—from somewhere. If one does not get them from healthily, biblically grounded systematic theology, one will most likely get them from the spirit of the age, whether that be Enlightenment rationalism or postmodern relativism or historicism” (“Kinds of Biblical Theology,” *WTJ* 70 [2008]: 134). Similarly to Hamilton and Poythress, Goldsworthy presses his readers concerning the relationship between dogmatic and biblical theology: “For a theologian to pursue a biblical theology implies some kind of already existing dogmatic framework regarding the Bible. Biblical theologians who insist that we do not need dogmatics simply have not examined their own presuppositions about the Bible. The issue is not really that of which comes first, dogmatics or biblical theology, because they are interrelated and involve the hermeneutical spiral. Because of the symbiotic relationship between them, I do not think it is possible to be competent in one without the other. A similar symbiosis exists between dogmatics and historical theology since dogmatics cannot ignore the history of the discipline. Evangelical biblical-theological presuppositions will include some cognizance of the dogmas discussed below as the structure for progress in theologizing” (*Christ-Centered Biblical Theology*, 42).


90 Hamilton, *God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment*, 47. In personal conversation, Hamilton told me that the way he uses “dogmatic theology” here is not synonymous with “systematic theology.” I would like to ex-
of biblical theology, Hamilton, whether consciously or not, is picking up on an implicit distinction made by Gabler who did, in fact, seek to separate the academy from the church when urging a distinction between biblical and dogmatic theology. The fact that history matters, however, does not necessarily imply that in historical investigation the church is set aside. Rather, it is historical investigation that shows the church to be the central focus in God’s redemptive plan. History is not the exclusive domain of historical research (whether historical-critical or otherwise) set off from the ecclesiastical realm, nor is the history of redemption merely textual; it is the very history in which the church has a vital, even indispensable, part.92

What is more, while it is doubtless correct that interpreters approach the text of Scripture with a set of presuppositions, the goal of biblical theology, as mentioned, must continue to be accurately perceiving the convictions of the OT and NT writers. Despite the fact that the majority of scholars in both fields (biblical and systematic theology) continues to support a distinction of the respective disciplines, however, drawing such distinctions is not always hard and fast. The need remains for definitional clarity and methodological vigilance lest biblical theology becomes systematic theology in disguise, the lines between biblical and systematic theology become unduly blurred, or the disciplines illegitimately collapse into one. If biblical theology is systematic theology by another name and systematic presuppositions, consciously or not, control one’s biblical-theological work to such an extent that the end product bears more the imprint of the contemporary interpreter than that of the original biblical writers, a line has been crossed.93

There thus remains a need for a procedure by which interpreters move from exegeting individual texts in their original historical setting to placing the results of such exegesis into their proper canonical context before moving on to a systematization in light of contemporary concerns. Along those lines, Grant Osborne, citing R. T. France, calls for “the priority in biblical interpretation of what has come to be called ‘the first horizon,’ i.e., of understanding biblical language within its own context before we start exploring its relevance to our own concerns, and of keeping the essential biblical context in view as a control on the way we apply biblical language to current issues.”94 By reaffirming the distinction...
between the first and second horizons of Scripture, I do not intend to issue a call for the various biblical and theological disciplines to separate even further—indeed, more dialogue needs to occur between biblical scholars and theologians.\(^9\) Instead, my purpose is to register a plea for recognizing the place of each discipline in the overall process of interpreting and applying God’s word.\(^9\)

In his recent assessment of the Theological Interpretation of Scripture, D. A. Carson, citing Graham Cole, distinguishes between four levels of biblical and theological scholarship.\(^9\) First comes the exegesis of biblical texts in their literary and historical contexts, with proper attention being given to literary genre, attempting to discern authorial intent to the extent that this is possible. Second, the interpreter endeavors to understand the text within the entirety of biblical theology, determining what it contributes to the unfolding storyline. Third, theological structures in a given text are sought to be understood in concert with other major theological scriptural themes. Fourth, all teachings derived from the biblical writings are both subjected to and modified by the interpreter’s larger hermeneutical proposal. Carson notes that traditional interpreters have operated mostly on levels 1 and 2, while many (if not most) recent practitioners of the Theological Interpretation of Scripture operate on levels 3 and 4.

I am content to let Carson appraise this latter movement. For our present purposes, it will suffice to note that the best biblical-theological work operates on all four levels (or at least the first three). On the one hand, biblical theologians must not skip levels 1 and 2 in their haste to progress to the levels 3 and 4. On the other hand, scholars should not stop at level 2 or even 3. Cole’s model (as explicated by Carson) does not merely serve as a proper basis for evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the Theological Interpretation of Scripture; it also provides a helpful grid against which a proper definition and method of biblical theology can be assessed. There is no getting beyond Gabler’s distinction, I am afraid. We must be careful to maintain the proper distinction between biblical and systematic theology.\(^9\)

Task there remains, constantly and necessarily, a second one, the doctrinal task, through which we align ourselves with the teachings of the New Testament and clarify whether or not and how and why we accept those teachings into our own spiritual lives, so that they are not only truth for the New Testament community, but also for us personally. The distinction between these two activities thus turns out to be beneficial for both. Distortions in the perception of the subject also harm its appropriation, just as conversely improper procedures in the appropriation of the subject muddy its perception” (History of the Christ, 18).


\(^9\) Scobie, Ways of Our God, 66–67. Scobie helpfully comments on the needed distinction between BT and ST, along with any other ancillary discipline: “Dogmatic [or systematic] theology is the final stage in the movement from the horizon of the text to the horizon of the interpreter. Professional theologians ought to be the servants of the church, continually aiding it in its thought and reflection on how biblical norms are to be applied in the contemporary situation.” Scobie also believes that the ever-increasing degree of specialization in the discipline of biblical theology is good to a degree, but if biblical theology is to serve as a legitimate bridge discipline, then more work needs to be done in opening up communication between the various theological disciplines.

\(^9\) Carson, “Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Yes, But . . .”

3. Conclusion

The past decade and a half has witnessed a tremendous amount of progress in evangelical scholarship on biblical theology. Works such as G. K. Beale’s *New Testament Biblical Theology* bear witness to the considerable degree of sophistication to which at least some of the evangelical practitioners of biblical theology have attained. The emergence of three new series, the New Studies in Biblical Theology (NSBT; currently 29 vols. and with more underway), the Biblical Theology of the New Testament (BTNT; 8 vols.), and the Biblical Theology for Christian Proclamation series (BTCP; 40 vols.), published by InterVarsity, Zondervan, and B&H Academic, respectively, further attests to the vitality and continuing promise of the discipline.

At the same time, there remains a need for scholars to be precise in defining what they mean when they claim to engage in biblical-theological work and to carefully distinguish between biblical and systematic theology. The notion of the biblical metanarrative, in particular, holds considerable promise in anchoring the future of biblical theology. Nevertheless, it will be important not to lose sight of the contribution of individual books of the Bible and of the variety of interrelated major and minor scriptural motifs. Biblical theology should remain a discipline where we would rather leave some loose ends untied than forcing them into a straitjacket and where interpreters are willing to heed the motto attributed to Albert Einstein, one of the most famous scientists of the past century: “Make everything as simple as possible, but not simpler.”

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99 Thanks are due Jeremy Kimble for his diligent note-taking and argument-condensing assistance and Mark Catlin for his help in grouping and categorizing recent biblical-theological works. Thanks also to the students in the NT Theology seminar at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary for many stimulating discussions on the subject in general and on the biblical theologies by Hamilton and Beale in particular.
Music, Singing, and Emotions: Exploring the Connections

— Rob Smith —

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Rob Smith lectures in Systematic Theology and Music Ministry at Sydney Missionary & Bible College in Sydney, Australia.

1. Introduction

Music, singing and emotions: what are the connections? The question is by no means new, but it’s certainly one that has received renewed attention in recent times. Of particular interest is the power of music to foster emotional health and psychosocial well-being. For example, in his Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain, Neurologist Oliver Sacks not only explores the pathologies of musical response from a clinical point of view, but also provides a deeply personal and moving account of the role that music played in lifting him out of depression after the death of his mother. Sacks writes:

For weeks I would get up, dress, drive to work, see my patients, try to present a normal appearance. But inside I was dead, as lifeless as a zombie. Then one day as I was walking down Bronx Park East, I felt a sudden lightening, a quickening of mood, a sudden whisper or intimation of life, of joy. Only then did I realize that I was hearing music, though so faintly it might have been no more than an image or memory. As I continued to walk, the music grew louder, until finally I came to its source, a radio pouring Schubert out of an open basement window. The music pierced me, releasing a cascade of images and feelings—memories of childhood, of summer holidays together and of my mother’s fondness for Schubert . . . I found myself not only smiling for the first time in weeks, but laughing aloud—and alive once again.1

The fact that music and singing have a profound ability to both impact and express human emotions will not come as a surprise to many. Common experience confirms the connection, as does the biblical witness. ‘Is anyone cheerful?’ writes James. ‘Let him sing songs of praise’ (James 5:13 ESV).

However, when one starts to probe into the precise connections between music, singing and the emotions and asks a seemingly innocent question like, How can a piece of music be both expressive of emotion and also generate emotion in human beings?, we suddenly find that we have entered a

realm where a number of distinct disciplines intersect. For example, musicology, psychology, neurology, biology, anthropology, philosophy and theology all have an interest in such questions and (on their better days) provide complementary accounts and partial answers. But (on their worse days) they provide competing accounts that simply increase the level of crosstalk and confusion.

So how should we proceed in trying to understand the connections between music, singing and emotion? My approach is this essay is threefold. Firstly, I wish to offer some reflections on the world that God has made, drawing on some of the less controversial findings of various musicological, psychological and neurobiological studies. Secondly, I will offer some reflections on the word that God has spoken, exploring some of the links we find between music, singing and emotions in the Old and New Testaments. Thirdly, I want to offer some reflections on the history of Christian thought, drawing on the insights of a number of theologians who have wrestled with these matters—despite coming to differing conclusions.

1.1. Definitions

But before going further, I need to define how I am using the three terms ‘music’, ‘singing’ and ‘emotion’.

**Music.** Music can be variously defined from a range of different perspectives. For example, it can be defined *phenomenologically*; that is, in terms of it being an organised arrangement of sounds and silences. Or it can be defined *functionally*; that is, in terms of it being a communicative activity that conveys moods to the listener. Or it can be defined *culturally*; that is, by taking account of the fact that the line between what is regarded as music and what is regarded as noise changes over time and varies from culture to culture. Without disputing the value of any and all of these definitions, in this essay I am simply using it to refer to music that has no lyrical content; that is, by ‘music’ I mean ‘instrumental music’.

**Singing.** My definition of singing follows from this. By ‘singing’ I mean more than the activity of making musical sounds with the human voice. That is an entirely legitimate activity and a valid way of defining ‘singing’. It is not, however, how I am using the term. By singing I mean the musical communication of words that have meaning at least to the person singing them, if not to the person or persons hearing them as well. It is in that sense that I am distinguishing music from song.

**Emotion.** Here again there are many possible definitions (depending on whether one thinks of emotions as primarily cognitive or primarily non-cognitive or as some combination of the two). I am using the word in a fairly unsophisticated way to cover a broad range of perceptions, expressions of feeling (like joy or grief) and the related bodily changes that normally accompany such feelings (like smiling or crying). The question I am pursuing, then, may be expressed thus: How do music and song influence and express such perceptions and reactions?

1.2. Limitations

Before we turn to the first part of our study, let me briefly mention some of things that this essay will not attempt do. Firstly, I will not attempt to identify (let alone discuss) the many functions of music and singing in general human experience—such as their ability to help us remember events and words—or the many purposes that music and singing serve in the gatherings of God’s people—such as their ability

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to unite people and express fellowship. Secondly, I will not attempt to provide a survey of everything that the Bible has to say about music and singing—as valuable as that would be. Thirdly, I will make no reference to the many different types of music and song that have arisen and been utilized in Church history, nor make any assessment of which types of music or styles of singing are best suited to Christian use.

2. Soundings from the World That God Has Made

With these things understood, let us embark on an exercise in sanctified natural theology (or, more accurately, natural anthropology) to see what we can learn from the world that God has made.

2.1. Music and Emotions

How do we begin to account for the fact that music can both express and arouse emotion? Stephen Davies, a philosopher at the University of Auckland with an interest in the aesthetics of art, suggests that the connection lies in what he calls ‘Appearance emotionalism’

That is, music appears to be sad (for example) in the same way that a weeping willow looks sad. Because the tree is bent over, it appears to resemble a person who is racked with grief. Davies puts it like this: ‘The resemblance that counts most for music’s expressiveness [...] is between music’s temporally unfolding dynamic structure and configurations of human behaviour associated with the expression of emotion.

So, to continue the example above, music can recall an appearance of sadness by a gradual downward movement, or by utilizing underlying patterns of unresolved tension, or by employing dark timbres, or thick harmonic bass textures.

Clearly, Davies is onto something here. Indeed, it is well known that minor keys and slow tempos tend to express and evoke sadness, just as major keys and fast tempos tend to express and evoke happiness. However, I have deliberately said ‘tend to’ because the ‘expressiveness’ of a piece of music is largely ‘response dependent’—that is, it is realized in the listener’s response. And not all listeners have the same response. For perceptions of similarity are not always shared. One person may see them and so be deeply moved by a piece of music, while another may miss them altogether and be quite unaffected.

Nevertheless, the fact that many listeners have a similar response to the same piece of music, suggests that there must be some objective component to its emotional expressiveness, even though the same emotions are not always subjectively experienced by all listeners in the same way. The reason for the variation is simple: not only is each listener unique, but music is never heard in a vacuum. Jeremy

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4 To my mind, the most accessible treatment of the history of Christian music can be found in A. Wilson-Dickson, The Story of Christian Music: From Gregorian Chant to Black Gospel, An Authoritative Illustrated Guide to All the Major Traditions of Music for Worship (Oxford: Lion, 1992).


6 Ibid., p. 181.

7 Ibid., p. 182.
Begbie from Duke Divinity School (who, as well as being a systematic theologian, is a trained musician with a particular interest in the interface between theology and the arts) explains why:

[M]usic is never heard on its own but as part of a perceptual complex that includes a range of non-musical phenomena: for example, the physical setting in which we hear the music, memories of people associated with it, artificial images (as in the case of film and video), words (the lyrics of a song, program notes, the title of a piece, what someone said about the piece on the radio), and so on. Music is perceived in a manifold environment. And this generates a fund of material for us to be emotional about.

But alongside these associations, there is now a growing body of literature stemming from a range of neurobiological studies showing how emotional responses to music have a direct effect on our hormone levels. For example, some music can increase levels of melatonin (which can help to induce sleep) and likewise decrease levels of cortisol (the hormone associated with stress).

In addition to this, a number of neuroimaging studies have mapped the effects of music on the paralimbic regions of the brain, regions that are associated with our capacity to process and express emotion. As these regions are stimulated by music, the net effect is a highly therapeutic one for both mind and body. Dr Randall McClellan explains why:

Emotions that are not expressed when they are felt may be turned inward where they can add stress to weakened parts of the body. When the stress is prolonged our natural ability to resist disease is impaired and illness may ensue. When used regularly, music is an effective vehicle for the dissipation of normal day-to-day emotional stress. But in times of intense emotional crisis, music can focus and guide emotional release by bringing the emotion to catharsis and providing it with the means of expression.

2.2. Singing and Emotions

So clearly there is much to be said for the healing effects of music. But what happens when we bring the human voice into the picture? How does singing both express and evoke emotion? Here again theories abound, and various insights can be gleaned from a number of disciplines.

What is incontrovertible is that voice is 'an essential aspect of human identity: of who are we, how we feel, how we communicate, and how other people experience us.' It is also clear that the human voice has the capacity to convey emotion in a range of different ways—through changes in pitch, contour, volume, etc. It is also significant that the six primary human emotions—fear, anger, joy, sadness, surprise, and disgust—are all usually expressed vocally, and are likewise differentiated by strong vocal

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acoustic variation.\footnote{K. R. Scherer, ‘Expression of Emotion in Voice and Music’ in \textit{Journal of Voice} 9:3, pp. 235–248.} As Dr Graham Welch from the University of London puts it: ‘Each of these basic emotions has a characteristic vocal acoustic signature and an acoustic profile that is associated with a strong characteristic emotional state.’\footnote{G. F. Welch, ‘Singing as Communication’, p. 247.} In other words, even if we do not understand the words that someone is saying or singing, it is usually fairly obvious what emotion is being conveyed.

Added to all this, and this the main point that I want to highlight, is the fact that when we sing, we usually sing words with meanings, and those words not only facilitate the communication of the \textit{cognitive content} of the song, but the singing of them helps communicate the \textit{emotional content} of the song as well. More than that, the fact that we are singing these words (or hearing them sung) also helps us to feel an emotion appropriate to the words we are singing (or hearing).

This truth was captured beautifully and succinctly by the late Yip Harburg—the man who wrote the lyrics for all the songs in \textit{The Wizard of Oz}, including the hauntingly evocative classic, ‘Over the rainbow’. What Harburg famously said was this: ‘Words make you think a thought; music makes you feel a feeling; a song makes you feel a thought.’ The physiological reality behind this observation, as a number of neuroimaging studies have now shown, is that whilst the majority of sensorimotor processes for singing and speaking are the same, singing engages parts of our brain (particularly in the right hemisphere) that speaking alone does not.\footnote{E. Özdemir, A. Norton& G. Schlaug, ‘Shared and Distinct Neural Correlates of Singing and Speaking’ in \textit{Neuroimage} 33 (2006), p. 633.} This is why singing is a unique activity not only for expressing and conveying emotion, but also for processing the emotional dimensions of cognitive thought.

It is not surprising, then, that people who have experienced great trauma can sometimes find it very difficult to sing—for singing threatens to awaken their emotional processes, which they have deliberately shut down in order to protect themselves from the full horror of what they have experienced. But it is also why singing can function as a very effective means of gently releasing suppressed emotions and of helping people to process the truth and reality behind their inner pain.

My positive point here, however, is simply that \textit{singing} not only helps us to engage the emotional dimensions of our humanity, but that singing \textit{truth} helps us to engage with the emotional dimensions of reality, thus helping to bridge the gap between cognitive knowledge and experiential knowledge. This is a point we will return to below.

\section*{3. Sounding from the Word That God Has Spoken}

Moving now from the world that God has made (and what can be observed by various natural anthropological means), we turn to the word that God has spoken. What can we learn from God’s special revelation in Scripture about the connections between music, singing and our emotions? We begin with some soundings from the Old Testament.

\subsection*{3.1. The Old Testament}

The first thing the Old Testament reveals is a profound link between the joy that results from experiencing God’s salvation and the making of music and the singing of songs. We see this first in Exodus 15 where after the LORD has rescued the people of Israel from the Egyptian army, Miriam takes
a tambourine in hand (v. 20) and as all the women follow her with tambourines and dancing, she sings to them saying:

   Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously;
   the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea. (Exod. 15:21, ESV)

And so the beginning of the chapter tells us that Moses and the people of Israel followed suit, singing to the Lord, saying:

1 . . . I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously;
   the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.
2 The Lord is my strength and my song,
   and he has become my salvation;
   this is my God, and I will praise him,
   my father's God, and I will exalt him. (Exod. 15:1b-2, ESV)

As John Durham points out, this celebration of ‘Yahweh present with his people and doing for them as no other god anywhere and at any time can be present to do [ . . . ] is a kind of summary of the theological base of the whole Book of Exodus.’¹⁶ For that reason, ‘it is more than merely a hymn of Yahweh's victory over Pharaoh and his Egyptians in the sea.’¹⁷ Indeed its primary focus is on the kind of God the Lord is, and the kind of things he does, and the kind of response that this creates. It that sense, it is paradigmatic. Not surprisingly, then, other Scriptures pick up these very same themes and forge the same connections—most notably Isaiah 12:

1 You will say in that day:
   'I will give thanks to you, O Lord,
   for though you were angry with me,
   your anger turned away,
   that you might comfort me.
2 'Behold, God is my salvation;
   I will trust, and will not be afraid;
   for the Lord God is my strength and my song,
   and he has become my salvation.'
3 With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.
4 And you will say in that day:
   'Give thanks to the Lord,
   call upon his name,
   make known his deeds among the peoples,
   proclaim that his name is exalted.
5 Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously;
   let this be made known in all the earth.
6 Shout, and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion,
   for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.' (Isa. 12:1–6, ESV)

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As Barry Webb points out in his commentary, ‘[t]he singing in this chapter follows in the same way that the song of Exodus 15 followed the original exodus.’ In fact, the words in Isaiah 12:2—‘God is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation’—are almost an exact quotation of Exodus 15:2. And the beginning of v. 5—‘Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously’—clearly echoes Exodus 15:21.

The simple message here is this: where there is salvation there is joy and where there is joy there is singing. They follow one another as night follows day and day follows night. For as people are taken from an experience of slavery to an experience of redemption, from an experience of God's anger to an experience of his comfort, from a place of fear to a place of trust, they have every reason to rejoice. And out of their joy they sing and make music.

Precisely the same connections are seen in the book of Psalms. The opening verses of Psalm 98 is just one of many similar examples:

1 Oh sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things!
   His right hand and his holy arm
   have worked salvation for him.
2 The LORD has made known his salvation;
   he has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations.
3 He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness
   to the house of Israel.
   All the ends of the earth have seen
   the salvation of our God.
4 Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth;
   break forth into joyous song and sing praises!
5 Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre,
   with the lyre and the sound of melody!
6 With trumpets and the sound of the horn
   make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD! (Ps. 98:1–6, ESV)

However, it is not just joy and gladness that can be expressed in music and song, but grief and anguish as well. This is seen particularly in the book of Psalms where almost half of the Psalter is made up of psalms that are laments—either in whole or in part. The value of such laments, as Walter Brueggemann points out, is that they are completely honest about the fact that ‘our common experience is not one of well-being and equilibrium, but a churning disruptive experience of dislocation and relocation.’ And the relevance of these Psalms to this study is that they, like the rest of the Psalter, were all intended to be sung—either by the congregation or by the Levitical choir.

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19 J. A. Motyer, in his commentary on these verses, helpfully speaks of the phenomenon of song as ‘an inner welling up of joy.’ See J. A. Motyer, The Prophecy of Isaiah (Leicester: IVP, 1993), p. 129.
So, for example, Psalm 5—which begins: ‘Give ear to my words, O LORD; consider my groaning. Give attention to the sound of my cry’—is addressed to the Choirmaster and contains the instruction, ‘For the flutes’. Psalm 6—which begins: ‘O LORD, rebuke me not in your anger, nor discipline me in your wrath. Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am languishing’—is likewise addressed to the Choirmaster with an instruction that it be played with stringed instruments. In fact, most of the better known lament psalms—like Psalm 13, Psalm 22, Psalm 42, Psalm 51, Psalm 69 and Psalm 88—are all addressed ‘to the Choirmaster’.

However, the members of the temple congregation were far from passive spectators. They were not simply sung to by the choir. As John Kleinig in his study of the place of choral music in Chronicles points out: ‘The choir addressed them directly and invited them to join in its praise (1 Chron. 16:8–13). The congregation did so by responding with certain stereotyped words and refrains (1 Chron. 16:36b). It thereby became an active partner in praise.’

The obvious point to be made from this is that the people of Israel were encouraged and instructed to sing not only in their times of joy, but also in their times of grief. And the importance of lament (that is, of vocalizing grief in song) is that it helps to facilitate the transition from ‘disorientation’ to ‘reorientation’ (or ‘dislocation’ to ‘relocation’), to use Brueggeman’s parallel terms. In other words, lament is productive—or, at least, it ought to be. The purpose of expressing our fears and failures, our darkness and distress, and particularly doing so in song, is to help us process our emotional pain and so bring us to a point of praise. This is clear not only from the shape of numerous individual Psalms which begin with lament and end with praise (e.g., Pss. 3–7), but from the shape of the entire Psalter—with the laments dominating the earlier books and the praises dominating more and more in the latter books, particularly in the final five Psalms (Pss. 146–150).

So there is much for us to learn here. Karl Kuhn focuses the chief lesson when he says: ‘As paradigms of faith and piety, the Psalms champion the affective dimension of devotion to and trust in God as elicited by the story of God’s care for Israel.’ And my point is that this ‘affective dimension’ to authentic faith is, quite intentionally and by divine design, linked to music and song.

### 3.2. The New Testament

When we come to the New Testament, the first thing to note is the emotional dimension of the Spirit’s fruit and the Spirit’s role, therefore, in bringing us to emotional maturity. That is, most (if not all) of the fruit of the Spirit listed by Paul in Galatians 5, whilst clearly not being exclusively emotional in nature, and profoundly practical and relational in their outworking, nonetheless have an irreducible

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23 W. McConnell, ‘Worship’ in T. Longman III & P. Enns (eds.), *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2008), p. 931. This general movement, from lament to praise, would seem to be a function of the way the Psalter has been structured to follow the historical progression of Israelite kingship, beginning with David’s experience of persecution in the time of Saul (Book I) and ending with the post-exilic hope of redeemed existence under a new Davidic king (Book V). For an insightful discussion of the purpose and shape of the Psalter, which pays particular attention to the structural significance of the kingship theme, see A. E. Hill and J. H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), pp. 346–351.

emotional component to them. Furthermore, learning to bear such fruit is part and parcel of the process of being transformed into the likeness of Christ (2 Cor. 3:18) or growing up into Christ (Eph. 4:15). And this clearly involves growing up emotionally as part of the package. Jeremy Begbie puts the point well: ‘Through the Spirit, we are given the priceless opportunity of—to put it simply—growing up emotionally: having our emotions purged of sin and stretched, shaped, and reshaped.’

But does this have anything to do with music and song? Begbie certainly thinks so. In fact, he immediately follows the preceding statement with this one: ‘It is perhaps in worship and prayer, when we engage with God directly and consciously, that this will be (or ought to be) most evident.’ In a more recent essay he makes his thought even more explicit: ‘[M]usic is particularly well suited to being a vehicle of emotional renewal in worship, a potent instrument through which the Holy Spirit can begin to remake and transform us in the likeness of Christ, the one true worshipper.’

But the question for many is: Does the New Testament ever make this connection? I believe so. And the place where it does is Ephesians 5:18–21:

18 And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit,

19 addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart,

20 giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,

21 submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ (Eph. 5:18–21, ESV).

Now a detailed exegesis of these verses will not be attempted here. For our purposes, the key issue turns on the relationship between the command in v. 18 (‘be filled with or by the Spirit’) and the five participles in vv. 19–21 (‘addressing,’ ‘singing,’ ‘making melody,’ ‘giving thanks’ and ‘submitting’). It is commonly argued that these five participles are best understood as ‘result participles.’ That is, when a church is filled by the Spirit these will be the results. This reading is certainly possible, both grammatically and theologically, and its implication—that singing is one of key indicators of a Spirit-filled church—has considerable historical support.

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28 Ibid., p. 303.


30 Paul’s language suggests that the Spirit is the *instrument* of filling rather than as the *content* of the filling. For the grammatical arguments that lead to this conclusion see H. W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), p. 703; P. T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Leicester: Apollos, 1999), pp. 391–393.

31 See, for example, the arguments listed by O’Brien, *Ephesians*, p. 387, n. 107.

32 Grammatically, either a ‘means’ reading or a ‘result’ reading is possible. Interestingly, Daniel Wallace rejects the ‘means’ reading on theological grounds. He believes ‘it would be almost inconceivable to see this text suggesting that the way in which one is to be Spirit-filled is by a five-step, partially mechanical formula!’ (D. B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], p. 639). However, this is not only a caricature of the ‘means’ reading (for the participles are neither a formula nor are they mechanical) but also begs...
However, I believe there is stronger case to be made for understanding the participles of vv. 19–21 as ‘means participles’; that is, Paul is here identifying the means by which he expects his readers to carry out his exhortation to be filled by the Spirit. What I am suggesting, then, is that, like the commands to ‘walk by the Spirit’ (Gal. 5:16) or to ‘let the word of Christ dwell in your richly’, being filled by the Spirit is not a matter of ‘letting go and letting God’, but (as v. 17 says) a matter of understanding the will of the Lord and then doing that will. So Paul does not leave his readers to guess how his command is to be carried out. He spells it out in detail: we are to address one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, we are to sing and make melody to the Lord with our hearts, we are to give thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and we are to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. These are the means (according to this passage at least) by which the Spirit fills the church with the fullness of God in Christ (Eph. 3:19, 4:13).

So to draw the obvious conclusion, singing and making music are vital means not only of addressing one another with the word of God (thereby edifying the church) and making melody to the Lord (thereby praising our Saviour), but of being filled with or by the Spirit and so growing up into Christ. And that (as I have suggested) includes coming to emotional maturity in Christ. As Jeremy Begbie expresses it: ‘To grow up into Christ is to grow up emotionally as much as anything else, and carefully chosen music in worship may have a larger part to play than we have yet imagined.’

4. Soundings from the History of Christian Reflection

We now turn, finally, to take some quick soundings from the history of Christian reflection on these matters.

the question, Why is such a reading more inconceivable than his own suggestion that the participles provide ‘the way in which one measures his/her success in fulfilling the command of 5:18’ (p. 639)?

Indeed the means reading of Ephesians 5:18–21 is strengthened by a comparison with Colossians 3:16, where singing is clearly the means by which the word of Christ richly indwells the church (see P. T. O’Brien, Colossians, Philemon [WBC 44; Waco: Word, 1982], p. 208. For to be indwelt by the word of Christ (both personally and corporately) is not a different experience from being ‘filled by the Spirit’; Christ’s person is not separate from his word, nor is he separate from his Spirit. Indeed it is by the Spirit that Christ himself dwells in our hearts through faith (Eph. 3:17). Therefore, as we sing to the word of Christ to one another, ‘with gratitude in our hearts to God’, we are not only instructed and made wise, but we have a greater experience as a community of what it means to be filled full in Christ, in whom ‘the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily’ (Col. 2:9–10).

As Andrew Lincoln rightly points out, the ‘heart’ refers to the believer’s ‘innermost being [. . .] where the Spirit himself resides (cf. 3:16, 17, where the Spirit in the inner person is equivalent to Christ in the heart)’ (see A. T. Lincoln, Ephesians [WBC 42; Waco: Word, 1990], p. 346).

As Timothy Gombis puts it: ‘The church is to be the temple of God, the fullness of Christ by the Spirit by being the community that speaks God’s word to one another, sings praises to the Lord, renders thanksgiving to God for all things in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and lives in relationships characterized by mutual submission.’ T. G. Gombis, ‘Being the Fullness of God in Christ by the Spirit: Ephesians 5:18 in its Epistolary Setting’ (TynB 53.2, 2002), p. 271. Emphasis original.


Music, Singing, and Emotions

4.1. Cautious Concern

Firstly, let me give you two examples of ‘great ones’ who have expressed a ‘cautious concern’ about the power of music and song.

Augustine. In his famous Confessions, Augustine is not short of things to say about music and singing—and most of it is extremely positive. Indeed he claims that when sacred words are combined with pleasant music then, ‘our souls (animos) are moved and are more religiously and with a warmer devotion kindled to piety than if they are not so sung.’ In other words, Augustine recognised and appreciated that when our emotions are moved by a song, the effect is not only felt in a warmer heart, but also expressed in an enhanced desire to please God. He continues:

When I remember the tears which I poured out at the time when I was first recovering my faith, and that now I am moved not by the chant but by the words being sung, when they are sung with a clear voice and entirely appropriate modulation, then again I recognize the great utility of music in worship.

At the same time Augustine was reluctant to give singing his unqualified blessing. Indeed he claimed to ‘fluctuate between the danger of pleasure and the experience of the beneficent effect’ of singing. He was particularly concerned about the danger of being so carried along by the music of the song that he would become impervious to the words being sung. Here is what he says: ‘Yet when it happens to me that the music moves me more than the subject of the song, I confess myself to commit a sin deserving of punishment, and then I would prefer not to have heard the singer.’

John Calvin. The same kind of ambivalence appears in John Calvin. On the one hand, Calvin readily acknowledged the value of singing the Psalms (and also some of the Bible’s other songs), for the reason that they ‘stimulate us to raise our hearts to God and arouse us to an ardour in invoking as well as in exalting with praises, the glory of his name.’ Indeed, in his 1537 Articles Concerning the Organisation of the Church, he makes the singing of Psalms obligatory! On the other hand, he too was qualified in his endorsement of singing. His reason for caution is that ‘music has a secret and incredible power to move our hearts. When evil words are accompanied by music, they penetrate more deeply and the poison enters as wine through a funnel into a vat.’

Admittedly, Calvin’s primary concern here is with ‘evil words’—that is, untruth—and so presumably he would not object to hearts being moved by the truth. But even when the words are good we are not out of danger. For, like Augustine, Calvin warns: ‘We should be very careful that our ears be not more

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39 Augustine, Confessions, X, xxxiii, 50, p. 208.
40 Augustine, Confessions, X, xxxiii, 50, p. 208.
41 Augustine, Confessions, X, xxxiii, 50, p. 208.
attentive to the melody than our minds to the spiritual meaning of the words.\textsuperscript{45} For this reason, Calvin also has a concern about the intentions and purposes of both those who write songs and those who choose them, and likewise how and why they are sung. It is this concern that lies behind his comment that the singing of songs is a ‘most holy and salutary practice’ when it is done properly, but ‘such songs as have been composed only for sweetness and delight of the ear are unbecoming to the majesty of the church and cannot but displease God in the highest degree.’\textsuperscript{46}

4.2. Enthusiastic Embrace

Others, however, have been considerably more enthusiastic about the benefits of music and singing, and significantly less nervous about its dangers.

\textit{Martin Luther}. Luther was a great lover of music and himself an accomplished musician. He was also greatly appreciative of music’s capacity to produce a variety of emotional dispositions. As he says:

\begin{quote}
Next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise. She is a mistress and governess of those human emotions [ . . . ] which control men or more often overwhelm them [ . . . ] Whether you wish to comfort the sad, to subdue frivolity, to encourage the despairing, to humble the proud, to calm the passionate or to appease those full of hate [ . . . ] what more effective means than music could you find.\textsuperscript{47}
\end{quote}

However, it was not music in itself that was Luther’s primary interest, but music as a vehicle for praising God and proclaiming his word. In other words, in Luther’s estimation singing is ‘word ministry’, and although not a substitute for the preached word, it is a complement to the preached word and a form of word ministry with added emotional power.

\begin{quote}
Music is a vehicle for proclaiming the Word of God [ . . . T]he gift of language combined with the gift of song was only given to man to let him know that he should praise God with both word and music, namely, by proclaiming [God’s word] through music and by providing sweet melodies with words.\textsuperscript{48}
\end{quote}

In fact, in Luther’s estimation, music was so important to life in general and to ministry in particular, that he did not believe that one should become a teacher or a preacher without some musical skill. To quote:

\begin{quote}
I always love music; who so has skill in this art, is of a good temperament, fitted for all things. We must teach music in schools; a schoolmaster ought to have skill in music, or I would not regard him. Neither should we ordain young men as preachers, unless they have been well exercised in music.\textsuperscript{49}
\end{quote}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{46} J. Calvin, \textit{Institutes of the Christian Religion}, Book III, XX, 32, p. 896.
\item \textsuperscript{48} M. Luther, ‘Preface to Georg Rhau’s Symphonoiaeicundae’ (1538), pp. 321, 323–324.
\item \textsuperscript{49} M. Luther, \textit{The Table Talk of Martin Luther} (trans. and ed. William Hazlitt; London: H. G. Bohn, 1857), p. 340.
\end{itemize}
Jonathan Edwards. As is well known Edwards had a very high regard for singing, believing that, ‘Tis plain from the Scripture that it is the tendency of true grace to cause persons very much to delight in such religious exercises.’50 Not surprisingly, Edwards often preached on singing, and in a sermon on Colossians 3:16, argued that ‘the ends of it are two: to excite religious and holy affection, and secondly to manifest it.’51 In his Treatise Concerning Religious Affections, Edwards expands on these points as follows:

[T]he duty of singing praises to God, seems to be appointed wholly to excite and express religious affections. No other reason can be assigned, why we should express ourselves to God in verse, rather than in prose, and do it with music, but only, that such is our nature and frame, that these things have a tendency to move our affections.52

Now it must be said (and has often been pointed out) that Edwards’s idea of affections should not be equated with modern concepts of emotions (particularly the non-cognitive variety). However, it is a mistake to think that Edwards’s understanding of the affections excludes an emotional dimension. To the contrary, true affection, for Edwards, has a necessary emotional component. On this point Edwards is crystal clear: ‘There is a distinction to be made between a mere notional understanding, wherein the mind only beholds things in the exercise of a speculative faculty; and the sense of the heart, wherein the mind don’t [sic] only speculate and behold, but relishes and feels.’53

So to return to the key point: the purpose of singing, in Edwards’s estimation, is to excite and express such affections.

5. Conclusions

What conclusions should be drawn from this study? I am tempted simply to say ‘those who have ears to hear, let them hear.’ But I should probably say a little more about the implications of all this for personal growth and for implications for church life.

5.1. Implications for Personal Growth

On the personal front, let me say this: If music and singing are important to you (particularly singing to and of the Lord) and if you find they not only bring you joy but also great comfort, then you are not alone. In fact, you stand in a long line of saints who share the same sense of gratitude for such gifts and abilities and have experienced the same sense of release and reorientation that comes through singing the word of God. This is normal. This is healthy. This is scriptural. This is good.

Now, of course, we are not all the same. We have different bodies, different brains, different personalities and differing emotional responses to most things. What is more, we have different musical tastes. But my encouragement to one and all (but particularly to those who see themselves as ‘musically challenged’) is to make the best use you can of the gifts of music that God has either given to you, or placed around you. And, in particular, learn to use the voice that God has given you, to sing to him and of him. Luther’s encouragement on this score is worth heeding:

Music is one of the best arts; the notes give life to the text; it expels melancholy, as we see in king Saul. Kings and princes ought to maintain music, for great potentates and rulers should protect good and liberal arts and laws; though private people have desire thereunto and love it, yet their ability is not adequate. We read in the Bible, that the good and godly kings maintained and paid singers. Music is the best solace for a sad and sorrowful mind; by it the heart is refreshed and settled again in peace.54

In short, we should recognize the good gift that God has given us to nourish our emotional health and be open to Jeremy Begbie’s thought that music and singing may need to play a larger part in your Christian growth that you have hitherto allowed or imagined. It is one of the means that God has provided and that the Holy Spirit uses to help make us people who feel and respond in ways that please him.55

5.2. Implications for Church Life

In terms of the implications for church life, it should be clear that music and singing whilst not of the esse (i.e., essence or being) of the church are vital for the beneesse (i.e., the health or well-being) of the church. So we would be foolish to neglect them—particularly when Scripture commends them so strongly. At the same time we must also be careful to protect them—for there is always the possibility of misusing music and song. As Jeremy Begbie astutely observes: ‘If the orientation is askew, or the emotion inappropriate, then manipulation, sentimentality, and emotional self-indulgence are among the ever-present dangers.’56

But these dangers can be avoided and, indeed, must be avoided so that as we sing the living and life-giving word of God, music and song can fulfil their divinely appointed office of reintegrating and reorienting us both personally and corporately, binding us together in prayer and praise to God and drawing us out of ourselves and toward each other in genuine love and sympathy.57

Voltaire supposedly once made a remark along the lines that ‘if it’s too silly to be said it can always be sung’—and no doubt examples could be multiplied to illustrate the validity of this observation. But if the thrust of my argument in this essay is correct, then I think we can and must say this: if it is important

54 M. Luther, The Table Talk of Martin Luther, pp. 340–341.
57 Stephen Guthrie puts it like this: ‘Music, of course, does not remake us; the Holy Spirit does. But it seems possible that music may be one means by which the Holy Spirit makes us people who feel and respond. We are brought to our senses. We are drawn out of the darkness of self-absorption and become aware of the world around us, our place within and responsibility to it. In song we move in a dance of sympathy with the others who are singing, and by the body are drawn out of ourselves and into the Body.’ S. Guthrie, ‘Singing in the Body and in the Spirit’, p. 643.
enough to be said, then it could (and in the right manner, time and place should) also be sung. Why? Because singing helps us to process and express not only the cognitive dimensions of truth but also the emotive dimensions as well. Such are the God-ordained connections between music, singing and the emotions.