

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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