

# Conspectus

---

**The Journal of the South African Theological Seminary**

**Volume 12**

**September 2011**

ISSN 1996-8167

## Table of Contents

Asumang, Captured by Christ Jesus: Paul as Christ’s Trophy Slave in Philippians 3:12c.....	1
Aucamp, Paradox and the Centrality of the Doctrine of God in Hermeneutics .....	39
Joubert, Mindfulness and the Brain: a Christian Critique of Some Aspects of Neuroscience.....	59
Lioy, Jesus’ Resurrection and the Nature of the Believer’s Resurrection Body (1 Cor 15:1–58).....	89
O’Donoghue and Lioy, Biblical-Theological Analysis of Matthew 6:19–34 to Clarify the Relationship between the Christian Disciple and Money .....	129
Pretorius, The Creation and the Fall of Adam and Eve: Literal, Symbolic, or Myth? .....	161
Smith, Integrated Theology: A Key to Training Thinking Practitioners .....	185
Van der Spuy, Cheating at Solitaire: the Danger of Self-Deception in Pastoral and Counselling Ministry .....	199
Woodbridge, An Evaluation of Contemporary Challenges to Evangelical Orthodoxy Posed by Toon’s Four Basic Types of Theology: A Christian response .....	217
Barnes, Review of Hixson, <i>Getting the Gospel Wrong: the Evangelical Crisis No One is Talking About</i> .....	241

Erdey, Review of Craig and Meister, <i>God is Good, God is Great: Why Believing in God is Reasonable and Responsible</i> .....	249
Pretorius, Review of Collins, <i>The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief</i> .....	269

## Panel of Referees

Vincent Atterbury	DTh	University of Johannesburg
Robert Brodie	PhD	St Augustine's College
Bill Domeris	PhD	University of Durham
Zoltan Erdey	PhD	South African Theological Seminary
Frank Jabini	DTh	University of Zululand
Sam Kunhiyop	PhD	Trinity Evangelical Divinity School
Pelham Lessing	MPhil	University of Port Elizabeth
Dan Lioy	PhD	University of the North-West
Elijah Mahlangu	PhD	University of Pretoria
Leonard Marè	PhD	University of Johannesburg
Christopher Pepler	DTh	University of Zululand
Mark Pretorius	PhD	University of Pretoria
Kevin Smith	DLitt	University of Stellenbosch
Arthur Song	PhD	University of Natal
Noel Woodbridge	DTh	University of Zululand
Peter Wyngaard	PhD	University of the Witwatersrand

Senior editor: Zoltan Erdey

Assistant editor: Kevin Smith

# Captured by Christ Jesus: Paul as Christ's Trophy Slave in Philippians 3:12c

Annang Asumang<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Paul's autobiographical account of his Christian existence in Philippians 3 has been a source of immense encouragement to believers, as well as a subject of extensive academic debate. An aspect of this debate is the group of grammatical, conceptual, and theological problems presented by his transitional disclaimer in Philippians 3:12. Several proposals for resolving these questions have been made; but the full import of his cryptic statement in 3:12c, that he was *κατελήμφοθην ὑπὸ Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ* appears not to have received the attention it deserves. By examining Paul's self-understanding throughout the epistle, and pertinent data in the secondary literature on the Roman *triumphus*, during which prized captives of war were proudly paraded as the victor's trophy, this article argues that Paul describes himself in Philippians 3:12c as Christ's captive trophy slave. The merits of the proposal, including how it rebutted the arguments of Paul's opponents and how it helps elucidate the link between Philippians 3 and the rest of the epistle, are also discussed.

---

<sup>1</sup> The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. The problem

The challenges posed to the interpretation of Philippians 3:12, which in the NRSV reads, 'Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own', are well known. They basically emanate from the ambiguities created by Paul's use of extensive paronomasia and punning on the Greek words of this three-part sentence. As eloquently put by Fee, the style results in the apostle saying 'some things in unusual ways which are very difficult to transfer into English (it's like trying to tell a joke in a second language' (1999:153; cf. Watson 1988:57–88).

These interpretive problems may be categorized into grammatical, conceptual, and theological ones.<sup>2</sup> Since the theological problem is dependent on the resolution of the grammatical and conceptual questions, its full discussion is not immediately germane to the present enquiry. Nevertheless, for completeness and to summarize, the theological problem relates to whether *τετελείωμαι*, a Pauline *hapax legomenon*, means

- (a) moral/spiritual perfection (so, NIV; KJV; ESV; AMP; NASB), thus feeding into the theological debate as to whether Paul deemed this type of 'perfection' to be achievable in this life and, if so, what was the specific socio-historical background to the disclaimer,<sup>3</sup> or,

---

<sup>2</sup> The textual problem is directly related to the grammar, for details of which see O'Brien (1991:417–418).

<sup>3</sup> A number of interpreters who opt for this view further argue that Paul aimed *τετελείωμαι* at rebutting a Gnosticizing Judaism among his opponents in Philippi (e.g.

(b) is it an expression of the goal, end, or purpose of Christian maturation (so TNIV; NRSV)?<sup>4</sup>

The grammatical problems, on the other hand, derive from Paul's word play on the related verbs, ἔλαβον, καταλάβω, and κατελήμφθην, and are in three areas:

Firstly, the transitive verb ἔλαβον (to take and make a thing one's own, to obtain or attain), lacks an object, and raises the question as to whether what Paul had in mind was his ambition to 'know' or 'gain' Christ, which he expresses in the previous section of the chapter (3:7–11), or alternatively, the 'prize of the heavenly call' which he subsequently refers to in the following section (3:13–14).

Secondly, ἔλαβον in 3:12a is compounded into καταλάβω in 3:12b, thus introducing an element of active force or aggression in the manner in which Paul strives to obtain or overtake the object, whatever this object is taken to be. This idea of active seizure of an object is then reintroduced in 3:12c, but this time, it is turned passive into κατελήμφθην, thus placing Paul at the receiving end of Christ's equally forceful and aggressive action.<sup>5</sup>

Thirdly, the preposition ἐφ' ᾧ, which introduces 3:12c, may be translated either as a causal 'because', thus making 3:12c the reason or motivation behind Paul's expressed ambition in 3:12b (so, Fee

---

Forestell 1956:123–136; Koester 1962:317–332; MacArthur 2001:242; O'Brien 1991:423; Watson 1988:75).

<sup>4</sup> Interpreters who opt for this more likely view stress the complex word play in the passage and how 3:15 definitely indicates the idea of maturity in growth rather than spiritual perfection (e.g. Fee 1999:154; 1995:344; Martin 1987:160; Pfitzner 1967:139)

<sup>5</sup> The idea of force or violence routinely accompanies the use of κατελήμφθην in the NT, e.g. in Mark 9:18; John 8:3–4; 12:35; 1 Thess 5:4.

1999:153; 1995:346 n.31; O'Brien 1991:425), or, as 'that for which', thus making 3:12c the immediate purpose of Paul's stated ambition in 3:12b (so, DeSilva 1994:49; Fitzmyer 1993:330).

As is often the case with exegetical conundrums like these, the key to the solution lies in ascertaining the controlling ideas in the verse and its surrounding passages. With regard to these ideas, interpreters generally agree that the verse serves as a disclaiming correction to prevent misinterpretation of the ambitions expressed in the preceding 3:7–11. However, this unanimity has not prevented disagreement on some of the details. The conceptual disagreements are in two areas:

Firstly, how much weight should be given to the fact that structurally, 3:12 is repeated by 3:13–14? In terms of structure, each of the two statements in 3:12–14 are made up of three clauses. In each, a negative disclaimer (i.e. that Paul has not yet achieved his goal) is followed by a positive statement pertaining to what Paul is doing to achieve that ambition, and then finishes with a third clause stating the motivation or purpose that drives this action towards the goal. If, as it appears evident, and most commentators agree (cf. Fee 1999:152; O'Brien 1991:418–419; Thurston and Ryan 2009:129), Paul meant the two statements in 3:12–14 to parallel each other, then the third clause of each statement should be considered as analogous. In that case, in what way should the idea of 'winning a prize' (clearly stated in 3:14) influence how 3:12c is interpreted? At least, this is the sense in which Paul uses the verb *καταλάβητε* in 1 Corinthians 9:24.

Secondly, is the governing imagery of 3:12 the commercial metaphor of gaining or owning something, which dominates the preceding section in



3:4–11,<sup>6</sup> or the athletic metaphor of racing to win a prize, which dominates the subsequent section of 3:13–14?<sup>7</sup> It is sometimes argued that Paul's use of διώκω in 3:12b and 3:14a definitely indicates a dominant athletic imagery in pursuit of a goal in 3:12 (e.g. Dupont 1970:180; Martin 2002:163; Thurston and Ryan 2009:126). But this interpretation is by no means certain, for διώκω also conveys the ideas of hunting down, striving, wrestling, or fighting to gain something. As rightly put by Pfitzner, the double occurrence of διώκω in 3:12b and 3:14a does 'not justify the conclusion that the [athletic] metaphor begins already in verse 12' (1967:139; cf. Caird 1976:141). Moreover, the ownership imagery is not completely lost in 3:11, but rather, it is reintroduced with κατελιηφέναι in 3:13a. These uncertainties heighten the ambiguities in 3:12, and make it impossible to categorically choose between the two candidate metaphors of ownership or prize winning at an athletic race, as its controlling imagery.

Put together, these problems illustrate the fact that Philippians 3:12 is a transitional verse, serving as a grammatical and conceptual turning-point, hinging the ideas of 3:4–11 and 3:13–14 together. Therefore, the ambiguities in 3:12 may have been deliberately aimed to serve Paul's rhetorical intentions. Accordingly, the best interpretations are those which retain these ambiguities by preserving the ideas of ownership, with a nuance of the aggressive manner through which this ownership is acquired (combined with the imagery of an athletic race and prize winning) which make this verse the suited turning point of Paul's argument. In addition, such interpretations must explain how 3:12 fits in the argumentative flow of the chapter, and the whole epistle.

---

<sup>6</sup> Interpreters who believe the commercial metaphor continues in the verse include O'Brien 1991:422 and Hooker 2000:526–527.

<sup>7</sup> Interpreters, who believe the athletic imagery is the dominating metaphor, include Thurston and Ryan(2009:126), Watson (1988:75) and Martin (2002:163).

Since 3:12c provides the motivation or purpose for 3:12ab, it is also likely that a key step in addressing the problem is to identify the most suitable idea conveyed by κατελήμφθην in 3:12c. To put the problem in a more succinct manner, what is the best way of interpreting κατελήμφθην ὑπὸ Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ in 3:12c, so that the ambiguities of the verse are retained while, at the same time, unveiling its full rhetorical import?

## 1.2. Interpretations of κατελήμφθην ὑπὸ Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ

The wide semantic range<sup>8</sup> of κατελήμφθην has led to at least four different interpretations of 3:12c, some interpreters opting for more than one. These are: (a) overtaken by Christ, (b) understood by Christ, (c) taken or laid hold on by Christ, and (d) arrested or apprehended by Christ.

### 1.2.1. Overtaken by Christ

One group of interpreters opt for translating κατελήμφθην ὑπὸ Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ as *overtaken by Christ Jesus* (e.g. McReynolds 1990:715). In this approach, 3:12 is deemed to reiterate Paul's desire in 3:4–11 to imitate his Lord in his death and resurrection while, at the same time, starting the athletic metaphor, which becomes more prominent in the subsequent verses. So, according to this view in 3:12, Paul protests that he had not yet attained the ideal of imitating Christ. But, in a probably playful expression of his ambitions, he states that he presses on in this pursuit with the desire to *overtake* Christ [or the ideal set by Christ] towards 'the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus' (3:12–14).

---

<sup>8</sup>Louw and Nida list ten different semantic meanings (1989).

The obvious advantage of this approach is that the athletic metaphor is retained, and the whole verse could be seen as setting forth the idea that Christ's achievements serve as the energizing motivation and standard of the Christian life.

However, there are at least two fatal flaws in this approach. Firstly, it completely removes the idea of ownership from 3:12, and so loses the deliberate ambiguity of the verse. Secondly, and more seriously, this interpretation introduces the unlikely scenario in which Christ Jesus is regarded as a fellow competitor with whom Paul competes in the race.

It is true that in its parallel in 1 Corinthians 9:24–26, Paul draws on the competitiveness of the foot race as a motivation for the believer to 'run in such a way that you may win it' (1 Cor 9:24). However, even if Paul sought to repeat this idea of competitiveness in Philippians 3, there is nevertheless no indication in the passage that Christ is a fellow competitor.<sup>9</sup> Rather, Christ is set forth as the channel through whom God issues the irresistible call from heaven toward which Paul is pulled to run (3:14). The best that can be said of Christ and the race in Philippians 3 then is that, if anything at all, he 'co-runs' or collaborates with Paul, rather than competes with the apostle (cf. Wiersbe 2001:88).

---

<sup>9</sup> Interpreters who take Philippians 3:9 as expressing a 'faith *of* Christ' (e.g. Thurston and Ryan 2009:124) subjective genitive doctrine instead of the more likely objective genitive 'faith *in* Christ', may well also regard Jesus as Paul's fellow competitor in 3:12. I am, however, yet to encounter any argument in contemporary scholarship pursuing the interpretation of 3:12c in that direction. For a discussion of the role of Phil 3:9 in the *pistou Christou* debate, see O'Brien (1991:398–400) and Matlock (2007:173–203).

### 1.2.2. Understood by Christ

A second group of interpreters render κατελήμφθην ὑπὸ Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ as *understood* or *comprehended by Christ Jesus* (e.g. Hawthorne 1983:152; Moris:n.d.). So, the Wycliffe Translation reads, 'Not that now I have taken, or now am perfect; forsooth I follow, if on any manner I shall comprehend, in which thing also *I am comprehended of Christ Jesus.*'

There are sound grammatical bases for such a translation. For, κατελήμφθην may be legitimately translated as cognitive apprehension of a concept or idea. Moreover, in Job 5:13 (LXX), κατελήμφθην is used to describe God as outdoing, and so, subverting the wise in their craftiness. It is similarly used in Job 34:24 (LXX) to describe God as ὁ καταλαμβάνων ἀνεξιχνίαστα ἔνδοξα (the one who comprehends the incomprehensible). Thus, it may be justifiably argued that in Philippians 3:12, Paul restates his ambition to *know* Christ, which he outlined in 3:8–10 as the object towards which he strives. And in 3:12c, he cites the superlative degree to which Christ knows or comprehends him as the motivation for striving to achieve that goal.

A main difficulty with this approach, however, is that it makes knowledge or comprehension, *per se*, as the key purpose of Paul's Christian existence, rather than the knowledge *of* Christ. This would have undermined any attempt by Paul to rebut the arguments of his Gnosticizing opponents; if it is true that such a group existed in Philippi. Moreover, and as several interpreters have noted, Paul's emphasis on knowledge in Philippians 3 is based on the Old Testament concept of relational intimacy, and not cognitive apprehension (cf. Fee 1999:144; 1995:328–330; O'Brien 1991:401). Furthermore, the ideas of ownership and athletic prize winning in the surrounding passages are lost with this interpretation.

### 1.2.3. *Taken or laid hold on by Christ*

Most modern translations and commentaries render 3:12c as *taken or laid hold on by Christ* (e.g. NKJV; ASV; NASB; NIV; TNIV; YLT, NIV; HCSB). Some in this group make a number of nuanced variations. The Common English Bible, for example, translates 3:12c as '*Christ grabbed hold of me*', thus, hinting at the aggression in Christ's acquisition of Paul, even if the idea of ownership is understated. A few others state Christ's *de novo* ownership of Paul, without underlying the act by which the ownership is acquired, or the aggressiveness of the act. So, the New Living Translation, for example, renders 3:12c, '*Christ Jesus first possessed me*'.

Others combine the fact of the ownership with the act by which the ownership is obtained, even though the manner of acquisition explicitly lacks the aggressive force. So, for example, the NRSV renders 3:12c: '*Christ Jesus has made me his own*' (also, ESV; DBY; NCV). The Amplified Version emphasizes both the ownership and the manner, in which the acquisition is done, even though the aggression is still understated, thus, '*Christ Jesus has laid hold of me and made me His own*'.

The popularity of this approach is to some extent justified, especially in those translations which combine the ownership idea with the forceful manner in which Christ acquired ownership of Paul. As many commentators have observed, it is evident that, practically, what Paul had in mind in 3:12c was his conversion, at which Christ forcefully obtained him and made Paul his own (cf. Fee 1999:154; O'Brien 1991:425). No doubt, such an allusion to his conversion at this point of his autobiographical account of his Christian existence, would have rightly served as an enormous motivation to complete the race. The

'memory about one's beginnings in Christ can serve as the proper shot of adrenaline for the continuing race', so says Fee (1999:154).

All the same, what this approach lacks is the idea of prize winning, or of Paul as a trophy of Christ, which the structure of the passage indicates. The Good News Translation interestingly renders 3:12c as, '*Christ Jesus has already won me to himself*'. In so doing, the ownership and prize winning ideas are retained, but at the expense of not stating the aggressive manner by which Christ acquires the prize.

#### *1.2.4. Arrested or apprehended by Christ*

Typical of their literal approach to translation, the King James and Authorized versions render 3:12c as '*I am apprehended of Christ Jesus*'. This leaves the clause quite ambiguous, since the word 'apprehend' has several meanings and connotations. However, one of these meanings is 'to arrest' or 'to capture', which evidently underlines the aggression with which Christ acquires Paul. This interpretation certainly accords with how his conversion is narrated in Acts 9:1–19. On his way to 'hunt down' and arrest the Christians in Damascus, Christ Jesus intercepted, arrested, and took Paul captive. So, as put by O'Brien, 'the risen and exalted Lord Jesus had mightily arrested him and set his life in a new direction' (1991:425; cf. Fee 1999:154).

Thus, in this approach, Paul is understood to be describing his conversion as a miraculous intervention of Christ, in order to rebut the argument of the Judaizers and explain the motivation that energizes his Christian ambitions. He strives to grow towards the goal of his Christian calling, because of the inner compulsion of being arrested or captured by Jesus. Spurgeon's (1889) exposition of Philippians 3:12c is worth repeating at length, for its profoundly edifying value:

And almighty Grace arrested him! He fell to the earth at the first blow. He was blinded with the second. No, not so much by a blow as by the greatness of the light of God that shone round about him! And there he lay prostrate, broken in heart and blind in eyes—he had to be led into the city—and one of those poor men whom he had determined to haul to prison had to come and pray for him, that his eyes might be opened, that he might be baptized, and that he might thus make his confession of faith in Christ! He well says that he was “apprehended of Christ Jesus.” The King sent no sheriff’s officer to arrest him, but He came, Himself, and took him into divine custody, laid him by the heels for three days in the dark—and then let him out into glorious liberty, an altogether changed man—to go forth to preach that faith which before he had sought to destroy!

Clarke also combines the interpretation of *κατελήμφθην* in 3:12c as ‘apprehended’ or ‘arrested’, with the idea of athletic prize winning by commenting:

There is still an allusion here to the stadium, and exercises there: the apostle considers Christ as the *brabeus*, or judge in the games, who proclaimed the victor, and distributed the prizes; and he represents himself as being introduced by this very *brabeus*, or judge, into the contest; and this *brabeus* brought him in with the design to crown him, if he contended faithfully (2011).

In this otherwise helpful approach, Paul is ‘introduced’ by Christ; but, he is introduced as an athlete rather than as Christ’s prize. In other words, Christ is Paul’s coach, a not unlikely scenario, but far removed from the idea expressed by 3:12c. Moreover, the ownership idea is not accounted for by Clarke’s rendering.

All things considered, I favour the proposal that ‘arrest’ or ‘capture’, is the best rendering of *κατελήμφθην* in 3:12c, since it satisfies several of

the criteria set out in section 1.1 above. Crucially, Paul's consistent self-understanding as a prisoner *of* Christ in many of his letters<sup>10</sup> is a key factor that must be considered when interpreting any of his autobiographical accounts.

As several interpreters have pointed out (e.g. Houlden 1970:297; Mitton 1973:119; Wild 1984:284–298), Paul often used the self-description as Christ's prisoner with a double meaning. At one level, that designation is meant to indicate that he was in prison *for the sake of* Christ. Yet, on another level, Paul understood himself as specifically imprisoned *by* Christ. In other words, it is Christ who has bound him as his prisoner to serve his purposes. As he put it to the elders of Ephesus in Acts 20:22, 'as a *captive to the Spirit*, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there.' Thus, this self-understanding as a *captive of Christ* (and of the Spirit) served as a key motivation throughout his Christian life. It is therefore unsurprising that the idea should surface in his autobiographical account in Philippians 3, given that he wrote from prison.

On its own, however, the idea of Paul as a captive of Christ does not satisfy all the criteria for interpreting Philippians 3:12c. How does the ownership idea in the verse correlate with the captive metaphor? What of the idea of prize winning implied by the structure of the passage? Then also, in what specific way does the captive imagery relate to Paul's account of his Christian existence in Philippians 3 and his self-understanding in the whole epistle? A nuanced proposal is therefore needed.

---

<sup>10</sup> For example, Ephesians 3:1; 4:1; 6:20; Philippians 1:7; 1:14–16; Colossians 4:3; 4:18; 2 Timothy 1:8–9; Philemon 1:1; 1:7–10; 1:13.



### 1.3. The Present Proposal: Paul the captive trophy slave

In what follows, I present a three stage argument, with supporting circumstantial evidence, to suggest that in Philippians 3:12c, Paul describes himself not just as a captured prisoner, but as a captured slave, who, by that virtue, is owned by Christ. And he is not just a captured slave, but specifically, a captive trophy slave, as if paraded by the triumphant Christ in the *Circus Maximus* during a Roman triumph, at which military successes were commemorated with athletic races. It is the pride with which Christ dotes on his captive trophy slave Paul in 3:12c, as well as the force of the capture, I propose, which energizes the apostle to race for the goal of completing his Christian race.<sup>11</sup>

The argument will proceed in the following fashion. Firstly, it will be demonstrated that, when Paul first introduces himself and Timothy at the beginning of the epistle in Phil 1:1 as δοῦλοι Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ (*slaves of Christ Jesus*), this was not just as a titular designation, but a functional description of his self-understanding as a slave of Christ. And, further, that this functional self-understanding is repeated and implied throughout the epistle.

Secondly, it will be argued that, specifically in Philippians 3:4–14, Paul sought to show that his Christian existence imitated 'the story of Christ', who in Philippians 2:6–11 is noted to have emptied himself to take on the status of a slave. Paul also, in 3:4–14, after counting his pre-Christian status and achievements as σκύβαλα, dung (or refuse),

---

<sup>11</sup>Before proceeding to lay out the argument, it is personally satisfying to report that after establishing my findings, I located a contemporary but partial support for my proposal in how the Bible in Basic English Translation renders Philippians 3:12c, namely, '*that for which I was made the servant of Christ Jesus*'. This of course underscores the idea of ownership, and specifically, slavery, in the verse; but it does not satisfy all the criteria. It is nevertheless quite close to the present proposal.

became, like Christ, a slave; but a slave owned also by Christ. And just as in Philippians 2:6–11, God exalted Jesus to the highest place; Paul in Philippians 3 runs the race to receive the prize of God's call. The following suggestion will be made: in the context of the epistle, Paul is not just owned by Christ; but, by the triumphant and enthroned Christ (2:9–11), who therefore regards Paul as his captive trophy slave.

Lastly, secondary historical evidence will be presented to show that before and after the time of Paul, it was the common practice for triumphant military generals and emperors to parade their trophy captives as slaves during the Roman *triumphus*, which was sometimes marked with athletic celebrations in the *Circus Maximus*. In conclusion, then, it is this which is alluded to in Philippians 3:12c.

## 2. Paul as Slave of Christ in Philippians

A key component of the self-understanding of Paul in his letter to the Philippians is his self-regard as a 'slave of Christ'. This is evident on several levels, namely, (a) by his self-designation in Philippians 1:1, (b) by describing other Christian workers in Philippians with slavery terminology and idioms, (c) by using the slavery terminologies and ideas for himself, outside Philippians 3, and crucially, (d) by using slavery terminology and idioms of Christ.

### 2.1. Paul and Timothy as Slaves of Christ in Philippians 1:1

As it is with all his letters, Paul begins Philippians with a salutation in which he describes himself with a particular designation. The self-designation of Philippians 1:1 is, however, unique among his letters in a number of ways. It is the only one of Paul's epistles in which he

designates *both* himself and a colleague, Timothy,<sup>12</sup> as δοῦλοι Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ (*slaves of Christ Jesus*).

Paul designates himself as *a slave of Christ* as part of his salutations in Romans 1:1 and Titus 1:1. Yet, in both Romans and Titus, the slave of Christ self-designation applies to Paul alone, and is set in apposition to a further self-designation as *an apostle of Jesus Christ*. It is only in Philippians 1:1 that the *slave of Christ* self-designation stands on its own without the apostolic qualification and, further, includes Timothy along with Paul.

It is true that, elsewhere in the contents of his letters, Paul refers to other members of his team as 'slaves of Christ' (e.g. Epaphras Col 1:7; 4:12 and Tychicus Col 4:7). But Philippians 1:1 is unique in that it is the only self-designation which describes Paul and a colleague as δοῦλοι Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ. What is the significance of this uniqueness for interpreting the epistle to the Philippians? For, as many interpreters have pointed out, that in each of the salutations of his letters, Paul 'adapts his descriptions of himself and his credentials to the circumstances of each letter' (O'Brien 1991:44; cf. Asumang 2009:5; Esler 2003:271; Glad 1995:2; Hodge 2005:270–288; Keay 2005:151–155).

Regarding this question, a number of interpreters (e.g. Dunn 1988:57; Martin 1987:57; Ollrog 1979:184 n.108; Sass 1941:24–32) have insisted that Paul's use of the δοῦλοι Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ designation was largely based on the Jewish and Old Testament idea of servant of

---

<sup>12</sup> Timothy is introduced along with Paul in six letters, namely, 2 Corinthians 1:1; Colossians 1:1; Philippians 1:1; 1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:1, and Philippians 1:1. The suggestion that in Philippians, Timothy functioned as amanuensis of Paul rather than co-writer (cf. Fee 1999:40; O'Brien 1991:44) as in Colossians may well be correct, since in the body of the letter, Paul refers only to himself as writing.

God,<sup>13</sup> rather than in the Greco-Roman functional sense of being owned by and serving as a slave of Jesus. In the Jewish sense, *slave of Christ* is understood to be a title of honour which, in the case of Philippians 1:1, would have served to underscore the honour and dignity of Timothy and Paul. Thus, the self-designation is taken to be a substitute for apostleship in which Paul's self-understanding was presented in the mould of the Old Testament prophets.

Evidently, this interpretation is not impossible in situations in which Paul's authority was at stake, (e.g. Gal 1:10). However, can the same be said of Philippians, in which Paul's authority *per se* was never an issue? On the contrary, in Philippians, whenever he expresses his relationship with the readers (as he frequently does throughout the epistle), Paul underscores his equality with them. No doubt, he presses them to act in certain moral ways and seeks to persuade them to adopt specific Christ honouring attitudes. But, these appeals to his first readers were based, not so much on his apostolic authority, as on his exemplary attitude, and the mutual affection, friendship,<sup>14</sup> and collegiality he shared with them (e.g. 1:7, 27, 2:2, 12, 16–17, 3:1, 15–17, 4:1, 8–9). Indeed, it is striking that the word ἀπόστολον (apostle or delegate, 2:25) is used only once in the letter, and that to describe the emissary function of Epaphroditus.

Therefore, the proposal that the '*slaves of Christ*' designation in Philippians 1:1 underlines Paul's apostolic authority is not convincing. Moreover, how does the Old Testament explanation of the designation apply to Timothy, who, though admittedly well known to the Philippians, had not encountered any problems of authority in Philippi?

---

<sup>13</sup>Examples of such Old Testament usages are: Moses (Ex 14:31; Num 12:7; Neh 10:29; Ps 105:26), Joshua (24:29), David (Ps 89:20), Jeremiah (Jer 25:4), Daniel (Dan 9:6, 10) and Jonah (2 Kgs 14:25).

<sup>14</sup> For a review of Philippians as a letter of friendship, see Fee (1999:12–17).

It is for this (and other) reasons that the majority of interpreters in recent decades have rejected the purely Jewish interpretation of Pauline use of the slave of Christ designation in his letters (e.g. Bockmuehl 1997:50–51; Cassidy 2001; Fee 1995; Fowl 2005:16–17; Martin 1990; Wansink 1996). That designation, they argue, is significantly related to the Greco-Roman understanding of the slavery idea. This is especially so in letters addressed to predominantly Gentile churches, such as Philippians.

So, as expressed by Barrett who, although believes that Paul originally derived the idea from the Old Testament 'Servant of Yahweh' concept, nevertheless remarks, 'Something more is involved when the Apostle uses the phrase slave of Christ Jesus ... by it, Paul acknowledges his total submission to the will of Christ' (1971:50; cf. Martin 1990:32). In that case, Paul's self-understanding in the whole of Philippians is significantly influenced by a functional rendering of the designation in Philippians 1:1 of being a slave of Christ. This should be reflected in the interpretation of 3:12c.

## 2.2. Christian workers in Philippians as slaves of Christ

Another key reason why the *slaves of Christ* designation in Philippians 1:1 should influence the construction of Paul's self-understanding in Philippians 3:21c, is that in Philippians, the primary defining characteristic of Christian workers is service, in the manner in which slaves could be described as serving their master. So, in Philippians 2:22 for example, Timothy is described as, 'like a son with a father he has ἐδούλευσεν (literally translated, *he has slaved*) with me in the work of the gospel'. Epaphroditus is similarly described as a fellow worker who risked his life while making up for 'those *services* that you could not give me' (2:30).

In Philippians 4:3, Paul appeals to γνήσιεσὺζυγε, (i.e. legitimate yoke-fellow), most probably another itinerant Christian co-worker in Philippi, to help restore the relationship between two women Christian leaders. The characterization of this itinerant worker is evidently meant to underline the collegiality between him and Paul. But, it is no accident that Paul's specific choice of words for this person was as *yoke-fellow*. By implication, this Christian worker served shoulder-to-shoulder with Paul under the common *yoke* of Christ. The idea of slavery is not too far from this description.

Then also, in Philippians 4:3, Euodia and Syntyche (the women Christian leaders in question), along with Clement, are described as συνεργῶν (i.e. co-labourer or co-worker). Thus, Christian workers in Philippians are routinely depicted with slavery terminologies and idioms. This should have significance in how one would interpret Philippians 3:12c.

### 2.3. Paul as slave of Christ in Philippians 1, 2, and 4

This portrayal of Christian workers in Philippians also applies to Paul himself, outside of Philippians 3. On three occasions in Philippians 1, Paul reminds the Philippians of his chains (e.g. 1:7, 14, and 16). While this description does not explicitly relate to the *slaves of Christ* self-designation, it is linked and inseparable from the idea of slavery. The degradation, humiliation and shame of Paul's imprisonment, most likely in the company of many real slaves, would have made being a prisoner *of Christ* and a slave *of Christ* practically indistinguishable, both to Paul himself, and his first readers (MaGee 2008:338–353; cf. Fowl 2005:17). 'Roman law regarded a captured Roman as a slave, though the right of *postliminium* enabled him to recover citizenship retrospectively on his

return; if he died in captivity, however, he died a slave' (Fitzgerald 2000:90).

As already noted, in 2:22, Paul described his own work along with Timothy's as ἐδούλευσεν (slaving). This was after he had indicated, in 2:16, that his ministry involved ἐκοπίασα (i.e. labouring in a strenuous manner), a kind of description which would fit a slave. Paul's transmission of greetings from Christians in τῆς Καίσαρος οἰκίας (i.e. in the household of Caesar) at the end of the letter in Philippians 4:22, is another reminder of the functionality of the *slaves of Christ* idea. Many of the Christians of Caesar's household were slaves, as the list of some of the members in the church(es) of Rome<sup>15</sup> in Romans chapter 16 indicates (Brown 2001:723–737; Stowers 1994:76). It is not an exaggeration then to state that, in Philippians, the correct description of all Christian workers, in both title and function, and Paul included, is as *slaves of Christ*.<sup>16</sup>

## 2.4. Christ as a slave in Philippians 2

There is another key reason why the *slaves of Christ* designation in Philippians 1:1 should considerably affect how Paul's self-understanding in Philippians 3:12c is constructed. In Philippians 2:7, Paul designates Jesus also as δούλου (slave), thus putting Paul's self-

---

<sup>15</sup> It has been estimated that by the end of the first century BC, 30–40 per cent of the population of Italy were slaves (Fitzgerald 2000:3). This proportion was the same in Rome itself and replicated in key provinces such as Philippi with very close Roman connections (see the chart in Oakes [2001:50] and the discussion in Kyrtatas [1987:45–46]). For a discussion on the 'Romanness' of first century Philippi as distinct from the other colonies in the Eastern Empire, see Hendrix (1992, vol. 5:315) and Levick (1967:161).

<sup>16</sup> Perhaps Paul's use of language of the 'body' in 1:20 and 3:21, and the 'abasement' described in 4:12 echo the slave allusions of the epistle.

understanding as a slave in significant perspective. Indeed, Perkins (1991:93–98) has argued that the Christ hymn of Philippians 2:6–11 serves as a governing metaphor for the whole epistle, making the slave idea one of the epistle's prominent features.

Even though Perkins overstates her case; the likely 'shock' to the Philippian readers of characterizing Jesus as slave would suggest that there is some merit in regarding the hymn as important for understanding the epistle. Certainly, and according to O'Brien, the emphasis on Christ's obedience as a slave is 'paradigmatic' for how Christian existence is portrayed in Philippians (1991:272–273; cf. Bloomquist 1993:164–165). It is not at all surprising, then, that Christian workers in Philippians (and Paul himself) should likewise be described as slaves.

As it is with the *slaves of Christ* title in Philippians 1:1, interpreters have debated whether the predominant background of the metaphor of Jesus as slave in Philippians 2:7 is, in the Jewish sense, derived from the 'Servant of Yahweh' idea in Isaiah (so, Fredriksen 2002:235–260; Kasemann 1980:5) or in the Greco-Roman sense (so, Byron 2003:164; Combes 1998:77–86; Fee 1999:95; O'Brien 1991:218–224). But such a choice is a false one. For, while the theological underpinnings of the slavery idea in Philippians 2:6–11 is in tandem with Isaiah chapter 53, the point Paul stresses in Philippians chapter 2, was Jesus' function as a metaphorical slave, namely, he 'emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on the cross' (Phil 2:7–8).

Moreover, Hellerman (2005) has convincingly shown that the Christ story of Philippians 2:6–11 was carefully designed by Paul to portray Jesus descending through the Roman social stratification of *corsus*



*pudorum* (course of ignominies). Paul's use of the slave metaphor for Jesus, therefore, was not merely designed to be in line with the Old Testament idea of Jesus as the Servant of Yahweh. More than that, it underscored it in the social and functional terms that the first Philippian readers, who were mostly Gentiles, would have understood it.

It is proposed that it is this consistently functional description in Philippians, of the incarnation of God in Christ as descent into slavery, and of Paul and his fellow co-workers as slaves of Christ, which the apostle employs in Philippians chapter 3. This is the focus of the next segment.

### **3. Paul as Slave of Christ in Philippians 3:4–14**

If throughout the epistle, Paul presents Christian workers as slaves of Christ, and Christ himself as slave of God, then we should not be surprised that in Philippians 3, he again expresses his self-understanding as a slave of Christ. This self-understanding is presented in 3:4–14 in three ways, namely, (a) by the manner in which Paul parallels his own Christian existence in 3:4–14 with Christ's kenotic story of 2:6–11, (b) by Paul's use of expressions in 3:4–14 describing himself as owned by Christ, and in the manner in which a slave could be said to be owned by his master, and (c) by Paul's description of himself in 3:12c as Christ's captive trophy slave.

#### **3.1. Paul's imitation of Christ in Philippians 3:4–14 and slavery**

Recent scholarship has rightly rejected the partition theory of Philippians and accepted that the letter was written and sent as one

integral unit,<sup>17</sup> for two reasons. Firstly, the key problem of Philippians 3:1 has now been convincingly explained based on the nature of friendship letters of the time (cf. Reed 1996:63–90). Secondly, many interpreters have identified interconnecting themes between Philippians 3 and the rest of the epistle, thus severely undermining the grounds for the partitioning theory (cf. Black, 1995:16–49; Bockmuehl 1995:57–88; Fowl 2005:12; Marchal 2006:18–19; Oakes 2001:141).

One such crossover of verbal and conceptual links between Philippians chapter 3 and the rest of the letter is the similarities between Paul's autobiographical account of his Christian existence (Phil 3:4–14), and 'the kenotic story of Christ' (Phil 2:6–11). Paul devotes Philippians 3 to give an account of his Christian existence with the dual rhetorical strategy of rebutting his opponents' arguments,<sup>18</sup> and, at the same time, encouraging his readers to imitate how he imitated Christ; the rebuttal serving as an excellent foil for achieving the latter aim (DeSilva 1995:52–53). As several interpreters have pointed out (e.g. Fee 1999:136; Hawthorne 1996:163–179; Kurz 1985:103–126), this autobiographical account is framed along the lines of the four-part movement of Jesus' kenotic story in 2:6–11.<sup>19</sup> In addition, Paul employs key resonating terminologies that represent him as imitating the kenosis of Christ.

---

<sup>17</sup>For a recent analysis of the questions of the integrity of Philippians, see Thurston and Ryan (2009:34) and Reed (1996:63–90).

<sup>18</sup>Williams (2002:54–60) discusses eighteen different possible candidates for the identity of these opponents.

<sup>19</sup>It is more common for the movements of the *Carmen Christi* to be described as three, namely, self-emptying—obedience—exaltation. But this, in my view, fails to emphasize the pre-incarnation exalted status before the self-emptying as a crucial stage. For reviews of scholarship on the *Carmen Christi*, see Martin (1983) and MacLeod (2001:437–450).

The 'story of Christ' in Philippians 2:6–11 is narrated in four movements, namely, (a) the elevated status of Christ as being in the form of God is underlined in 2:6, followed by (b) Christ's voluntary self-emptying to become a slave in 2:7, then (c) Christ's obedience to death on the cross, at the time, a typical slave death (cf. Fitzgerald 2000:37; Hellerman 2003a:429; Hengel, 1977:62; O'Brien 1991:230), in 2:8, and then (d) Christ's resurrection and exaltation by God in 2:9–11.

<b>Christ (2:6–11)</b>		<b>Paul (3:4–14)</b>
High status as God (2:6)	↔	High status and achievement (3:4–6)
Self-emptying to become a slave (2:7)	↔	Self-emptying by counting all things as 'dung' (3:7–9)
Obedience unto slave's death (2:8)	↔	Desire for conformity to Christ's death (3:10–12)
Exaltation by God (2:9–11)	↔	Ambition to win prize from God (3:12–14)

*Table 1: Paul's Imitation of Christ in Philippians 3:4–14*

As shown in table 1, Paul's autobiographical account in Philippians 3:4–14 follows a similar and corresponding four movement pattern, namely, (a) Paul's elevated status and achievements are summarized with the seven accolades in 3:4–6, followed by (b) Paul's voluntary self-emptying of his high status and achievements, counting these as σκύβαλα (rubbish, refuse, dung) in 3:7–9, followed by (c) Paul's expression of his desire to be conformed to Christ, in his death and resurrection in 3:10–12, and then (d) Paul's expression of his ambition

to persist in this drive till he receives his prized exaltation from God in 3:12–14.<sup>20</sup>

It is clear from the above parallels that in Philippians chapter 3, Paul saw his current Christian existence at a similar stage as that of the story of Christ before exaltation: the stage of humility, self-abasement, obedience, and indeed, σκύβαλα (rubbish, refuse, or dung). Roman slaves in antiquity were routinely labelled as 'refuse', *katharma* in the colloquial Latin (Hopkins 1993:21). Paul's reckoning of his pre-Christian status and achievements as σκύβαλα would, therefore, have resonated well with his readers who were familiar with this characterization of slavery.

Furthermore, when he expresses his ambition in 3:8–11, his desire was to be conformed to Christ's death which he had previously stressed, was a 'death on a cross' (2:8). This undoubtedly underlined the slavery connotations. It is interesting to note the undeniable link between crucifixion and slavery in those times; the phrase *servile supplicium* (i.e. slaves' punishment) actually became the technical term for crucifixion, whether of slaves or the free. So, Sceledrus, a Roman slave character in one of Plautus' comedies, for example, immortalized this association with the words, 'I know the cross will be my tomb. There's where my ancestors rest—father, grandfather, great-grandfather, and great-great-grandfather' (Plautus, *Miles Gloriosus* 372). The slave of Christ idea is, therefore, not too far from the surface in Paul's expression of his desire to be conformed to Christ in life and death.

---

<sup>20</sup> A number of interpreters have also found contrasting points between Christ's exaltation in 2:9–11 and the contemporary imperial cult of Philippi, as well as the description of the new citizenship of believers with the soon to appear Saviour in 3:20–21 (e.g. Oakes 2005:301–322; Perkins 1991).

The parallels between Paul's story (3:4–14), and that of Christ (2:6–11) go beyond the correspondences between the four stage movements to include direct verbal echoes. So, just as Jesus did not ἡγήσατο (count, 2:6) his equality with God something to exploit, so also Paul, on three occasions, ἡγημαί (counted, 3:7, 8) his high status and achievement as lost. Evidently, Paul's stress on his self-emptying in 3:7–11 is meant to correspond to Christ's post self-emptying status as slave (cf. Dalton 1979:100; DeSilva 1995:40; Garland, 1985: 157–159).

Accordingly, when Paul alludes to his conversion on the road to Damascus (3:12c), and he describes it as the point from which Christ forcefully captured and enslaved him. For people became slaves in the Greco-Roman context in one of three ways, namely, born to a slave parent, enslavement for the sake of a financial debt,<sup>21</sup> or through capture (cf. Combes 1998:30; Wiedemann 1987:22).

### 3.2. Paul is owned by Christ in Philippians 3:4–14

Another indication used by Paul to underline his post self-emptying status as a slave of Christ, is the manner in which he underscores in the passage that he was owned by Christ. A key characteristic of the Greco-Roman slave was that he was the property of his or her master (Combes 1998:24; Fitzgerald 2000:23–31; Philips 1985:6). As Aristotle pointed out, the slave is 'part of the master—he is, as it were, a part of his body, alive yet separated from it' (*Politics* 1255b). It is also for this reason

---

<sup>21</sup> It is not impossible that the idea that Paul became Christ's slave through purchase would also faintly resonate in the passage, given the commercial language of 'profit', 'loss' and 'worth' used in 3:7–11. However, such a commercial interpretation of Paul's enslavement to Christ would diminish the stress on the aggressive manner of acquisition of Paul as Christ's slave in 3:12c.

that the slave was regarded as an extension, and the agent of the power and will of the master (Fitzgerald 200:13).

In that regard, Paul's description of himself as owned by Christ in 3:4–14 must be taken as reflecting his self-understanding as the slave of Christ. So, when he calls Jesus, Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ τοῦ κυρίου μου (*Christ Jesus my Lord*, 3:8), this is an explicit statement of his enslavement to Christ. As many interpreters have pointed out, this is the only place in all the Pauline letters in which the apostle uses the singular personal pronoun *my Lord*, to express his relationship with Christ (O'Brien 1991:389; Thurston and Ryan 2009:128). His preferred rendition is the plural, *our Lord*, which he uses on sixty occasions. Paul seeing himself as Christ's personal slave in Philippians 3:4–14 is, therefore, extremely important. As put by Fee, concerning the phrase 'my Lord', Paul's conversion, 'transformed the former persecutor of the church into Christ's *love slave* whose lifelong ambition is to know him in return' (1999:144, emphases added).

The language of 'knowing' and 'gaining' Christ (3:8–10), though not a natural expression of his enslavement to Jesus, is nevertheless indirectly related to that idea. This is especially so since they are used in close proximity to Paul's expression of being owned by Christ (cf. Black 1995:41; DeSilva 1995:42; Fee 1999:144). The expression indicates Paul's desire for a deep filial intimacy with Christ comparable to that between a father and his son.

In the context of the Paul-Christ relationship, this is of profound significance. The master-slave relationship in the Greco-Roman household was characterized by a fictive kinship which, by virtue of its flexibility and potential for continued development, was sometimes more intimate than the father-son relationship in the same household. The latter was not infrequently bedevilled with father-son rivalries,

jealousies, and other hostile emotions (cf. Fitzgerald 2000:78–80; Petterson 1982:19).

It is not that such negative emotions, and worse, did not exist in the master-slave relationship. They did. However, given the power that the master exerted over the slave, the tensions were usually much more controlled. The master-slave fictive kinship relationship, therefore, tended to be much more dynamic and characterised by continued development (Fitzgerald 2000:80).<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, and in the context of the 'slave of Christ' idea, the filial intimacy that Paul expresses in his desire to 'know' Christ should be seen in the positive manner that it represents, and therefore, should influence the interpretation of 3:12c.

### 3.3. Paul as captive trophy slave of Christ in Philippians 3:12c

When Paul comes to the point in his autobiographical account where he wished to state a disclaimer and declare his ambition to achieve the goal of his calling in 3:12–14, he has already established in the preceding verses that he is Christ's slave. Yet, in his desire to also present his autobiography in imitation of Christ, he needed to set forth his goals to achieve the prize, in parallel with the case of the triumphant Christ in the previous chapter. In consonant also with his strategy of rebutting the claims of his opponents, Paul wished to state that the achievement of the prize was not a matter that can be gained by 'confidence in the flesh' (3:3). The achievement was dependent on the power of Christ that worked in him.

---

<sup>22</sup> It will constitute a profound anachronistic misinterpretation for Greco-Roman slavery, as represented in the New Testament, to be read through the prism of the recent chattel slavery of Africans to the Americas, especially with regard to the conditions of household slaves of the first century. See Combes 1998 and Byron 2003 for discussions of the implications of the differences.

The best way to represent these truths was to describe himself as Christ's captive trophy slave (3:12c). The idea of himself as Christ's trophy naturally follows not from just being owned by Christ, but also, that he was captured by the resurrected, triumphant, and exalted Christ (2:9–11). This presentation of himself as a captive trophy slave of Christ met his rhetorical requirements, and at the same time, underlined the basic theological fact that the power which drove him was from Christ, his master.

The question which now confronts us is this: what is the possible socio-historical background of the link between the athletic prize winning idea, and the metaphor of capture by the triumphant Christ to become his slave?

#### 4. Roman Triumph, the Circus, and Philippians 3:12c

It is possible that in 3:12–14, the apostle transitioned from describing himself as a captive trophy slave in 3:12c, to an athlete in 3:13, without seeking to directly link the two metaphors. If so, that would not be a departure from the apostle's literary style. An example of this is Philippians 2:15–17; Paul transitions from a cosmological metaphor of stars, to the artificial light metaphor of torchlight, to the athletic metaphor of running, the menial metaphor of hard labour, ending with the cultic metaphors of sacrifice and libation, all in three verses.<sup>23</sup> This not uncommon Pauline literary phenomenon of the mixing of metaphors cautions against the temptation to seek to draw out his images in 3:12–14 into an extensive narrative.

In the present context, it suffices to observe that if Paul did not have a particular narrative in mind in 3:12–14, the present proposal is not in

---

<sup>23</sup> For a recent analysis of Paul's use of metaphors, see Collins 2008.



any way weakened. The movement from a captive trophy slave metaphor in 3:12c, to an athletic arena in 3:13–14, would not be a strange departure from the apostle's literary style.

Even so, it will be at least interesting, and more likely, would have enhanced the rhetorical import of Paul's language in 3:12–14 to his first readers if a socio-historical precedent existed, in which the public presentation of a captive trophy slave coincided with an athletic event. Such a precedent would make sense of Paul's transition from 3:12c to 3:13, reflect the intermediary nature of 3:12, and so underscore the seamlessness and rhetorical effectiveness of his autobiographical account.

In that case, the ceremonies of *The Roman Triumph* would most likely have provided such a socio-historical precedent for Paul's transition in 3:12c to 3:13. The institution of the Roman triumph, 'the most famous procession in the Greco-Roman world' (Duff 1992:63), was routinely organized in Rome, apparently<sup>24</sup> from as far back as the time of Romulus (when the city was founded in 753 BC) until the fourth century AD. The triumph was celebrated in commemoration of a victory by a Roman general or emperor in foreign lands. And it served as a way of enhancing the status of the general or emperor, as well as uniting the people behind their warriors, while displaying Rome's culture (Beacham 1999; Beard 2009; Ramsay 1875: 1163–1167; Scullard 1969:213–218; Versnel 1970; Warren 1970:49–66).

The triumph consisted of a procession through the streets of Rome by the victorious general or emperor accompanied by pomp and pageantry to commemorate the conquest. The victorious general rode in a chariot,

---

<sup>24</sup> Classicists are divided on the question of when the first triumph was held, for details of the argument of which, see Beard 2009:45–53.

wearing regalia that signified divine and king-like qualities. In front of him, and sometimes behind the carriage, would be a throng of his prized booty; captives, vanquished kings, generals, and slaves, some of whom would subsequently be executed, and others imprisoned or enslaved (cf. Beard 2009:107–125). The procession was followed by public sacrifices, festivals, and banquets throughout the city.

While not a permanent feature of all triumphs, for the scale of the celebrations was dependent on the degree and significance of the victory, some of the triumphs were accompanied by days of athletic games in the Circus Maximus of Rome. So, Titus Livy, for example, describes the games which formed part of Tarquin's triumph following the capture of Apiola during the war of Latini (*Livy* I.35). These games included chariot and horse racing, foot races, and wrestling. In some cases, the captured prisoners of war featured as athletes of the games (Beard 2009:264; Mommsen 1864–79:42–57).

The link between the *Ludi Romani*, the athletic games, and the triumph procession is, according to Versnel, 'the only facet of the triumph on which there is nearly full agreement' among classical historians (1970:3).<sup>25</sup> This is not surprising, since the games in the *Circus Maximus* were regarded as an entertainment for the gods, or representations and re-enactments of the victories of the battle (cf. Versel 1970:267 n.1).

If Paul was familiar with the Roman triumph, and 1 Corinthians 4:9 indicates that he was, then there is adequate circumstantial precedent to explain why Paul, writing from prison, may have transitioned from describing himself as Christ's captive trophy slave (3:12c), to

---

<sup>25</sup> But see his argument in 1970:110–114 that the two did not necessarily originate together.

describing himself as an athlete in a race to win a prize (3:13). The military associations of Philippi would have made such an allusion quite resonant with the first readers (cf. Hellerman 2003b:327–328).

## Conclusion

The ambiguities in Philippians 3:12, it has been argued, are most likely deliberate and designed to achieve the maximum rhetorical strategy of setting forth Paul's case in his polemics against his opponents, whilst at the same time, encouraging his friends in Philippi to imitate his imitation of Christ. That being so, it was proposed that in Philippians 3:12c, Paul presents himself as Christ's captive trophy slave.

The argument was based on the grammar and concepts in the verse, the apostle's self-understanding as a slave of Christ in the whole epistle, the manner in which he portrays Christian workers in the epistle as slaves, and his presentation of Christ also as slave, with whom he parallels his autobiography in Philippians 3:4–14. This proposal also has the advantage of explaining how 3:12c belongs to both the preceding 3:4–12, which is conceptually dominated by the idea of ownership, and the subsequent 3:12–14, which is dominated by the athletic imagery. The socio-historical precedent for this proposal, it has been argued, is the Roman triumph which was sometimes celebrated with athletic games.

In terms of the relevance of the proposal for contemporary Christian praxis, the apostle's representation of enslavement to Christ as a defining characteristic of the Christian worker has immense significance for the construction of the functional self-image of Christian workers today. The increasingly common label, 'servant of Christ (or of God)', should be understood as going beyond an honorific description. More than that, it implies total submission to Christ as

Lord, and practical, strenuous, and humble hard labour on behalf of his people.

On the other hand, the same description draws on the immense power which emanates from the Lord, and which works through his 'slaves' as his agents to achieve his purposes. The pride with which Christ dotes on believers as his trophy slaves must certainly be an energizing motivation towards continued spiritual growth and fruitful labour.

## Reference List

- Asumang A 2009. Vehicles of divine mystery: Paul's Danielic self-understanding in Ephesians 3. *Conspectus* 7:1–26.
- Barrett CK 1971. *Commentary on the first epistle to the Corinthians*. London: A&C Black.
- Beacham R 1999. *Spectacle entertainments of early Imperial Rome*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Beard M 2009. *The Roman triumph*. London: Harvard University Press.
- Black DA 1995. The discourse structure of Philippians: a study in text-linguistics. *Novum Testamentum* 7:16–49.
- Bloomquist LG 1993. *The function of suffering in Philippians*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.
- Bockmuehl M 1997. *Epistle to the Philippians*. London: A & C Black.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1995. A commentators' approach to the "effective history" of Philippians. *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 60:57–88.
- Brown MJ 2001. Paul's use of δοῦλος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ in Romans 1:1. *JBL* 120(4):723–737.
- Byron J 2003. *Slavery metaphors in early Judaism and Pauline Christianity: a traditio-historical and exegetical examination*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.

- Caird GB 1976. *Paul's letters from prison: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon, in the revised standard version*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cassidy RJ 2001. *Paul in chains: Roman imprisonment and the letters of Saint Paul*. New York: Herder and Herder.
- Clarke A 2011. Adam Clarke's commentary on the Bible (E-Sword). Edited by Rick Meyer. Franklin.
- Collins R 2008. *The power of images in Paul*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press.
- Combes IAH 1998. *The metaphor of slavery in the writings of the early church: from the New Testament to the beginning of the fifth century*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.
- Dalton W J 1979. The integrity of Philippians. *Biblica* 60:93–103.
- DeSilva DA 1995. No confidence in the flesh: the meaning and function of Philippians 3:2–21. *Trinity Journal* 15(1):27–54.
- Duff PD 1992. The march of the divine warrior and the advent of the Greco-Roman king: Mark's account of Jesus "entry into Jerusalem." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111:55–71.
- Dunn JDG 1988. *Romans*. Word Biblical Commentary 38A. Dallas: Word.
- Dupont J 1970. The conversion of Paul, and its influence on his understanding of salvation by faith. In WW Ward and RP Martin (eds), *Apostolic history and the gospel: biblical and historical essays presented to F. F. Bruce on his 60th birthday*, 176–191. Exeter: Paternoster Press.
- Esler PF 2003. *Conflict and identity in Romans: the social setting of Paul's letter*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Fee GD 1995. *Paul's letter to the Philippians*. The New International Critical Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1999. *Philippians*. IVP New Testament Commentary. Downers Grove: IVP.
- Fitzgerald W 2000. *Slavery and the Roman literary imagination*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fitzmyer JA 1993. The consecutive meaning of ΕΦ' Ω in Romans 5.12. *New Testament Studies* 39(3):321–339.
- Forestell TJ 1956. Christian perfection and gnosis in Philippians 3:7–16. *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 18:123–136.
- Fowl S 2005. *Philippians*. Two Horizons New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Fredriksen P 2002. Judaism, circumcision and apocalyptic hope. In MD Nanos (ed.), *The Galatian debate: contemporary issues in rhetorical and historical interpretation*, 235–260. Peabody: Hendrickson.
- Garland DE 1985. The composition and unity of Philippians: some neglected literary factors. *Novum Testamentum* 27:152–163.
- Glad C 1995. *Paul and Philodemus: adaptability in epicurean and early Christian pedagogy*. New York: Brill.
- Hawthorne GF 1996. The imitation of Christ: discipleship in Philippians. In RN Longenecker, *Patterns of discipleship in the New Testament*, 163–179. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1983. *Philippians*. Word Biblical Commentary (vol. 43). Waco: Word.
- Hellerman JH 2005. *Reconstructing honor in Roman Philippi: Carmen Christi as cursuspudorum*. SNTS Monograph Series 132; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2003a. The Humiliation of Christ in the Social World of Roman Philipp: Part 2. *Bibliotheca Sacra* 160:421–433.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2003b. The humiliation of Christ in the social world of Roman Philippi: Part 1. *Bibliotheca Sacra* 160:321–336.

- Hendrix HL 1992. Philippi. In DN Longenecker (ed.), *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 5:315. New York: Doubleday.
- Hengel M 1977. *Crucifixion in the ancient world and the folly of the message of the cross*. Philadelphia: Fortress.
- Hodge CJ 2005. Apostle to the Gentiles: constructions of Paul's identity. *Biblical Interpretation* 13(3):270–288.
- Hooker MD 2000. *The letter to the Philippians*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.
- Hopkins K 1993. Novel evidence for Roman slavery. *Past and Present* 138:3–27.
- Houlden JL 1970. *Paul's letters from prison*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Kasemann E 1980. *Commentary on Romans*. Translated by GW Bromiley. London: SCM Press.
- Key R 2005. Paul, the spiritual guide: a social identity perspective on Paul's apostolic self identity. *Tyndale Bulletin* 56(1):151–155.
- Koester H 1962. The purpose of the polemic of a Pauline fragment. *New Testament Studies* 8(4):317–332.
- Kurz WS 1985. Kenotic imitation of Paul and of Christ in Philippians 2 and 3. In F Segovia, *Discipleship in the New Testament*, 103–126. Philadelphia: Fortress.
- Kyrtatas DJ 1987. *The social structure of the early Christian communities*. London: Verso.
- Levick, B. 1967. *Roman Colonies in Southern Asia Minor*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Louw JP and Nida EA 1989. *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.
- MacArthur J 2001. *Philippians*. MacArthur New Testament Commentary. Chicago: Moody Publishers.
- MacLeod DJ 2001. The exaltation of Christ: an exposition of Philippians 2:9–11. *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158:437–450.

- MaGee GS 2008. Paul's response to the shame and pain of imprisonment in 2 Timothy. *Bibliotheca Sacra* 165:338–353.
- Marchal J 2006. *Hierarchy, unity, and imitation: a feminist rhetorical analysis of power dynamics in Paul's letter to the Philippians*. Atlanta: SBL.
- Martin DB 1990. *Slavery as salvation: the metaphor of slavery in Pauline Christianity*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Martin RP 2002. *The epistle of Paul to the Philippians: an introduction and commentary* (TNTC Series). Leceister: IVP.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1987. *The epistle of Paul to the Philippians: an introduction and commentary*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1983. *Carmen Christi: Philippians 2:5–11 in recent interpretation and in the setting of early Christian worship*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Matlock BR 2007. The rhetoric of πιστις in Paul: Galatians 2.16, 3.22, Romans 3.22, and Philippians 3.9. *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 30(2):173–203.
- McReynolds PR (ed.) 1990. *Word study Greek-English New Testament*. Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers.
- Mitton CL 1973. *Ephesians*. New Century Bible Commentary. London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott.
- Mommsen T 1864–79. Die ludimagini und Romani. *RomischeForsch*, Berlin:42–57.
- Moris HM 2011. *Institute of Creation Research: apprehended of Christ*. Online article. Accessed from [www.icr.org/article/apprehended-christ/](http://www.icr.org/article/apprehended-christ/), 24-07-2011.
- Oakes P 2005. Re-mapping the universe: Paul and the Emperor in 1 Thessalonians and Philippians. *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 273:301–322.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2001. *Philippians: from people to letter*. SNTS Monograph Series 110. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



- O'Brien PT 1991. *The Epistle to the Philippians*. New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Ollrog W 1979. *Paulus und seine Mitarbeiter: Untersuchungen zu Theorie und Praxis der paulinischen Mission* (vol. 50), WMANT. Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag.
- Perkins P 1991. *Philippians: theology for the heavenly politeuma*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress.
- Petterson O 1982. *Slavery and social death: a comparative study*. London: Harvard University Press.
- Philips WD 1985. *Slavery from Roman times to early trans-Atlantic trade*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Pitzner VC 1967. *Paul and the agon motif: traditional athletic imagery in the Pauline literature*. Leiden: Brill.
- Ramsay W 1875. Triumphus. In J Murray, *A dictionary of Greek and Roman antiquities*, 1163–1167. London: SCM.
- Reed JT 1996. Philippians 3:1 and the epistolary hesitation formulas: the literary integrity of Philippians, again. *Journal of Biblical Literature* 115(1):63–90.
- Sass G 1941. Zur Bedeutung von SouXobei Paulus. *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 40:24–32.
- Scullard HH 1969. *Festivals and ceremonies of the Roman Republic*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Spurgeon C 1889. Paul apprehended and apprehending: sermon #2315. *Spurgeon's Gems*. Newington Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit. 30th May 1889. Online article . Accessed from [www.spurgeongems.org/vols37-39/chs2315.pdf](http://www.spurgeongems.org/vols37-39/chs2315.pdf), 24-07-2011.
- Stowers SK 1994. *A rereading of Romans: justice, Jews, and Gentiles*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Thurston BB and Ryan JM 2009. *Philippians and Philemon*. Sacra Pagina Commentary. Collegeville: Liturgical Press.

- Versnel HS 1970. *Triumphus: an Inquiry into the origin, development and meaning of the Roman triumph*. Leiden: Brill.
- Wansink CS 1996. *Chained in Christ: the experiences and rhetoric of Paul's imprisonments*. JSNT Supplement Series. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic.
- Warren LB 1970. Roman triumphs and Etruscan kings: the changing face of the triumph. *Journal of Religion and Society* 60:49–66.
- Watson DF 1988. A rhetorical analysis of Philippians and its implications for the unity question. *Novum Testamentum* 30(1):57–88.
- Wiedemann T 1987. *Slavery: Greece and Rome*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wiersbe WW 2001. *The Bible exposition commentary: New Testament* (vol. 2). Wheaton: Scripture Press.
- Wild RA 1984. The warrior and the prisoner: some reflections on Ephesians 6:10–20. *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 46(2):284–298.
- Williams D 2002. *Enemies of the cross of Christ: the terminology of the cross and conflict in Philippians*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

# Paradox and the Centrality of the Doctrine of God in Hermeneutics

Andrew Aucamp<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This essay examines the legitimacy of paradox as a valid hermeneutical category. The arguments of theologians and authors on both sides of the debate are examined and critiqued. Importantly, the way that R L Reymond applies his anti-paradox principle in his systematic theology is evaluated in order to provide insight into the debate. The author of this essay concludes that while the anti-paradox position is correct in principle, it can be applied in a narrow or mechanistic way that does not give adequate recognition to the semblance of paradox in scripture. Also, while the pro-paradox position has some validity, some of the statements made by those holding to this position are problematic and destroy the foundation for being able to differentiate between truth and error. A modified statement is therefore proposed that upholds the anti-paradox principle, but still gives expression to the semblance of paradox found in scripture.

---

<sup>1</sup> The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

## Introduction<sup>2</sup>

There are two distinct camps in the theological debate on the validity of paradox as a legitimate hermeneutical category. On the one hand, a number of theologians, such as Packer (1961:18–25), Grounds (1978), Kuiper and van Till, affirm the presence of paradoxes in scripture (see Reymond 1998:103–104) (hereafter referred to as the 'pro-paradox group'). These paradoxes seem to represent two contradictory statements (called 'antinomies' by Packer); statements that appear irreconcilable to human logic. According to them, the only resolution is to live with the apparent contradiction and deny that it is real (Packer 1961:21; Grounds 1978:4). Examples of doctrinal antinomies include God's sovereignty and human freedom (Packer 1961:21), and unconditional election and the free offer of the gospel (Waldron 1989:122, 145).

On the other hand, a second group of theologians deny the validity of such a category of hermeneutics (hereafter referred to as the 'anti-paradox' group). Basinger (1987:213), for example, concludes from his analysis that self-contradiction is not a category into which biblical truth can be fitted. Reymond (1998:104–106) agrees, and raises a number of problems with holding to a pro-paradox position (noted in a later section). Reymond (1998:108–109, 692–693) then applies this principle in a number of important areas, including the doctrine of the

---

<sup>2</sup>Two disclaimers are in order. Firstly, this paper is not an attempt to reconcile every opposing doctrinal system on the basis that 'seeming contradictions' are true but are soluble somewhere in God's mind. Some doctrinal systems are simply wrong, on the basis of poor exegesis and reasoning. Seeming contradictions need to be shown to have their basis in the word of God. Secondly, the criticism of Reymond in this paper is not a large scale rejection of his works. His publications are largely good and would greatly benefit the reader.

Trinity, and whether God desires the salvation of all men or the elect only.

However, after reading Reymond's application of his anti-paradox position to the Trinity and the question of God's desire for the salvation of all men, some serious and problematic questions arise. Therefore, this paper critiques Reymond's *application* of his anti-paradox principle on the issues/doctrines of the Trinity and God's desire for all men to be saved, thus hopefully providing insight into the debate on the legitimacy of paradox as a category for hermeneutics.

## 1. Definitions

Definitions are crucial in this discussion, especially as contributors to the debate tend to use terms interchangeably (Basinger 1987:205). Grounds (1978:3–4), for example, use 'paradox' and 'mystery' interchangeably, as does Waldron (1989:122, 145).

The definitions of Basinger (1987:205–206) are adopted in this paper. Accordingly,

- A 'verbal puzzle' refers to seemingly incomprehensible statements that can be resolved by clarifying the meaning of the terms therein.
- A 'mystery' refers to concepts that may never be open to human explanation, but nevertheless are logically possible. A miracle is an example of a mystery, as we are unable to explain how God performs them.
- A 'paradox' refers to concepts that appear to be self-contradictory to human logic.

## 2. Reymond's Approach and Methodology

This section is a critique of Reymond's application of his anti-paradox position to two important doctrines, namely, the Trinity and God's desire for the salvation of all men. While acknowledging the strength of his position, this segment of the article expositis and evaluates his application of his method to these two areas of doctrine.

### 2.1. The strength of his position

The anti-paradox position has some inherent strengths. The primary consideration that makes this position compelling to its adherents, is the claim that if paradoxes are permitted to exist in the Word of God, then Christians will have no basis on which to separate truth from error (Reymond 1998:106). The anti-paradox group argues that an apparent contradiction, because it cannot be reconciled by human logic, looks like a real contradiction to us. Therefore, there is no basis to distinguish between true and apparent contradictions, and hence, there is no basis for us to establish truth.

The implications of the pro-paradox position are therefore far reaching. One of the most profound implications is in canonicity. For example, rejections of letters or documents are made on the basis that they contradict accepted scripture (Grudem 1994:66). However, a consistent pro-paradox position can never exclude a document on this basis, as the contradiction may, after all, only be apparent. Since, according to the pro-paradox group, scripture contains other apparent contradictions, exclusion of any document is therefore not possible. This is clearly unacceptable.

Reymond (1998:105–106) also notes other problems with the pro-paradox position, such as frustrating all attempts at systematising

theology. The very nature of systematic theology is to harmonise and systematise doctrines in a coherent manner. Another problem pertains to meaning. For example, the paradoxical concept of a square circle has no meaning.

On this basis, it is an inevitable conclusion that the anti-paradox position is correct, *in principle*. However, the evaluation that follows shows that Reymond's application *modus operandi* is also problematic and, therefore, some refinement is required.

## 2.2. An exposition of Reymond's method

In order to test the consistency of Reymond's application of the anti-paradox position, it is important to elucidate his method by examining his classification of a miracle as a 'mystery' (Reymond 1998:107). This will require some discussion, since Reymond does not fully justify this categorisation, nor make his reasoning explicit.

A miracle in scripture approaches human reason initially as a paradox. For example, it is simply impossible for the weight of any person (distributed over the surface area of their feet) to be sustained by the surface tension of water. This is another way of stating that it is impossible for a man to walk on water. However, the scriptures assert this miracle. A number of options present themselves as to the interpretation of such biblical statements:

- The statement is a mistake or a lie. The author either is trying to deceive us or was mistaken.
- The statement is not literal, and thus such passages require an allegorical or spiritual interpretation.
- The statement is some form of idiom, and a literal interpretation is erroneous.

The above list is obviously not exhaustive. The three examples merely represent a secular, atheistic, anti-supernatural assumption; an epistemological framework which excludes the possibility of miracles—it is impossible for a human to walk on water. The root of such preferences is the common experience (people do not walk on water) and scientific research (the surface tension of water is too minimal to support the tension created by two feet). Therefore, the declaration that a literal man walked on literal water is, in the first instance, paradoxical, for it contradicts human experience.

However, the evangelical epistemology permits the acceptance of Peter's account of Jesus walking on water as literally true. The basis of this epistemological acceptance is the concept of an omnipotent creator who established the laws of nature and science (and can therefore suspend them), making the possibility of a man walking on water rational, even though the mechanism of how this was done by God is inscrutable. Thus, Reymond (1998:107) has labelled a miracle a 'mystery', not a 'paradox'.

The main point of this brief analysis is that the doctrine of God (his nature, being, and attributes) is central to hermeneutics and understanding paradox. Our understanding of who God is, what he is, and what he is like, turns a seemingly paradoxical and impossible statement into a rationally acceptable and reasonable statement, even though there are still some unexplained aspects to the statement. It is important to note that the truth statement (i.e. that Jesus walked on water) is not modified in order to remove the 'paradox'. The meaning of 'man', 'walking', or 'water' are not spiritualised or modified, for they are accepted as literally true. Simply, the paradox receives acceptance in light of an omnipotent God who has complete control over the laws of nature and is able to do the impossible.



Based on this analysis, then, Reymond's categorisation of a miracle as a 'mystery', rather than a 'paradox', is sound and acceptable. However, the application of this anti-paradox principle to the doctrine of the Trinity requires careful examination.

### **2.3. Reymond and the doctrine of the Trinity**

Reymond (1998:108–109) makes the rather remarkable statement that the doctrine of the Trinity is not paradoxical, and that the historical confessions have so defined the doctrine of the Trinity to avoid any contradiction. His main argument is that the historic confessions (such as the Westminster Confession) have applied the terms 'God' or 'Godhead' to the 'one', and 'person' to the 'three'. By doing this, a direct contradiction is avoided.

Although a full evaluation of this is beyond the scope of this paper, a few comments are in order. Irrespective of how the church and its confessions have grappled with and articulated the doctrine of the Trinity, a neat and precise statement of the Trinity, using terms that eliminate all paradox, is problematic; the biblical data is more complex than that.

For example, Isaiah 45:22c states: 'I am God, and there is no other' (NKJV). Reymond (1998:109) is correct when he contends that the title 'God' refers either to the Godhead in their unitary wholeness, or to one of the persons of the Trinity. Whichever way one interprets the term 'God' however, a paradox of some degree is inevitable. For example, if one of the persons of the Trinity was speaking in this passage, it would introduce a seeming paradox as it would imply that this person is unique and no other divine persons exists. We know this not to be true, as each person of the Trinity is fully divine. However, if it is the 'single Godhead' who was speaking, this is also paradoxical, because the

personal pronoun 'I' is used and not 'we'. In scripture, the pronoun 'I' refers to a single *person*, not a plurality of persons. An attempt to avoid the paradox may be made by theologians by using terms such as a 'singular, personal being' instead of a 'single person' to denote the 'I'. Unfortunately, in the normal usage of language a 'singular, personal being' is a 'single person.' It is for this reason that many 'lay people' and 'good theologians' do employ language that denotes a level of paradox when describing the Trinity, although Reymond (1998:108) criticises this.

One may accept the seemingly paradoxical language of passages such as Isaiah 45:22, however, without squeezing the doctrinal formulation of the Trinity into neat, non-paradoxical language, as Reymond's methodology seems to suggest. The paradox of the Trinity becomes acceptable in our minds in the same manner the paradox of a miracle does. The concept and contemplation of a being who is 'spirit' allows for the *logical possibility* that such a 'non-material' being can have triune properties that defy our human conceptions of what a 'person' is when referring to God. The 'properties' of such a 'spirit' allow for the possibility of a singular, personal God, (or a single person; I don't think we can really distinguish between these concepts), to also consist of three distinct persons. The point is this: inasmuch as one may try to define the doctrine of the Trinity in human language and concepts (in order to remove a paradox), *some degree of paradox seems to reside in scripture*. The seeming paradox is rendered acceptable, however, not by changing the statements of scripture, but by introducing the concept of a being who is 'spirit,' the properties of which are beyond us, and allow for the possibility of a single, personal being to also be three persons. Following this methodology, then, one may render or classify the doctrine of the Trinity a 'mystery' (according to the earlier definition) in the same way that one may render a miracle a 'mystery'.

Two qualifications are in order. Firstly, this article does not advocate a modification of the historic confessional statements. Rather, this article is, partly, an objection to theologians like Reymond, who do not permit the use of 'paradoxical language' to describe the Trinity. After all, some of the language of scripture does have a semblance of paradox.

In addition, Reymond should also acknowledge the limitations of confessional statements, especially in the light of the complexity of the biblical data pertaining to some doctrines. The Confessions are not inspired, and some of their statements may substantively (but still not perfectly) represent scripture.

Secondly, as discussed more fully in a later section, it is more appropriate to introduce a new category of paradox into the debate, as the definition of a 'mystery' does not give adequate recognition to the paradoxical language sometimes found in scripture.

This discussion of paradox, in relation to the Trinity, points to another important conclusion in the paradox debate. The idea of what exactly constitutes a 'paradox' (with regard to the relationship of the 'one' and 'three') when referring to a being, whose exact nature is incomprehensible to us, is not immediately self-evident. After all, God is not an apple, and the three persons of the Trinity are not apples either (see the rather simplistic example of Reymond [1978:108]). The physical properties of apples can be defined and are apparent to us, and it is therefore logically impossible for three apples to equal one apple. The Godhead, however, is a non-material being, and each of the three persons are non-material beings (except for Christ after the incarnation).

Their 'non-material properties' are not apparent to us. This means that as humans we need to be cautious when trying to establish what constitutes a real contradiction when speaking of the persons of the

Trinity. An example from the world of physics can illustrate the point. The fact that light can exhibit both particle and wave properties is still puzzling to scientists, and does seem to pose an apparent contradiction. However, this apparent contradiction is accepted in the scientific world as it has been proven to exist, and also scientists admit that there are unknown factors regarding the properties of light. In other words, even science has a category of 'apparent contradiction.' It is an acceptable category because scientists acknowledge that they don't know all there is to know about the universe. Is it then totally unacceptable for theologians to have a category of 'apparent contradiction' when trying to understand the self-revelation of a being whose non-material properties are inscrutable to us?

This is a possible explanation (in part at least) for some of the theological statements of the pro-paradox group with regard to the Trinity. The language of scripture seems paradoxical, as noted earlier. This 'Trinitarian paradox' cannot be eliminated completely by using neat confessional categories. The pro-paradox theologians therefore attempt to express this seeming paradox in their statements.

It is possible to make a similar point from the declaration that the Father is in the Son, and the Son is in the Father (John 14:10). From a human and material perspective, this is strictly a logical paradox. How can the Son be in the Father if the Father is already in the Son? Stated differently, if the Father is already in the Son, how can the Son 'occupy' the Father? The paradox is rendered acceptable; however, on the basis that God is 'spirit,' and 'spirit' has properties that are beyond our scrutiny and comprehension. It is not necessary to try to remove the paradox by re-defining the meaning of the word 'in'. Rather, the problem is soluble and rendered logically acceptable when an immaterial, divine being is part of the equation. The debate on the Trinitarian relations, of course, is further complicated by the

incarnation, which provides the divine Son with a material body and human nature.

Importantly, then, the application of Reymond's anti-paradox principle has missed some of the richness (and paradoxical language) of the biblical data on the doctrine of the Trinity. There seems to be an eagerness on Reymond's part to reduce complex, seemingly paradoxical language into neat and tight definitions or terms that eliminate any suggestion of paradox. This is largely the problem with his approach.

It is perhaps important to stress again that this paper is not advocating rewriting historic doctrinal formulations on the doctrine of the Trinity into largely ambiguous and completely paradoxical language. Rather, this paper is essentially a plea, firstly to recognise that such doctrinal formulations may have limitations, and secondly, to avoid hastily criticising theologians who include paradoxical language in their exegetical explanations. After all, the scriptures do have a semblance of paradox.

#### **2.4. Reymond and God's desire for the lost**

Reymond (1978:692–693) criticises the view that God desires the salvation of all men, including the non-elect, for such notions seem to impute irrationality to God—what God desires to happen, he would have decreed to happen. This is, again, an application of the anti-paradox principle, for irrationality in God is a contradiction.

Reymond (1978:693), therefore, resolves the alleged paradox by denying that God desires the salvation of all men. This highlights the centrality of the doctrine of God in hermeneutics and resolving apparent contradictions. The theologian's concept of God is a key factor in

resolving paradox. Since the question of whether or not God desires the salvation of all men has a direct impact on the free offer of the gospel, it requires *brief* discussion.<sup>3</sup>

The scriptural teachings regarding the desire of God for all men to be saved are numerous and compelling, and it is not possible to interpret such passages any other way.<sup>4</sup> Christ weeping over Jerusalem (Matt 23:37–39) is a case in point. Christ's desire to gather them under his wings must certainly include spiritual blessings and salvific intent (Henry 1991:1737). The desire of Christ cannot be relegated to his 'human nature'. His human nature exclusively, void of the attributes of omniscience and omnipotence, would not make it possible for him to gather and watch over millions of people post-incarnation. Rather, it was an expression of the divine Son of God, weeping over a people going to physical and spiritual destruction. Therefore, it seems that in the light of a sovereign God, a semblance of paradox is present. The illustration below is helpful.

A lady makes it known that she enjoys eating chocolate. Yet, when someone offers her some chocolate, she declines. Is there an inconsistency between her desire and her action? Is this paradoxical, to the extent that we must deny either that she enjoys chocolate, or believe that she was somehow unable to eat the chocolate? It has a semblance of a paradox, but another solution presents itself. If we had insight into her dispositional complex (a term used by Murray [1984:61] to denote the whole complex of desires, motives and propensities), one may find that she has many desires, one of them being to stay thin and healthy.

---

<sup>3</sup> The main purpose of this paper is to reflect on the issue of paradox in hermeneutics, and not to defend in detail the subject of God's desire for all men to be saved. A fuller discussion would require the inclusion of the more complex subject of the impassibility of God.

<sup>4</sup> See discussion by Waldron (1989:121–122).

She has a number of options available to her when presented with the chocolate. She can eat some of it, and exercise to remain slim and healthy. She could also decline the chocolate, on the basis that her desire to stay thin and healthy is greater than her desire to eat the chocolate. This would not mean that she does not desire the chocolate, but that the desire to eat the chocolate is subordinate to other desires. One may never know why she did not choose to eat the chocolate *and* exercise, especially if we also discover that she enjoys exercise. Her decisions are her own, and they are resolved in her dispositional complex. One could also make the mistake of assuming, that because she did not eat the chocolate (although she did stay thin and healthy), she was left with a sense of frustration for not having had any chocolate. To the contrary, she may have had a sense of accomplishment and joy for not eating the chocolate, and achieved her primary goal.

Granted, the above illustration has its limitations. The main character is not divine, or sovereign. However, the illustration points out that even at a human level, to impute irrationality to a person from seeming inconsistencies between statements, desires, and actions is dangerous, especially without a thorough understanding of inner dispositions. Therefore, that which may appear inconsistent and paradoxical initially may, in fact, be fully comprehended and resolved. So, it is not correct to solve the seeming paradox between God's desire to save all men, and his choice not to decree the fulfilment of that desire, by denying God's desire for the salvation of the lost, or negating his sovereignty altogether. Rather, the solving of such a seeming paradox requires cognisance of the following: God is perfectly holy and sovereign, yet he is an emotionally complex personal being who exercises his will for the ultimate ends of his glory.

At the very least, Reymond should have explored this position more thoroughly before discarding it so easily. Therefore, Reymond's solution to this seeming paradox is unsatisfactory and, once again, demonstrates a quickness to resolve potentially paradoxical concepts in the scriptures by placing them into neat and tight compartments, in order to reduce all semblance of paradox.

From the discussion so far, it is desirable to subdivide further the category of paradox defined earlier in the article.

*A direct and strict self-contradiction.* For example, the statement, 'one apple equals three apples' falls into this category.

*A semblance of contradiction on the level of purely human categories, knowledge and experience.* While some biblical truths seem to have a semblance of contradiction, they are not contradictions *per se*. If the term 'apparent contradiction' is retained for this category, then, it is important to state that the pro-paradox group's description of this category (of contradiction) is problematic. The following section will comment on the pro-paradox group's statements, and clarify the exact nature of this problem.

It is tempting to classify this semblance of contradiction as a 'mystery'. With only a few minor qualifications, this would be conceivable. However, the definition of 'mystery', cited earlier in the article, does not give sufficient recognition to the degree of contradiction based on purely human knowledge, categories, and experience found in the scriptures. It is therefore advantageous to introduce a range of terms that permit graded levels of contradiction.

Frame (1987:131) adopts a similar approach in his discussion of circularity in epistemology, noting that, while Christian arguments are



circular (as all systems of thought are), the circularity is 'broadened' by introducing other biblical and extra-biblical evidences. This broadening of the circular arguments makes it more compelling and acceptable to our mind and sense of logic. It is critical to this discussion to allow for both a strict, logical self-contradiction, and a semblance of contradiction. A semblance of contradiction allows for the *logical* possibility of resolution in view of the infinite nature and being of God, although the exact nature of the resolution has not been revealed to us. This is developed in the next section.

### 3. Comments on the Pro-paradox Position

The preceding analysis shows that there is a category of truth in scripture that has a semblance of contradiction to it. These types of contradictions are not direct self-contradictions, but rather, tend to present themselves as contradictions by implication, logical extension, or by the limitations of our 'humanness'. To resolve such apparent contradictions, it is not necessary to change the meaning of concepts, or deny one truth at the expense of the other. Rather, the seeming contradictions can find their partial (but still adequate) resolution in the doctrine of God. God's nature, being and attributes introduce options that make what seems contradictory on a strictly human sensory level, logically possible on the divine level. A miracle, discussed earlier is a case in point. In this regard, then, while the *intent* of the pro-paradox group is correct (i.e. it does reflect some of the semblance of paradox in the scriptures), their actual statements on this semblance of paradox are problematic. They express their sense of seemingly contradictory biblical data in a way that, in principle, destroys the possibility of knowing truth from error.

It is misleading for the pro-paradox group to assert that these apparent contradictions are insoluble by human logic. Such sentiments do not acknowledge that the apparent contradictions are resolved in their minds (to *some extent* and to *some degree*) within the framework of a divine, infinite being. Moreover, such sentiments erroneously imply that the pro-paradox group sacrifices reason, logic, and the possibility of coherence. As rational beings, the pro-paradox group accepts statements that seem *to have a semblance of contradiction*, but, in fact, they are not essentially contradictory—their concept of a divine being has introduced the *possibility of resolution*. This remains the case even if the nature of the harmonisation is not explicit to them.

The next segment is a refined presentation of the notion of *apparent contradictions*.

Some scriptural truths give the impression of paradox or contradiction. However, such *seeming* paradoxes are not directly self-contradictory, but find some degree of harmony in our minds and hearts, especially in light of the epistemological framework of an omnipotent, divine, sovereign, and perfect being. It is in the triune God that the resolution and explanation of such truths exist, even though the manner of the resolution is not perceivable or obvious. Ultimately, there can be no self-contradictory truth in the scriptures, and therefore, any ideas that contradict the scriptures are erroneous.

With regard to the much-discussed doctrine of divine sovereignty and human freedom or responsibility, three points merit mention.

Firstly, divine sovereignty and human freedom do have a semblance of paradox, if viewed from a purely human knowledge and experience perspective. Importantly, however, these two concepts are not strictly

self-contradictory. They are not on the same level of contradiction as three apples equal one apple, and one apple equals three apples.

Secondly, this seeming paradox is reconciled in our minds, not by denying human freedom (as defined by Reformed theology), nor by denying God's sovereignty. It is resolved in the presence of a divine being with limitless wisdom and power. The 'mechanisms' of how God achieves his will are largely unknown to us. For example, we do not know how it is possible for a being to simply speak, and that spoken word to automatically and immediately come to pass without any apparent 'exertion' from God. This is beyond the limits of our humanness and experience. In the face of such a divine being, it is entirely plausible that he is able to produce creatures that exercise their wills according to their dispositional complexes and, at the same time, accomplish exactly what God has ordained. The pro-paradox group are therefore incorrect to say that these truths are irreconcilable to human logic. The above statement has just 'reconciled' them in the face of the divine being, although the 'mechanics' of how God achieves both remains unknown to us. It is therefore appropriate for the pro-paradox group to express some of this paradox, but faulty to claim it is irreconcilable in our minds.

Thirdly, both human freedom (responsibility) and God's sovereignty is taught in the scriptures. Multiple verses and considerations establish both. Philippians 2:12–13 is the classic text in this regard, bringing human responsibility and divine sovereignty into the closest possible relationship. Acts 4:25–28 describes people sinfully plotting against God and endeavouring to destroy his work. Yet, God fulfils his plans and purposes regardless. This semblance of paradox has therefore not been created by faulty exegesis or systems of theology. Both human freedom and God's sovereignty can be accepted as being true, as they

are not strictly self-contradictory, and they find a degree of resolution in the presence of a divine being.

## Conclusions

This paper argued that the position of the anti-paradox is correct *in principle*. They are correct in arguing that there can be no direct self-contradictions in scripture. They are also correct in arguing that there cannot be apparent contradictions that are irresolvable by human logic either. This would destroy any basis for holding to truth and identifying error.

However, Reymond's application of the anti-paradox principle in the areas of the doctrine of the Trinity, and God's desire to save all men, is problematic. It is problematic in the sense that it endeavours to resolve some of the apparent contradictions of the scriptures in a mechanistic or rigid way, at the expense of the complexity of the biblical data. Reymond does not adequately explore the resolution of these seeming contradictions in the face of the divine being, his attributes, and nature.

This paper also argued that, while the *intent* of the pro-paradox group is correct (i.e. they seek to reflect some of the semblance of contradiction found in the scriptures), their actual statements are problematic and seem to imply they have completely sacrificed logic and coherence. Their statements on these paradoxes overstate the case and seem to destroy the basis for differentiating truth from error.

This paper therefore proposes that the debate on paradox in hermeneutics will be furthered by differentiating between a strict, logical contradiction, and a semblance of contradiction. A semblance of contradiction allows for the logical possibility of resolving two seemingly contradictory positions in view of the infinite nature and

being of God, although the exact nature of the resolution has not been revealed to us.

It is also apparent from the preceding discussion that more research is required on categorising and then developing the resolution of apparent contradictions. For example, some of the categories include:

- Paradoxes which find their resolution in God's power, such as miracles. However, miracles are equally classifiable as a mystery, as they are not a point of contention in this debate (their resolution in a miracle working God is rather obvious).
- Paradoxes which find their resolution in God's nature and being, such as the Trinitarian relations.
- Paradoxes which find their resolution in God's inner emotional and volitional being, such as his decrees, acts, and desires.

The doctrine of God is central to ones hermeneutics in resolving apparent contradictions. As evangelicals, it is imperative that we worshipfully and prayerfully labour in God's Word to know him as comprehensively and accurately as possible.

## Reference List

- Basinger D 1987. Biblical paradox: does revelation challenge logic? *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 30(2):205–213.
- Frame J 1987. *The doctrine of the knowledge of God*. Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed.
- Grounds VC 1978. The postulate of paradox. *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 7(1):3–21.
- Grudem W 1994. *Systematic theology*. Leicester: IVP.
- Henry M 1991. *Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible*. Massachusetts: Hendrickson.

- Murray J 1984. *Collected writings of John Murray. Volume 2: systematic theology*. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust.
- Packer JI 1961. *Evangelism and the sovereignty of God*. Downers Grove: IVP.
- Reymond RL 1998. *A new systematic theology of the Christian faith*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.
- Waldron SE 1989. *A modern exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*. Darlington: Evangelical Press.

# Mindfulness and the Brain: A Christian Critique of Some Aspects of Neuroscience

Callie W T Joubert<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The aim in this paper is to critique some aspects of neuro-scientific studies on mindfulness and mindful practices. Firstly, because of the often mistaken assumption that it is something totally new; its roots in fact lie in religious and philosophical views which are the antithesis of a Christian worldview. Secondly, because of opposing views of what the mind is, and how the mind relates to the brain, Christians have come under pressure to show how their claims about God are different from those of epileptics and atheists. In order to deal with these issues, this study commences with a brief introduction to the concept of mindfulness, its historical roots and the scientific claims in support of mindful practices. A philosophical critique of physicalism and panpsychism is then offered from a biblical perspective, followed by a discussion of some of the dangers lurking in the neighbourhood of mindful practices. The conclusion is that the philosophical and religious assumptions that underlie scientific views of ourselves and spiritual growth matter enormously; they deserve continual scrutiny.

---

<sup>1</sup> The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

## Introduction

It seems that neuroscience has become a 'hot commodity'. On the one hand, some believe that 'bit by experimental bit, neuroscience is morphing our conception of what we are', which excludes any conception of a human person in terms of an immaterial soul (Churchland 2002:1). On the other hand, there are those who believe that 'neuroscience acts like a magnifying glass, enabling us to see detail about the human condition that we might otherwise overlook' (Thompson 2010:205).

Trends in the fields of mental and physiological health also reveal an increasing interest in neuroscience and the study of spirituality and religion. In such studies, the brain and mindfulness take center stage. A principal claim is that mindful practices have 'life-changing effects' and lead to definite 'psychospiritual transformation' (Beauregard and O'Leary 2007:290; cf. Knight 2008; Lui 2005; Saure et al. 2011; Siegel 2006, 2007a, 2007b; Thompson 2010; Whitesman 2008). The scientific credibility of mindfulness, and the mindful practices associated with it, has consequently grown in popularity as a way to promote better brain function.

Its scientific coverage and increasing popularity among Christians warrant exposé, for at least three reasons. Firstly, it is often incorrectly assumed that mindfulness, and the associated mindful practices are something totally new; its roots in fact lie in ancient religious and philosophical views which are the antithesis to a Christian theistic view of the world. The second motive relates to the following question: what is the mind, and how does it relate to the brain? Thirdly, in light of the two diametrically opposed answers to the above question, Christians have come under pressure to show how their claims about God are



different to those of epileptics, atheists, and people holding different beliefs.

In order to deal with such issues, the study will commence with the presentation of introductory issues (i.e. the concept of mindfulness, its historical roots, and the scientific claims in support of mindful practices). Of importance will be to understand how neuroscientists obtain and interpret data. Attention will then turn to a philosophical critique of materialism and panpsychism from a biblical perspective. Of importance also will be to see why a human person—an immaterial soul—is not a brain, and why it is a mistake to assume that matter can be 'enminded'.<sup>2</sup> The aim in the third section of this paper is to highlight some of the dangers in the neighborhood of mindful practices.

## 1. Mindfulness, its Historical Roots, Main Doctrines, and Scientific Claims

Whitesman (2008:12) defined 'mindfulness' as a 'moment-to-moment, non-judgemental awareness', [the] focusing of one's complete attention on what one now experiences, without evaluating, judging, or critically engaging the experience. Sauer et al. (2011:5) explains that 'mindfulness is an old concept; its theoretical roots were formulated by the Buddha...' Buddhism not only developed out of Hinduism (Taliaferro 2009), but shares with both Hinduism and Taoism the common belief in *monism*. Proponents of monism hold that there exists only one reality—the absolute reality. All other realities are aspects or manifestations of this one reality (Momen 1999:191–199). Absolute reality is viewed as an impersonal reality, void of personal features—a typical component of the Christian worldview. Such an understanding

---

<sup>2</sup> All types of panpsychists believe that mind somehow inheres in matter, including atoms and subatomic particles, hence the term *enminded* (see Skrbina 2005).

of epistemology entails that all human knowledge is necessarily relative, which means that knowledge about anything is only true from a particular perspective or point of view. One of the aims of Mahayana Buddhism is to 'remove all notions and conceptualizations of the truth' (ibid, 197).

The Buddha, who lived sometime between 566–486 BC, explained the human condition in terms of 'Four Noble Truths.' The fourth truth specifies an eightfold path to freedom from suffering. The seventh path is the path of 'right mindfulness'—the focus of attention and awareness on whatever one may be doing at a certain moment. Krüger et al. (1996:111) stated that 'in Buddhism the ability to develop *full awareness* is a most important step in spiritual growth.' Central to the project of achieving 'full awareness' are mindful practices such as meditation, yoga,<sup>3</sup> tai chi chuan,<sup>4</sup> qigong/qui quong,<sup>5</sup> visualization, and breath control (Siegel 2006, 2007a, 2007b). The 'Christianised' version of mindful practices are not limited to these practices; they include metallizing (i.e. imagining or visualising), centering (i.e. focusing one's attention on some object—real or imagined), confession, study, reading and writing, and fasting (Thompson 2010).

---

<sup>3</sup> Hunt and McMahon (1988:46) noted the following: 'The average Yoga student in the West is not aware that Yoga was introduced by Lord Krishna in the Bhagavad-Gita as the sure way to the Hindu heaven, or that Shiva, "The Destroyer" (and one of the three most powerful and feared of Hindu deities) is addressed as Yogeshwara, or Lord of Yoga... Nor does the average Yoga instructor mention or likely even know the many warnings contained in ancient Yoga texts that even 'Hatha Yoga [the so-called *physical* Yoga] is a dangerous tool'.'

<sup>4</sup> The Chinese martial art practiced for both its defense training and its health benefits.

<sup>5</sup> The Chinese philosophy and practice of aligning breathing, physical activity, awareness with mental, spiritual, and physical health, as well as the development of human potential. It includes aspects of Chinese martial arts and is purportedly the spiritual awakening to one's true nature.

A large body of scientific research suggests that mindfulness has a positive impact on a variety of mental health symptoms, such as stress, anxiety, some personality disorders, chronic pain, substance abuse, and endocrinological and physiological function (Sauer et al. 2011).<sup>6</sup> The research shows that changing an individual's perception and mindset about reality (even such things as oneself, other people, physical health and mental disorders) improves brain function and one's health. For example, anxiety is not necessarily seen as a problem; it is only a problem if one *thinks* it is a problem. In other words, if anxiety is viewed from a different perspective, one is changing reality (the problem). But what does the brain have to do with mindfulness? How and why did the convergence between brain biology and mindfulness occur?

One issue that has captured the attention of many scientists over the years is whether brain states are associated with consciousness, contemplation, and mystical experiences (e.g. Beauregard and O'Leary 2007; Knight 2008; Siegel 2007b). This is no surprise, considering that Buddhist monks have pursued meditation for about two and a half millennia. The advent of neuroimaging or brain scanning technologies made the study of neuronal states, associated with mystical consciousness, a reality. However, it will be worthwhile to highlight how neuroscientists make inferences about the relationship between the brain and the positive effects of meditation. Three points require mention.

Firstly, neuroscientists cannot study the brain directly (i.e. open a person's skull during meditation in order to observe what is happening in the brain). Rather, such data is obtained by monitoring brain activity, and studying and comparing photo-images of the brain. Secondly,

---

<sup>6</sup> See Siegel (2007b) for a summary of these research studies.

neuroscientists cannot determine what a person is actually thinking or feeling during meditation. That information is obtained via self-reports from meditators. This, in itself, indicates the highly subjective nature of data. However, both of the abovementioned methods of data collection are subject to interpretation. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, if consciousness and mental states (e.g. sensations, thinking, believing, desiring, judging, or choosing) are immaterial in nature, then neuroscientists cannot see or image it. However, just because the mind cannot be seen does not mean that the mind does not exist, or that the brain and its processes are all there is.

So, how do neuroscientists interpret their data? A number of methods exist, but two interpretations will aid to appreciate its problematic nature. Firstly, from alterations in brain activity (e.g. increased neuronal firings) and various blood flow pathways (often mistakenly interpreted as information flow in the brain), *stems* the interpretation that the mind is either in the brain (i.e. the physical process, since the mind cannot be observed), has emerged from the brain, or, is produced (caused) by the brain (Siegel 2007a, 2007b). This is clearly evident in how the mind is defined. In the words of Daniel Siegel (2006:2): 'The mind can be *defined* as an embodied process that regulates the flow of energy and information' (emphasis in the original). Elsewhere, Siegel (2007:14) said that, 'To visualize this perspective we can say that the "mind rides along the neural firing patterns in the brain" and realize that this firing is a correlation with bidirectional causal influences.'

Secondly, from brain activity and heightened awareness that correlate positive thoughts and feelings, follows the interpretation that meditation has a positive effect on health.<sup>7</sup> The problematic nature of scientific

---

<sup>7</sup> It is a fact that meditation produces brain states not associated with ordinary awareness (Beauregard and O'Leary 2007). For a critical view of the conceptions of

interpretations should therefore be evident. Immaterial things cannot be visualized. What is observed by the neuroscientist is the mind's *action* on the brain, and not the mind itself. Moreover, if a neuroscientist finds regular correlations between a person's mental life, brain activity, and a positive effect on health, then that bears a relevant similarity to the Spirit of God and Creation in Genesis 1:2, which means that those correlations must be unnatural for the scientist, not natural.

## 2. The Relationship between the Mind and Brain

An introductory remark is in order. Scientific research concluding that a change of a person's perception and mindset (about reality, oneself, and other people) has a corresponding effect on physiological health, is no surprise to a Christian. The Bible is unequivocally clear about the relationship between a person's spiritual state (the heart), thinking, and physical health. A few examples will illustrate this truth: 'Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress; my eye is wasted away from grief, my soul and my body also' (Ps 31:9); 'When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away...' (Ps 32:3); 'Anxiety in the heart of man weighs it down...' (Prov 12:25); 'A tranquil heart is life to the body, but passion is rotteness to the bones' (Prov 14:30); 'A joyful heart is good medicine, but a broken spirit dries up the bones' (Prov 17:22); 'For as he thinks within himself, so he is. He says to you, "eat and drink!" but his heart is not with you' (Prov 23:7). The amazing thing about these texts is that the writers achieved this knowledge without understanding the brain. This, together with the scientific fact that no

---

neuroscientists and their interpretations of brain data, see Rees and Rose (2004), Bennett and Hacker (2003), and Bennett et al. (2007). For a critical analysis of the role of beliefs that underlie interpretations and the confusions related to correlations and the use of metaphors to describe brain data, see Regine Kolk (in Rees and Rose 2004:71–87).

person has access to his/her own brain, makes one wonder whether any knowledge of the brain is necessary for Christians to grow in godliness, or to improve their relationship with other people or God (contrary to what proponents of mindfulness and mindful practices would like us to believe [cf. Thomson 2010]).

In this segment of the article, in light of the question *what are human beings*, I hope to evaluate the materialistic interpretation of the mind and brain according to Matthew 10:28 and 1 Corinthians 2:11. Focus will then shift to panpsychism, the rival view to both materialism (atheism) and Christian theism. The final segment will highlight reasons as to why panpsychist assumptions about consciousness and living matter are erroneous.

## 2.1. Materialism/physicalism

Who or what is a human person? Is a person an immaterial soul and mental substance, or merely a material brain/body? Neuroscientist Michael Gazzaniga recently estimated that '98 to 99 percent' of 'cognitive neuroscientists share a common commitment to reductive materialism in seeking to explain mental phenomena' (cited by Snead 2007:15; see also Beauregard and O'Leary 2007:x). The term often associated with materialism is physicalism.<sup>8</sup> Physicalists hold that all existent entities consist solely of matter.<sup>9</sup> Philosopher of neuroscience, Patricia Churchland (2003:1), expressed the physicalist stance this way: 'The weight of [neuroscientific] evidence now implies that it is the

---

<sup>8</sup> Philosophers George Botterill and Peter Carruthers (1999:4) acknowledged that physicalism of one sort or another is now the unquestioned approach in the philosophy of mind.

<sup>9</sup> A physicalist naturalist would view all existent entities as products of evolution—laws and processes of nature, and chance.

*brain*, rather than some nonphysical stuff, that feels, thinks, and decides. That means there is no soul ... to spend its postmortem eternity blissful in Heaven or miserable in Hell.<sup>10</sup> The physicalist stance thus implies an atheistic worldview.

If there is no soul, and if the brain is the thing that feels, thinks, decides, perceives, and creates reality (Siegel 2006:8), what happened to the mind? What is the mind? For psychiatrists Daniel Siegel (2006) and Curt Thompson (2010), the mind is an embodied process. The illustration of water boiling is helpful. The water is the brain, and the boiling process the mind. So the boiling is just another aspect of what is happening in or with the water, but in no way different from it in kind. In other words, the difference between the mind and brain is merely conceptual or imaginary.

To make their case, physicalists need metaphysical identity: whatever can be said of the mind can be said of the brain, and *vice versa*. To put it differently, if something can be said about the soul/mind that is not true of the brain/body, then what physicalists assert about human beings and the brain, is false. In essence, then, persons are not brains at all. Brief examination of two biblical passages will outline the Christian view on the matter,<sup>11</sup> and only items considered relevant to the argument will be touched on.

---

<sup>10</sup> Christian philosopher and theologian Nancey Murphy's (2006:ix) conviction is that we are our bodies. For her neuroscience has completed the Darwinian revolution, bringing the mind into the purview of biology. Thus, human capacities once attributed to the immaterial mind or soul are now yielding to the insights of neurobiology. She asks us 'to accept the fact that God has to do with brains—crude though this may sound' (Murphy: 88, 96).

<sup>11</sup> The exposition of the texts is that of the author of this paper, whose specialty is the philosophy of mind. The aim is therefore not to interact with other exegetes of the texts, but to combine a metaphysical understanding of immaterial entities with a plain

## 2.2. Matthew 10:28

It is important to look first at the context in which Jesus uttered the following words: 'And do not fear those who kill the body, but are unable to kill the soul; but fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.' Verse 1 informs us that Jesus 'summoned his twelve disciples' and 'gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out.' One of the warnings to his disciples was the certainty of persecution and suffering (vv. 17–18). However, Jesus did not encourage his disciples not to fear anything (v. 26), but rather, to fear within the correct perspective (v. 28).

The context indicates that there are three types of persons capable of interacting with matter (bodies)—three immaterial, one of which has matter as part of its constitution (the human person). The first kind of immaterial entity is a tormented *disembodied* unclean spirit (demon). Scripture often represents such entities as desiring a body to inhabit (human or animal); since a body is the vehicle through which they manifest themselves (cf. Mark 5:1–15). The second kind of immaterial entity is the *unembodied* Holy Spirit, who does not need a body, but is nevertheless capable of entering one (cf. Gen 2:7; Acts 2:1–4, 38). How that is so is of lesser importance than the fact that it is so. The important point to see is that the metaphysical identity of an immaterial spiritual entity neither depends on, nor is determined by, the material bodies they enter. If this is true of the disembodied devils and the unembodied Holy Spirit, then it is also true of human persons.

---

reading of the text and, by so doing, to refute claims that an immaterial person is a material body or brain. For insight on the constitutional nature of the soul, see Moreland (1998), and for insight into the 'problem of identity', see Moreland and Craig (2003:192-201), and Loux (2006:97–102).



Seemingly, therefore, physicalists face at least three difficulties, namely, (a) the spirit entities cannot be reduced to, or be equated with, matter, (b) such phenomena cannot be explained scientifically (empirically), and (c) none of the spirit entities 'emerged'<sup>12</sup> from or are caused by matter. The fact is, these spirit entities favour a *substantial self*, different from the body they inhabit. In the light of this, we may infer the following from the teachings of Jesus:

1. There are things that God is able to do to the soul that is beyond the reach of men. Had the soul and body been identical, men who killed the body would likewise be able to kill the soul.
2. The soul and body are further contrasted to express the truth of point 1.
3. It seems that Jesus had a specific purpose for making the distinction between soul and body, namely, it is a matter of life and death.
4. The soul survives the death of the body (cf. Eccl 12:7; Jas 2:26)—there is a destiny awaiting every person after death.
5. The fear of God ought to exceed the fear of the prospect of what men can do to the body.

### 2.3. Corinthians 2:11

In 1 Corinthians 2:11, the apostle Paul writes, 'For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of man, which is in him.'

---

<sup>12</sup>*Emergentism* is a physicalist explanatory theory of consciousness, mental states and personal agency. Emergentism comprises two theses: (1) there is no such thing as a pure spiritual mental being because there is nothing that can have a mental property without having a physical property, and (2) whatever mental properties an entity may have, they emerged from, depend on and are determined by matter (see Clayton 2004). Both theses are assumed to be consistent with the evolutionary story of how life originated from non-living physical materials.

Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God.' The analogy of relationship seems clear: the human spirit is to the human body what God's Holy Spirit is to God. A few observations are in order.

Firstly, the word 'thought' in the text is known, in psychology and metaphysics, as a mental state or entity (as also a belief, sensation, desire, and volition); when a person is thinking or knows something, his spirit is in a state of thinking and knowing something. Secondly, a mental state has intentionality, since it is *of* or *about* something beyond itself, and therefore, it has content and meaning. Put another way, the spirit's mental state allows it to know itself and interact with objects in the world. Thirdly, a mental state (e.g. a thought about a spider) is characterised by certain attitudes (e.g. fear in the case of the spider). Fourthly, a mental state, such as a thought, is characterised by self-presenting properties—features of things which a person has direct awareness in him or herself (e.g. the properties of an apple, such as its redness, surface, shape, or taste). Fifthly, and most remarkably, mental states are conscious states of the spirit (or soul). If a person lacks consciousness, then that person will not know what he/she believes, thinks about, desires, touches, feels, or wills.

We can now state the relationship between the spirit and the knowing of its own thoughts as follows:

1. If the human spirit (or God's) has thoughts, then the spirit is necessarily such that whenever a thought is exemplified, it exemplifies the spirit.
2. If the human spirit (or God's) entails thoughts, then the spirit is necessarily such that when a thought is attributed to it, then a capacity (to think) is attributed to it. In other words, when a

thought is attributed to the spirit, then it is reasonable to believe that a thought belongs to it.

This characterisation makes it reasonable to say that if conscious, thinking, self-awareness, and intentionality (knowing what one's thinking is of or about) are essential properties of both the immaterial Spirit of God and the spirit of man, then, they are self-presenting properties. That is, these properties are distinctive properties of a conscious, knowing, and intentional entity, a subject or self, and are therefore describable from a first-person perspective. This means that one can adopt certain attitudes toward objects (e.g. to believe they exist, fear or hate them, even resist them).

If the function of a self-presenting property is to present the objects of mental states to a thinking subject (a self), then one can know directly and immediately what one is thinking, desiring, or feeling at that particular moment. It seems that this is what Paul was trying to communicate in verse 10—he knew the thoughts of God, for he revealed them to him, a spiritual mental person. There is no reason to assume that Paul had to listen to his brain first. It seems that God would have no need to communicate first to one's brain (unconscious matter) before communicating with him/her as an immaterial person. In short, 1 Corinthians 2:11 underlines three truths, namely, (a) private awareness of one's own mental life, (b) direct and immediate awareness of one's mental life, and (c) the existence of an immaterial spirit and mental capacities.

If a person (Joe) is nothing other than a material brain, then none of the abovementioned points would be true. Firstly, Joe would have no access to his brain whatsoever, but he would know that he is feeling pain when pricked with a pin. A neuroscientist may know all there is to know about brains, but still not be in a position of truly knowing what Joe is

thinking, by simply observing and interpreting charts and images of Joe's brain activity. For example, if Joe is thinking about a red rose, the brain scan cannot point out the color red, or the rose, no matter how gifted the interpreter. And yet, there exists a sensation of red in his immaterial soul/mind. The above example indicates that Joe and his mental states are not the same as his body or brain matter, for none of the cited aspects have any material properties (i.e. weight, width, length, density, or elasticity).

So far, the discussion has identified two obstacles to the study of the brain and attempts to image the relationship between the mind (and consciousness) and the brain. First, for physicalists, the question of how consciousness 'emerges' from matter is simply a question about how the brain works to produce mental states, even though neurons (brain cells) are not conscious<sup>13</sup>—even though neurons (brain cells) are unconscious.

The second obstacle is this: consciousness of invisible, immaterial entities is not 'imageable' (i.e. cannot be pictured in the mind) and, therefore, cannot be explained through visual metaphors. If a neuroscientist can find regular correlations between a person's mental life and brain activity, then that bears a relevant similarity to the Spirit

---

<sup>13</sup> Naturalist philosopher David Chalmers (in Velmans and Schneider 2007) stated it as follows: 'almost everyone allows that experience arises one way or another from brain processes, and it makes sense to identify the sort of process from which it arises' (231). The naturalist logic of 'arise' or 'emerged' from means, of course, *caused* by the brain. This logic accordingly leads to the bizarre idea that experiences produce an 'experiencer'. There are two problems which Professor Chalmers identified for his fellow naturalists. The first is that they 'have no good explanation of how and why' that could happen (226), and the second is that 'cognitive science and neuroscience fail to account for conscious experience ... [N]othing that they give to us can yield an explanation' (232).

of God and creation in Genesis 1:2. This means that those correlations must be unnatural for the physicalist, not natural. But since we cannot image or picture the mind and consciousness, we are not able to image the causal interaction between the mind and brain.

It will be useful to conclude this discussion with a few remarks. When physicalists postulate the existence of spirit entities, such as the soul, spirit, or the mind, they are falsifying physicalism. Spirit is simply not a natural entity that fits in a physicalist ontological view of the world. This is why Christian physicalists, like Professor Nancey Murphy (2006) *must* reject the existence of the spirit, soul, and mind (see fn. 9). From this follows another problem: once a person rejects the existence of spiritual entities, then that person cannot appeal to them to explain anything. Therefore, for a physicalist to accept the mental realm amounts to either (a) an acceptance of the ontological difference between matter and mental spiritual entities (substance dualism), or (b) accepting the refutation of physicalism. If one is willing to admit that consciousness and mental states are unique compared to all other entities in the world, then that radical uniqueness makes consciousness and mental states unnatural for a physicalist. Therefore, just because one cannot see consciousness on a brain scanning machine, it does not imply or entail that it does not exist.

One final remark; if a human being (an immaterial person) emerged from an ape, as physicalists with a naturalist bent hold, then there is absolutely no reason not to think angels (immaterial spirits) could also have emerged from an ape. The point is simple: what we are confronted with in the 'emergent' story of human origins is something so implausible that it cannot be true. To think that life just spontaneously began from lifeless, mindless chemical processes seems rather irrational. This is why reductionist physicalists, in contrast to emergent

physicalists, such as philosopher of mind and neuroscience Paul Churchland (1984:21) reasoned that,

The important point about the standard evolutionary story is that the human species and all of its features are the wholly physical outcome of a purely physical process ... if this is the correct account of our origins, then there seems neither need, nor room, to fit any nonphysical substances or properties into our theoretical account of ourselves. We are creatures of matter. And we should learn to live with that fact.

It stands to reason, what comes from the physical by means of the physical can only be physical. However, the problem for physicalists is to explain how human beings could be conscious if they are nothing more than physical or material beings. To this problem, proponents of panpsychism offer a solution, identified in the following segment.

## 2.4. Panpsychism

Whereas physicalism reduces everything that exists to matter, panpsychism reduces everything to mind. In the latter case, the material world is either seen as an illusion (such as in Buddhism and Taoism) or seen as just an aspect<sup>14</sup> or manifestation of mind; as in versions of process theology, Panentheism, or Mormonism. Physicalism and panpsychism are thus both monistic, in contrast to a substance dualist view of the world. On the substance dualist view, matter is not just an aspect of the soul or mind, but a radically different ontological reality, as demonstrated earlier in the essay.

---

<sup>14</sup> Beauregard and O'Leary's (2007:292) view is that *psyche* (the mind) cannot be reduced to *physis* (matter). Mind and brain are rather complementary aspects of the same underlying principle.

What exactly is panpsychism? Quite a handful of definitions have been advanced by proponents of this worldview: all objects in the world possess an inner or psychological nature; physical reality is conscious or sentient; mind is a fundamental property of everything that exists (Moreland 2008). Although definitions overlap, they all share this in common: everything is conscious; therefore, everything has a mind. From this, it follows that all material objects have experiences for themselves. It is therefore not strange to hear from neuroscientists and psychiatrists that the brain can feel, think, communicate, create reality, monitor, and appraise things. Intuitively, one might think that if the brain can do all these things, then the brain can be spiritual (as the title of Beauregard and O'Leary's [2007] book, *The Spiritual Brain*, clearly illustrates). So, what are the objections against a panpsychist view of 'enminded' matter?

If all matter consists of and exemplifies mind; if panpsychism entails a 'participatory worldview' (Skrbina 2005) in terms of which each existing thing participates in everything else; if the individual mind is a particular manifestation of a universal mind (World-Soul/Mind); and if panpsychism is a correct view of reality, then it makes sense to think that ignoring our brain is the equivalent of ignoring God, or that the more we are listening to 'what our brains are telling us, the more we are ultimately paying attention to God' (Thompson 2010:57, 59). Why should we believe this? If God is in all things, and everywhere present in the world, then all things participate in God and share in his mind and Spirit, and panpsychism/pantheism is the true view of the world. At least two reasons demonstrate that panpsychism (so construed) rests on a misunderstanding of reality, both of which relate to the analogy panpsychists draw between God's relation to the world and the relation of the mind to the brain/body.

First, how is God's presence 'in' the world to be understood? We can construe God's presence in the world as a matter of causality and knowledge. This means that God 'has immediate awareness of and causal access to, all spatial locations. Thus, God is not literally spatially in each such location' (Moreland 2008:122). The alternative is to say that God is omnipresent in the world in the sense 'that he is "fully present" everywhere in space' (ibid). In other words, God is entirely present in all places at once, but not located at only one particular point.

If what was argued in the previous section is correct, then neuroscientists cannot localise God or a soul/mind in a material brain. However, if a person (soul/mind) is to be identified with any part of a human body (e.g. the brain), a loss of any part of the brain is a loss of parts of the soul/mind. This, however, is simply not true. A person who lost both eyes in an accident has not lost two parts of his/her soul/mind, for the mind has no parts *per se*. The same applies to God and his relation to creation. If God is present in a tree, for example, then three things follow: (a) the tree is divine; (b) if the tree dies, then some part of God must also die, and (c) God changes all the time, since a tree grows and changes throughout its existence. By implication, if the world changes, then so must God.

Space does not permit a development of the argument, but it is suffice to say that God—a transcendent being—must be changeless, immaterial, and timeless. Why? 'Timelessness entails changelessness, and changelessness implies immateriality' (Copan and Craig 2004:253). In other words, 'Something is temporal if two questions can be asked of it: when was it? How long was it? The former is a question of temporal location, the latter of temporal duration. A timeless entity involves neither.' (Habermas and Moreland 1998:226). Therefore, if God is present everywhere in the world, as the soul/mind is in a body, but not located or identified with any material part, then claims like *ignoring*



*your brain is the equivalent of ignoring God, or the more we are listening to what our brains are telling us, the more we are ultimately paying attention to God*, are false. It is a conceptually incoherent notion that amounts to a serious confusion of metaphysical realities.

The second reason why panpsychism is incoherent is due to the faulty analogy on which it is built. If human beings and God are persons, then it makes sense to say that only persons, rather than brains, communicate with each other. It follows that if one is to attribute abilities to a material brain which belong only to an immaterial soul/mind (person), then one confuses categories of reality. For example, every state of the soul/mind is *of* or *about* something; a physical thing has no sense *of* or *about* anything, for it lacks consciousness. Nagasawa (2006:1) came to the same conclusion from his analysis of panexperientialism (a variant of panpsychism): 'panexperientialism is either extremely implausible or irrelevant to the mystery of consciousness.'

If the mind is as an embodied brain, as panpsychist physicalists hold, then the mind is nothing but a 'bundle' of experiences *in* or *of* the brain. The question that arises is this: who or what coordinates or organizes the various sensations, thoughts, and experiences into a unity or coherent whole? According to Thompson (2010), it is the brain that is both monitoring its own activity, *and* self-organising itself. Moreover, people not only create 'grooves in the neural networks' of their brains, but 'will remain' in them if their left and right brains are not integrated (ibid, 81). It seems, then, that the difference between the mind and matter (the brain) is only *imaginary*. This is another difficulty facing the panpsychist worldview.

If immaterial entities (e.g. God and a soul/mind) cannot be located in matter, captured at a specific point in space, or observed with the eyes, then, talking about persons (souls/minds/selves) in the 'grooves' of their

brains make little sense. If personhood (mental, spiritual, and moral capacities and states) is to be located inside the skull, then the metaphysics of panpsychism amounts to a view of the person as locatable in the brain, or at least, a view of the mind as the physical processes or activities of or in the brain. Thus, to make sense of this inconsistency is to see that mental *terms* are retained in talk but mean nothing other than physical processes of or in the brain, an entity that exists in time, that is locatable in skulls, and which neuroscientists can handle with their hands. But, as we have seen in the previous section, there are things that are true of persons (souls/minds/selves—immaterial things) that are not true of brains (physical things). Therefore, the panpsychism's view of the mind is simply not true.

No Christian would deny the important role of the brain in human make-up, as with other organs of the human body, but increasing emphasis on brainpower and techniques to improve brain function based on neuroscientific 'insights', has led to a few disconcerting facts that deserve mention.

Firstly, a reading of the works of New Age 'enlightened ones' and 'postmodern Christians' reveals that they reject dualism (the view that reality consists of both matter and spirit and as radically different ontological entities), truth and falsehood, and right and wrong. They prefer 'holism' (oneness, integration, synthesis), a relational ontology (view of reality), and an epistemology based on subjective experiences and feelings. Secondly, they are deeply disturbed by discussions of the soul (what a human person is), essences or natures (what makes humans what they are), and substances (what has unified parts and properties, qualities and attributes).<sup>15</sup> Therefore, both issues have major implications for our understanding of the Bible and 'the faith which was

---

<sup>15</sup>Cf. Brown and Jeeves 1998; Green 1998, 2009; Murphy 2006.

once for all delivered to the saints' (Jude 3). With this in mind, we can now focus on the neuroscientific interpretation of brain data and mystical experiences, and consider some of the dangers associated with mindful practices.

### 3. Neuroscience, Mystical Experiences, and Dangers Associated with Mindful Practices

Taking brain data (i.e. blood flow, neuronal firings, and correlations between brain areas and positive feelings and thoughts) as criteria by which to formulise claims relating to people's spirituality and general well-being, gives us reason to pause. Reservations derive from neuroscientific experiments, such as those of physicalist Michael Persinger (1987), in light of claims that people are experiencing God during meditation. Activating the temporal-lobe neurons (those areas of the brain associated with feelings and epilepsy) of persons not suffering from epilepsy, lead to some very interesting results. Persons reported highly unusual feelings; about 80 per cent of the people reported *feeling as though there was a presence nearby*, even if out of view. Atheists said they felt a 'oneness with the universe'. One person had a visual experience involving an angelic appearance, accompanied by sublime feelings.

Persinger's data suggests that all of these experiences are the result of neural activity; altering neural activity in the temporal-lobe has nothing to do with being in 'contact' with a supreme being. What are Christians to make of this? There are at least three things we can say. Firstly, Persinger's interpretation of the data places a burden of proof on the Christian to show why a natural explanation (e.g. a neuronal cause) for both epileptics and normal people is not sufficient to conclude that Christians' spiritual experiences are not caused by God. In other words,

Christians have to show why their case is different and why one type of explanation cannot serve all relevantly similar examples. One response is this: just because feelings associated with certain brain areas correlate with the same brain areas as those of epileptics and religious people, it does not entail that epilepsy and religious experiences are the same things. It is an acknowledged fact that not all epileptics are religious, and not all religious people are epileptic (Beauregard 2007).

Secondly, Persinger's data may lead to the conclusion that all experiences—those of epileptics, atheists and religious people—confirm contact with God. Why would this not follow? This possibility is excluded by the atheists who, despite their feeling of 'oneness with the universe', do not believe in the existence of God. The least we can say is that reports of sublime feelings, heightened awareness, and positive thoughts are weak criteria by which to assess spiritual experiences and/or interpreting them as 'contact' with God.

Thirdly, there is an epistemological problem. When people experience various feelings, they usually interpret the feelings, and not everyone interprets the feelings as those caused by God; some do, and others experience 'oneness with the universe'. One would want to know, for example, whether a Pantheist's, Buddhist's, and a Christian's interpretation of his or her spiritual experiences are all on the same level. Moreover, how should one interpret the experiences of atheists, who consider themselves spiritual (cf. Comte-Sponville 2008:137), without God? How would one know that Pantheists and theists were contacted by the same God during a mindful practice? If it is all a matter of interpretation, then there is reason to think that spiritual experiences and feelings are weak criteria by which to make judgments about their causes, let alone judging the truth of the interpretations.

The epistemological problem becomes exacerbated by the recommendations from professional therapists as far as they pertain to mindful practices. Consider the following suggestions by Christian psychiatrist Curt Thompson (2010:143):

1. Allow yourself to sense God's presence. There is no right or wrong way for him to appear or to be revealed. You may even perceive his physicality to the point of being in bodily form.
2. [I]magine, hearing God clearly say to you directly ...: 'You are my daughter, and I do so love you, I am so pleased with you'.
3. Sense, if you can, God looking you directly in the eyes.

Item (1) raises the following question: if Christians are to expect God to appear to them, as Dr Thompson suggests, with no right or wrong way of appearance, even in bodily form, then how would they know that it was indeed God that appeared, especially in light of the apostle Paul's warning that 'even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light (2 Cor 11:14)? With regard to item (2), how would we distinguish between God's voice, our own deceptive hearts (Jer 17:9), and that of a demonic entity? It is concerning that Thompson leaves meditators and visualizers with no guidelines to detect the difference. If a Christian is to 'sense' during meditation that God is looking them directly in the eyes (item (3)), how is the Christian to know that it is God himself, and not some entity masquerading as God? Again, Thompson is silent on this. He merely states that 'all this' will initially *only* take place during meditation.

But why mention meditation specifically? Is it a mere coincidence that a nonjudgmental attitude is a precondition for mindfulness and mindful practice to yield its fruits? People like Thompson hold that logical, and right and wrong thinking associated with analyses and critical reasoning, are highly problematic, especially for people living in the

West. Such thinking, he explains, 'separates us from the objects we wish to examine and analyze ... [e.g.] other people and God' (Thompson 2010:37). Why should we not believe this?

The following example demonstrates the contrary. If one wishes to interact successfully with a dog, awareness and understanding of the dog's character and nature is imperative, for such information ensures interaction that is appropriate to the dog's nature. In a similar vein, RC Sproul et al. (1984:x) wrote: 'It is because we believe that the capacity of the heart to increase its passion for God is inseparably bound up with the increase of the understanding of the character of God, that we care so much for the intellectual dimension of faith. The more we know of God, the greater is our capacity to love him.' Therefore, it seems that there is something inconsistent about Thompson's logic. It is inconsistent for Thompson to hold that knowledge of neuroscientific insights into the brain (gained through the intellect) will bring him—and us—closer to each other and God, yet, in the same breath, to suggest that intellectual examination of the nature of God and people, in light of Scripture, will cause a separation between Christians—and between them and God.

## Conclusion

What are Christian physicalists telling us about the immaterial person when they are using biology, the brain, and central nervous system as a basis for spiritual teaching? Firstly, they hold that the person is not a substance; that the 'I', an immaterial self, is located somewhere in the brain, or is nothing else but a sense of inwardness (a 'bundle of experiences or feelings' [Taylor 2004:119]). In other words, the human agent is a brain in a body.

Secondly, they accept that the brain is the key to unlocking mental and spiritual well-being, because it is 'scientific'. This may have two unintended consequences: (a) it is likely to divert people's attention from the reality of the *soul* as the seat of thoughts, beliefs, volition, motives, desires, emotion, choices, and action. In other words, away from the *real person*; and (b) it is likely to lead people to think that the brain can explain why they are the way they are, and how they can change their brains!

It is evident from the discussions in this paper that there is a burden of proof on those who claim that people are identical to their brains (or bodies). Advocates of physicalist monism must do at least three things, namely, (a) explain New Testament revelation that counts against this view, (b) explain personal identity during a disembodied intermediate state between death and the final resurrection, and (c) explain how the now physical body can and will become a spiritual body, if the person is identical with a physical body/brain now.

The question that now presents itself is this: what is a more appropriate, as opposed to the only, approach to spiritual transformation? The first point pertains to the inseparable connection between beliefs, character, and action. At the outset, one must acknowledge that beliefs are *not* blind; in fact, the same is true of love (cf. Phil 1:9). Beliefs involve thinking, and the thinking depends on the *what* (the content) of our beliefs. A belief's impact on one's action will also depend on the intensity with which the belief is held (the degree to which we are convinced of the *truthfulness* of the belief, based on evidence or support), and the importance it plays relative to our entire set of beliefs (our worldview). If beliefs influence our thinking, action, and character formation, how can a person change his or her beliefs about something? Obviously, various options are available: a person can embark on a course of study, think about certain things (e.g. the scriptures), gather

evidence and ponder arguments in favour for or against a particular point of view, and try various ways to find a solution to a problem. The point we have to see is this: if the soul is a unity of faculties (mental, spiritual, and moral), then what happens in one will have an effect on the others. In other words, intellectual growth can exert influence on all the other aspects of the self.

In conclusion, philosophical and religious assumptions that underlie scientific views of ourselves and spiritual growth matter enormously; they deserve continual scrutiny.

## Reference List

- Beauregard M and O'Leary D (eds.) 2007. *The spiritual brain: a neuroscientist's case for the existence of the soul*. New York: HarperOne.
- Bennett MR and Hacker PMS 2003. *Philosophical foundations of neuroscience*. London: Blackwell Publishing.
- Bennett M, Dennett D, Hacker P, and Searle J 2007. *Neuroscience and philosophy*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Botterill G and Carruthers P 1999. *The philosophy of psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brown WS and Jeeves MA 1998. Portraits of human nature: reconciling neuroscience and Christian anthropology. *Science and Christian Belief* 11(2):139–150.
- Chalmers D 2007. The hard problem of consciousness. In M Velmans and S Schneider (eds.), *The Blackwell companion to consciousness*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing.
- Churchland PM 1984. *Matter and consciousness*. Cambridge: MIT.
- Churchland PS 2002. *Brain-wise: studies in neurophilosophy*. Cambridge: MIT.



- Clayton P 2004. The emergence of Spirit. Online article. Accessed from [www.philipclayton.net/files/pages/TheEmergenceofSpirit.pdf](http://www.philipclayton.net/files/pages/TheEmergenceofSpirit.pdf), 16-03-2011.
- Comte-Sponville A. 2006. *The atheist book of spirituality: an elegant argument for spirituality without God*. London: Bantam Press.
- Green JB 1998. Body and soul, mind and brain: pressing questions. Online article. Accessed from [www.catalystresources.org/issues/312green.html](http://www.catalystresources.org/issues/312green.html), 18-03-2011.
- Green JB 2009. Out-of-body experiences: what do they mean? Online article. Accessed from <http://signstimes.com/?p=article&a=40027604761.645>, 18-03-2011.
- Habermas G and Moreland JP 1998. *Beyond death exploring the evidence for immortality*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock.
- Hunt D and McMahan TA 1998. *America, the sorcerer's new apprentice: the rise of new age Shamanism*. Eugene: Harvest House Publishers.
- Knight LFM 2008. Mindfulness: history, technologies, research, applications. Online article. Accessed from [www.totalbalance.com.au/mindfulnessarticle/uis.pdf](http://www.totalbalance.com.au/mindfulnessarticle/uis.pdf), 16-06-2011.
- Kollek R 2004. Mind metaphors, neurosciences and ethics. In D Rees and S Rose (eds.), *The new brain sciences: perils and prospects*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Krüger JS, Lubbe GJA, and Steyn HC 1996. *The human search for meaning: a multireligious introduction to the religions of mankind*. Pretoria: Via Afrika.
- Loux MJ 2006 (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). *Metaphysics: a contemporary introduction*. New York: Routledge.
- Lui N 2005. Mindfulness: a Christian critique. Online article. Accessed from [www.fuller.edu/uploadedFiles/Academics/School\\_of\\_Psychology/nancyLui2005.pdf?n=1352](http://www.fuller.edu/uploadedFiles/Academics/School_of_Psychology/nancyLui2005.pdf?n=1352), 16-06-2011.

- Momen M 1999. *The phenomenon of religion*. Oxford: One World Publications.
- Moreland JP 1998. Restoring the substance to the soul of psychology. *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 26(1):29–42.
- Moreland JP 2008. *Consciousness and the existence of God: a theistic argument*. New York: Routledge.
- Moreland JP and Craig WL 2003. *Philosophical foundations for a Christian worldview*. Downers Grove: IVP.
- Murphy N 2006. *Bodies and souls, or spirited bodies?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Murphy N (undated). Scientific perspectives on Christian anthropology. *CTI Reflections*. Online article. Accessed from [www.astseminary.com/nonreductivephysicalism/MurphyNanceyNRP1.pdf](http://www.astseminary.com/nonreductivephysicalism/MurphyNanceyNRP1.pdf), 20-06-2010.
- Nagasawa Y 2006. A place for protoconsciousness? *Psyche* 12(5).
- Persinger MA 1987. *Neuropsychological bases of God beliefs*. New York: Praeger.
- Rees D and Rose S (eds.) 2004. *The new brain sciences: perils and prospects*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sauer S, Lynch S, Walach H, and Kohls N 2011. Dialectics of mindfulness: implications for Western medicine. Online article. Accessed from [www.biomedcentral.com/](http://www.biomedcentral.com/), 16-06-2011.
- Siegel DJ 2006. An interpersonal neurobiology approach to psychotherapy: awareness, mirror neurons, and neural plasticity in the development of well-being. *Psychiatric Annals* 5(3):1–18).
- Siegel DJ 2007a. Mindfulness training and neural integration: differentiation of distinct streams of awareness and the cultivation of well-being 2(4):259–263.

- Siegel DJ 2007b. Reflections on the mindful brain: mind your brain, inc. Online article. Accessed from [www.openground.com/articles/Siegel-article.pdf](http://www.openground.com/articles/Siegel-article.pdf), 01-02-2011.
- Skrbina D 2005. *Panpsychism in the West*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Snead OC 2007. Neuroimaging and the 'complexity' of capital punishment. Online article. Accessed from [http://www.worksbepress.com/orlando\\_snead/3/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1002&context=orlando\\_snead](http://www.worksbepress.com/orlando_snead/3/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1002&context=orlando_snead), 09-11-2010.
- Sproul RC, Gerstner J and Lindsley A 1984. *Classical apologetics: a rational defense of the Christian faith and a critique of presuppositional apologetics*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Taliaferro C 2009. *Philosophy of religion: a beginner's guide*. Oxford: One World.
- Taylor K 2004. *Brainwashing: the science of thought control*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Thompson C 2010. *Anatomy of the soul: surprising connections between neuroscience and spiritual practices that can transform your life and relationships*. Texas: Saltriver/Tyndale House.
- Velmans M and Schneider S (eds.) 2007. *The Blackwell companion to consciousness*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing.
- Whitesman S 2008. Mindfulness in medicine. *CME* 26:12–15.



# Jesus' Resurrection and the Nature of the Believer's Resurrection Body (1 Cor 15:1–58)

Dan Lioy

## Abstract<sup>1</sup>

This journal article undertakes a biblical and theological analysis of 1 Corinthians 15, in order to discern what Paul had to say about Jesus' resurrection and the nature of the believer's resurrection body. The essay first considers Paul's theology within the context of Second Temple Judaism and Adamic motifs in ancient Jewish literature. Then, the essay highlights Paul's teaching that the Messiah conquered death so that believers could have new life in Him. The apostle revealed that the resurrection body would not die or engage in sin, and it would share in the resurrection power of the Messiah. Furthermore, Paul declared that this transformation would not be slow and gradual; instead, when the Saviour returned, believers—whether dead or alive—would be instantly changed. They would receive incorruptible bodies, and this transformation would display the Son's complete and final victory over death.

---

<sup>1</sup> This journal article is a preliminary version of material to appear in a forthcoming monograph being researched and written by the author dealing with evolutionary creation. The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary. © 2011 All rights reserved.

## Introduction

My previous journal article explored the question of human origins (Lioy 2011). Of central importance in this regard is the issue of Adam and Eve's historicity (cf. Lane 1994b:161; Niehaus 2008:15; Plantinga 1991; Schaeffer 1972:41). Some claim that Adam and Eve never really existed and so could not have been the principal source of genetic endowment for all humans (cf. Barbour 2000:133–134; Day 2005:17–18, 21, 25; Domning and Hellwig 2006:4, 6, 20, 71, 74, 190; Harlow 2008:197–198; Harlow 2010:181, 190–191; Haught 2000:137–138; Kass 2003:60; Lamoureux 2008:274–277, 319, 329; Murphy 2010:2; Peacocke 2001:78; Schneider 2010:201). In contrast, this essay maintains that Adam and Eve are not fictional, generic characters appearing in an ancient Hebrew myth. Instead, they are a literal, historical couple who, before the Fall, initially existed in a genetically pristine state as persons having moral integrity. Furthermore, when Adam and Eve sinned in the ancient Eden orchard, they experienced spiritual separation from God. Also, as a consequence, all their physical descendants are born into this world as mortal creatures who are separated in their relationship with their Creator-King, as well as from one another.

In 1 Corinthians 15:22 and 45, Paul made explicit reference to Adam. The apostle's discourse presupposes that Adam actually existed in space-time history. Furthermore, in verse 45 (which quotes Gen 2:7), the apostle made a distinction between the 'first Adam' becoming a 'living being' and the 'last Adam' becoming a 'life-giving spirit'. As Witherington (2009:240) puts it, while the 'first Adam' became the 'progenitor of death', the 'last Adam' became the 'progenitor and indeed the bestower of life'. That being so, if the first male *Homo sapien* was just a microcosm story for ancient Israel, or a metaphorical

prototype for all humanity, the forcefulness of Paul's contrast is enormously diminished. Also, his contention in 1 Corinthians 15 for the reality of the future resurrection of all believers is undermined. Succinctly put, the efficacy of the apostle juxtaposing the first Adam with the last Adam hinges on Genesis 2 being an account that reflects an underlying historical reality.

## **1. Paul's Theology within the Context of Second Temple Judaism**

According to the analysis offered by Witherington (2009:172), scholars from across the philosophical spectrum consistently regard Paul as the 'first and greatest Christian theologian'. Admittedly, as Segal (1990:xii) notes, 'Paul's writings are neither systematic nor simple'. Young (1997:25) surmises that the apostle's 'conceptual approach to theology' was 'circular and interactive', rather than 'linear'. For all that, as Barrett (1962:3) makes clear, Paul 'laid the foundations for systematic theology'. The latter includes a nuanced assessment of human origins. For instance, like other New Testament authors, the apostle wrestled with the biblical and doctrinal ramifications of death's presence within the human race. This is especially so in 1 Corinthians 15, where Paul compared and contrasted the first Adam with the last Adam (that is, Jesus of Nazareth).

Kreitzer (1993a:12) points out that the apostle's reference to the first male Homo sapien is 'protological', which means it is 'pointing back to the beginning'. Dunn (1998:90) elucidates that as Paul developed his theological argument, he took part in an 'already well-developed debate' in which 'his own views' were shaped 'by its earlier participants' in other Jewish literature of the period. De Boer (2000:347) is even more specific when he refers to the 'conceptual

affinities between Paul's eschatological ideas and first-century Jewish eschatological expectations' (cf. 2 Bar 23:4; 48:42–44; 54:15–19; 4 Ezra 3:7, 21–22; 7:116–119; Sir 25:24; Wis 1:13; 2:23). Admittedly, as Vos (1972:27–28) observes, the 'Jewish eschatology' that was contemporaneous to Paul had its starting point in the Tanakh. Even so, this detail cannot entirely 'account for the agreement' existing between other Jewish writers and the apostle, with respect to the 'data going beyond' the Old Testament. Vos concludes that a 'piece of Jewish theology has been here by Revelation incorporated into [Paul's] teaching.'

In the view of Schnelle (2009:292), the stance the apostle articulated within the context of 'religious-philosophical discourse' concerning the 'origin of evil and its conquest' displays 'originality not in its analysis but in its resolution'. To illustrate, Paul was aware of the prevalent view that when sin entered the world, all seemed to be lost; yet, for the apostle, the fate of humanity did not end there. He revealed that to match the terrible consequences of human sin, the Father intervened with his powerful, sustaining grace. His unmerited favour prevailed in the person of his Son, who died on the cross, rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven. Furthermore, as Scroggs (1966:102) points out, the Messiah 'not only is true humanity', but 'also mediates this true humanity to the believer'.

## 2. Adamic Motifs in Ancient Jewish Literature

Silva (2007:837) points out the 'undeniable network of associations' Paul's theology has with the account of Adam's creation and fall recorded in Genesis 1–3. According to the synopsis offered by Hawthorne (1983:82), the 'first Adam' was created in the 'image and likeness of God' (cf. Gen 1:26–27), whereas the 'second Adam'



eternally pre-existed as the consummate 'image of God' (cf. 2 Cor 4:4, 6; Phil 2:6; Col 1:15). Moreover, while the 'first Adam wrongly tried to become like God' (cf. Gen 3:5), the 'second Adam' refused to capitalize on the unparalleled benefit of being 'equal with God.' Hooker (1994:504) goes even further in elucidating the nature of the theological 'relationship between Adam and Christ'. The incorrect supposition is that these are 'two successive competitors in a task', in which the first individual 'fails while the second succeeds'. Instead, the Father commissions the Son to overturn the 'failure of Adam'. The Son does so by nullifying the negative consequences of Adam's transgression and bringing 'life where Adam brought death'. Because of what the Son accomplished through his incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and exaltation, he is 'greater than Adam'.

Tobin (2004:167) explains that any conceptual links between Adam and Jesus (whether explicit or allusive) that Paul made in his writings, occurred within the context of speculation about Adam appearing in religious texts produced by 'early Judaism' (e.g. Apoc Moses; 2 Bar; 4 Ezra; Sib Or). Levison (1988:145) clarifies that 'early Jewish authors creatively developed portraits of Adam by adapting the Genesis narratives'. More specifically, Wenham (1995:119) draws attention to the concept of Adam in 'Jewish thought' as the 'archetypal man and original human being'. Davies (1980:46) advances the discussion when he states that in Rabbinic Judaism, the 'First Man' was considered to be 'altogether glorious'. Purportedly, his luminescence even transcended the brightness of the sun. For this reason, his 'fall was correspondingly disastrous'. Scroggs (1966:2) elaborates that Adam's 'primeval act' of disobedience in the Eden orchard 'resulted in man's present precarious and critical condition', namely, the spiritual and moral corruption of all his physical descendants.

Tobin (2004:167) draws attention to the fallacy of presuming there was only one 'Adam myth' to be found during the intertestamental period in which extracanonical Jewish documents were written. Instead, the 'figure of Adam appears in several different contexts'. Furthermore, the symbol of Adam was 'used for several different purposes in these writings' and conveyed a 'variety of interpretations'. Such a diversity of perspectives was 'conditioned by the purposes and viewpoints of the different authors'. Hurtado (1993:745) cautions against letting any tacit 'contrast of Christ and Adam' (along with any conjecture that Paul reworked mythological speculations about Adam) either to obscure or 'control the overall exegesis' of the apostle's writings. Of greater theological importance is the light such key passages as 1 Corinthians 15 shed on the theological significance of Jesus' death and resurrection. (For a systematic and detailed analysis of Adamic motifs in ancient Jewish literature, cf. Barrett 1962:1–21, 68–76, 83–119; Davies 1980:31–35, 38–57; Levison 1988:33–161; Scroggs 1966:16–58; Steenburg 1990).

### **3. The Resurrection of the Saviour (1 Cor 15:1–11)**

In 1 Corinthians chapter 12 through 14, Paul provided a lengthy discussion of spiritual gifts. Then, in chapter 15, the apostle shifted his focus to another important doctrinal topic: the resurrection of the dead and the essence of 'postmortal existence' (Thiselton 2000:1170). According to Witherington (2010:131), 'by and large Paul's logic is a narrative one'. Longenecker (2002:88) further notes that much of the apostle's 'theological reflections' are characterized by nuanced and sophisticated 'narrative dynamics'. Undoubtedly, this is because, as Goldingay (2003:29) explains, the 'dominant way' the Old Testament 'expounds the nature of its faith is by telling Israel's story'. Prominent examples would be the 'two narrative sequences Genesis-Kings and

Ezra-Nehemiah-Chronicles', as well as the 'short stories about Ruth, Esther, Jonah, and Daniel and his friends' (30). Amid this scholarly exchange, Gorman (2004:277) concludes that 1 Corinthians 15 'represents the pinnacle of Pauline rhetoric and theological argument'.

The early Israelites believed that when people died, they went to a subterranean chamber called *sheol* (cf. Job 10:21–22). Both Isaiah 26:19 and Daniel 12:2 speak about the resurrection of the dead, so by New Testament times, the Pharisees had come to believe in a general resurrection of the dead at the last day (cf. Job 14:14; Pss 16:10; 49:15; 73:24; 2 Bar 50:2–4; 1 En 51:1; 62:14–16; 4 Ezra 7:32–33; Test of Ben 10:6–8; Test of Judah 25:4). This is the view that Martha expressed to Jesus when he told her that her brother, Lazarus, would rise again (cf. John 11:23–24). In contrast, the Sadducees did not believe in a resurrection at all (cf. Matt 22:23; Mark 12:18; Luke 20:27; Acts 23:8). Perhaps this religious group rejected the doctrine because it was not overtly taught in the Mosaic Law, to which they strictly adhered (cf. Brown 1986a:268–270; Gaster 1962b:40; Kreitzer 1993c:806; Martin-Achard 1992:682–683; Muller 1988:145–146; Schep 2009:90–91).

The church at Corinth appears to have been influenced by the erroneous ideas commonly taught in Greco-Roman culture. Numerous ancient philosophers thought that all forms of matter are wicked and that the ultimate goal in life is to become free from one's evil material existence. If there is an afterlife, it is alleged to be purely spiritual in nature, meant only for the soul not the body. Numerous philosophers taught that the soul is the true core of a person's identity and that it is imprisoned in one's physical body. Release from this confinement was thought to come at death. Even though the body decays into nonexistence, the soul was believed to live on eternally (cf. Barrett 1994:111–112; Brown 1986b:677–679; Dihle 1999:608–617; Dunn 1998:76–78; Gill 2002:174; Guthrie 1981a:120–121, 829; Ladd

1997:499–500; Morris 2001:205; Sand 1993:501; Schnelle 2009:228–229; Thielman 2005:301–302; Young 1997:123). Evidently, because of the faulty understanding the believers at Corinth had about what it meant to be spiritual, some of them did not accept the truth of a bodily resurrection. They may have believed that Christians, after death, live on forever in heaven as disembodied spirits; but to them, the idea of one's soul re-joined with one's body was distasteful.

The cornerstone of Paul's faith was the resurrection of the Messiah. Indeed, the apostle had built his entire ministry on knowing that the Father had raised the Son from the dead after his crucifixion. Furthermore, Paul had endured all sorts of hardship because of his commitment to the risen, living Lord. Therefore, the apostle was dismayed that some in the fledgling church at Corinth were denying the bodily resurrection of the dead. Consequently, Paul determined that he had to correct this theological error. In a figurative sense, as Ciampa and Rosner (2010:754) point out, the apostle swam 'against the tide of Greco-Roman teaching and with the flow of the Old Testament and its Jewish interpreters'. Moreover, Paul rode the 'wave created by the coming of Jesus'. The apostle began his argument by establishing common ground with his readers: they all believed that Jesus had been raised from the dead. When Paul had arrived in Corinth, he had proclaimed the gospel, namely, the core of teachings about Jesus and salvation that had been handed down from the first Christians. The apostle's readers had not only accepted the gospel, but also had based their faith squarely upon it (1 Cor 15:1). Furthermore, it was fundamental to their salvation (v. 2).

The preceding observations notwithstanding, some of the believers at Corinth had begun to believe that there was no future resurrection of the dead, an idea that was contradictory to the gospel. Paul warned his readers that if they held to this theologically heterodox notion, then

their Christian faith was made pointless. In verses 12–19, the apostle would explain what he meant. For now, Paul repeated a portion of the gospel he had preached in Corinth, namely, the part that related to Jesus' death and resurrection. In actuality, this was a truth of foremost 'importance' (v. 3). Due to the structure, wording, and content of verses 3–5, it may be that here the apostle was quoting a 'very early credal formulation that was common to the entire church' (Fee 1987:71; cf. Conzelmann 1975:249; Fitzmyer 2008:541; Furnish 1999:109; Garland 2003:684; Godet 1979:758; Grosheide 1984:349; Morris 1985:201; Prior 1985:259; Sampley 2002:973; Thiselton 2000:1188–1189; Tobin 2004:163, 176).

The first statement is that in accordance with Old Testament prophecy (cf. Ps 22; Isa 52:13–53:12; Luke 24:25–26, 44–46), the Messiah died on the cross to atone for the sins of the lost. Accordingly, the Saviour's sacrificial death was not a tragic accident or even an 'afterthought' (Morris 2001:201). It had a divinely intended purpose, that is, to rescue sinners. Second, Paul stated that Jesus 'was buried' (1 Cor 15:4). Burial in a tomb certified the reality of his death (cf. Heb 2:9, 14). Third, after being interred on Friday afternoon, the Saviour was resurrected on Sunday morning (1 Cor 15:4; cf. Ps 16:8–11; Hos 6:2; Jonah 1:17; Matt 28:1–10; Mark 16:1–8; Luke 24:1–12; John 20:1–10). Fourth, Jesus manifested himself to Peter, and then the remainder of the apostles (1 Cor 15:5; cf. Matt 28:16–17; Luke 24:24, 36–43; John 20:19–29; 21:1–25; Acts 1:1–9). These appearances proved the reality of the Messiah's bodily resurrection.

Paul expanded the creed he had been quoting by citing additional post-resurrection appearances. To begin with, the apostle reported that Jesus had manifested himself to a group of believers numbering more than 500 (1 Cor 15:6). This incident is not mentioned elsewhere in scripture. Since many of these people were still living at the time Paul wrote, his

readers would have, if they wanted them, plenty of eyewitness testimonies to the Saviour's resurrection. The risen Lord also appeared to his half-brother, James (v. 7; cf. Matt 13:55; Mark 6:3; Acts 1:14), who by this time was a prominent leader in the Jerusalem church (cf. Acts 15:13; 21:18; Gal 1:19; 2:9). Once more, scripture reveals nothing more about this appearance. In addition, Jesus manifested himself to a larger group of 'apostles' (1 Cor 15:7). Finally, Jesus appeared to Paul. Clearly, the apostle was referring to his meeting with Jesus on the Damascus road (cf. Acts 9:3–6; 22:6–10; 26:13–18). To Paul, this encounter was more than just a vision. He had seen Jesus as surely as all the others had.

In describing his own sighting of the risen Lord, Paul called himself 'one abnormally born' (1 Cor 15:8). This phrase translates a Greek noun that referred literally to an abortion, a miscarriage, or a stillbirth (cf. Danker 2000:311; Garland 2003:693; Gill 2002:176; Louw and Nida 1989:257; Morris 2001:203; Müller 1986:182; Orr and Walther 1976:318, 323). The other apostles had all achieved their status through following the Saviour during his earthly ministry; but Paul regarded his entrance into his apostolic office as being sudden and abnormal, like a freakish birth. Some in Corinth might have come to undervalue Paul in comparison to the other apostles. If so, Paul seemed to agree when he called himself the 'least' (v. 9) among his peers. Here, he may have been making a pun on his Roman name, Paulus. The latter means 'the little one' and implies his status was that of an ecclesiastical 'dwarf' (Fee 1987:733; cf. Balz 1993:59; Danker 2000:789; Hornell 2000:25; Louw and Nida 1989:829). Indeed, Paul said he was unworthy to be included in that esteemed inner circle of church leaders, for he was guilty of maltreating the 'church of God'.

Despite Paul's criminal past, he was an apostle due to God's unmerited favour. The Lord could have punished Paul for his actions, but instead,

he forgave him and called him to service. Moreover, in response to God's grace, Paul laboured longer and harder than any of his apostolic contemporaries have in proclaiming the good news. That said, Paul was careful to add that this activity, too, was by the Lord's 'grace' (v. 10). Since Paul was a genuine apostle, he was heralding the same gospel that all the others were preaching. Furthermore, it was this gospel through which the Corinthians had come to faith (v. 11). Most likely, Paul meant that if his readers were disbelieving a portion of the good news—that is, the part about the bodily resurrection from the dead—then they were going against not only him, but also the rest of the apostolic leadership of the church. In this regard, Thiselton (2000:1213) describes what Paul heralded as the 'common kerygma of a shared, transmitted gospel tradition' (cf. Barrett 1968:346; Bruce 1971:143; Conzelmann 1975:260; Fitzmyer 2008:543, 553; Furnish 1999:106; Garland 2003:679, 695; Godet 1979:771; Grosheide 1984:354; Morris 1985:205; Sampley 2002:974, 976).

#### **4. The Ramifications of Denying the Saviour's Resurrection (1 Cor 15:12–19)**

While Paul and his readers occupied some common ground by agreeing that Jesus had been resurrected, the apostle was aware of a theological problem. Some of the parishioners in Corinth were denying the possibility of a general resurrection (1 Cor 15:12). Expressed differently, they were convinced that 'nothing of a personal life survives death' (Orr and Walther 1976:340). Moreover, they abhorred the notion that the 'dead have a future existence in some somatic form' (Fee 1987:741). Because Paul recognized the seriousness of this disagreement, he strove to reason with his readers about their mistaken opinion. To start, the apostle noted that if the dead are not raised, then neither could Jesus have been raised, for the latter would be an

exception to the rule. Besides, if the dead are not raised, then there was no point in Jesus being raised. Thus, the Corinthians' two beliefs contradicted each other. In brief, they could not claim that Jesus was raised and also assert that the dead are not raised (vv. 13, 16).

From the latter observation, Paul drew some conclusions, ones his readers would not like, but would have to recognize as logically consistent with their denial of resurrection. First, if Jesus was not raised, then Paul's preaching was futile and the Corinthians' faith was pointless (v. 14). The reason is that the Saviour's resurrection is at the core of the Christian faith. Without Jesus rising from the dead, the gospel is not worth heralding or believing. Next, if the Messiah was not raised, then Paul had taught a falsehood about God. Expressed differently, the apostle was a liar and his readers could not trust his teaching (v. 15). Finally, if the Son was still dead in the burial chamber, then the Corinthians' belief in him was baseless, for he had done nothing to solve their sin problem (v. 17). In short, as Ciampa and Rosner (2010:757) maintain, they and their deceased fellow believers were still 'culpable' for their transgressions and 'standing under divine judgment' (v. 18). That being the case, no one was more pitiable than a Christian, for they were hoping for eternal salvation while remaining condemned for their sin (v. 19). Conzelmann (1975:267) observes that the apostle is 'not arguing in timeless theoretical terms, without regard to the real situation'. Instead, he is 'challenging' his readers 'in the light of their faith' (cf. Bruce 1977:306–307; Capes 2007:158; Gorman 2004:279; Marshall 2004:278; McRay 2003:412–413; Polhill 1999:249; Schnelle 2009:227).



## 5. The Reality of the Saviour's Resurrection (1 Cor 15:20–28)

In one sense, all the logical conclusions Paul had drawn from the Corinthians' implicit denial of Jesus' resurrection were meaningless. After all, he was raised, and his bodily resurrection is the prototype of the future resurrection of all those who trust in him for salvation. Paul depicted the Messiah's resurrection as just the beginning, the 'firstfruits' (1 Cor 15:20) of the resurrection harvest yet to occur at his Second Advent [*see note further on*] (cf. Exod 22:29; 23:19; 34:26; Lev 23:9–14; Num 15:18–21; Deut 18:4). Indeed, Jesus not only was the first to rise from the dead, but he also serves as a pledge that more resurrections would one day follow. His resurrection guaranteed that all believers, whether deceased or living, would someday be raised to eternal life. In point of fact, Jesus' resurrection 'set in motion' (Fee 1987:759) an unstoppable 'chain of events'. For instance, Jesus made death's destruction irrevocable with his own death on the cross and subsequent resurrection; but complete victory over death awaits the return of the Messiah to defeat Satan, the one who introduced sin into the world and brought the judgment of death upon the human race when Adam and Eve first sinned in the ancient Eden orchard (cf. Beker 1987:73; Collins 2010:155; Green 2008:172; Kreitzer 1993a:11; Orr and Walther 1976:332–333).

To further develop the doctrinal implications of the Messiah's resurrection, Paul used 'typological exegesis' (Lincoln 1981:43). The apostle's objective was to set up a comparison between Adam and Jesus and argue that the Son was the Father's 'righteous agent of salvation' (Thiselton 2000:1228; cf. Rom 5:12–20; Cosner 2009:71; Dahl 1964:435–436; Mosert 2005:109; Ridderbos 1997a:98; Schreiner 2008:307–308). As Dunn (1998:200) explains, Jesus is the

'eschatological counterpart of primeval Adam'. Because Adam sinned, all people die; and because Jesus was raised from the dead, all believers likewise will be raised from the dead (1 Cor 15:21). Adam brought death to all his physical descendants, whereas Jesus brings eternal life to all his spiritual offspring (v. 22). Paul stated that the resurrection of the dead follows a specific order: first the Saviour, then his followers. Jesus has already been raised from the dead, and at his Second Coming the redeemed will be resurrected (v. 23).

As part of what takes place at the end of history, two additional events would occur. First, the Messiah would abolish 'all dominion, authority and power' (v. 24), meaning forces that oppose him. Second, the Son would present the kingdom to his Father. In verse 25, Paul quoted Psalm 110:1 to describe the Messiah's total victory over his foes. That verse reflects an ancient practice in which a monarch would symbolize his control over an enemy by placing his foot on the other's neck (cf. Josh 10:24). In fulfillment of Psalm 110:1, Jesus would 'put all his enemies under his feet' (1 Cor 15:25). Presumably, the Son's adversaries included the evil powers of darkness that presently dominate the world. Death was also the Messiah's foe and this too he would eliminate, thus removing the penalty for the original sin of Adam, the biological progenitor of the human race (v. 26; cf. Isa 25:8; 26:19; Hos 13:14; Rev 20:13–14). To abolish death is another way of referring to the resurrection of the dead; in other words, eternal life would win out over death.

From a theological standpoint, death was not originally a part of God's plan for humanity. Prior to the Fall, Adam and Eve were 'naturally mortal' (Haarsma and Haarsma 2007:217), but as a result of their sin, they lost their 'potential for immortality'. Expressed differently, Adam's sin required the punishment of spiritual and physical death, and the only way to remove that penalty was through the atoning sacrifice

of the Son. In the future, he would consummate his victory on the cross by irreversibly putting an end to death in all its aspects. Alexander (2008:267) explains that 'physical death is an enemy to be destroyed', for 'it has no place in the fulfilled kingdom of God'. Consequently, as Gillman (1997:18) states, one day 'death itself will die' (cf. Beker 1987:76, 90; Godet 1979:791; Capes 2007:159–160; Cosner 2009:72; Fee 1987:747; Furnish 1999:116; Garland 2003:712; Morris 1985:212; Witherington 2010:407).

In 1 Corinthians 15:27, Paul quoted from Psalm 8:6 to show that ultimately it was the Father who enabled the Son to sovereignly reign over all his foes. For clarification, however, the apostle added that the Father himself was not subject to the Son. In fact, after the Father had made everything subservient to the Son, then the Son would be made subordinate to the Father (v. 28). At the end of the age, the Father would be 'all in all', which means he would reign supreme and unchallenged. As Morris (2001:213) explains, this statement does not mean that the Son is in some way metaphysically inferior to the Father (and the Spirit); instead, within the triune Godhead, each member performs different soteriological and eschatological functions. According to Gruenler (1986:xvii), the subordination between the three members of the Godhead is 'voluntarily assumed'. It also 'flows out of the dynamic and mutual hospitality of the divine Family as a unity'. In this regard, 'each of the persons of the Trinity willingly, lovingly, and voluntarily seeks to serve and please the other'. The subordination, then, is not one in which the Son and the Spirit are reduced to 'second- and third-class' status within the Godhead; instead, all three 'persons of the Triune Family' remain co-equal and co-eternal with one another.

Neither Satan nor sin nor death would stand against the triune God. Indeed, all the enemies of faith would be vanquished. Thus, by denying the resurrection of the dead, the Corinthians were actually opposing the

ultimate sovereignty of God for, if death was not vanquished, then God did not rule completely everywhere over everything. In verses 23–28, Paul did not give an exact chronology or timetable of the preceding end-time events. Be that as it may, one interpretive option finds a definite sequence for what happens at the Messiah's Second Advent. According to this view, the dead in Christ would rise first at his return (vs. 23), followed by those believers who were alive at the time, an event sometimes called the rapture. 'Then' (v. 24) the Messiah would begin his millennial reign on earth, when the saints ruled with him (cf. Rev 20:4–6), followed by his conquest of the kingdoms of this world (cf. vv. 7–10). The devil and his demonic cohorts would be defeated, and then death itself would be cast into the lake of fire (cf. 1 Cor 15:26; Rev 20:14). In contrast, another interpretive option understands the phrase, 'he must reign' (1 Cor 15:25), as what the Saviour is doing now in this age. Put another way, his reign is more spiritual in nature, extending over the entire course of human history. Hence, Jesus' reign during this present age is his moral rule over the lives of the saints. After such a reign, then comes the 'end' (v. 24; cf. 2 Bar 29; 73; 74; 4 Ezra 7:26–30; 13:29–50; Barrett 1968:356–357; Bruce 1971:147–148; Fitzmyer 2008:571–572; Furnish 1999:107–108, 117–118; Garland 2003:709–711; Grosheide 1984:369–370; Hill 1988:308–320; Mare 1976:285–286; Prior 1985:268–269; Sampley 2002:981–982; Thiselton 2000:1232–1234).

## **6. The Implications of Denying the Saviour's Resurrection (1 Cor 15:29–34)**

In case Paul's theological arguments for the resurrection were not enough, he offered a collection of practical reasons in support of the doctrine. First, the apostle mentioned 'living people having themselves vicariously baptized for dead people' (Conzelmann 1975:275). This

was an early religious practice about which there is little information. Literally, dozens of explanations have been offered to explain what Paul meant in 1 Corinthians 15:29, though only three of the commonly mentioned possibilities are summarized here:

(1) Believers were being baptized on behalf of loved ones who had died without believing in the Messiah. These believers mistakenly thought that baptism, in itself, conveyed spiritual life and that its effects could be transferred from one person to another.

(2) Believers were being baptized as a public statement of their hope of one day being raised from the dead.

(3) Newer converts were being baptized in the name of deceased believers. This was the converts' way of declaring their intent to take the place of the deceased in serving the Redeemer (cf. Beasley-Murray 1986:147; Bromiley 1979:426; Bromiley 2001a:135–136; Fape 2000:396; Grogan 2009:501–502; Grudem 1995:134; Oepke 1999:542; White 1996:49; Schreiner 2008:729–730).

Regardless of what Paul actually meant, it seems the rationale for the custom depended on the teaching that the dead would be resurrected. The apostle was saying that it was pointless for people to be 'baptized for the dead' (v. 29) if there was no life after death. The latter statement did not necessarily constitute an outright endorsement for or condemnation of the religious practice; instead, Paul referred to a well-known ritual in the lives of his readers to strengthen his broader argument.

Next, Paul discussed his own life. In carrying out his apostolic work, he constantly put himself in danger of injury and death, both from persecution and from the natural risks of travel in his day (v. 30; cf.

Acts 27; 2 Cor 11:23–33). It seemed to the apostle that nearly every day he faced the prospect of dying. He affirmed that the latter was as certain as his own boasting in what the Messiah had done for the Corinthians (1 Cor 15:31). As Paul wrote to his readers from Ephesus, he had fresh in his mind some attacks he had already endured while in the city. The exact nature of these attacks remains unclear (e.g. whether they were literal or figurative); but the apostle compared these onslaughts to fighting 'wild beasts' (v. 32). The latter was a cruel form of entertainment and execution in the Roman world. Paul openly questioned why he would put himself at such risk of losing his life if there was no resurrection. If he had nothing more than temporal 'human hopes', what good would his missionary work do anyone? In that case, it would make more sense for him to live solely for the pleasures of the moment, as Isaiah 22:13 described (cf. Isa 56:12; Wis 2:5–6; Luke 12:19).

Finally, the apostle did not want his fellow believers in Corinth to be deceived by those who denied the reality of the resurrection. To emphasize his point, the apostle quoted from the Greek poet, Menander, a man whose writings the Corinthians might have known. The resurrection doubters were the 'bad company' (1 Cor 15:33) who would poison the thinking, ruin the 'good character', and corrupt the behaviour of unsuspecting believers (cf. Menander's play, *Thais*, fragment 187 [218]). The anti-resurrection crowd was not only a toxic influence, but also 'ignorant of God' (1 Cor 15:34). Paul considered it shameful that such a dearth of theological knowledge was present in the church at Corinth. The apostle summoned the believers to give up their sinful point of view and return to a sober, accurate understanding of the resurrection. Paul's remarks indicate that there is a direct connection between what people believe about the future, and how they behave in

the present. For instance, those who think that death is the absolute end of personal existence tend to see little reason for living morally.

## 7. The Nature of the Resurrection Body (1 Cor 15:35–49)

After Paul elaborated on some of the theological implications of denying the resurrection of the dead, he next focused on describing the nature of the resurrection body. His intent was to get at the core of the objections advanced by his readers. As was noted earlier, they contested the idea of a dead physical body coming back to life. This aversion, though, did not deter the apostle from insisting that believers would have real bodies at the resurrection. Still, it would be incorrect to infer from this truth that Paul had in mind either the 'reanimation of decayed corpses' (Garland 2003:701) or a 'spruced-up version of the physical body' (733). Rather, there is a profound difference between a resurrection body and an earthly one. In what Conzelmann (1975:280) refers to as a 'loose diatribe style', the apostle imagined the questions the Corinthians might have had about the resurrection body. For instance, a presumed group of dissenters would want to know what form the body would take (1 Cor 15:35; cf. 2 Bar 49:2). In response, Paul rhetorically labelled as 'foolish' (1 Cor 15:36)—that is, senseless or thoughtless—anyone who would ask such questions (cf. Barrett 1968:370; Bruce 1971:151; Gill 2002:179–180; Mare 1976:290; Sampley 2002:987; Thiselton 2000:1263).

Next, the apostle explained that the natural world existing all around his readers showed how physical entities went through transformation and were of different types. For an example, Paul referred to plant life. He noted that a seed is a sort of body, and it undergoes a kind of death when it is sown; but then the seed grows into a plant, which is another type of body (v. 37). There is continuity between the seed and the plant,

and yet they are different in form and function. The apostle used a number of different examples to teach that various physical entities in the natural world were different from one another (v. 38). Seeds, for example, differed; human and animal bodies also differed from one another (v. 39); and heavenly bodies were glorious in a different way than were earthly bodies (v. 40). Among heavenly bodies—such as the sun, moon, and stars—there are differing kinds of glory (or splendour). Even among a particular kind of heavenly body—namely the stars—the glory (or radiance) differed (v. 41). Regardless of the distinctions, all of them were due to 'God's creative determination' (Fitzmyer 2008:590).

What Paul stated in these verses reflects a prescientific understanding of how the world functioned (e.g. that living organisms were basically static and existed as separately created groups). If his observations are recognized as being couched in the language of appearance, then it is reasonable to regard them as being sufficiently valid on a theological level. It would be misguided, though, to insist that the apostle's inferences have no intrinsic value just because he did not utilize modern scientific classifications of organisms. The intent of Paul's exposition was not to draft a precise taxonomy (contra Frame 2002:311; Klenck 2009:118; Morris 1995:86; cf. Brunner 1952:20–21; Bube 1971:203; Jeeves 1969:107; Lamoureux 2008:135–137; Wilcox 2004:41), but to use comparisons to natural things to explain how believers can be transformed in the resurrection (cf. Bruce 1977:308; Ciampa and Rosner 2010:801; Garland 2003:728; Harlow 2008:190–191; Hulsbosch 1965:10; Orr and Walther 1976:342, 346; Vos 1972:180–181). When the apostle's underlying purpose is kept in mind, one can see how these verses affirm (rather than deny) the doctrinal integrity of God's Word.

Verse 38 draws attention to the Lord's involvement in the natural world. As was noted in my previous journal article (cf. Lioy 2011:133–134), just as God presided over the creation of the entire cosmos, he



also superintended the biological evolutionary process of all forms of carbon-based life on earth, so that they developed according to his perfect will and for his everlasting glory. This includes his providential involvement in the planet's history (through both natural and supernatural means) to foster the emergent complexity of life found across the globe (cf. Brown 2010:62; Jackelén 2006:623; McGrath 2010a:10; O'Connor and Wong 2006; van Huyssteen 2006:662–663). Moreover, God created the cosmos with 'functional integrity' (Murphy 2001). This means that while the universe is completely dependent on God for its existence, he has 'endowed' it with the 'ability to accomplish' its purpose without necessitating supernatural 'corrections' or 'interventions'.

Paul wanted his readers to firmly grasp the truth that the new spiritual body raised from the dead would be related to the old natural body that dies, yet, at the same time, the new body would be remarkably transformed in at least three ways to enable it to accommodate what its existence would be like in the eternal state (cf. Barrett 1968:373; Fee 2007:116, 517, 519; Fitzmyer 2008:591; Grosheide 1984:383; Prior 1985:273; Sampley 2002:987; Thiselton 2000:1273). Whereas the natural body was weak, subject to sin, and prone to sickness and death, the transformed spiritual body would not die, could not engage in unrighteousness, and would share in the resurrection power of the Son himself (vv. 42–44). Moreover, as with a seed placed in the ground and the plant it produces, there is both continuity and a splendid difference between what dies and what is raised from the dead. Put another way, the seed is not the same as the plant, any more than the resurrection body is metaphysically the same as the old body.

Kreitzer (1993c:807–808) clarifies that the phrase 'the resurrection of the dead' (v. 42) loses some of its emphasis when it is translated from Greek to English. In English, people usually think of 'dead' as a 'state

of being' or a locale where individuals who have 'departed' reside. In Greek, however, the phrase 'resurrection of the dead' conveys a 'much more dynamic image'. When translated literally, it says something like 'the standing up from the midst of corpses'. From a theological perspective, Paul was not saying that the cadaver of a deceased believer literally comes back to life, but that God causes life to rise out of death as a new, glorified body emerges. As Kreitzer (1993b:74) points out, it is 'extremely difficult to know precisely what Paul envisioned this body to be like or what bodily properties he held it to have'. In truth, the many comparisons the apostle used in verses 36–44 show how inadequate and constricted 'language' (75) can be in trying to explain in a definitive, accurate way what 'resurrection' is and how it happens. Undoubtedly, the idea of the resurrection body being 'spiritual' (v. 44) is absurd to an atheistic, naturalistic mind-set; nonetheless, with respect to the Messiah, almighty God directly intervened to bring about a time-bound, historical circumstance and outcome that is beyond scientific verification (cf. Lioy 2011:137).

Paul insisted on the truthfulness of what he wrote by once more comparing Adam and Jesus, in which an 'antithetical orientation' (Vos 1972:11) between the two figures is set within an 'eschatological framework' (Barrett 1962:73). The apostle drew his readers' attention to Genesis 2:7 (cf. Wis 15:11). Genesis 2:7 reveals that when the Creator breathed life into the first *Homo sapien*, he became a 'living being' (1 Cor 15:45). The implication is that the biological progenitor of the human race had a physical, natural body. In contrast to the 'first Adam', the 'last Adam' became a 'life-giving spirit'. Paul was referring to Jesus' resurrection body, which was raised in a glorified, supernatural form (cf. Chia 2005:189; Collins 2006a:146–147; Dahl 1964:429–430; Green 2008:173; Guthrie 1981a:337; Marshall 2004:265; McRay 2003:416). Due to that historic event, Jesus is the

'Living One who gives life to others' (Fee 2007:119). On one level, the Saviour 'fulfilled in His life the potentialities of unfallen Adam' (Merrill 1991:17). On another level, the sacrificial death and resurrection of the Saviour 'restored all mankind to those potentialities'. In light of these monumental achievements, Jesus is the 'perfect counterpoint to Adam' (Matera 2010:143).

The apostle stressed that Adam's natural body preceded the spiritual one of the risen Lord (v. 46). Perhaps Paul made this emphasis because the Corinthians thought they had already entered into a wholly metaphysical state of existence. In reality, they had to complete their lives with morally depraved, natural bodies like the one belonging to Adam. As was noted in my previous journal article (cf. Lioy 144–145), everyone is born in a state of sin and guilt, has an inner tendency or disposition toward sinning, and is powerless to rescue themselves from their predicament (cf. Eccl 7:29; Jer 17:9; 2 Bar 4:3; 17:2–4; 23:4; 43:2; 48:46; 54:15, 19; 56:5–6; 4 Ezra 3:7, 21–22, 26–27; 4:30; 7:118; Sir 14:17; 15:14; 25:24; Wis 2:23–24; Rom 3:23; 6:23; 7:5, 13; Eph 2:1–3). It is only at the resurrection that believers receive a glorified, heavenly body like that of the Saviour. He alone is both the 'Inaugurator of the new humanity' (Ridderbos 1997a:56) and the 'prototype of God's new human creation' (Dunn 1998:265).

Paul further differentiated between Adam and Jesus by noting that the 'first man' (1 Cor 15:47), as a 'living being' (v. 45), was made from the soil of the ground and, thus, earthly in nature. Conversely, the resurrection body of the 'second man' (v. 47) was heavenly, or spiritual, in nature (cf. Barth 1956:22; Barrett 1968:375; Bruce 1971:151–152; Edgar 2002:37; Fitzmyer 2008:598–599; Garland 2003:737; Grosheide 1984:388; Sampley 2002:988; Thiselton 2000:1286). All Adam's physical descendants inherited his 'earthly' (v. 48) type of body and shared his spiritual and genetic fingerprint. In contrast, all Jesus'

spiritual offspring receive 'heavenly' bodies when they are raised from the dead. Moreover, all who came after the man of dust bore his 'image' (v. 49). The encouragement and exhortation for believers was for them to wear the likeness of the one who came from heaven. From a theological perspective, even though within fallen humanity the image of God has been defaced through sin, people still bear the divine likeness to some degree (cf. Gen 5:1; 9:6; Jas 3:9). For believers, the image of God not only includes temporal (physical) life, but also eternal life (cf. Bruce 1977:311; Brunner 1952:58; Godet 1979:858–859; Kreitzer 1993a:75; Levison 1993:189; Lioy 2010:8; Witherington 1998:148; Wright 2005:28).

## **8. The Assurance of Victory Over Death (1 Cor 15:50–58)**

Paul reiterated in straightforward terms that natural, earthly bodies were not suited to a spiritual, heavenly existence. Put another way, that which was subject to death and decomposition could never receive as an inheritance that which was eternal and glorious in nature (1 Cor 15:50). Lincoln (1981:53) explains that Paul's 'concept of the heavenly dimension' is 'firmly tied' to his 'view of humanity and its destiny'. More specifically, the apostle believed that the 'heavenly dimension was not simply a peripheral cosmological trapping', in other words, a mode of being that had 'nothing to do with the real essence of human existence'. Likewise, Paul did not regard heaven as an 'order of existence' that 'completely separated Christ from humanity'. Instead, the apostle considered heaven to be 'integral to humanity', in accordance with the sovereign and eternal will of God.

At this point, the apostle had a 'mystery' (v. 51) to impart to his readers. For Paul, a mystery was a truth that in times past had been veiled, but now was disclosed through the Messiah (cf. Danker

2000:662; Finkenrath 1986:504; Krämer 1993:448; Liefeld 2009:361; Louw and Nida 1989:345; O'Brien 1993b:622; Orr and Walther 1976:351). In the present context, this mystery was that living and also deceased believers would have their bodies miraculously transformed when the Lord Jesus returned. The apostle revealed that not all Christians would 'sleep' (that is, physically die). Some believers would be alive at the time of the Second Advent. Nevertheless, all believers would be 'changed', which means that their earthly bodies would be reconstituted and transformed into glorified, resurrected ones. Paul disclosed that at the consummation of history, this metamorphosis would happen in the 'smallest conceivable instant' (Garland 2003:743), that is, quicker than the blink of an eye (v. 52).

In the Old Testament era, the Jews would blow a series of trumpets to signal the start of great feasts and other significant religious events (cf. Num 10:10). The sounding of the 'last trumpet' (1 Cor 15:52) on the day of the Lord would signal the occurrence of the resurrection (cf. Isa 27:13; Joel 2:1, 15; Zeph 1:14–16; Zech 9:14; 4 Ezra 6:23; Sib Or 4:173–175). There are at least three primary views regarding the nature of the final trumpet:

1. It is the seventh and last in a series of trumpet calls that would be sounded at the resurrection (cf. Rev 8:2, 6, 13; 11:15). The end of the present world order would then be ushered in.
2. It is the loud trumpet blast mentioned in Matthew 24:31. At the Redeemer's Second Coming, he would dispatch his angels to gather his chosen from all over the earth.
3. It is the sounding of the trumpet mentioned in 1 Thessalonians 4:16. The redeemed would be carried away from the earth prior to a period of tribulation and the Saviour's return to earth (cf. Best and Huttar 2009:352; Friedrich 1999:86–87; Harris

Lioy, 'Jesus' Resurrection and the Believer's Resurrection Body (1 Cor 15:1–58)'

1986:874; Jones 1992:938–939; Ryken 1998:900; Werner 1962:472–473).

Regardless of which view is favoured, Paul's overriding theological point remains clear, namely, that 'perishable' (1 Cor 15:53), mortal bodies were unfit to inhabit heaven. Consequently, it was necessary for them to be transformed into 'imperishable', immortal ones. It would be incorrect to conclude from what the apostle revealed that there is no real connection between the earthly body and the heavenly body; instead, the fundamental difference between one's temporal and eternal existence was like a person putting on a new robe. Bodies that would not be ravaged by death and decay would replace the weak and dying bodies of believers. In that future day, the long-anticipated defeat of 'death' (v. 54) would occur. Here, death is 'personified as God's eschatological antagonist' (Schnelle 2009:247) that needed to be vanquished.

Paul quoted Isaiah 25:8 to indicate that the sovereign Lord would completely conquer death. Then, in 1 Corinthians 15:55, the apostle quoted Hosea 13:14, the context of which is a prophecy of God's judgment against Israel. Paul sought to rhetorically taunt 'death' as if it was a loser that did not have ultimate power to inflict harm. The apostle was probably not so much making an argument in 1 Corinthians 15:55 based on scripture, but rather, using biblical language to emphasize an important theological truth. Metaphorically speaking, death was like a poisonous hornet or scorpion whose stinger had been pulled and 'drained of potency' (Ciampa and Rosner 2010:836). Jesus, through his atoning sacrifice, had dealt a lethal blow to death. The believers' confident expectation was that when the Messiah returned, he would raise them from the dead and, in this way, he would rescue them forever from the clutches of death (cf. John 11:25–26).

In 1 Corinthians 15:56, Paul told his readers that it was through the presence of sin that death received its power to hurt believers. As revealed in Romans 5:12 after Adam disobeyed God's command, death became a permanent fixture in his life and in the lives of all his physical descendants. Paul also disclosed that sin misappropriated the Mosaic Law to manipulate people. Sin was like a personified entity that used God's commands to produce all sorts of wrong desires in people and to seduce them into disobeying him (cf. 7:7–11). Apart from God, all people are powerless to resist sin or overcome death. The apostle gave thanks to the Father for the triumph available through his Son, the risen Lord Jesus (1 Cor 15:57). Paul wanted his cherished friends to remain steadfast in his teaching about the resurrection and resolute in their faith, for they had ultimate victory in the Redeemer (cf. Gilkey 1959:267, 283–284; Gorman 2004:281; Matera 2007:147; Peters 1989:108; Polhill 1999:250). The hope of the resurrection was meant to spur on the apostle's readers (and all believers) to serve the Lord diligently and wholeheartedly. The apostle assured them that their efforts would never be wasted, since in the Saviour they would bear eternal fruit and reap a heavenly reward (v. 58).

## Conclusion

A biblical and theological analysis of 1 Corinthians 15 highlights the truth that the Messiah conquered death so that believers could have new life in him. Paul reminded his readers that the crux of the gospel centred around the Son dying for the sins of the lost, being buried, being raised on the third day, and appearing to a sizable group of his followers. The apostle then linked the believers' resurrection with the Son's resurrection. Paul noted that if believers were not to be raised to new life, then, neither was the Son raised; and if that were the case, then all Christianity was a farce. The apostle's contention, though, was that the

Son had been raised from the dead. Moreover, he had blazed an eschatological trail for all believers to follow. The apostle revealed that at the Son's return, he would destroy all forces that opposed him, including death itself, which he would deal a fatal blow. Then, he would hand over the divine kingdom to the Father, who would reign supreme and unchallenged.

Paul reminded his readers that death entered the world because of Adam's sin; and since the human race is related to Adam through natural birth, sin and death spread to all humanity. The apostle explained that while one man's disobedience brought natural death to all, in the same way, another man's obedience would result in resurrection and eternal life for all who were spiritually related to him. Furthermore, his resurrection was the down payment, or guarantee, that believers would also be raised. Additionally, the Saviour's bodily resurrection was the prototype of the future resurrection of all those who trusted in him for salvation. Paul explained that the Messiah sealed death's destruction with his own crucifixion and resurrection from the dead; but complete victory over death would only come when the Messiah returned to defeat Satan.

Though the apostle thought it was foolish to try to pinpoint the exact nature of the resurrection body, he used comparisons to natural things to explain how believers would be transformed. For instance, as a seed had a relationship to a plant it produced, so the resurrection body was related to the old body; but the seed was not the same as the old body, any more than the resurrection body was the same as the old body. Expressed differently, a glorified body raised from the dead would be related to the old, natural body that died, and yet, it would be remarkably metamorphosized. The resurrection body would not die or engage in sin, and it would share in the resurrection power of the Messiah. Furthermore, Paul revealed that this transformation would not



be slow and gradual; instead, when the Saviour returned believers—whether dead or alive—would be instantly changed. They would receive incorruptible bodies, and this transformation would display the Son's complete and final victory over death.

## Reference List

- Alexander DR 2008. *Creation or evolution: do we have to choose?* Oxford: Monarch Books.
- Balz H 1993. Paulos. In H Balz and G Schneider (eds.). *Exegetical dictionary of the New Testament*, 3:59–62. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Barbour IG 1989. Creation and cosmology. In T Peters (ed.), *Cosmos as creation: theology and science in consonance*, 115–151. Nashville: Abingdon.
- Barrett CK 1962. *From first Adam to last: a study in Pauline theology*. London: Adam and Charles Black.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1968. *A commentary on the first epistle to the Corinthians*. New York: Harper and Row.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1994. *Paul: an introduction to his thought*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Barth K 1956. *Christ and Adam: man and humanity in Romans 5*. TA Smail (trans.). Eugene: Wipf and Stock.
- Beasley-Murray GR 1986. Baptism, wash. In C Brown (ed.), *New international dictionary of New Testament theology and exegesis*, 1:143–150. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Beker JC 1987. *Suffering and hope: the biblical vision and the human predicament*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Best HM and Huttar D 2009. Music, musical instruments. In MC Tenney and M Silva (eds.), *The Zondervan encyclopedia of the Bible*, 4:343–356. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

- Bromiley GW 1979. Baptism for the dead. In GW Bromiley (ed.)' *The international standard Bible encyclopedia*, 1:426. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2001a. Baptism for the dead. In WA Elwell (ed.), *Evangelical dictionary of theology*, 135–136. Grand Rapids: Baker.
- Brown C 1986a. Resurrection. In C Brown (ed.), *New international dictionary of New Testament theology and exegesis*, 3:259–275. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1986b. Soul. In C Brown (ed.), *New international dictionary of New Testament theology and exegesis*, 3:676–689. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Brown WP 2010. *The seven pillars of creation: the Bible, science, and the ecology of wonder*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bruce FF 1971. *1 and 2 Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1977. *Paul: apostle of the heart set free*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Brunner E 1952. *The Christian doctrine of creation and redemption. Dogmatics: vol. II*. Translated by O Wyon. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press.
- Bube RH 1971. *The human quest: a new look at science and the Christian faith*. Waco: Word Books.
- Capes DB, et al. 2007. *Rediscovering Paul: an introduction to his world, letters, and theology*. Downers Grove: IVP.
- Ciampa RE and Rosner BS 2010. *The first letter to the Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Collins CJ 2006a. *Genesis 1–4: a linguistic, literary, and theological commentary*. Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2010. Adam and Eve as historical people, and why it matters. *Perspectives on science and faith* 62(3):147–165.

- Conzelmann H 1975. *1 Corinthians*. Translated by JW Leitch. Philadelphia: Fortress.
- Cosner L 2009. Christ as the last Adam: Paul's use of the creation narrative in 1 Corinthians 15. *Journal of creation*. 23(3):70–75.
- Dahl NA 1964. Christ, creation, and the church. In WD Davies and D Daube (eds.), *The background of the New Testament and its eschatology in honour of CH Dodd*, 422–443. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Danker FW (ed.) 2000. *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Davies WD 1980. *Paul and rabbinic Judaism: some rabbinic elements in Pauline theology*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Day AJ 2005. Adam, anthropology and the Genesis record: taking Genesis seriously in the light of contemporary science. *ISCAST*. 1:1–31. Huntingdale: ISCAST. Online article. Accessed from [www.iscast.org/journal/articlespage/Day\\_A\\_2000-01\\_Adam\\_Anthropology](http://www.iscast.org/journal/articlespage/Day_A_2000-01_Adam_Anthropology).
- de Boer MC 2000. Paul and apocalyptic eschatology. In JJ Collins (ed.), *The encyclopedia of apocalypticism. Vol. 1. The origins of apocalypticism in Judaism and Christianity*, 345–383. New York: Continuum.
- Dihle A 1999. *Psychē*. In G Kittel (ed.). Translated by GW Bromiley. *Theological dictionary of the New Testament*, 9:608–617. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Domning DP and Hellwig MK 2006. *Original selfishness: original sin and evil in the light of evolution*. Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing.
- Dunn JDG 1998. *The theology of Paul the apostle*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

- Edgar B 2002. Biblical anthropology and the intermediate state: part I. *Evangelical quarterly* 74(1):27–45.
- Fape MO 2000. Baptism. In TA Desmond and BS Rosner (eds.), *New dictionary of biblical theology*, 395–397. Downers Grove: IVP.
- Fee GD 1987. *The first epistle to the Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Finkenrath G 1986. *mystērion*. In C Brown (ed.), *New international dictionary of New Testament theology and exegesis*, 3:501–506. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Fitzmyer JA 2008. *First Corinthians*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Frame J 2002. *The doctrine of God*. Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing.
- Friedrich G 1999. *sálpinx*. In G Kittel (ed.), GW Bromiley (trans.), *Theological dictionary of the New Testament*, 7:71–88. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Furnish VP 1999. *The theology of the first letter to the Corinthians*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Garland DE 2003. *1 Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Baker.
- Gaster TH 1962b. Resurrection. In GA Buttrick (ed.), *The interpreter's dictionary of the Bible*, 4:39–43. Nashville: Abingdon.
- Gilkey L 1959. *Maker of heaven and earth: the Christian doctrine of creation in the light of modern knowledge*. Lanham: University Press of America.
- Gill DW 2002. 1 Corinthians. In CE Arnold (ed.), *Zondervan illustrated Bible backgrounds commentary*, 3:101–193. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Gillman N 1997. *The death of death: resurrection and immortality in Jewish thought*. Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing.
- Godet FL 1979. *Commentary on first Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Kregel.

- Goldingay J 2003. *Old Testament theology: Israel's gospel*. Vol. 1. Downers Grove: IVP.
- Gorman MJ 2004. *Apostle of the crucified Lord: a theological introduction to Paul and his letters*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Green JB 2008. *Body, soul, and human life: the nature of humanity in the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Baker.
- Grogan GW 2009. Baptism for the dead. In MC Tenney and M Silva (eds.), *The Zondervan encyclopedia of the Bible*, 1:501–502. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Grosheide FW 1984. *Commentary on the first epistle to the Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Grudem W 1995. *Systematic theology: an introduction to biblical doctrine*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Gruenler RG 1986. *The Trinity in the gospel of John: a thematic commentary on the fourth Gospel*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock.
- Guthrie D 1981a. *New Testament theology*. Downers Grove: IVP.
- Haarsma DB and Haarsma LD 2007. *Origins: a reformed look at creation, design, and evolution*. Grand Rapids: Faith Alive.
- Harlow DC 2008. Creation according to Genesis: literary genre, cultural context, theological truth. *Christian scholar's review* 37(2):163–198.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2010. After Adam: reading Genesis in an age of evolutionary science. *Perspectives on science and Christian faith* 62 (3) 179–195.
- Harris MJ 1986. Trumpet. In C Brown (ed.), *New international dictionary of New Testament theology and exegesis*, 3:873–874. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Haught JF 2000. *God after Darwin: a theology of evolution*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Hawthorne GF 1983. *Philippians*. Waco: Word Books.

- Hill CE 1988. Paul's understanding of Christ's kingdom in 1 Corinthians 15:20–28. *Novumtestamentum* 30(4):297–320.
- Hooker MD 1994. The letter to the Philippians: introduction, commentary, and reflections. In LE Keck (ed.), *The new interpreter's Bible*, 11:469–549. Nashville: Abingdon.
- Hornell DG 2000. *An introduction to the study of Paul*. London: Continuum.
- Hulsbosch A 1965. *God in creation and evolution*. Translated by M Versfeld. New York: Sheed and Ward.
- Hurtado LW 1993. Pre-existence. In GF Hawthorne, RP Martin, and DG Reid (eds.), *Dictionary of Paul and his letters*, 743–746. Downers Grove: IVP.
- Jackelén A 2006. Emergence theory—what is its promise? *Zygon* 41(3):623–632.
- Jeeves MA 1969. *The scientific enterprise and Christian faith*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity.
- Jones IH 1992. Music and musical instruments. In DN Freedman (ed.), *The Anchor Bible dictionary*, 4:930–939. New York: Doubleday.
- Kass LR 2003. *The beginning of wisdom: reading Genesis*. New York: Free Press.
- Klenck JD 2009. Major terrestrial animal taxonomic classifications as defined by God. *Journal of creation*. 23(2):118–123.
- Krämer H 1993. *mystērion*. In H Balz and G Schneider (eds.), *Exegetical dictionary of the New Testament*, 2:446–449. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Kreitzer LJ 1993a. Adam and Christ. In GF Hawthorne and RP Martin (eds.), *Dictionary of Paul and his letters*, 9–15. Downers Grove: IVP.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1993b. Body. In GF Hawthorne and RP Martin (eds.), *Dictionary of Paul and his letters*, 71–76. Downers Grove: IVP.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1993c. Resurrection. In GF Hawthorne and RP Martin (eds.), *Dictionary of Paul and his letters*, 805–812. Downers Grove: IVP.
- Ladd GE 1997. *A theology of the New Testament*. DA Hagner (ed.). Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Lamoureux DO 2008. *Evolutionary creation: a Christian approach to evolution*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock.
- Lane WL 1991a. *Hebrews 1–8*. Waco: Word Books.
- Levison JR 1988. *Portraits of Adam in early Judaism: from Sirach to 2 Baruch*. Sheffield: JSOT Press.
- Liefeld W 2009. Mystery. In MC Tenney and M Silva (eds.), *The Zondervan encyclopedia of the Bible*, 4:359–363. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Lincoln AT 1981. *Paradise now and not yet: studies in the role of the heavenly dimension in Paul's thought with special reference to his eschatology*. Grand Rapids: Baker.
- Lioy D 2010. *Axis of glory: a biblical and theological analysis of the temple motif in scripture*. New York: Peter Lang.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2011. An evolutionary creation process for the origin of humanity. *Conspectus* 11:115–165.
- Longenecker BW 2002. The narrative approach to Paul: an early retrospective. *Currents in biblical research* 1(1):88–111.
- Louw JP and Nida EA (eds.) 1989. *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament based on semantic domains. Vol. 1: introduction and domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.
- Mare WH 1976.1 Corinthians. In FE Gaebelein (ed.), *The expositor's Bible commentary*, 10:175–297. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Marshall IH 2004. *New Testament theology: many witnesses, one gospel*. Downers Grove: IVP.
- Martin-Achard R 1992. Resurrection (OT). In DN Freedman (ed.), *The Anchor Bible dictionary*, 5:680–684. New York: Doubleday.

- Matera FJ 2007. *New Testament theology: exploring diversity and unity*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2010. *Romans*. Grand Rapids: Baker.
- McGrath AE 2010a. Science and faith at Odds? *Q words*. Online article. Accessed from [www.qideas.org/essays/science-and-faith-at-odds.aspx](http://www.qideas.org/essays/science-and-faith-at-odds.aspx).
- McRay J 2003. *Paul: his life and teaching*. Grand Rapids: Baker.
- Morris HM 1995. Reasons for opposing evolution. In RB Zuck (ed.), *Vital apologetic issues: examining reason and revelation in biblical perspective*, 82–95. Grand Rapids: Kregel.
- Morris L 1985. *The first epistle of the Paul to the Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2001. *1 Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Mosert C 2005. Theodicy and eschatology. In B Barber and D Neville (eds.), *Theodicy and eschatology*, 97–120. Adelaide: ATF Press.
- Müller H 1986. *ektrōma*. In C Brown (ed.), *New international dictionary of New Testament theology and exegesis*, 1:182–183. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Muller RA 1988. Resurrection. In GW Bromiley (ed.), *The international standard Bible encyclopedia*, 4:145–150. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Murphy GL 2001. Chiasmic cosmology and creation's functional integrity. *Perspectives on science and Christian faith* 53(1):7–13.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2010. Human evolution in theological context. *BioLogos* 1–9. San Diego: Biologos Foundation.
- Niehaus JJ 2008. *Ancient near eastern themes in biblical theology*. Grand Rapids: Kregel.
- O'Brien PT 1993b. Mystery. In GF Hawthorne, RP Martin, and DG Reid (eds.), *Dictionary of Paul and his letters*, 621–623. Downers Grove: IVP.



- O'Connor T and Wong HY 2006. Emergent properties. In N Zalta (ed.), *Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*. Stanford: Stanford University.
- Oepke A 1999. *báptō*. In G Kittel (ed.). Translated by GW Bromiley. *Theological dictionary of the New Testament*, 1:529–546. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Orr WF and Walther JA 1976. *1 Corinthians*. New York: Doubleday.
- Peacocke AR 1979. *Creation and the world of science: the Bampton lectures, 1978*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Peters T 1989. Cosmos as creation. In T Peters (ed.), *Cosmos as creation: theology and science in consonance*, 45–113. Nashville: Abingdon.
- Plantinga A 1991. When faith and reason clash: evolution and the Bible. *Christian scholar's review* 21(1):8–33.
- Polhill JB 1999. *Paul and his letters*. Nashville: Broadman and Holman.
- Prior D 1985. *The message of 1 Corinthians: life in the local church*. Downers Grove: IVP.
- Ridderbos HN 1997a. *Paul: an outline of his theology*. Translated by JR De Witt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Ryken L, et al. (eds.) 1998. *Dictionary of biblical imagery*. Downers Grove: IVP.
- Sampley JP 2002. The first letter to the Corinthians: introduction, commentary, and reflections. In LE Keck (ed.), *The new interpreter's Bible*, 10:773–1003. Nashville: Abingdon.
- Sand A 1993. *Psychē*. In H Balz and G Schneider (eds.), *Exegetical dictionary of the New Testament*, 3:500–503. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Schaeffer FA 1972. *Genesis in space and time: the flow of biblical history*. Downers Grove: IVP.

- Schep JA 2009. Resurrection. In MC Tenney and M Silva (eds.), *The Zondervan encyclopedia of the Bible*, 5:88–94. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Schneider JR 2010. Recent genetic science and Christian theology on human origins. *Perspectives on science and faith* 62(3):196–212.
- Schnelle U 2009. *Theology of the New Testament*. ME Boring (trans.). Grand Rapids: Baker.
- Schreiner TR 2008. *New Testament theology: magnifying God in Christ*. Grand Rapids: Baker.
- Scroggs R 1966. *The last Adam: a study in Pauline anthropology*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Segal AF 1990. *Paul the convert: the apostolate and apostasy of Saul the Pharisee*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Silva M 2007. Philippians. In GK Beale and DA Carson (eds.), *Commentary on the New Testament use of the Old Testament*, 835–839. Grand Rapids: Baker.
- Steenburg D 1990. The worship of Adam and Christ as the image of God. *Journal for the study of the New Testament* 39:95–109.
- Thielman FS 2005. *Theology of the New Testament: a canonical and synthetic approach*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Thiselton AC 2000. *The first epistle to the Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Tobin TH 2004. *Paul's rhetoric in its contexts: the argument of Romans*. Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers.
- vanHuissteen JW 2006. Emergence and human uniqueness: limiting or delimiting evolutionary explanation. *Zygon* 41(3):649–664.
- Vos G 1972. *The Pauline eschatology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Wenham D 1995. *Paul: follower of Jesus or founder of Christianity?* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

- Werner E 1962. Musical instruments. In GA Buttrick (ed.), *The interpreter's dictionary of the Bible*, 3:469–476. Nashville: Abingdon.
- White REO 1996. Baptism for the dead. In WA Elwell (ed.), *Evangelical dictionary of biblical theology*, 49. Grand Rapids: Baker.
- Wilcox DL 2004. *God and evolution: a faith-based understanding*. Valley Forge: Judson Press.
- Witherington B 1998. *The Paul quest: the renewed search for the Jew of Tarsus*. Downers Grove: IVP.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2009. *The indelible image: the theological and ethical thought world of the New Testament. Vol. 1: the individual witnesses*. Downers Grove: IVP.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2010. *The indelible image: the theological and ethical thought world of the New Testament. Vol. 2: the collective witness*. Downers Grove: IVP.
- Young BH 1997. *Paul the Jewish theologian: a Pharisee among Christians, Jews, and Gentiles*. Peabody: Hendrickson.



# **A Biblical-Theological Analysis of Matthew 6:19–34 to Clarify the Relationship between the Christian Disciple and Money**

Darrell O’Donoghue and Dan Lioy

## **Abstract<sup>1</sup>**

This essay conducts a biblical-theological analysis of Matthew 6:19–34 to clarify what it teaches about the relationship between the Christian disciple and money. One major finding is that Jesus presents money as a rival god that challenges for the allegiance that rightly belongs to the Lord. Jesus also draws attention to the way a proper allegiance to God can be expressed. A second major finding is that money and the Lord are radically different gods. Moreover, there are significantly different consequences to the believer that result from devotion to either money or God. The third major finding shows that the consequences of allegiance to either God or money, needs to be understood in terms of how one’s actions affect ones’ community.

## **Introduction**

To understand what Matthew 6:19–34 teaches about the relationship between Jesus’ disciples and money, it is important to examine the historical and literary contexts, as well an examination of the major

---

<sup>1</sup> This journal article is based on Darrell O’Donoghue’s MTh thesis, under the supervision of Dan Lioy. The views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

theological motifs found within the text. Once this task is carried out, there can be a synthesis and clarification of the study's major findings.

Matthew 6:19–34 is found within the first of Matthew's five discourses. This discourse is known as the Sermon on the Mount (hereafter referred to as the SOM). That the text is found within the SOM creates the first problem related to the interpretation of the passage. Specifically, while there are five main views as to how the SOM is to be read, there is no scholarly consensus concerning any of these options.

First, there is the Lutheran view of the SOM (cf. Blomberg 1992:94; Carson 1994:165; McArthur 1978:17). This view maintains that the demands of the SOM are impossible to follow, and are in place to make people aware of their sinfulness and push them towards Christ. This view, however, will not suffice. While the SOM may in fact make clear a person's sinfulness and thus, the need for salvation, the SOM is presented as one of five discourses in Matthew that followers of Christ can and are expected to obey (cf. Hendrickx 1984:6). Matthew 28:19–20 instructs and expects Jesus' disciples to obey his teachings, which surely relates back to the five discourses in Matthew.

Second, there is the view held by Weiss (1971:84), which says that the SOM is apocalyptic in nature. Weiss (91) argued that what Jesus taught about the Second Coming only makes sense if he believed he would return within the lifetime of the people among whom he worked. One result of this view is that Jesus would have been incorrect in his thinking (cf. Blomberg 1992:94; Carson 1994:163; Pelikan 2001:45). A second result of this view is that the SOM presents a temporary or interim ethic so radical in its demands, that it was only expected to be obeyed for a short while—in this instance, before the end of the world (cf. Carson 1994:163; Pelikan 2001:45). The major problem with this view is that the rest of the canon affirms that Jesus would not have

made such a radical error in judgement. Also, Matthew recorded the SOM after the death of Jesus, with the expectation that its hearers follow its demands (cf. Matt 28:19–20).

Third, dispensationalists hold that the SOM teaches an ethic adhered to in Jesus' millennial reign (cf. Blomberg 1992:94; Carson 1994:167; Chafer 1976:98; Lloyd-Jones 2006:18). In this view, the SOM's demands are not an ethic for today. Carson (1994:169) addresses the problem with this view when he argues that the writer expects the readers to live out the SOM in a sinful society, and not in an idyllic setting. A supporting example is that the SOM ends with an exhortation to put disobedience aside and obey the teachings of Christ (cf. Matt 7:24–27).

Fourth, the SOM is an ideal social and liberal agenda (cf. Kissinger 1975:40). Allegedly, all one has to do is hold to the SOM's demands, and a peaceful society will ensue (cf. Blomberg 1992:94). This view ignores human sinfulness and their need for God's help to obey his demands. Further, the two world wars of the previous century cast significant doubt on the legitimacy of this view.

Fifth, there is the Anabaptist view, which holds that the SOM is to be obeyed literally in all civic and social aspects of society (cf. Blomberg 1992:94; Carson 1994:165). One major problem with this view is that it fails to recognize that the SOM is not meant to be the final word on all matters about which it teaches (cf. Carson 1994:164–165). Jesus' didactic style needs to be taken into account, as well as the biblical teachings of the rest of the canon.

In light of the preceding analysis, the most prudent approach is to accept the SOM's place in Matthew as the teachings of Jesus, in which he shows his disciples what it is like to live as citizens of his kingdom

under his reign. Furthermore, these are teachings that can and should be adhered to by all believers, in all places, through all ages. The implication, then, is that the SOM, being one of the five discourses in Matthew, is practical in nature (meant for application by all believers). As Carson (1994:166–167) argues, it is acknowledged that conformity to the SOM is expected now, even though perfection will not be achieved until the Second Advent. Now, that the preferred approach to reading the SOM has been determined, the historical and literary analysis of the biblical text can proceed.

## 1. Historical Analysis

Two important tasks precede the historical analysis of the SOM, namely, (a) the exploration of the religious, cultural, and sociological context of the origin of Matthew (cf. Lategan 2009:65), and (b) the exploration of the purpose of Matthew and the SOM (cf. Lategan 2009:65; Smith 2008:172). The outcome of both tasks will affect the understanding of the SOM.

### 1.1. Origin

#### *1.1.1. Date, author, audience, and geographical location*

Many modern scholars favor a late dating of Matthew—around AD 80–90. These scholars assume that Matthew was dependent on Mark, and Mark was written somewhere around AD 65 (cf. France 1989:83). Mark would have been in circulation for several years to become well known enough for Matthew to have used it as a source. Carter (2000:916) claims that Matthew's reference to the destruction of the temple proves the book was written after AD 70, since Matthew gives a theological interpretation of why the events occurred. It is likely that both Ignatius



and the *Didache* referred to Matthew, implying that Matthew wrote after AD 100 (cf. Senior 1997:81).

It is assumed in this essay that Matthew (and the accompanying SOM) was written earlier than the AD 80–90 dating. One could argue that the prophecies relating to the destruction of the temple make a strong case for a dating before AD 70, since, if the prophecies were already fulfilled, one would expect to find references to their fulfillment (cf. France 1989:85). There are also references in Matthew to suggest that the temple was still intact. Also, while modern scholars generally accepted that Mark was written around AD 65, this assumption in fact may not be true (82–83). The early church's belief, that Matthew was written first, would place the gospel in the early 60s. For instance, Irenaeus dates the gospel in the early 60s. There is no evidence available to contradict his belief (88).

In conjunction with the dating of the book is the issue of authorship. The orthodox Protestant view is that the former tax collector, named Matthew, wrote the first Synoptic Gospel that bears his name (cf. Lioy 2004:11–12). This would coincide with an earlier dating. A late dating and thus a move away from Matthew as the author, is based on the assumption that the book could not have been written by an eyewitness of the events (cf. Derickson 2003:87). However, the early church fathers all attributed the first Synoptic Gospel to Matthew (97). These men were recognized scholars who would have based their conclusions on 'widespread testimony and not isolated personal theories'. Thus, it is correctly assumed that Matthew can be attributed as the author of the first Synoptic Gospel (and the accompanying SOM).

Of particular interest to the main problem of this essay is that 'Matthew was a tax collector, who left everything in his life for Jesus' (Green 2000:25). Nevertheless, it remains unclear from where this gospel

originated, and who were the initial intended recipients (cf. Keener 1999:49). What seems certain (at least to some degree) is that Matthew's primary audience were Jewish Christians (cf. Keener 1999:49; Long 1997:2). This view is based on the amount of specific Jewish and Old Testament references found in Matthew. Admittedly, Gentile Christians are also addressed in the text (cf. Wilkins 2001:39). While scholars do not know with certainty Matthew's place of origin, the consensus view is that the original recipients were probably located in a prosperous urban area (cf. Long 1997:2).

### *1.1.2. Jesus' context: audience, location, and economic climate*

The assumption has been made that the apostle Matthew is the author of the first Synoptic Gospel. Thus, it could be that some of the original recipients of the SOM would have heard or read Matthew. These are people who would have known that to follow Jesus, Matthew would have given up everything to do so (cf. Matt 8:20).

There is some debate around who were the initial intended recipients of the SOM. Matthew 5:1–2 mentions Jesus addressing his disciples, while 7:28 refers to the amazed crowds. Ervast (1983:12, 15) comments on the issue of how one is to reconcile 5:1–2 and 7:28, saying that it is not a matter of either one option or another, but that the recipients of the SOM are both the disciples and the crowd. Senior (1997:102) sums up his own position, by affirming that the SOM is addressed to the crowds through Jesus teaching the disciples.

Having made the above observations, it is not necessary to reconcile Matthew 5:1–2 to 7:28. Clearly, Matthew 5:1–2 tells the reader that Jesus is addressing the SOM to disciples, and Matthew 28:20 affirms that the discourses found in Matthew are for training in discipleship. The fact that the crowds heard what Jesus said in the SOM does not

mean that they were in any way the intended primary recipients. So, while Jesus may have simultaneously addressed both the crowds and the disciples, his followers were indeed the intended primary recipients.

There are several suggestions as to where Jesus delivered the SOM. Nonetheless, 'the exact location where Jesus taught his Sermon remains uncertain' (Lioy 2004:90–91). Jesus' going up a hill or mountain to teach his disciples could create a direct conceptual link to Moses, who received the law on a mountain. Jesus, fulfilling the role of prophet and, thus, executing the right to speak prophetically about the ways of God, is a theological motif found in Matthew (cf. Dunn 2009:54).

Of significance to the central issue being explored by this essay is that Galilee was a 'monitised economy' (Esler 1995:41). The use of money was commonplace for all classes of people, from the poorest of society to the very wealthy. People would have been aware of concepts such as 'maximizing resources,' 'keeping production costs low,' as well as 'manipulating demand to keep prices high'.

In Jesus' context, there was a large financial gap between the rich and the poor (cf. Wenham and Walton 2001:21). There was a middle class, but it was nominal in size (cf. Davids 1992:702). The implication is that the Lord's teaching on money was coming to a society that inhabited all sorts of social and wealth classes.

The financial well-being of some of the wealthy class would have come at the expense of the poor (cf. Davids 1992:702). For example, landowners exploited the poor, which led to the AD 70 revolt, in which Jewish debt records were destroyed. Tax collectors also added a lofty percentage above Rome's required tax (cf. Green 2000:25). The Jewish community classified tax collectors (like Matthew) in the same category as murderers—hated as 'social pariahs'.

Many of the Jewish religious leaders formed part of the elite that maintained the status quo—keep the Roman societal structures in place (cf. Carter 2001:35). Their conflicts with Jesus were considered, amongst other things, an assault on their wealth.

Jesus' own financial disposition at the time of his birth was one of poverty (cf. Davids 1992:702). This is supported by the fact his parents offered the sacrifices of poor people in Luke 2:24. It could be that their business in Galilee may have eventually been successful, in which case, they would have achieved a modest level of existence. As an adult, Jesus did not own any land (704). Further, the Lord's disciples were considered a 'ragtag bunch.'

There was a view held by some in Jesus' time that material riches were a sign of God's favour, and that to be poor was a 'sign of God's displeasure' (Lioy 2004:166–167). This attitude and worldview is contrary to the teaching of the tenth commandment (167). Further, scripture reveals that Jesus, whose life pleased God, was not considered wealthy. Jesus' life was one lived simply and free from the concern of material possessions (cf. Keener 1999:230). The prevalent philosophies of the day, some of whom, like Plato, taught on the worthlessness of wealth, would have respected such a stance; but the general attitude would be to acquire as much wealth as possible.

## 1.2. Purpose

Several theories have been put forward concerning why Matthew wrote his gospel (and the accompanying SOM). The fact that scholars argue for several possible reasons, confirms Blomberg's (1992:34) argument, that Matthew had more than one intention in mind when writing. First, Kilpatrick believes that Matthew is a reworking of liturgical material (cf. Guthrie 1976:26). Keck (2005:34) points to the well-structured

material in the text to make for easy memorisation. However, as Guthrie (1976:27) argues, these features do not need a liturgical purpose to justify their place in Matthew. Thus, it cannot be said with certainty whether this was the intended purpose. This essay affirms that the teaching on money in the SOM is well-organised and easy for memorisation, regardless of whether it was planned to be so.

Second, it was previously argued that Matthew had instruction in discipleship for at least one of his reasons in writing. Again, the comparison to Moses here would be helpful, but this time, as the corresponding role of a teacher. Specifically, the SOM begins with Jesus going up the mountain and ends with Jesus coming down, thus promoting Jesus as the new Moses (i.e. amongst other roles, as the new teacher of Israel) (cf. Achtemeier, Green, and Thompson 2001:100). The theme of discipleship in Matthew requires discipleship to be lived out in community. In particular, discipleship requires concern for the social well-being of the community to which believers belong (cf. Guthrie 1985:153–154).

Third, because Matthew gives details about the person and work of Jesus, the gospel can be viewed as a biography (cf. Nolland 2005:19). The difference between Matthew and other biographies of antiquity is that, while the latter were concerned about the kind of ideal taught, Matthew was concerned with Jesus' theological identity and eschatological mission. Humphries-Brooks (1996:4) shows that in learning about the person of Christ, readers also learn about appropriate action in their own world. One can therefore say that Matthew, as a biography, strengthens the role the gospel plays in fostering discipleship.

Fourth, Matthew provides definition for the Christian movement. Specifically, Matthew attempted to help the church distinguish its

identity amidst a plethora of philosophical options (cf. Long 1997:2–3). Matthew's church, as already noted, was probably located in a prosperous urban area, where there were both Jews and Gentiles—and a variety of worldviews.

The emphasis placed in Jewish interest and Old Testament references are to be taken into account when considering the purpose of Matthew (cf. Guthrie 1976:25). Matthew attempts to show the pertinence of the Jewish Scriptures and more particularly how these ancient sacred texts find their ultimate fulfillment in Jesus and the church (cf. Keck 2005:38). It seems that the teachings of the Torah and the Christian Gospels are in fact compatible (Drane 2001:206).

Lioy (2004) argues convincingly for the continued relevance and application for God's moral law in the life of the New Testament Church. In fact, Jesus is portrayed as fulfilling the law in its truest sense (cf. Leske 1998:1257). The SOM affirms the on-going validity of the moral law. In the SOM, Jesus unpacks the pertinence of the moral law for his followers (cf. Lioy 2004:189–193). In this regard, the Ten Commandments may be viewed as a summary of God's moral law (6). Moreover, an incorrect attitude towards money can lead to a violation of the first and fifth commandments.

Finally, Matthew is seen to have a universal theological purpose, for it is a gospel to all people (cf. Drane 2001:206). As a proclamation of the gospel, Jesus is portrayed as one who leads his people from the captivity of sin (cf. Wright 1992:385–386). The pertinence for this essay is that in the SOM, Jesus leads his followers from an allegiance to money as a god and the degenerate experience that worship of money brings.

## 2. Literary Analysis

### 2.1. Literary structure of the text

Of the several proposals concerning the formal division and subdivision of the SOM, Talbert's (2006:120–121) will be adopted in this essay. The reason for this is as follows. Brooks (1992:27–28) argues that, in light of the considerable disagreement over the literary structure of the SOM, it may be that Matthew did not have as rigid a structure as scholars are seeking to find. Most likely, Matthew favoured triads and therefore, grouped broad theological concepts in threes but, at times, in order to fit his argument, he may have deviated from this literary arrangement. Thus, to understand the structure of the text purely in triadic form could result in missing some of what Matthew sought to portray.

Talbert's (2006:26) structure groups the major thought units of the SOM by way of scholarly consensus, including 6:19–34, but allows for 'innovation' in the subdivision of the major thought units of the SOM. So, for example, while he breaks down 6:19–24 into three parts, the latter can vary in the structural outline. Talbert's approach, then, enables him to follow the natural argument of the text. For example, by allowing for some innovation in the subunits and not enforcing a strict triadic formula, he can acknowledge a prohibition in part one of his first subunit, without having to find another prohibition in part two of the second subunit.

### 2.2. Talbert's formal division of the text

Subunit one of Matthew 6:19–24 breaks down as follows (cf. Talbert 2006:121):

### Part One: 'The Two Treasures' (6:19–21)

- A prohibition is found in 6:19 to not lay up treasures on earth.
- A command is found in 6:20 to lay up treasures in heaven.
- A reason is found in 6:21 that in one's heart will be where their treasure is.

### Part Two: 'The Two Eyes' (6:22–23)

- An assertion is found in 6:22a with Jesus stating that the eye is the lamp of the body.
- An inference is found in 6:22b and 23a saying that if the eye is good, then the body will be full of light and, conversely, if bad, will be full of darkness.
- A conclusion is found in 6:23b, in which Jesus says that if the light in you is darkness, then how great is that darkness.

### Part Three: 'The Two Masters' (6:24)

- An assertion is made in 6:24 with the statement that no one can serve two masters.
- The reason is found in 6:24b,c, namely, that a person will love one master and hate the other.
- There is an application in 6:24d with the statement that one cannot serve both God and mammon (or wealth).

Subunit two of Matthew 6:25–34 breaks down as follows (cf. Talbert 2006:126):



### Part One (6:25–30)

- A prohibition is found in 6:25a for the disciple to not worry.
- Four reasons relating to the prohibition then follow in 6:25b, 26, 27 and 28–30.

### Part Two (6:31–33)

- There is a prohibition found in 6:31 to not worry.
- Two reasons are related to the prohibition and found in 6:32a and 32b. The reasons are that this is Gentile behaviour and God knows the disciples' needs.
- There is a command found in 6:33a to seek God's kingdom.
- There is a promise found in 6:33b relating to the command in 33a.

### Part Three (6:34)

- There is a prohibition against worrying found in 6:34b.
- Two reasons related to the prohibition are found in 6:34b (i.e. tomorrow will worry about its own things) and 34c (i.e. sufficient for the day is its own trouble).

## 2.3. The three sayings of Matthew 6:19–24

### 2.3.1. Part one—the two treasures

Jesus used antithesis in Matthew 6:20–21 by giving a prohibition and command, stated in the absolute, to show that his disciples must stop prioritising the accumulation of wealth over and above service to God and his kingdom (cf. Hendrickx 1984:129; Lloyd-Jones 2006:396). This stylistic feature is important to note, for a surface level reading of 6:20–

21 can appear to suggest that the Lord was instituting an outright ban on the accumulation of material possessions. There are motivating factors given with the prohibition and command, namely, the eternal and imperishable value that comes from a life lived in service to Jesus, as opposed to the perishable and temporary value of possessions amassed on earth (cf. Guelich 1982:326–327).

According to Talbert (2006:121), the rationale for this command/antithesis is in 6:21 (cf. Talbert 2006:121). The heart is the controlling point of a person's desires and motivations (cf. Ridderbos 1987:137), and the affections of the disciples' heart set the course of their life. Thus, the disciples must direct their allegiance and affection of their hearts towards Jesus, over and above the accumulation of wealth.

### *3.3.2. Part two—the good and bad eye*

This saying continues the theme of affection and loyalty of the disciples' heart that began in the first saying. This is confirmed when it is understood that the heart and eye were used synonymously (cf. Stott 1998:157). A good eye referred to generosity to others (Talbert 2006:122). A bad eye referred to a stingy disposition towards others. There is some debate about the assertion found in Matthew 6:22a. What remains unchanged is that the goal is the same for the disciple to be full of light. Since the good eye points to a generous heart, one achieves it by having a generous attitude.

In scripture, light is used as a metaphor for truth, revelation, and blessing (cf. Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman 1998:510–512). It is also used as a symbol for purity (cf. Carson 1994:87). Therefore, one may conclude that the inference in 6:22b is as follows: should Jesus' disciples express obedience to God through generosity, their lives will

be characterised by purity, revelation, blessing, and truth. The other inference found in 6:23a shows that the stingy disposition would lead to a degenerate experience for disciples, the details of which are explored below.

## **2.4. Part three—the two masters**

This saying, like the previous two, continues the theme of allegiance to God over money. By Jesus asserting in Matthew 6:24 that no one can serve two masters, he is stating a fact. 'To be a slave is to be attached to a Master' (Spicq 1994:381). Stott (1998:158) maintains that 'slavery by definition demands fulltime service of the slave and a belonging to one Master.'

The reason for this in 6:24b and 24c is that the disciple will love one master and hate the other (cf. Talbert 2006:121). In Semitic language, to hate something or someone over another is a way of denoting strong preference (cf. Carson 1994:88; Talbert 2006:123). Thus, the application of 6:24d shows that a disciple's allegiance, which should belong exclusively to God, will suffer, should one decide to serve mammon (or wealth). There is debate around whether to consider mammon a personal name for a known pagan deity (cf. France 1985:139; Kapolyo 2006:1123). Regardless, the gospel presents it as something that challenges the disciple's allegiance and is thus a potential idol.

## **2.5 Matthew 6:25–34**

### **2.5.1. Part one—Matthew 6:25–30**

It is fitting that the second subunit begins with the prohibition, 'Therefore do not worry', inferring that when the disciples accept the

truth of 6:19–24, they could find themselves overly anxious concerning their financial state (cf. Schmidt 1988:172). By addressing the disciple's life, Jesus is referring to one's very existence (cf. Brown 1975b:683). Thus, the kind of worry Jesus is talking about relates to human survival. This kind of worry obscures the disciple's priorities (cf. Carson 1994:92).

Jesus' four reasons for prohibiting worry in 6:25b–30 is as follows.

First, the essence of life is more than food and clothing (cf. Hagner 1993:1630).

Second, by arguing from the lesser (i.e. nature) to greater (i.e. humans), the Lord shows that the heavenly Father will care for his own (cf. Blomberg 1992:125; Carter 2001:177). That God is a 'heavenly' Father carries the implication that he is intimately involved with their lives and cares for their needs (cf. Traub 1967:520–521).

Third, Jesus equates worrying to an attempt to change one's height. Just as one has no control over one's height, Jesus is saying that worry is useless (cf. Lioy 2004:170). Further, worrying about areas of life where God is sovereign is an attempt to overthrow God's authority rather than trusting him (cf. Carter 2000:177). Finally, Jesus again argues from nature to show that since God cares for nature, he will do even more for his own. At this point, Jesus teaches how the disciple can move from anxiety to trust. Jesus told his disciples to consider the lilies of the field. The Greek term rendered 'consider' comes from *katamanthano* (cf. Hill 1977:144). The implication is that one pays close attention with the aim to learn.

### 2.5.2. Part two—Matthew 6:31–33

In Matthew 6:31, Jesus gives another prohibition (cf. Talbert 2006:121), this time ruling against worry over questions of what the disciples will eat, drink, or wear. There are two reasons related to the prohibition. The first reason, found in 6:32a, is that this kind of worry is typical of Gentile behaviour. This is not a racial reference, but rather, a religious one (cf. France 1985:141). It was characteristic of pagans to live in anxious fear, for they believed the fortunes of their lives were dependent on the whims of different gods and goddesses, whom they needed to please in order for things to go well (cf. Packer 1975:161). The second reason, found in 6:32b, is that the Lord is a very different God from the deities venerated by pagans. Hence, Jesus' disciples did not need to worry.

The command in 6:33a is for the disciples to seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness (cf. Talbert 2006:121). The Greek term rendered 'first' comes from *proton*, and should be considered as primacy of priority, though not in a chronological way (cf. Schmidt 1988:177). The Greek term rendered 'and', which appears between the phrases 'kingdom of God' and 'his righteousness', is *kai*. Here, *kai* is 'explicative rather than continuative' (Schmidt 1988:176). Thus, the respective phrases *kai* connects are parallel in that they define each other (i.e. to seek God's kingdom and his righteousness amount to doing the same thing).

The promise of 6:33b relates back to the command in 33a (cf. Talbert 2006:121). This promise creates something of a conundrum. What is to be made of Jesus' followers who are both commended for their radical discipleship, while at the same time, described as destitute (cf. Heb 11:37)? Dray (1998:80) responds to this query by arguing that the passage is taught in the vein of Old Testament wisdom literature (i.e. it

makes observations that are generally true, but there are exceptions to the rule, especially should God have another purpose in mind).

### 2.5.3. Part three—Matthew 6:34

Once again, there is a prohibition not to worry (cf. Talbert 2006:121). As for the two motives that follow the prohibition, a slight amendment to Talbert's (2006:121) outline is required. The two motives found in 6:34b and 34c make the same point. Thus, there are two separate sayings, but one motivation related to the prohibition. The first reason for not worrying about tomorrow is that tomorrow will worry about its own things (cf. Talbert 2006:126). This first reason can be understood by realising that the next reason states clearly what this statement means (cf. Hagner 1993:166), i.e. 'each day has its own share of trouble and anxiety ... let tomorrow (and all future days), so to speak, worry about itself.'

The Greek term rendered 'trouble' comes from *kakia*, and in this context, it denotes the 'evil of trouble, affliction' (Unger and White1985:212). *Kakia* is used throughout the rest of the New Testament to denote evil in the moral sense of the word (cf. Hendrickx 1984:147). Having shown that worry related to food and clothing amounts to idolatry, it is legitimate to consider *kakia*, in the moral sense of the word. Thus, the disciple, by worrying over money, adds the moral evil of idol worship to the day.

## 3. Theological Motifs

The SOM makes reference to several major theological motifs without explicitly defining what they are. For example, Jesus makes reference to seeking the kingdom of God. However, the reader is left wondering what this kingdom is and how it would look when it finally arrives.

Thus, it will now be helpful to expand on the meaning of four of the major theological motifs found in Matthew 6:19–34.

First, of the available views regarding the kingdom of God, the idea of the kingdom being an already-present and still-to-come reality, often referred to as the 'already but not yet' view, will be adopted (cf. Young 1995:76). Jesus believed and proved the divine kingdom to be a present reality (cf. Bowden 2005:690). Jesus also taught the kingdom as being a future/still-to-come reality (cf. Matthew 25:34). Metzger (1992:148) resolves the apparent contradiction of present and future realities by examining the Greek verbs associated with the kingdom in the gospels. The verbs show that God's kingdom refers to the 'reign' or 'kingly rule' of God, and not necessarily to a physical territory, i.e. there is no point in asking whether the kingdom is future or present, since the kingdom includes both realities.

A brief survey of the kingdom theme in scripture shows what the nature of this kingdom looks like that Jesus commanded his disciples to seek. It is universal and everlasting (cf. Lioy 2004:87). It grows supernaturally, progressively, and uninterrupted (cf. Young 1995:77–88). It is worth giving up everything for (cf. Matt 13:44–46). Once one gains entrance, one is a spiritual son (cf. Matt 13:38). The sons are people who bear spiritual fruit, that is, their lives display transformed character and they participate in good works that change the lives of other people (cf. Gal 5:22; Eph 5:9). The kingdom advances without having to adhere to the principles that govern this world (cf. John 18:36). Knowledge of the kingdom is seen to be of great value (cf. Matt 13:52). Finally, living under the reign of God is to experience righteousness, peace, and joy (cf. Rom 14:17).

The second major theological motif is that of the person of God found in the SOM. Marshall (2004:121) notes that after considering the

kingdom of God, it is logical to consider the nature of the 'God of the Kingdom.' The preceding literary analysis mentioned that God, as a heavenly Father, is intimately involved in the lives of his disciples. Unlike the Judaism of the day, Jesus' ministry taught his disciples to relate to God as father in a warm, familiar, affectionate, and intimate way (cf. Metzger 1992:145).

God, presented as the believers' heavenly Father, has the connective idea that followers of Christ are also sons of God (cf. Combrink 1983:90). For example, in Matthew 5:9, Jesus refers to the disciples as 'sons of God.' In Matthew, followers of Christ are also taught to relate to one another as brothers. The theme of the 'brotherhood' of God's people is a central conceptual link in the theme of covenant as taught in Deuteronomy, i.e. the Father-son relationship means Jesus' disciples are a spiritual family type of community who are all united through faith in Christ.

The third theological motif is that of discipleship and community. In Jesus' day, discipleship was understood to be lived out in the context of community (cf. Carson 1994:166–167). The SOM itself expects an application of discipleship to include generosity expressed to others. When one becomes a follower of the Saviour, they do not just learn from him, but also, become his adherents (cf. Unger and White 1985:171). Senior (1997:63) echoes this view when he says that Matthew presents Jesus as the ultimate example of how the Christian life is to be lived. The actions and responses of Jesus are, in essence, 'models for authentic discipleship.'

By following Jesus, their master, disciples affirmed the goal of becoming like him (cf. Wilkins 1992:187). Being a follower of Jesus differed from that of discipleship to other rabbis, in that while other rabbis adopted the goal of eventually obtaining disciples who would



follow them, Jesus' disciples would remain his committed followers their entire lives. For some disciples, in particular the apostles, the cost of discipleship was high (cf. Wilkins 1992:187). They had to literally give up everything to follow Jesus. However, this kind of radical demand was not made to all Jesus' disciples, but rather, to some who were not part of the inner circle of twelve. Even if the Saviour's followers are not required to give up everything to follow him, they should embody an attitude that is prepared to give up everything for him (cf. Matt 8:18–12; Luke 14:25–33).

Jesus' disciples become part of the church community. Without going into a detailed ecclesiology, it is still worth noting some of the aspects what the New Testament church is to look and act like, especially as this would carry implications on the way a disciple stewards his or her material possessions. The church, as a community, is to make God known (cf. 1 Pet 2:9; 4:10). It is a community that is to be recognisable by the love its members have for one another (cf. John 13:35). It is a community that is to regard each other as spiritual siblings (cf. Matt 23:8). Jesus expects his followers to have a greater allegiance to him—over and above their commitment to their immediate physical family (cf. Mark 10:29).

The fourth theological motif is that of the giver of the SOM, namely, Jesus. He is designated as the Messiah, or, as the Greek language equivalent, the Christ (cf. Green 2000:39). *Messiah* or *Christ* means, 'anointed one.' Israel as a nation was familiar with the anointed roles of prophets, priests, and kings. Israel was expecting a Messiah who would embody these three offices of ministry.

It was previously stated that Jesus comes as a Moses type of prophet, who assumed the right to speak on behalf of God. Hebrews 4:15 declares Jesus to be the great high priest who is able to sympathise with

the weaknesses of his disciples. Of particular interest to this essay, in addition to the above point, is that Jesus was tempted in the same sort of ways his followers experience enticement to sin (yet he never transgressed God's will). The historical analysis showed that Jesus was, at least for a time, and perhaps his whole life, from a poor family and knew what it was like to be in want and short of money.

As king, Jesus leads his people from the captivity of sin. Of pertinence to this essay is the fact that he leads people away from the idolatry of worshipping various forms of material wealth (including money). Also, as king, he will preside in judgment over the nations (cf. France 1994:221). The giver of the SOM will then be the one who acts as judge to its demands.

## 4. Synthesis of the Findings

### 4.1. Money as a rival god

Money (along with all other forms of material wealth) was presented as a rival god that challenges for the disciples' allegiance. The historical analysis of the SOM showed that the passage provided definition for the Christian movement. As demonstrated, this included a continuing relevance of the Decalogue. To displace one's allegiance to God, with an allegiance to money, was essentially a violation of the first commandment, which directs God's people to worship him alone.

The literary analysis of the SOM showed that when Jesus instructed his disciples to seek first God's kingdom, it was not a matter of chronology, but rather, a matter of priority. Not putting God first and running after the accumulation of material wealth was shown to be behaviour that characterised idol worshippers, who live in fear of their idols. Further, the literary analysis made the point that, the anxiety that results from

lack of trust in God, was shown to add the moral evil of idol worship to any given day. Also, the theological themes of both the God of the SOM and Jesus, the presenter of the SOM, portrayed the supremacy of the Lord over all creation.

The demand on the Christian disciple to neglect allegiance to money (along with all other forms of material wealth) in favour of allegiance to God stands, regardless of one's financial disposition. The historical analyses showed that the SOM was written in what was more than likely a prosperous urban area. Also, as previously mentioned, Jesus as the supreme example of how a disciple should be, was for most of his life (if not all) poor, and in the best-case scenario, achieved a modest level of existence. Thus, the teachings are also pertinent to the poor disciple.

Money, as a rival god, was presented as a radically different deity to the disciples' heavenly Father. The consequences of following either the Lord, or money, are significantly different. The depiction of God was that of a spiritual Father who is intimately involved with and cares for the needs of his own. While money, as an idol, did not receive much description, the differing consequences of allegiance to God and material wealth were noted, thus hinting towards the kind of master money makes. Prioritising allegiance to money over God results in accumulating transient treasures that will not last, as opposed to the eternal treasures connected with God's kingdom.

Worship of material wealth is degenerative, as seen in the metaphor of the bad eye, which shows that allegiance to money creates a stingy person. The veneration of riches potentially deceives people into thinking they are in fact good stewards of the wealth that God has given to them. The historical analyses highlighted that some of the affluent in the Jewish community exploited the poor. Thus, stinginess and greed

corrupts people, and they can become potential perpetrators who add to the loss of human dignity.

In contrast to a life lived in allegiance to money, the disciple, who was shown to prioritise God by being generous to others, was also shown to have a life characterised by purity, truth, blessing, and revelation. Further, Matthew 6:25–34 showed a life lived in allegiance to God as one characterised by the alleviation of unnecessary anxiety, i.e. the correct attitude towards the accumulation of wealth results in a God given liberation from anxiety.

Something of the nature of living under God's rule is mentioned here, for it further highlights the radical difference in orientation of lifestyle for the disciple who rejects the veneration of material wealth for the worship of God. For instance, the motif of God's kingdom and living under his rule included a life involved with his eternal purposes. This included participation with God in good works that transform other people's lives, and in exercising compassion. That the motif of discipleship and the application of stewardship of wealth can involve the disciple in such actions dwarfs the anxiety-ridden and degenerate type of character that the worship of money creates.

#### **4.2. The accumulation of wealth**

The literary analysis of the SOM concluded that, by paying attention to Jesus' teaching style, one can also surmise that he was not prohibiting the accumulation of wealth. This answers the question of whether the disciple is to neglect pursuing income-producing work in favour of seeking God's kingdom. The literary analysis also revealed that the admonition from Jesus was not to neglect work, but to work hard and to trust God to provide.

Further, the historical analysis of the SOM showed that Jesus had a trade, and also lived a sinless life. Thus, it is possible to be involved in an enterprise, whereby a disciple accumulates wealth and keep one's allegiance to God. However, it was concluded (in the portion of the essay examining the theological motif of discipleship), that Jesus may require different levels of sacrifice from different disciples.

The historical analysis of the SOM settled on the assumption that Matthew, a former tax collector, wrote the first Synoptic Gospel. Matthew was someone who gave up everything to follow Jesus. Further, discipleship requires the disciple to adopt the attitude of preparedness to give up monetary pursuits in favour of obedience to Jesus.

Matthew 6:19–34 provides some indication as to whether one's accumulation of money is at the cost of authentic discipleship. First, one could argue from the passage on the two kinds of treasure, that if the disciple has not prioritised God's values above money, the disciple is not adhering to the demands of following Jesus. Second, the teaching of the good and bad eye showed that a stingy disposition demonstrates a sacrifice of discipleship for the worship of money. Third, a life characterised by anxiety and fear over provision points to a movement away from following Jesus, to skewed priorities and a wayward attitude toward wealth.

Trust in God was the suggested cure to assuage the worry related to human survival and a disciple's unclear priorities. This kind of trust was not shown to be a quick fix, for the disciple needs to take time to learn from nature. This kind of reflection would have been done, as mentioned earlier, in the context of people, who were suppressed by the Roman Empire and many of whom had been exploited by their own peers, i.e. God's cure for the alleviation of this kind of worry may not

meet the expectations of people who are looking for swift justice on their enemies.

The alleviation of anxiety related to human survival and its cure were counter cultural in that day. The Romans came to power through conquest and accumulated much wealth. In contrast, Jesus advocated trust in God. Philosophies of the day may have taught the admiration of people who lived a life free from the lure of wealth, but in practice, they did not adhere to such a worldview.

### **4.3. Stewardship of money as a community affair**

The literary analysis of the SOM exposed that generosity is a requirement of the disciple. For the practice of generosity, a recipient is required. The theological motif of God's kingdom carried the implication that God the king ruled over his community of people. It is within this context of community that Jesus exhorted and commanded his people to practice good stewardship with money. The church community was depicted as a relational one, i.e. a spiritual family that cared deeply for the needs of the other. The spiritual family was shown to supersede the priority the disciple has to his or her own earthly family, i.e. it can be concluded that money (as well as all forms of material wealth) was expected to be used as a means to meet the needs of the spiritual family.

Finally, God was portrayed as having concern for the needs of his people. In the theological analysis, the church was presented to be a community that is to make God known. Thus, generous stewardship of money, entrusted to the believer by God, is a reflection of God's character. Significantly, good stewardship of wealth was shown to create a disposition of purity, blessing, and revelation. In turn, these are

attributes that reflect the presence and power of God in the lives of Jesus' disciples.

## Reference List

- Achtemeier PJ, Green JB, and Thompson MM 2001. *Introducing the New Testament: its literature and theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Blomberg CL 1992. *Matthew*. The New American Commentary 22. Nashville: Boardman Press.
- Bowden J 2005. Kingdom of God. In John Bowden's (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Christianity*, 690–691. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brown C 1975b. *Soul*. In C Brown (ed.), *The new international dictionary of New Testament theology* (vol. 3), 676–687. Exeter: The Paternoster Press.
- Carson DA 1994. *The Sermon on the Mount: an exposition of Matthew 5–7*. Carlisle: Paternoster Books.
- Carter W 2000. *Matthew and margins: a socio-political and religious reading*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press: Sheffield.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2001 *Matthew and empire: initial explorations*. Harrisberg: Trinity Press International.
- Chafer LS 1976. *Systematic theology: Christology* (vol. 5). Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications.
- Combrink HJB 1983. The gospel according to Matthew: an Introduction and theology. In AB Du Toit's (ed.), *Guide to the New Testament IV, the synoptic gospels and Acts: introduction and theology*, 57–101. Translated by DR Bridges. Johannesburg: Orion Publishers.

- Davids PH 1992. Rich and poor. In JB Greens and S McKnight's (eds.) *Dictionary of Jesus and the gospels*, 701–710. Downers Grove: IVP.
- Derickson GW 2003. Mathaen priority/authorship and Evangelicalism's Boundary. *Masters Seminary Journal* 14(1):87–103.
- Dobschütz E von 1914. The Lord's prayer. *Harvard Theological Review* 7(3):293–321.
- Drane J 2001. *Introducing the New Testament* (1st Fortress Press ed.). Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Dray S 1998. *Discovering Matthew's gospel*. Leicester: Crossway Books.
- Dunn JDG 2009. *New Testament theology: an introduction*. *Library of Biblical Theology*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.
- Eichler J and Brown C 1976. Possessions, treasure, mammon, wealth, money. In C Brown, *The new international dictionary of New Testament theology* (vol. 2), 829–836. Grand Rapids: Regency.
- Ervast P 1983. *The Sermon on the Mount or the key to Christianity: an iinterpretation by Pekka Ervast*. Finland: KaristoOy.
- France RT 1985. *Matthew*. The Tyndale New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1989. *Matthew—evangelists and teacher*. Exeter: The Paternoster Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1994. Matthew, Mark and Luke. In DA Hagner (ed.), *A theology of the New Testament* (rev. ed.), 212–245. Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press.
- Guelich RA 1982. *The Sermon on the Mount: a foundation for understanding*. Waco: Word Books.
- Green M 2000. *The message of Matthew: the kingdom of heaven*. (rev. ed.). BST. Leicester: IVP.
- Hagner DA 1993. *Matthew 1–13*. Word Bible Commentary (vol. 33a). Dallas: Word Books.



- Hendrickx H 1984. *The Sermon on the Mount: studies on the synoptic gospels*. London: Geoffrey Chapman.
- Hill D 1977. *The gospel of Matthew*. London: Oliphants.
- Humphries-Brooks S 1996. Matthew. In WE Mill and RF Wilson (gen. eds.), *Mercer Commentary on the Bible 6: The Gospels*, 2–56. USA: Mercer University Press.
- Johnson LT 1999. *The writings of the New Testament* (rev. ed.). Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Juel GH 1997. The Trinity and the New Testament. *Theology Today* 54(3):312–324.
- Kapolyo J 2006. Matthew. In T Adeyemo (gen. ed.), *Africa Bible Commentary*, 1105–1170. Nairobi: Word Alive Publishers.
- Keener CS 1999. *A commentary on the gospel of Matthew*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Kissinger WS 1975. *The Sermon on the Mount: a history of interpretation and bibliography*. Metulen: The American Theological Library Association.
- Lategan B 2009. Mapping the hermeneutical process. In Du Toit A (ed), *Focusing on the message: New Testament hermeneutics, exegesis and methods*, 65–105. Pretoria: Protea Book House.
- Leske A 1998. Matthew. In WR Farmer (ed.), *The international Bible commentary: a Catholic and ecumenical commentary for the twenty-first century*, 1253–1330. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press.
- Long TC 1997. *Matthew*. Louisville: WJK.
- Marshall IH 2004. *New Testament theology: many witnesses, one gospel*. Downers Grove: IVP.
- Metzger BM 1992. *The New Testament: its background, growth and content*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Nashville: Abingdon Press.
- McArthur HK 1978. *Understanding the Sermon on the Mount*. Westport: Greenwood Press Publishers.

- Nolland J 2005. *The Gospel of Matthew: a Commentary on the Greek text*. The New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Pelikan J 2001. *Divine rhetoric: the Sermon on the Mount as message and as model in Augustine, Chrysostom and Luther*. Crestwood: St Vladimir's Seminary Press.
- Ridderbos HM 1987. *Matthew*. Bible Students Commentary. Translated by R Togman. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Ryken L, Wilhoit JC, and Longman III T (gen. eds.) 1998. *Dictionary of biblical imagery*. Downers Grove: IVP.
- Saldarini AJ 2003. *Matthew*. In Dunn JDG (gen. ed.), *Eerdmans commentary on the Bible, 1000–1063*. Grand Rapids. Eerdmans.
- Schmidt TE 1988. Burden, barrier, blasphemy: wealth in Matt 6:33, Luke 14:33, and Luke 16:15. *Trinity Journal* 9(2):171–189.
- Senior D 1997. *The gospel of Matthew*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.
- Smith KG 2008. *Academic writing and theological research: a guide for students*. Johannesburg: South African Theological Seminary Press.
- Spicq C 1994. *Theological lexicon of the New Testament: (vol. 1)*. Translated and edited by JD Ernest. Peabody: Hendrickson.
- Stott JRW 1988. *The message of the Sermon on the Mount*. Leicester: IVP.
- Talbert CH 2006 *Reading the Sermon on the Mount: character formations and ethical decision making in Matthew 5–7*. Grand Rapids. Baker.
- Unger MF and White W Jr. (eds.) 1985. *Vine's complete expository dictionary of Old and New Testament words*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.
- Weiss J 1971. *Jesus proclamation of the kingdom of God*. Translated by RH Hiers and H Larrimore. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

- Wenham D and Walton S 2001. *Exploring the New Testament: a guide to the gospels and Acts* (vol. 1). Downers Grove: IVP.
- Wilkins MJ 2001. In CE Arnold's (gen. ed.) Zondervan illustrated Bible backgrounds commentary, 2–203. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Wright NT 1992. *The New Testament and the people of God*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Young BH 1995. *Jesus the Jewish theologian*. Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers.



# The Creation and the Fall of Adam and Eve: Literal, Symbolic, or Myth?

Mark Pretorius<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to attempt to explain the deeper meaning determined in the reference to Adam and Eve, the two trees, and the serpent found in Genesis chapters 1 and 2. The intention is to demonstrate that these characters and events were not mythological anecdotes, but concrete descriptions of factual events and characters, which have a deeper and added significance and spiritual importance now. The optimism of this paper is to reach a conclusion which will appeal to many as a favourable counter to the quandary and mystification arising from the questions asked.

## Introduction

The view that the book of Genesis is myth or allegory will most likely influence how one interprets associated passages of scripture. For example, how can one comprehend the significance of John 3:16 if one were to construe the narrative of the fall in Genesis 3:1–24 as myth or allegory? As the federal head, Adam symbolized all humankind before God in the Garden of Eden. When he sinned, it affected humanity for all future generations. Accordingly, interpreting this narrative as non-literal significantly dilutes the coming of Christ and his redemption of *all* humankind as the second *federal head* of the human race. This

---

<sup>1</sup> The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

would affect related scriptural references that follow this imperative narrative, hence, presenting a distorted picture of redemption.

Consequently, one would likewise view hell as mythological. According to Kennedy (2006:57), Christianity's Augustinian orthodoxy persuaded many people—over more than a millennia—that hell awaits any person not saved by Jesus Christ. For Kennedy, this was based on the second chapter of Genesis imaginatively describing the rebellion of Adam and Eve. He goes on to say that those scholars who reject the view of hell and the first primordial humans as fact, are to be admired for their insight and honesty.

The ramifications of decreeing the first two chapters of Genesis as myth has grave implications for believing the rest of the Bible. How would one distinguish which parts of the Bible are myth, and which parts describe factual events? Who has the authority to make such significant judgements?

According to Mitchell (1897:913–914), before one can attempt to answer these questions, one must first answer the question of whether the story of the fall, and the events that led up to it, is literal history or an allegory? Did the author of Genesis endeavour to describe the factual occurrence of a primary man and woman, or, simply hold a mirror up to human experience in general? However, before answering the propounded questions, it is necessary to present a brief synopsis of the emergent hermeneutical predispositions of Genesis, and specifically, the events surrounding the Garden of Eden.

## **1. Genesis as Narrative Fiction**

Regrettably, it appears that numerous biblical scholars are becoming passive in their attitude against the proposal that the creation story is an

allegory or mythological.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, some have now embraced the view conjectured by (chiefly) evolutionists—that the creation narrative is nothing but fiction. Marcus Borg (2003:49–50), for example, contends that,

the Genesis stories of creation, the Garden of Eden, the expulsion of Adam and Eve, Cain's murder of Abel, Noah and the flood, and the Tower of Babel are what might be called 'purely metaphorical narratives.' They are not reporting the early history of the earth and humankind; they are not history remembered. Yet as metaphorical narratives, they can be profoundly true, even though not literally factual.

Borg (2003:52) further deliberates:

A metaphorical approach leads to a very different result. The Genesis stories of creation are seen as Israel's stories of creation, not as God's stories of creation. They therefore have no more of a divine guarantee to be true in a literal-factual sense than do the creation stories of other cultures. When they are seen as metaphorical narratives, not factual accounts, they are 'myths' in Thomas Mann's sense of the word: stories about the way things never were, but always are. They are thus true, even though not literally true.

---

<sup>2</sup> The author is aware that one could (and many scholars do) consider the events of Genesis through the lens of the *Literary Framework Theory*, accordingly affirming the creation week structure and the events surrounding the fall to be more figurative than literal. Mortenson and Ury (2008:212) as an illustration, state that the creation week and similar events is intended to present Gods activities of creation, rather than a literal sequential one. The problem is, when applying this to the rest of Genesis 2 and 3 it may leave the narrative open to speculation, thus giving credence to the events as myth.

When referring to doctrinal complexities (e.g. the fall of man), some scholars likewise consider such doctrines fictional anecdotes among many originating in Genesis. Spangenberg (2007:274), for example, thinks that the fall of man is mythical narrative, not history. He further contends that there was an Adam; he was simply a character in a chronicle, like the serpent that tempted him.

Before expositing such views any further, it is important to define briefly the term 'myth', since it seems that the usage of the term by theologians is inconsistent.

According to Hamilton (1990:57), many scholars would be quite content to interpret the creation story and the fall as neither history nor myth. According to them, it is not history, in the sense that Genesis 1–3 describes past events that actually happened. But neither are they myth, at least in the historical-philosophical definition of the term 'myth'. The following explanations by Eliade (1967:1), Kirk (1973:57), and Dundes (1984:45) will suffice. They define the term 'myth' as (a) a sacred narrative explaining how the world and humankind came to be in their present form, or, (b) a traditional story of purportedly historical events, serving to unfold part of the worldview of a people, or explain a practice. Subsequently, one may well interpret these scholarly views of Genesis from this perspective, instead of events as a fabricated narrative.

On this, noted scientist and theologian, Ian Barbour (2000:133), has likewise expressed his reservations on the Genesis account of events being literal. He remarks:

Because of evolutionary history, the fall of Adam cannot be taken literally. There was no Garden of Eden, no original state of innocence, free of death and suffering, from which humanity fell.



The fall can be taken as a powerful symbolic expression of human sinfulness, where sin is understood as self-centeredness and estrangement from God and other people, and, one might add, from the world of nature.

Unfortunately, the views that the first eleven chapters of 1–11 are mythological narratives, is prevalent in many evangelical, Presbyterian, and Reformed scholarly writings (e.g. Gunkel 1997; Jewett 1991; Lever 1970; Van Till, Snow, Stek, Davis and Young 1990; and Waltke 1988).<sup>3</sup> The most prominent and influential scholar advocating this view of Genesis was Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1956; 1997). One may infer that for Bonhoeffer, the activities surrounding Genesis 1–3 can be perceived as an *aetiological narrative*, that is, a language of origins unfettered from the constrictions of history and science (see Mettinger 2006:68).

However, in defence of these scholarly views specifically pertaining to 'the fall', none of the other biblical books refer to the narrative to explain the origin of sin and mortality. Hence, it is not atypical that there is a growing number of biblical scholars emphasising that *original sin* does not form part of Jesus' message. Nonetheless, this does not connote the creation story of original sin as fictitious, as shall be illustrated by the events leading to the deed.

Conversely, those who study creation from a purely scientific and naturalistic perspective have put forth theories about the origin of life which are speculative, at best. As indicated by Hartley (2000:57), some of these theories are, to varying degrees, in greater conflict with the specific narrative of Genesis 1–2. Only as scientific research continues

---

<sup>3</sup> The rationale behind mentioning these scholarly works is simply to acknowledge that the ideas surrounding the interpretation of Genesis is still fragmentary, and open to much debate in varied religious assemblies.

to aid better understanding of the mystery of the origin of life, will the continuity between the Genesis account of creation, and scientific theories of origins potentially increase. Ultimately, there can be no principal conflict between the two approaches—the theological approach and the scientific naturalist approach—for the world studied through the scientific method is the world created by God.

Furthermore, Hartley (2000:57) rightly expresses that given the tension between the biblical account of origin and those of science, biblical theology has preferably centred its exposition on God's saving deeds, spurning substantially references to creation.

In the next segment, a systemised biblical and scientific elucidation of Adam and Eve (as literal beings) follows. This will make it possible to elucidate the various difficulties shrouding the narrative of the fall.

## **2. The Creation of Adam and Eve**

Over and above the scriptural references to a literal creation of Adam and Eve in Genesis (1:26–28; 2:5–7, 15–4:1 and 4:25) new data from *Mitochondrial DNA* sampling yielded some curious results. The most compelling evidence to date for explaining the origin of humanity comes from collective research conducted by anthropologists, geneticists, and geochemists. This mitochondrial DNA evidence establishes that humans descended from one woman in a single location (cf. Horai et al 1995:532–36; Ruvulo et al 1993:111–535; Sherry et al 1994:761–75; Vigilant et al 1991:1503–7). Likewise, Y-chromosomal evidence confirms that humanity descended from one man, from the same location (cf. Pritchard et al 1999: 7360–65; Underhill et al 2000:358–61; Whitfield et al 1995:379–80). With obvious biblical overtones, according to Ross (2009:186), geneticists refer to humanity's mitochondrial DNA ancestors as mitochondria Eve, and to the Y-

chromosomal ancestor as Adam. Further to this, scientists call the location from where they originated, the Garden of Eden.

Expanding on this, one of the world's leading scientists, Dr Francis Collins, head of the *Human Genome Project*, stated the following (2007:126): 'Population geneticists, whose discipline involves the use of mathematical tools to reconstruct the history of populations of animals, plants or bacteria, look at these facts about the human genome and conclude that they point to all members of our species having descended from a common set of founders.' To further cement this idea, Lioy (2011:31) rightly declares that everyone is organically connected, or ontologically united, to Adam (that is, biologically, spiritually, morally, and legally; [cf. Gen 2:24; 3:16–19; Ps 51:5; Rom 5:12–14; 1 Cor 15:21–22]). Lioy (2011:31) advances this suggestion when he expresses that Jesus, in quoting from Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 to emphasize the sanctity and inviolability of marriage, premised his argument on the fact that Adam and Eve were a real couple who lived at a distinct point in space-time history. This idea of a literal Adam and Eve is explored further in section 6. The question now is this: what took place in this garden, which led to the fall of humanity, as experienced today?

### **3. The Palistrophic Pattern**

The recital of this narrative in Genesis chapters 2 and 3 is intriguing, as it is in seven sections, set in a palistrophic pattern.

- A. God forms the man and places him in Eden (2–4b–17)
  - B. God makes a woman to complement the man (2:18–23)
    - C. The serpent and the woman talk (3:1–5)
      - D. The couple eats from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (3:6–8)
    - C. God interrogates the man and the woman (3: 9–13)
  - B. God pronounces punishment (3:14–21)
- A. God expels the couple from the garden (3:22–24)

At the centre (D), as indicated by Hartley (2000:58), stands the report of these archetype humans electing to disobey God. The interchange between the man, woman, and the serpent provides dramatic movement, which primarily captures how motivation to disobey God rises from an inversion of the order of responsibility that God has established.<sup>4</sup>

From this palistrophic pattern, one gleans that God gave the first humans the ability to make choices. What constitutes choice is important, as it goes to show how sin emerged. In its most basic form, for any person to make a choice, the person's act must be free, that is, it must not be determined causally Wellum (2002:259). Hence, a person could have always chosen otherwise. Basinger (1993:416) puts it this way: for a person to be free with respect to performing an action, they must have it within their power 'to choose to perform action A or choose not to perform action A. Both A and not A could actually occur. However, which will actually occur has not yet been determined' (see also Hasker 1983:32–44). God infused Adam with the ability to choose, and Adam chose wrong, as illustrated by his choice in D, the climax of the palistrophic pattern.

---

<sup>4</sup> This will be revisited at the end of the paper to exemplify how the principles extracted from this narrative connect with modern human nature today.

It is unwise to undervalue the significance of this unfolding pattern, as it substantiates a cogent illustration originating in Genesis 2–3 leading to the ruinous event, the banishment of the primary humans, and climaxing in the emerging Christ and his redemptive deed on the cross. However, one needs to delve deeper into what constituted the fall. This will require the careful consideration of connected scriptural references, references that cannot be disregarded by rendering the preceding events myth.

#### **4. Adams Choice and the Fall**

God gave Adam a choice. He could eat from every tree in the Garden of Eden, except one, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. 'And the Lord God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die"' (Gen 2:16–17). Adam had a choice, and he chose not to obey God.

This narrative is developed further in Genesis 3:1–6 and 23–24; two additional voices are introduced to the narrative:

Now the serpent was craftier than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God really say, "You must not eat from any tree in the garden?"' The woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, "You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die."' 'You will not surely die', the serpent said to the woman, 'for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil'. When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also

gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it (Gen 3:1–6).

The immediate consequences of eating from the tree of knowledge become obvious. Their act of self-assertion shattered the harmony humans had enjoyed with God, each other, the animals, and the environment. This led to the following decisive pronouncement by God: 'So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life' (Gen 3:23–24).

The narrative evidently presupposes that Adam and Eve only had virtuous thoughts prior to the sin, even though it was not clear to them. In other words, they never understood anything contrary to good. According to Larkin (2010:34), however, Adam and Eve perceptibly developed a conscience upon partaking of the tree of good and evil. One could infer that it was the origin of dualistic thinking, that is, the origin of an evil conscience *vis-à-vis* a pure conscience. Thus, materialisation of dualistic thinking immediately begets additional difficulties. Adam and Eve now understood fear (a fear of God firstly), which led to remorse and an attempt to cover their sin.

It seems reasonable to assume the author of Genesis was proposing to give readers a literal explanation of the origin of sin. The rationale may be twofold, namely, (a) it lines up with his habit as observed in the rest of his work, and (b) the close relation between this narrative, and subsequent passages (intended for literal interpretation) warrant the standpoint taken.

To expand on this, it is necessary to explain the significance of the trees and the serpent, as they now emerge as key players in the narrative of the fall.

## 5. Literal, Symbolic or Myth?

To assume that the narrative of the fall is mythological, one would be forced, by default, to accept the entire creation story as myth. If one contests one portion of the Bible, is it not reasonable to question other portions too? How would one know which portions are true, and which are not, and what criteria is applied to make such a judgement? Furthermore, who sets the criteria? One cannot be selective in which portions are mythological and which are not. This inevitably leads to Bultmannian methodology (see Bultmann 1961, 1984), in which the criteria for demythologising the Bible become predetermined views of what is and is not reasonable to modern man.

Nevertheless, there are hermeneutical approaches that assist to bring out the sense behind the literal writing. This by no means diminishes the truth of Scripture, but rather, brings forth the veiled implications found in these sacred writings. Thus, in interpreting whether the trees in Genesis were factual or not, one has to respond with a 'yes'.

This solicits several questions. Firstly, if the trees were factual, they appear to possess power to give eternal life, and impart death, depending from which tree one ate? A literal reading of Genesis 2:9 and 17 and 3:2–7 necessitate this.

But, this leads to additional questions. Logically, it seems these trees had the power that scripture ascribes to God alone. An impasse

therefore becomes obvious: who had the power to give Adam life or take it away; a tree or God?<sup>5</sup> Evidently, something is amiss, or is it?

In the subsequent sections, I hope to elucidate on this professed dilemma, and clarify questions often asked on this 'mystery'. The following four points provide the interpretive key:

1. One would need to accept the story of two trees in the Garden of Eden and the temptation Adam and Eve faced by the serpent's lies as factual truth (properly understood), not myth.
2. The trees had no intrinsic power; they were merely visible symbols of God's power.
3. The trees also symbolised God's power of choice given to Adam and Eve; a choice to exercise their free will.
4. For their free will to be rightly free, the choices offered had to have the same appeal for it to be a fair choice. Thus, although both trees brought forth a desire to eat (as both were pleasing to the eye), they were forbidden to eat from the one.

To consolidate further the rationale for literal trees and a literal serpent, it is essential to reinforce the reasoning for a literal Adam, for he is the principal character in the narrative of the fall.

According to Duffield and Van Cleave (1983:140), liberal and neo-orthodox theologians generally interpret the first eleven chapters of Genesis as myth. However, the following elements make the literal interpretation more feasible:

---

<sup>5</sup> *Elohim* is the generic term for God in Hebrew and emphasizes the power and creative aspects of God. God alone has this power.



- a) Nowhere in the Bible is the narrative of Adam interpreted symbolically. If the creation and fall stories were allegories, the spiritualised interpretations would have been numerous.
- b) There is no indication in the book of Genesis (between chapters eleven and twelve) that suggests a change from allegory to history. Noah is as much a real character as Abraham and Adam.
- c) Parallels between Adam and Christ are made by the Apostle Paul. Since Christ is an historical person, it is not likely that he would be an antitype of a non-historical character (see Rom 5:14; 1 Cor 15:22–45.)
- d) In two genealogies recorded in later books of the Bible, the name of Adam is listed alongside obvious historical characters (see 1 Chr 1–2; Luke 3:23–38). Adam is additionally included in the genealogy of Christ alongside others, like David, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
- e) Real geographical locations are included in the story of Adam, such as Assyria and the river Euphrates.
- f) The fallen condition of man is very literal. An actual fallen state can hardly be attributed to a mythical event. Furthermore, the fact that humanity has made remarkable progress scientifically while simultaneously making no progress morally, ethically, and socially, clearly points out humanity's sinful nature.

One should observe that, for the Apostle Paul, the primary human disobedience is a key element in his theology of redemption (Rom 5:12–14). One can reasonably conclude that Adam was a factual being, in a factual garden, having faced an actual test.

Considering all the evidence put forward hitherto, alternative options of a mythological Adam appear fairly diminished. It additionally initiates

ideas that the rest of the story is also literal, but with symbolic and metaphorical meanings.

## 6. The Serpent: Fact or Myth?

The character of the serpent presents another potential theological complexity.<sup>6</sup> If the serpent was factual, did it symbolise something other than a creature which spoke and tempted?

If Adam was a literal being (as proposed in §5), one may conjecture reasonably that the trees were literal yet with a symbolic meaning. If one concludes this, then logic dictates the serpent was real—the context of the story compels this. But why does the narrative include a serpent, and not some other creature? What was the significance of God making use of a serpent?

Firstly, Moses (the implied author of Genesis and the Pentateuch) was born in Egypt and grew up in the royal household of Pharaoh. The first part of Acts 7:22 states: 'And Moses was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians.' According to Currid (1997:155) the author of Exodus and Numbers was familiar with Egyptian practices and beliefs. The Exodus and Numbers accounts, dealing with serpents, properly reflect ancient Egyptian customs of the New Kingdom Period. Thus, one can rightly perceive that the Hebrew people, who left Egypt with Moses in the exodus, were also accustomed to Egyptian culture and life.

Secondly, it is not a coincidence that the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures incorporate several references to serpents, or to creatures

---

<sup>6</sup> There have been many proposals to identify the serpent, but the most common one is Satan. The idea of Satan as God's cosmic foe, however, did not develop until much later, sometime in the postexilic era (see 1 Chr 21:1 and Zech 3:1–2). It must be noted that the author of Genesis did not connect the serpent and Satan (Hartley 2000:73).

frequently interpreted as serpents, using disparate Hebrew terms. For the Hebrew people in Egypt, surrounded by people who worshipped snakes as the attributes or personifications of various gods, the serpent would have been a prominent character, according to the *Encyclopaedia Americana* (1988:25, 100). It was a common phallic representation of pagan practices often used symbolically in parts of scripture. Thus, for the Hebrews, the serpent required no introduction.

Furthermore, God used this paganistic culture (of the Egyptians) against them (Exod 7:8–12). For example, the role of magic was significant in Egypt. This cannot be overlooked, especially in connection to their beliefs in serpents, and particularly, to the Exodus passage of Aaron's rod and the magician's serpents (Mircea 1987:49–50). Again, because the snake was significant to Pharaoh, his people, and the Hebrews, it required no introduction—it was a powerful symbol to them.

Although the symbol of a snake is predominantly associated with evil, there are occurrences where the symbol was a depiction for good. An example of this is the narrative of the Hebrew people, in which God sent fiery serpents among the people, in response to their criticism of the manna he provided (Num 21:6). Once the people of Israel repented, God told Moses to make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole. In this narrative, the serpent represented deliverance from sin, for anyone that looked upon this 'statue' lived. As stated in the *New Unger's Bible Dictionary* (1988:185), the significance of looking on the bronze serpent and living, has a similar connotation. Healing is based on faith, not on the copper serpent itself. This is also emphasised in John 3:14–15, where Jesus refers to this incident, reflecting that the Son of Man must be uplifted, that all who believe on him will have everlasting life.

According to Cooper (1978:146–148), the serpent symbolized both good and bad—life energy, resurrection, wisdom, power, cunning,

death, darkness, evil, and corruption. One can observe the power of their paganistic culture exhibited clearly here, which presumably God turned and used for the Hebrews' good (Num 21:9). In subsequent scriptural passages, it becomes apparent that the serpent is not just a snake, but customarily used to symbolise many types, especially the devil (e.g. Rev 20:2, 12:9, Luke 10:18; John 8:44). It may be tempting to conjecture this as the reason that God, when narrating the story to Moses, used the serpent symbolically. Equally, nothing here implies the serpent is non-literal. However, it certainly illustrates that, from the Israelites' experience in pagan Egypt and its relation to snakes, the Hebrews would have readily understood the evil significance of the devil materializing in the form of a serpent, in order to tempt.

Furthermore, Genesis 3:1 clearly teaches that the serpent was a beast of the field which God had created. This implies that the serpent is not a supernatural being, further strengthening the case of a factual, rather than mythological serpent. One should also reflect on the following. Why would the narrator change from history to myth in a few sentences? When considering God and man in the narrative, the literality, as maintained by Murphy (1863:142–143), has never been questioned by those who acknowledge the event to be factual. Therefore, why would one now question the literality of the serpent?

It is therefore possible to infer that the serpent 'who' tempted Adam and Eve was factual, but also, symbolic of the devil himself. However, this poses another question: did the serpent have the power to tempt Adam and Eve to the point of them disobeying God? This is significant, as it demonstrates God's character and willingness to help Adam and Eve to overcome their temptation. Since God is omniscient, God knew that Adam and Eve would disobey. This also raised a further question: if God is omnipotent and omniscient, why did he not prohibit the serpent, as the devil in the form of a serpent is no match for an omniscient and

omnipotent God? Although this is a complex question to answer, the scriptures allude to God sanctioning sin to beget his providential design. This included permitting the serpent to persuade Adam and Eve to sin.

## 7. God's Providence and the Sinful Acts of Humanity

The preceding statement necessitates the engagement of the following difficulty: the relationship between God's work and the committing of sinful acts by humans. Consequently, it is necessary to distinguish between God's normal working, in relation to human actions, and his working in relation to sinful acts. The scriptures make it clear that God is not the cause of sin. James records, 'When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me". For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed' (Jas 1:14). John declares: 'For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does, comes not from the Father but from the world' (1 John 2:16).

But, if God does not cause the sinful actions of humans, what does it mean to say that humanity is under God's influential providence? Strong (1907:423–425) declares that there are several ways in which God can, and does, relate to sin within his providence. He can prevent it, allow it, direct it, or limit it. In each case, God is not the cause of human sin, but acts in relation to it. The following illustration is helpful.

*God does not always prevent sin.* At times, he simply wills to allow it. Although it is not what he would desire to occur, he acquiesces in it. By not preventing the wilful sinning of humans, God essentially makes certain that humanity will indeed commit sin. Nonetheless, he does not cause them to sin, or render it necessary that they act in that fashion (see Acts 14:16, Rom 1:24–28).

*God can also direct sin.* While permitting certain sins to occur, God nevertheless directs them in such a way that good comes out of them. This is what Stauffer (1955:207) calls the law of reversal. Probably, the most dramatic recorded occurrence of this is the story of Joseph. Throughout the narrative of Joseph's life, one sees the providential hand of God on him. When he did come face to face with his brothers, who had previously tried to kill him, he was able to declare: 'So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh; lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt' (Gen 45:8). Moreover, after the death of Jacob, he reiterated to them: 'You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives' (Gen 50:20). One should recognise here the remarkable nature of divine omnipotence. God often permits humans to do their worst, and still carry out his purposes. However, even when God permits sin to occur, he imposes limits beyond which it cannot go. This leads to the question, why God permitted the fall?

Although this paper specifically focuses on the literality of the characters in Genesis 2 and 3, the question, *why God allowed the fall*, requires succinct mention. This is a controversial question indeed. The momentous works of Calvin (Gerrish 2004), Luther (Tappert 1959), Augustine (Taylor 1982), or Barth (1969) testify to this fact. Of all the proposed solutions to the question, the answer of Williams (2007:229–230) seems most plausible. It is only through God permitting Adam to sin that he revealed specific attributes of his person. For example, there would have been no Calvary or demonstration of his unparalleled love, absolute holiness, mercy, and grace. Since deep love is only manifest under extreme conditions, it seems that God allowed this extreme condition (the fall) in order to manifest the full depth of his love towards humanity. Thus, God permitted the serpent to tempt Adam and

Eve, much in the same way individuals are tempted today. To believe otherwise would surely be a criticism of God's character as an omniscient, omnipotent being, and ascribe to the serpent more power than to God.

Certainly, human nature desires independence, power, and choice, as graphically illustrated by Adam and Eve. This is especially true in light of God decision to endow human beings with the power to make choices. The question, therefore, is this: from which tree do we choose to eat? The tree of good and evil that leads to banishment and death, or the tree of life found in Christ which leads to eternal life?

To illustrate this further, those who receive Christ as Saviour and Lord, are no longer in Adam but in Christ, the Last Adam, God's new federal representative.

'Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My Word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgement, but has passed from death into life' (John 5:24).

'And so it is written, the first man Adam became a living being. The last Adam became a life-giving Spirit' (1 Cor 15:45).

The events described in Genesis chapters 1 and 2 are not mythological. It is important for each Christian to understand and believe this, for such truth forms the foundation of other essential doctrines Without a proper understanding of the nature of God, the literal fall of the man Adam, the inability of man to win salvation through good works, and the principle of substitutionary sacrifice, one can never fully understand salvation through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

## Conclusion

Many theologians and biblical scholars share the view that the Bible should be taken seriously, but not literally. The consequence of such sentiments is the view that Genesis is most likely mythological, or at best, an aetiological narrative which really only witnesses to a fundamental and enduring relationship between God and the world. However, such a view is incorrect, for scripture conveys religious ideas that one may accept independent of any cosmology, ancient or modern. In fact, current research on mitochondrial DNA confirms the existence of common descent (i.e. a literal first human couple).

The history of the fall recorded in Genesis chapters 2 and 3 is, for all intent and purpose, a literal history. It records facts which underlie the entire system of revealed truths. The Lord and the Apostles make references to the fall and Adam, not only as revealed truth, but also, as furnishing grounds for all God's subsequent dispensations and dealings with humanity.

A correct theological understanding of the fall of Adam and Eve makes plain the fact that the characters in the narrative of the fall are literal characters, and not mythological. The subtlety of a humanistic view of sin, as argued by some professing to be Christians, is merely a veiled denial of original sin inherited by Adam's disobedience in the Garden of Eden.

Any view which is in conflict with the impact of sin in a fallen world is not an option. The fallen condition of man is literal, and devastating. Man cannot take care of himself. God had to intervene through the coming of Christ.



## Reference List

- Barbour IG. 2000. *When science meets religion*. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.
- Basinger D 1993. Divine control and human freedom: is middle knowledge the answer? *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 36:55–64.
- Barth K 1969. *Church dogmatics* (I. 1). London: T&T. Clark.
- Bonhoeffer D 1956. Letters and papers from prison. London: SCM.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1997. Creation and fall: a theological exposition of Genesis 1–3. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (vol. 3). English Edition edited by John W de Gruchy. Minneapolis: Fortress.
- Borg MJ 2003. *The heart of Christianity: rediscovering a life of faith*. San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers.
- Collins FS 2006. *The language of God*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Cooper JC 1978. *An illustrated encyclopedia of traditional symbols*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Bultmann R 1961. In SM Ogden (ed. and trans.), *Existence and faith: shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann*. New York: Meridian Books.
- Cummings M (ed.) 1988. The encyclopedia Americana—30 volumes (International ed.). Danbury: Grolier Inc.
- Currid JD 1997. *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books.
- Duffield GP and Van Cleave NM 1983. *Foundations of Pentecostal theology*. Los Angeles: LIFE Bible College.
- Dundes A 1984. Introduction. In A Dundes (ed.), *Sacred narrative: readings in the theory of myth*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Gerrish RA 2004. The place of Calvin in Christian theology. In DK McKim, *The Cambridge companion to John Calvin*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gunkel H 1997. *Genesis*. Translated by ME Biddle. Macon: Mercer University Press.
- Hartley JE 2000. *Genesis*. NIV Biblical Commentary. Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers.
- Hasker W 1983. *Metaphysics: constructing a world view*. Downers Grove: IVP.
- Hamilton VP 1990. *The book of Genesis: chapters 1–17*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Harrison RK (ed.) 1988. *The new Unger's Bible dictionary*. Chicago: Moody Press.
- Horai S et al., 1995. Recent African origin of modern humans revealed by complete sequence of Hominoid Mitochondrial DNA's. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences USA* 92(17):532–36.
- Howard J et al (ed.) 1990. *Portraits of creation: biblical and scientific perspectives on the world's formation*. Calvin Centre for Christian Scholarship. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Kennedy P 2006. *A modern introduction to theology: new questions for old beliefs*. UK: IB Taurus Publisher.
- Kirk GS 1973. *Myth: it's meaning and functions in ancient and other cultures*. Berkeley: Cambridge University Press.
- Larkin C 2010. *Dispensational truth, or God's plan and purpose in the ages*. New York: Cosimo Inc.
- Lioy D 2011. *Evolutionary creation in biblical and theological perspective*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Mettinger TND 2006. *The Eden narrative: a literary and religio-historical study of Genesis 2–3*. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns.

- Mircea E 1967. *Myths, dreams and mysteries*. Translated by P Mairet. New York: Harper and Row.
- Mircea E (ed.) 1987. *The encyclopedia of religion, 16 vols*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co.
- Mitchell HG 1897. The fall and its consequences according to Genesis, chapter 3. *The American Journal of Theology* 1(4):913–926.
- Mortenson T and Ury TH (eds.) 2008. *Coming to grips with Genesis: biblical authority and the age of the earth*. Florida: New Leaf Publishing.
- Murphy JG 1863. *A critical and exegetical commentary on the book of Genesis: with a new translation*. New Jersey: Princeton University.
- Pritchard JK et al. 1999. Population growth of human Y chromosome: a study of Y chromosome Microsatellites. *Molecular Biology and Evolution* 16:1791–98.
- Ross H 2009. *More than a theory*. Grand Rapids: Baker.
- Ruvulo M et al. 1993. Mitochondrial CO11 sequence and modern human origins. *Molecular Biology and Evolution* 10:1115–35.
- Sherry S T et al., 1994. Mismatch distribution of mtDNA reveal recent human population expansion. *Human Biology* 66:761–75.
- Spangenberg JJ 2003. Can a major religion change? Reading Genesis 1–3 in the twenty-first century. *Verbum et Ecclesia* 28(2):259–279.
- Strong H 1907. *Systematic theology*. Westwood NJ: Revell.
- Taylor JH (trans.) 1982. Augustine of Hippo, the literal meaning of Genesis (De Genesi ad litteram), VIII, 6:12 (vol. 1):192–3 and 12:28. Westminster Maryland: The Newman Press.
- Tappert TG 1959. *The book of concord: the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Underhill et al. 2000. Y chromosome sequence variation and the history of human population. *Nature Genetics* 26:358–61.

- Vigilant L et al. 1991. African population and the evolution of human Mitochondrial DNA. *Science* 253(27):1503–7.
- Waltke B 1998 (April). The first seven days: what is the creation account trying to tell us? *Christianity Today* 12, 42–46.
- Wellum S 2002. Divine sovereignty-omniscience, inerrancy, and open theism: an evaluation. *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45(2):257–277.
- Whitfield SL, Sulston JE, and Goodfellow PN 1995. Sequence variations of the human Y chromosome. *Nature* 378(23):379–80.
- Williams JR 2007. *Renewal theology: systematic theology from a Charismatic perspective*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

# Integrated Theology: A Key to Training Thinking Practitioners

Kevin G Smith<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The thesis of this article is that the dominant models of theology in universities and seminaries are too fragmented to serve the purpose of training thinking practitioners for the church. The separation and isolation of the theological sub-disciplines is better suited to the needs and goals of a research university than to the objectives of a seminary or to the needs of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. The article presents the call of four leading works on practical theology for more holistic approaches to the theological task, approaches that seek to bring the various theological sub-disciplines into constructive dialogue with one another. The article contends that developing integrated models of theological reflection and research is essential if we are to train students for pastoral ministry, where they need to be well-rounded theological thinkers rather than research specialists in a narrow sub-discipline. The article concludes with a call for evangelical theologians to take the lead in developing more integrated models of theological research—after all they are the people whose mission is to train pastors as thinking practitioners.

---

<sup>1</sup> The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

## Introduction

For those of us involved in theological education, there is a great need to return to an integrated vision of theology. The current fragmented structure of theology in many seminaries and universities has its roots in the modern<sup>2</sup> research university (Osmer 2008). It works well enough if the goal of theology is to research the minutiae of the Bible, but it is hopelessly inadequate for training leaders for service in the church (2 Tim 3:16–17). If the objective of a theological institution is to write scholarly articles, then it makes sense to separate, for example, the Old Testament department from say the missions department. However, if the goal is to equip church leaders who can lead the people of God to live faithfully amidst the complexities of contemporary life, then our study of the Old Testament dare not be separated from our study of New Testament, systematic theology, church history, practical theology, and so forth.

I have become convinced of three interrelated realities. First, the purpose of seminary training is to produce thinking practitioners<sup>3</sup> and practical thinkers, church leaders who can think theologically in the complexities of contemporary life. Second, the way many theological faculties and curricula are divided into isolated sub-disciplines is not optimally suited to this purpose. It is well suited to preparing academic specialists in narrow sub-disciplines, such as systematic theology or missiology, which serve the agenda of the academy more than the mission of the church. Third, seminaries need to address this need by

---

<sup>2</sup> In this article, the word 'modern' refers to the so-called modern period and worldview, in contrast to the so-called postmodern period and worldview. Therefore, 'the modern research university' refers to the rise of research-oriented universities during the modern period.

<sup>3</sup> Browning (1993) calls them 'reflective practitioners'.

developing viable models of holistic or integrated theology, teaching Christians leaders to draw on all the sub-disciplines to answer the critical questions, 'What then shall we do?' and 'How then shall we live?' (Browning 1993; Anderson 2001).

Needless to say, others have already recognised these problems and sounded a call for more holistic or integrated approaches to theology, and there are many encouraging signs of evangelical seminaries and Christian universities engaging in creative ways of developing holistic, interdisciplinary programmes. In this article, I shall summarise the manner in which several eminent theologians have made a similar call for more holistic ways of doing theology. I have singled out four influential texts on practical theology for this purpose, two emanating from an American context, and two from the South African, written by the following practical theologians.

## 1. Don Browning

Browning (1993), widely considered the father of American practical theology, argued for a fundamental practical theology. He was not asking for a new way of doing practical theology, but for a new way of doing theology, one that is thoroughly practical in its point of departure, its methodology, and its overarching objectives, but which at the same time encompasses within it all the essential components of theology. Browning (1993:7) states his ambition directly:

The view of theology I have outlined should not be seen as simply a subspeciality called practical theology. On the contrary, it is my proposed model for theology as such. I will be claiming that Christian theology should be seen as practical through and through and at its very heart. Historical, systematic, and practical theology (in the more specific sense of the term) should be seen as

subspecialities of the larger more encompassing discipline called fundamental practical theology.

Central to Browning's vision of how we ought to do theology is his belief that all theology moves from practice to theory and back to practice (a practice-theory-practice model). Browning contrasts his approach with that of theologians like Stanley Hauerwas, David Tracy, and especially Karl Barth (1936:47–70), who use a theory to practice model. Barth 'saw theology as the systematic interpretation of God's self-disclosure' (Browning 1993:4), which relegates the practical aspect to the application of God's self-disclosure. By contrast, Browning believes all theological reflection begins with practical concerns, which drive the theologian's interest and inquiry. The first step in the process is to provide a thick description of these theory-laden practices. Browning calls this descriptive theology. The next two tasks engage the situation in dialogue with the faith community's normative sources; this covers historical theology and systematic theology, which is where the process of theological reflection engages with traditional theological sub-disciplines, including church history, historical theology, systematic theology, and biblical studies.

Although Browning is considered a giant in practical theology, his vision of a holistic approach to theology, in which the sub-disciplines (he calls them subspecialities) are integrated into a unified, coherent process, has not found widespread acceptance. Browning is a giant within [the sub-discipline of] practical theology and, contrary to his stated wishes or intent, *his approach to theological reflection is generally treated as a model for doing practical theology, rather than as a practical model for doing theology.*

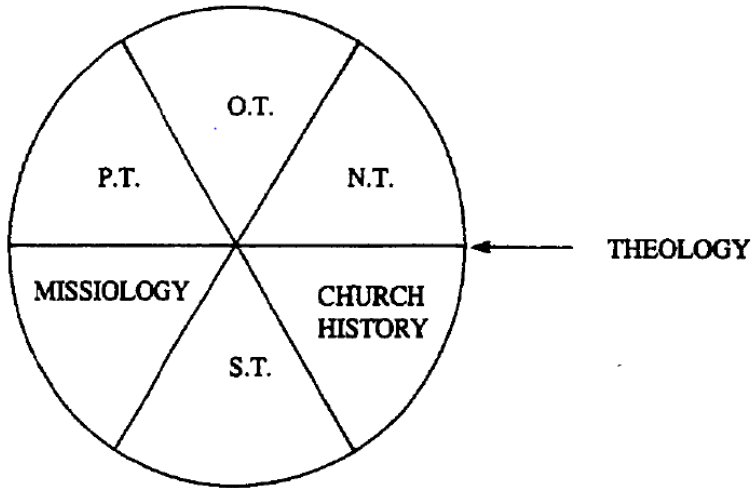


## 2. Louis Heyns and Hennie Pieterse

Louis Heyns and Hennie Pieterse (1990) wrote a primer on practical theology which remains in use in several institutions today, including my own. In attempting to define theology as a field of scientific study, Heyns and Pieterse note that God himself lies outside the scope of scientific inquiry, so he cannot be the object of theological study. Many Reformed theologians consider the word of God to be the object of study, but Heyns and Pieterse consider this to be too narrow a view. They argue that 'the object of theological study is human faith in God and human religious statements about God' (4). Based on this view of the object of theology, they point out that 'theology is a variegated science. It studies the Bible, analyses the religious statements of churches and individuals, discusses the church's witness, traces its history and evaluates the religious praxis of congregations' (5). These various tasks give rise to the traditional subdivisions within theology, such as biblical studies, systematic theology, church history, practical theology, and the science of religion. Next follows their crucial statement for the purposes of this article:

Theology should not be subdivided into independent fields of study to the extent that it becomes no more than the aggregate of all these sub-disciplines. *A field of study is not a section of theology; it is a particular perspective on theology.* ... theology is an indivisible whole (Heyns and Pieterse 1990:5, italics added).

They then use two diagrams to illustrate these opposite ways of viewing the relationship between the sub-disciplines of theology. *Figure 1: Fragmented Theology* (Heyns and Pieterse 1990:5, Fig. 1.1) shows an inadequate view. In this conception, theology as an academic discipline is the sum of its sub-disciplines, and each of the sub-disciplines is conceptualised as operating rather independently.



*Figure 1: Fragmented Theology*

Figure 2: Holistic Theology (Heyns and Pieterse 1990:5, Fig. 1.2) represents the preferable way of viewing theology and its sub-disciplines. Theology is a single field of study, and each sub-discipline provides a certain perspective on it. Each sub-discipline is 'concerned with the whole of theology' (6). They are right to view theology as a single discipline, with the various sub-disciplines providing different perspectives on the whole. There will always be a need for academic specialists who work exclusively within a single sub-discipline, and their specialised research is of undoubted value to the church and its leaders. Obvious examples are experts in textual criticism, biblical archaeology, and Bible translation. Their specialised research in a single sub-discipline contributes valuable perspective for all theology, and in so doing serves the church. However, for those training to be general practitioners in church ministry as opposed to academic specialists in a single sub-discipline, their education is impoverished if

they are not taught how to bring insights from all the sub-disciplines together.



*Figure 2: Holistic Theology*

The remainder of Heyns and Pieterse's book is devoted to practical theology as a sub-discipline of theology. They do not proceed to argue for integrating the sub-disciplines; they merely sound a caution against viewing any sub-discipline too separately from the remainder of the theological endeavour.

### 3. Jurgens Hendriks

More recently, Jurgens Hendriks, Professor of Practical Theology and Missiology at the University of Stellenbosch, expressed a similar view. In articulating his 'basic assumptions', he wrote:

The researcher believes that theology, basically, **is one discipline** (and should not be divided into its many sub-disciplines), and **missionary** by its very nature. All theological sub-disciplines must be taken into account in the process of doing theology (Hendriks 2004:21, emphasis in original).

Hendriks (2004:21–34) proceeds to describe his vision of what integrated theology looks like. He argues that it should be Trinitarian, faith-based, church-based, scriptural, missional, contextual, and practical. All theology is missional in that it is inherently focused on God's purpose for human beings and creation. 'Missional' describes the purpose of theology—it seeks to understand God's purpose for situations within the framework of the overall mission of God. The ultimate objective of [all] theology is to discern the will of God so that the people of God might respond faithfully and strategically. In this sense, Hendriks concurs with Browning (1993) that theology ought to be fundamentally practical. His model focuses on the study of praxis, which he defines as 'reflective (prayerful) involvement in this world' (22). His model is designed to study the praxis of faith communities (local churches) so as to discern the will of God for their participation in God's ongoing work in the world.

This leads Hendriks (2004) to advocate a hermeneutical-correlational methodology for doing theology, that is, a methodology that 'correlates or compares various perspectives and initiates a dialogue between them' (21). He contends 'that theology is hermeneutical by its very nature. It depends on the interpretations that fallible people try to make of both their reality and normative sources, such as the Bible, creeds, and Christian traditions' (29). Congregations seek to understand how they should 'participate in God's missional praxis' (30) through 'constructive dialogue or correlation between their interpretations of the realities of the global and local context and the faith resources at their

disposal' (30). Scripture and tradition (including the history, memory, and story of a faith community) are important dialogue partners (faith resources) in this process. In other words, the hermeneutical-correlational method analyses texts and contexts and brings them into 'dialogue' with one another. The goal is what Fowler (1995:6–7) calls a 'fusion of two horizons'—the way in which the interpreted social reality of the faith community and the interpreted normative texts come together 'to provide vision and guidance for an anticipated future' (Hendriks 2004:30).

What does all this mean in simple terms? Basically, Hendriks has developed a model for doing theology that studies the practical issues facing congregations in order to determine how congregations should participate in the mission of God, that is, how they should respond to the situation. It is an integrated model in that it seeks to bring all the theological sub-disciplines to bear on the theological study of congregational praxis. His model is, however, pure practical theology (sub-discipline) in that he seeks to analyse the beliefs and practices of communities of God's people in a way that is transformational, experiential, unsystematic, contextual and situational, and interdisciplinary, to use some of the terms Pattison and Woodward (2000:13–16) list as the characteristics of practical theology.

#### 4. Richard Osmer

Osmer (2008), the Thomas W. Synnott Professor of Christian Education in the Department of Practical Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, argues forcefully and convincingly that the traditional 'silo approach' to theology is a relic of the modern period. It was only suited to the needs of the modern research university, and does not adequately serve the needs of the church in a postmodern era, or even that of the

research university operating within the framework of a postmodern perspective on research.

Osmer (2008) outlines the forces at work that led to the rise of the encyclopaedic approach to theology. With the tides of secularisation and scientific research sweeping through the philosophy of modern research universities, theology was fighting for its survival within the academy. Enter Schleiermacher (1830), who argued that theology should be reorganised into three specialised fields: philosophical theology (104–119), historical theology (120–186), and practical theology (187–219). Philosophical theology would use the methods of philosophical research, historical theology (which subsumed biblical studies and church history) the methods of historical research, and practical theology could apply the scientific findings of other disciplines to the life of the church, especially the clerical ministry. (If he had been writing after the rise of the social sciences, he would likely have conceptualised the nature and methods of practical theology differently.) Schleiermacher's goal was to show that theology is indeed a scientific discipline which rightly belongs in the modern research university, largely because it uses accepted scientific methods of research.

Although Schleiermacher's three-fold division did not prevail, Osmer believes that it led directly to the division of theology into four sub-disciplines: biblical studies, systematic theology, church history, and practical theology. Osmer (2008:§2795) notes that this is the birthplace of the encyclopaedic model of theology, which has four major characteristics:

1. Theology is divided into specialized, relatively autonomous fields.

2. Each field pursues its distinctive tasks along the lines of a modern research discipline, with a specialized language, methods of inquiry, and subject matter.
3. The goal of theological scholarship is the production of new knowledge.
4. The specific task of practical theology is to relate the scholarship of the other theological disciplines to the work of clergy and congregations.

The unfortunate result of this was that the theological sub-disciplines became silos, each focusing on the pursuit of new knowledge by means scientific, discipline-specific research methods. Application was left solely in the domain of practical theology, which was viewed as an applied science. This development enabled theology to continue to exist in the modern research university, but 'it is questionable whether it is adequate to the challenges of our postmodern context' (Osmer 2008:§2808). Osmer believes that significant changes in the understanding of research in the postmodern era make the encyclopaedic (silo) model obsolete and ill-suited as a contemporary approach to theological research and training. Osmer does not formally argue for integrated theology, though he does believe that it is now impossible for the theological sub-disciplines to survive in isolation (silos). The sub-disciplines can retain their identity, but they must be in constant dialogue with other fields of study, theological and non-theological.

Osmer (2008) does offer a model of practical theology that approaches an integrated model of theology. It brings practical theology into dynamic interaction with various academic fields. First, the descriptive-empirical task uses the methods of the social sciences. Second, the interpretive task 'engages the social sciences, natural sciences, and philosophy to place particular episodes, situations, and contexts in a

broader explanatory framework' (§2882). Third, the normative task dialogues with systematic theology, Christian and philosophical ethics, and 'normative social theory' (§2882). Last, the pragmatic task 'engages with action sciences like education, therapy, organization change theory, and communication theory' (§2883).

In summary, Osmer has argued for the abolition of the silo mentality that the encyclopaedic model produces. He envisages all theological sub-disciplines becoming more interdisciplinary and more practical in their approach. He offers a model of practical theology that is heavily weighted towards dialogue with other disciplines, though it is insufficiently focused on biblical exegesis for my preferences. Osmer rightly argues that the kind of interdisciplinary, dialogical model he has proposed is much better equipped for teaching Christian leaders to think theologically and holistically.

## Conclusion

This survey has noted how a handful of prominent theologians who have called for a return to a more integrated vision of theology, lamenting the fact that over-specialisation and excessive separation of the sub-disciplines is not ideal for the task of training Christian leaders for the church. Although the voices considered above differ significantly, there are some noteworthy points of agreement. First, they are all considered practical theologians. It seems that practical theology is the branch of theology most concerned with bringing the various theological sub-disciplines together. Second, they have all developed models of theological research that embrace the practice-theory-practice movement. Third, they all wrote as academicians working in theologically liberal institutions, and embracing (to varying degrees) liberal approaches to the theological task.



It is encouraging to note that a number of evangelical seminaries and training organisations are doing excellent work in the area of developing holistic, interdisciplinary training programmes. Some noteworthy examples include the ministerial training programmes offered by George Fox Evangelical Seminary (USA), Nairobi International School of Theology (Kenya), and the South American Theological Seminary (Brazil). Singapore Bible College, by nature a more traditional seminary, is grappling with integration, and an organisation called More than a Mile Deep (MMD) is developing an entire theological curriculum based on an action-reflection-action pedagogy. The International Council for Higher Education (ICHE) works alongside theological institutions to promote integrated and contextual learning. These institutions have recognised that strict adherence to the encyclopaedic model of theology is not ideal for training reflective practitioners. They have adapted their training to help graduates integrate insights from various theological sub-disciplines as well as from other academic fields.

Where little work has been done, at least to my knowledge, is on *the development of models of evangelical theological research that effectively integrate the theological sub-disciplines*. The likes of Browning, Hendriks, and Osmer have provided some blueprints from a liberal perspective, but I know of no similar work that has developed anything comparable from an evangelical perspective.

I close with the words of Lee Gatiss (2005, 'About'), the editor of *The Theologian: The Internet Journal for Integrated Theology*:

'Theological integration' is one of our prime concerns – to integrate biblical studies, doctrine, and pastoralia in creative and useful ways, avoiding the over-specialized nature of much seminary and

theological college education in order to produce more rounded and effective theologians and preachers for the 21st Century.

What we need now are evangelical models of theological integration well-suited to the formation of thinking practitioners.

## Reference List

- Anderson RS 2001. *The shape of practical theology*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.
- Barth K 1936. *Church dogmatics* (vol. 1). Edinburgh: T&T Clark.
- Browning DS 1993. *A fundamental practical theology: descriptive and strategic proposals*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Fowler JW 1995. The emerging new shape of practical theology. Paper read at the meeting of the Academy for Practical Theology.
- Gatiss L (ed.) 2005. *The theologian: the internet journal for integrated theology*. [www.theologian.org.uk/about.html](http://www.theologian.org.uk/about.html), 17-08-2011.
- Hendriks HJ 2004. *Studying congregations in Africa*. Wellington: Lux Verbi.
- Heyns LM and Pieterse HJC 1990. *A primer in practical theology*. Pretoria: Gnosis Books.
- Osmer RR 2008. *Practical theology: an introduction*. Kindle edition. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Pattison S and Woodward J 2000. An introduction to pastoral and practical theology. In J Woodward and S Pattison (eds.), *The Blackwell reader in pastoral and practical theology*, 1–19. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Schleiermacher FDE 1830. *Brief outline of the study of theology*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.

# Cheating at Solitaire: The Danger of Self-Deception in Pastoral and Counselling Ministry

Mervin van der Spuy<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

‘Cheating at Solitaire’ deals with self-deception and attempts to answer questions such as, what is self-deception, how does moral reasoning go wrong, what is the relationship between self-deception and delusion, and how can self-deception be prevented? The intent is to make pastors and counsellors aware of the danger of self-deception and its potential negative influence on ministry and mental wellbeing. In contrast to Buddhist-based mindfulness, honest Spirit-guided self-awareness is suggested as an antidote, and five steps in taking inventory of who we are in God’s eyes are outlined. It is concluded that although most pastors and counsellors are upright and ethical professionals, who strive to live with authenticity and integrity, it would be beneficial to admit and be more aware of one’s propensity for self-deceit.

## Introduction

I borrowed the phrase ‘cheating at solitaire’ from an article about self-deception, written from a business perspective exploring relationship between the themes of executive mental health and organisational performance (Litz 2003). Thus, the question I would like to pose is this: will pastors and Christian counsellors ‘cheat at solitaire’? Self-

---

<sup>1</sup> The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

deception is so undeniable a fact of human life that if anyone tried to deny its existence, the proper response would be to accuse this person of it (Wood 2009). Unfortunately, pastors and counsellors are not immune to this, and self-deception remains an ever present danger in pastoral and counselling ministry.

In his article, Litz (2003) points out that the occurrence of self-deception, and its negative impact on organisational performance, has surprisingly had very little written about it in management literature. Likewise, and in spite of the incidence of high-profile pastors' and counsellors' involvement, self-deception has not been given much attention in pastoral ministry. Botha (2005), reflecting theologically on self-deception, points out that one would expect, given our ability to live in false realities of 'fantastical fictions', that the problem of self-deception would be studied by theologians and biblical scholars, but finds surprising that it appears to be avoided by these disciplines.

The intent of this article is to make pastors and counsellors aware of the danger of self-deception, by providing a better understanding of it, and, in particular, to realise its potential negative influence on pastoral and counselling ministry and mental wellbeing. Thus, the following questions require discourse: what is self-deception? How does moral reasoning go wrong? What is the relationship between self-deception and delusion, and how can self-deception be prevented or its effects be minimised?

## **1. What is Self-Deception?**

A precise definition of self-deception is difficult. Some would say it is probably a vain endeavour. Botha (2005), for example, points out that self-deception includes a wide variety of behaviours and mental experiences which, in themselves, are related to one another. He lists

honest mistakes, phony feelings, irrationality, wishful thinking, delusions, difficulties with memory and language, avoidance, ignorance, hypocrisy, maintenance of self-esteem, false belief, blind faith, and even hypnosis. However, self-deception is more than just the individual components. It is more than just rationalization or denial. Self-deception is similar to, but distinct from, psychological phenomena like wishful thinking, and more than just self-serving bias (Litz 2003). In wishful thinking, one wants something to be true, but remains aware that it is not. Self-deception, in addition, requires that one commits one's consciousness to believe, and that, on the basis of the wish, one's belief is behaviourally manifested.

It is generally an accepted fact that to deceive is to make someone believe what is untrue. This logically implies that self-deception is the deceiving of oneself as to one's true feelings, motives, circumstances, and actions—believing what is untrue. Clearly, belief is intrinsically involved in self-deception. It is only when one's belief-system is challenged and evidence is brought forth that contradicts this belief that the dynamic aspects of self-deceiving faith are clearly seen. Noordhof (2009) explains that there are two apparent paradoxes that lie at the heart of discussions of self-deception, namely, one focusing on belief, the other on intention. The *belief paradox* concerns how the self-deceived person can combine both 'the belief that p' and 'the belief that not-p'. The *intention paradox* concerns how the self-deceived can intend to believe 'that p', and manage it, without knowing what they are up to (believing 'not-p'), and be able to make it in some way legally acceptable. Writing in the fourth century BC, the Greek scholar Demosthenes noted the ease with which self-delusion occurs, noting that 'nothing is so easy than to deceive one's self, for that which we wish, we readily believe.'

Scripture describes deceived people as looking at themselves in a mirror, and immediately forgetting what they looked like (Jas 1:19–27). The danger of self-deception in pastoral and counselling ministry is not that one just 'forgets what one looks like', but that one is able to hold two contradicting 'pictures' of oneself, at the same time. Self-deception, in this sense, is consequently about finding a way not to admit to ourselves something we recognize as true but do not wish to believe. The Arbinger Institute (2002) defines self-deception as the state of not knowing and resisting the possibility that there is a problem, while one may actually be the problem oneself. Researchers seem to suggest that four criteria must be satisfied simultaneously for the state of self-deception to exist (Litz 2003):

1. A person must hold two contradictory beliefs.
2. These beliefs must be held simultaneously.
3. Only one of these beliefs must be subject to awareness.
4. The state of non-awareness, that is, the choice of what the individual chooses not to think about, is intentional.

Self-deception involves the subversion of the evidence-based belief formation process (the deception) and the subversion is due to the agent's own desires (the self). Van Leeuwen (2007) further points out that self-deception seems paradoxical, noting three issues. First, it seems that self-deception involves a conceptual contradiction—in order to deceive one must believe the contrary of the deception one is perpetrating, but if one believes the contrary, it seems impossible for that very self to believe the deception. This represents a spiritual or belief component in self-deception. Second, a view of the mind (the psychological component) that seats rationality as an important function, and exhaustive mental ability, has become widely accepted. The idea of attributing irrational beliefs to people does not make sense, for we find it difficult to understand someone's beliefs, unless they are

rational. But the mind can be deceived and self-deception is highly irrational. Third, from a bio-genetic perspective of cognitive mechanisms of the brain, we know that we are well-equipped to provide reliable information about ourselves and our environment. Self-deception, however, undermines the knowledge we have of ourselves and the world. Dyck and Padilla (2009) refer to the phenomenal advances in the neurosciences and the discoveries about our nature as moral beings. Neuropsychology has modified how we view our brain capacity for sensible (and non-sensible) experiences. It not only helps us understand how self-deception occurs, but it also creates hope through new research on brain regenerativity and plasticity, and psychopharmacology does offer new treatment options.

So, how does one make sense of the term 'self-deception'? We can draw divisions between parts of the mind so that one part can count as deceiving the other, or we can focus on the development of a belief-system that simultaneously believes 'p' and 'not p' (Moomal and Henzi 2000). Self-deception can be seen as the mind's way of protecting itself from psychological pain, but pain, physical and psychological, occurs for biological reasons. Self-deception is more than just an 'active misrepresentation of reality to the conscious mind' (Van Leeuwen 2007). To advance our understanding of our capacity for self-deception as a property of being human, it seems clear that we should understand it from an integrated bio-psycho-social-spiritual perspective.

## **2. How Moral Reasoning Goes Wrong: Self-Deception**

Botha (2005) points out that in probing the concept of self-deception, we become aware that we are facing something pervasive and ever-present: 'the human propensity for self-delusion is rooted, not merely in

the way we choose to interpret our experience, nor in occasional pathologies of experience, but in the very formation of experience.'

At its core, the concept of self-deception is an ethical issue. Whether it is the missionary that holds strong racist views, while ministering to the very same people-group he/she hates; or the pastor who secretly visits prostitutes, while fervently condemning immoral behaviour from the pulpit, or the prominent politician who abuses his/her powers to have sexual relationships with a staff member, while promoting strong marriage and family laws in parliament, it is clear that defective moral reasoning and self-deception are related. Self-deception is not harmless, for it undermines one's agency and it gradually erodes moral ethical values. As Van Leeuwen and Neil (2009) point out that 'self-deception does not produce choice-worthy happiness'. It also does not benefit the mental wellbeing of the person or bring glory to God within the body of believers.

We can so easily deceive ourselves as a consequence of our capacity (a dark legacy of the Fall) to wilfully disregard our intuitive perception of moral value in favour of the attractive (though self-deceptive) creations of our socially constructed imaginations (Wood 2009). In ethical and moral decision-making, our imaginative abilities give us a way to conserve an image of ourselves as morally upright and blameless, even when we are not. According to Pascal (in Wood 2009), the central threat to being morally upright is not ignorance of the moral law or moral weakness, but rather, the main threat to the moral life is self-deception. As such, moral wrongdoing is usually a product of self-deceptive moral reasoning. The heart—our special cognitive faculty—intuitively perceives moral value and produces a spontaneous moral judgment and conviction that is both cognitive and affective. The heart perceives value, but imagination bestows value. Our imagination determines the subjective moral value of objects and situations



(depending on how we understand and interpret them), but our imagination can be a deceptive and self-serving faculty. It is therefore easy to see why we are highly likely to come to believe that our self-serving, but enticing, imaginative fantasies are true. Our imaginative fantasies are therefore enticing because we ourselves voluntarily construct them as maximally attractive.

How can one both know and not know the 'truth' simultaneously? At the beginning of the twentieth century, Sigmund Freud (whose theories led to the separation of mind, brain, and spirit) proposed that we all constantly hide the truth from ourselves, often with disastrous results. To Freud, self-deception follows from defence mechanisms that people activate as protection against recognising the actual, but unacceptable motivations of behaviour. More recently, scholars have analysed the possible causes, effects, tactics, and moral value implications of self-deception from an integrated perspective (overcoming the mind-brain-spirit split). It seems self-evident that self-deception serves to camouflage one's errors, weaknesses, or wrongdoings (sinful behaviour from a biblical perspective). Whether it is to reinforce self-esteem or to protect self-image, a self-deceived person persistently avoids acknowledging the truth, even when it would normally be appropriate to do so (Botha 2005). Truth is a function of our morality and it matters. Our ability to know 'truth' and to live authentically is dependent on our capacity to avoid the pitfall of self-deception. So, the challenge in avoiding self-deception becomes confession of failure, acknowledgement of sinful behaviour, acceptance of loss and ineptitude, experiencing grace, committing to virtuous living, and pursuing a moral character with integrity.

### 3. Self-Deception, Dissociation, and Delusion: the 'Swaggart Blind-Spot'

The Hartford Institute for Religion Research (1999) found that 23 per cent of ministers had some sort of sexual indiscretion that caused a rupture between pastor and congregation. There is no statistically significant difference between the occurrence of sexual misconduct between pastors, pastoral counsellors, Christian counsellors, secular counsellors, therapists, and psychologists. Therapists (95 per cent male and 76 per cent female), acknowledge having been sexually attracted to their patients on occasion, and at least 20 per cent of clients report that they had sexual encounters with their therapist (Remley 2010). How is it possible that in spite of the most stringent ethical guidelines and codes so strongly supported by therapists, they do the opposite of what is required? Only through self-deception!

Self-deception usually emerges in the context of our self-conscious and reflective efforts to solve an unsettling question and the related cognitive dissonance. When confronted with two opposing views (cognitive dissonance), one either tries to resolve it, or find a way of reducing the dissonance. In this way, says Scott-Kakures (2009), self-deception is a problem and a failing that springs from distinctive human capacities and abilities, capacities and abilities that are required for and engaged in our self-conscious efforts to settle questions. However, settling questions is an unsettling business. It is my submission that if dissonance reduction fails, and the questions are not settled (current cognitive perspective can rule out neither p nor not-p), the self-deception process proceeds with dissociation and delusions—developing what I refer to as the 'Swaggart Blind Spot'.<sup>2</sup> While

---

<sup>2</sup> In February 1988, Swaggart, a very well-known Pentecostal American pastor, teacher, musician, television host, and televangelist, stirred controversy after a private

adhering to and promoting the one belief (that *p*), the self-deceived person seems to be dissociated from the other belief (not *p*), and *vice versa*. While engaging with the one, the other seems to be hidden away in the 'blind spot'. So, in such a case, two opposing cognitions that in themselves could well not stand in a consonant relationship can, nonetheless, be brought into a dissonant and inharmonious relationship by virtue of the presence of the dissociative blind spot. Dyck and Padilla (2009) state that people can indeed be so blinded that they engage in evil actions, seeking happiness for themselves through their passions and appetites in pursuit of overindulgence and excess.

In some way, the dissociation leads to a full-blown delusion, in which the subjects lose their grip on reality with regard to certain subject matter, with the result that they have little chance of being able to make appropriate cognitive adjustments to the way the world is (Noordhof 2009). The American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (2000) defines delusions as 'a false belief based on incorrect inference about external reality that is firmly sustained despite what almost everybody else believes and despite what constitutes incontrovertible and obvious proof to the contrary.' This identified mental instability is an essential feature in self-deception. Noordhof (2009) observed that 'the delusory belief persists even if subjects recognise that they would not believe it if it were somebody else's belief.'

Once dissociation takes place and delusions appear, intervention, care-giving, therapy, and so on, seem to have very little preventative power.

---

investigation found he had solicited a prostitute for sex. Initially, Swaggart denied the accusations; but, as a media investigation proceeded, he acknowledged that some allegations were true. He later apologised for the acts in a televised broadcast and his contriving confession is well-remembered.

Pastors and Christian counsellors should be made aware to get help at the earliest development of, or indication of, self-deception happening.

#### **4. Preventing Self-Deception: Honest Self-Awareness**

Taking inventory of who we are in God's eyes, Morgan (2011) reminds us of the eminent Swiss psychoanalyst, Carl Jung, who said that all of us have a shadow self. Jung compared our shadow of self to a long bag filled with all the 'dark parts of the self' that we would prefer to keep hidden and secret. From time to time, we look inside the bag as we drag it along, but it contains the dark parts of ourselves that we like to deny. It contains all the evil 'junk' that divides our hearts, the negative 'paraphernalia' that hurts our relationships, the toxic stuff that is undeniably part of all of us. Most prefer not to face it or take responsibility for these shadows in the heart. The difficulty is that, eventually, the shadow of the self escapes. Instead of accepting it and working with it, we tend to blame others (even demonise others), we inflict pain on others, and in self-deception, we also inflict pain on ourselves. Mental health practitioners (and pastors) should not assume that they are invulnerable to impairment (Ford 2006).

Morgan (2011) encourages us to embrace and face the parts of the heart and deceptive intentions that do not take us to God. So, the first step in preventing self-deception is to be made aware that we all have the ability and propensity to prevent self-deception.

Pienaar (2009) postulates that self-awareness is the key to combating the self-deception trap. Ford (2006) says that self-awareness is in fact a key aspect of professionalism. Corey et al (2007) note that professionals, who work intimately with others, have a personal and professional responsibility and commitment to self-awareness—being aware of their own feelings, needs, problems, life issues, and

'unfinished business'. Whereas counselling training does give attention to personalisation issues and even requires student-counsellors to go for therapy, prospective pastors are seldom trained to be skilled in this area. Ethical and legal issues (e.g. dual-relationships, confidentiality, transference, and counter-transference) should be part of pastoral training (Sanders 1997). The pastor may be trained to do house visitation, but it is unlikely that anyone has told the pastor what to do in a situation in which a congregant admits to having a sexual dream about him/her. What is the pastor to do if he/she is stimulated by this revelation? Does the pastor call the elders for a board meeting? I think not. The cognitive dissonance will most likely be internalised and it could be the first step towards self-deception. Unresolved personal issues, feelings, and problems can gradually subvert professional competence and 'grease the slide into the abyss of burnout or an unethical dual relationship' (Ford 2006).

Parker and Davis (2009), using the perspectives of Winnicott, acknowledge that every person has a 'false self', ranging from the healthy to the truly split-off compliant false self, which is mistaken for the whole. On the continuum, there are people with healthy ego capacities, and conversely, at the pathological end of the false-self continuum are people with impaired ego capacities. Such individuals will almost always act out of the false self. Rather than allowing congregants, pastors, and counsellors to come to their own conclusions regarding morality, the church's commanding culture may instead necessitate the use of the false self and, therefore, could facilitate self-deception. Hands and Fehr (1993) point out that clergy often maintain a facade of professionalism, while their pain is hidden. In fear of shame and condemnation, they have no place to admit the truth. The church should be a safe-place where the 'shadow self' can be acknowledged and explored.

Instead, churches might be encouraging self-deception in their offer of authoritative foreclosed answers to questions of morality. Parker and Davis (2009) explain that the rigid moral stances of the church might implicitly demand unquestionable obedience from all, while it forbids any critical or honest self-awareness. I would suggest that all pastors should seek out adequately trained and skilled therapists to come alongside them in their quest for honest self-awareness, thus preventing the pitfalls of self-deception. All counsellors should be involved in ongoing supervision that goes beyond case-conferencing to dealing with personalisation issues.

Whenever a believer's relationship with God is experienced as unable to 'hold the person' and accommodate his or her feelings (especially negative ones), there is a great likelihood that the person will cope with the cognitive dissonance by using their false self. The pastor or counsellor may experience God (and the church) as unable to receive one's aggression, hatred, or other kinds of sinfulness. Then they may recurrently present a false self which complies with this perception of God and progressively move towards self-deception. The pastor or counsellor, who perceives God as requiring only strength and perfection, while not allowing or accepting human weakness or failure, may hide self-aspects that are thought to be unacceptable in their 'blind-spot'. Parker and Davis (2009) say that even in prayer the believer might only express an acceptable image of self.

The second step in preventing self-deception requires a paradigm shift for pastors and counsellors. In other words, pastors and counsellors must move away from believing that hyper-spirituality and perfection is required to a place where honest self-awareness is not only accepted, but is regarded as being a virtue.

The third step in preventing self-deception is to create an environment of non-judgemental acceptance and unconditional love, characterised by safety, nurturance, responsiveness, and consistency. Pastors and counsellors should develop relationships that erode the need for self-deception. Within a care-giving setting, such ministry or intervention must occur within the context of the therapeutic relationship. This requires wise self-disclosure that is 'boundaried'—not dramatic TV exposés or brave (foolish) public confessions. The 'Jerry-Springer-let-it-all-out-in-public'<sup>3</sup> style is not what is needed. What is needed is a safe care-giving holding environment. Churches might be able to compensate for their care-giving failures by at least providing good-enough holding environments that will support authentic living. The church and church leaders can create the macro environment for authentic living, but the safe environment needed for honest self-awareness must be contained. Congregants, friends, and family may be well-intentioned, but they have neither the skills nor the 'know-how' to deal with honest self-disclosure. Again, I would urge those in ministry to seek out professional help, where confidentiality and therapeutic safety are at least somewhat guaranteed.

The fourth step in preventing self-deception is to develop adequate self-care skills. Cottone and Tarvydas (2007) list the following: continuing education, consultation and supervision, networking, and stress-management strategies as professional self-care skills. They suggest five personal self-care skills, namely, (a) healthy personal habits, (b) attention to relationships, (c) recreational activities, (d) relaxation and centeredness, and (e) self-exploration and awareness. In similar vein Hands and Fehr (1993) direct those in ministry towards healthy

---

<sup>3</sup> Jerry Springer (born February 13, 1944) is an English-born American television presenter, best known as host of the tabloid talk show *The Jerry Springer Show* since its debut in 1991.

integration, encouraging self-appreciation and intimacy with God, self, and others. One way that pastors and pastoral-care workers can nurture their true self, is to allow for the spontaneous gestures and honest authentic living of their congregants, and, by allowing themselves the same. Self-care does not come naturally; we have to overcome our inertia tendencies and actively and purposefully pursue self-care. Ultimately, say Hands and Fehr (1993), 'the attaining of self-intimacy is a spiritual quest'.

The fifth step in preventing self-deception is to develop an integrated spirituality. Crook (2007) presents a Christian method for making moral and ethical decisions. Sometimes, the choice between right and wrong seems so clear-cut that no decision appears to be necessary. However, most decision making is much more complicated, and as we have seen, once self-deception sets in, moral reasoning is compromised. Crook (2007) points us to the Bible, Christian community, and personal experience as sources of guidance. His basic stance, however, is 'that Christian morality is decision and action emanating from character that is shaped by a faith relationship with Christ'. Whereas scripture and church are objective realities that are open to discussion and interpretation that can be accepted or rejected, personal experience is subjective and therefore more difficult to deal with and, as we have seen, vulnerable to self-deception. Crook (2007) explains that ultimately, the responsibility falls on the individual to make personal judgements, using their mind, trusting the leading of the Holy Spirit, and allowing for the prompting of their conscience. Our mind can be tricked (deceived), our conscience can be unreliable, and we might misunderstand the prompting of the Spirit. An integrated spirituality seems to be required to prevent self-deception.

With the emergence of Zen Buddhist-based Mindfulness Therapy infiltrating Christian counselling, it is important to note here that



mindfulness and self-enhancement (self-promoting illusions) were positively correlated. Boatright and McIntosh (2008) found that the data indicated that the more participants reported being 'mindful', the more they reported self-aggrandising illusions. A distinction should be made between 'honest self-awareness and 'mindfulness'. Mindfulness requires non-judgmental, non-elaborative, present-awareness. To be mindful entails experiencing what arises within the presently aware mind (i.e. thoughts, aversions, attachments, desires, memories, ideas, and sensory input are all witnessed objectively, in a non-judgmental, non-attached manner). This is in stark contrast to the work of the Holy Spirit who reveals to us our sinful heart and convicts us of wrongdoing. It is not an emptying of the mind, but an infilling of the Spirit!

The notion of an integrated spirituality would therefore extend to the nurturance of holistic, integrated images of the Trinity. A practical way of promoting a more integrated spirituality is the use of scriptural passages that encourage a movement toward more authentic living and openness to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Speaking of the Holy Spirit (John 7:38–39), Jesus said: 'He who believes in Me [who cleaves to and trusts in and relies on Me] as the Scripture has said, "From his innermost being shall flow [continuously] springs and rivers of living water"' (AB). Integrated spirituality requires and emphasises the need to be 'continuously filled with the Spirit' (Eph 5:18). As Crook (2007) concludes, 'Life in the Spirit entails awareness of the presence of God, a sense of fellowship with other believers, and a common commitment to the truth that unites people under the presence of God.'

Search me, O God, and know my heart;  
Test me and know my anxious thoughts.  
Point out anything in me that offends you,  
and lead me along the path of everlasting life. (Ps 139:23–24, NLT)

## Conclusion

Most pastors and counsellors are upright and ethical professionals who strive to live with authenticity and integrity. However, all can benefit from becoming aware of and accepting the fact that we all have the ability and propensity to self-deception. We can all benefit by challenging some of the prevailing paradigms while we strive to make the church a safer and more healing environment. With an active and vibrant integrated spirituality we can learn to practise good self-care.

Hopefully, these reflections on self-deception will help pastors and Christian counsellors not to 'cheat at solitaire'.

## Reference List

- APA 2000. Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (4<sup>th</sup> ed. text revision). Washington DC: APA Publisher.
- Boatright RA and McIntosh WD 2008. The relationship between mindfulness and self-promoting illusions. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 11(6):561–566.
- Botha PJJ 2005. Theology, rationality and truth-claims: metatheoretical reflections on self-deception. *Religion & Theology* 12(2):97–128.
- Corey G, Schneider-Corey M, and Callanan P 2007. *Issues and ethics in the helping professions* (7<sup>th</sup> ed.). Brooks/Cole.
- Cottone RR and Tarvydas VM 2007. *Counseling ethics and decision making* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Prentice Hall: Pearson Merrill.
- Crook RH 2007. *An introduction to Christian ethics* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). Prentice Hall: Pearson.

- Dyck AJ and Carlos PE 2009. The empathic emotions and self-love in Bishop Joseph Butler and the neurosciences. *Journal of Religious Ethics* 37(4): 577–612.
- Ford GF 2006. *Ethical reasoning for mental health professionals*. SAGE Publishers.
- Hands DR and Fehr WL 1993. *Spiritual wholeness for clergy—a new psychology of intimacy with God, self and others*. The Alban Institute.
- Harbaugh GL 1992. *Caring for the caregiver*. The Alban Institute.
- Hartford Institute for Religion Research. A quick question: how common is clergy sexual misconduct? Quick question archives. Online article. Accessed from [http://hrr.hartsem.edu/research/quick\\_question18.html](http://hrr.hartsem.edu/research/quick_question18.html), 19-04-2011.
- Litz RA 2003. Cheating at solitaire: self-deception, executive mental health, and organizational performance. *Business and Society Review* 108(2):235–261.
- Mele AR 1983. Self-deception. *Philosophical Quarterly* 33(133):365–377.
- Moomal Z and Henzi SP 2000. The evolutionary psychology of deception and self-deception. *South African Journal of Psychology* 30(3).
- Morgan TJ 2011. Taking inventory of who we are in god's eyes. *Priest* 67(3):21–22.
- Noordhof P 2009. The essential instability of self-deception. *Social Theory & Practice* 35(1):45–71.
- Parker Stephen and Edward BD 2009. The false self in Christian contexts: a Winnicottian perspective. *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 28(4):315–325.
- Pienaar C 2009. The role of self-deception in leadership ineffectiveness—a theoretical overview. *South African Journal of Psychology* 39(1):133–141.

- Remley TP and Herlihy B 2010. *Ethical, legal, and professional issues in counselling* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Pearson Merrill.
- Sanders RK (ed.) 1997. *Christian counseling ethics—a handbook for therapists, pastors and counselors*. Downers Grove: IVP.
- Scott-Kakures D 2009. Unsettling questions: cognitive dissonance in self-deception. *Social Theory & Practice* 35(1):73–106.
- The Arbinger Institute 2002. *Leadership and self-deception*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.
- Van Leeuwen DSN 2007. The spandrels of self-deception: prospects for a biological theory of a mental phenomenon. *Philosophical Psychology* 20(3):329–348.
- Van Leeuwen DSN 2009. Self-deception won't make you happy. *Social Theory & Practice* 35(1):107–132.
- Wood WD 2009. Axiology, self-deception, and moral wrongdoing in Blaise Pascal's *Pensées*. *Journal of Religious Ethics* 37(2):355–384.

# **An Evaluation of Contemporary Challenges to Evangelical Orthodoxy Posed by Toon's Four Basic Types of Theology: A Christian response**

Noel B Woodbridge<sup>1</sup>

## **Abstract**

Contemporary theology is a maze of conflicting beliefs and approaches. The present situation poses unique challenges to evangelical orthodoxy. Using typology (as developed by social scientists), this article surveys a limited variety of intellectual constructs around which the greater variety of contemporary theologies are built. The article analyses Toon's four basic types of theology and evaluates their dangers, especially when their research methods are applied in a total manner. The article concludes with an appropriate Christian response to the contemporary challenges to evangelical orthodoxy posed by these approaches to theology.

## **Introduction**

Contemporary theology is a maze of conflicting beliefs and approaches, from dogmatic fundamentalism, to radical liberalism. In fact, the shape of today's theology has changed so much over the past century, especially since the 1960s, that it has become difficult to make sense of it all. The present situation of contemporary theology poses unique challenges to evangelical orthodoxy. Using typology (as developed by

---

<sup>1</sup> The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

social scientists) this article surveys a limited variety of intellectual constructs around which a greater variety of contemporary theologies are built. After discussing a few typologies of contemporary theology, this article analyses four basic types of theology. It then evaluates their dangers, especially when their research methods are applied in a total manner. Toon’s four basic types of theology are based on Berger’s extended typology—extended from three to four basic approaches to theology—the deductive, the inductive, the reductive, and the regulative (Toon adds the regulative or narrative approach of Lindbeck to the three approaches in Berger’s typology). The aim of this article is to provide an appropriate Christian response to the contemporary challenges to evangelical orthodoxy posed by these four basic types of theology.

## 1. Definition of Relevant Concepts

### 1.1. Type and typology

Richard H Niebuhr, in his *Christ and Culture*, supplies a good example of this method of typology. He explains a ‘type’ and ‘typology’ as follows (Niebuhr 1951:43–44):

A *type* is always something of a construct, even when it has not been constructed prior to long study of many historic individuals and movements. When one returns from the hypothetical scheme to the rich complexity of individual events, it is evident at once that no person or group ever conforms completely to a type. Each historical figure will show characteristics that are more reminiscent of some other family than the one by whose name he has been called, or traits will appear that seem wholly unique and individual.

The method of *typology*, however, though historically inadequate, has the advantage of calling to attention the continuity and significance of the great *motifs* that appear and reappear in the long

wrestling of Christians with their enduring problem. Hence also it may help us to gain orientation as we in our own time seek to answer the question of Christ and culture.

## 1.2. Evangelical Orthodoxy

Keyser used 'evangelical', 'conservative', and 'fundamentalist' interchangeably. However, he claimed that a more accurate term for all of these was 'orthodox'. Furthermore, he maintained that evangelical orthodoxy had 'developed a theological epicenter known as the "five fundamentals"' (Cowan 2003:98).

The above-mentioned five fundamentals did not include all of evangelical orthodoxy. However, they represented the common ground among evangelicals, who still differed among themselves on issues such as the nature and mission of the church, the relationship of justification to sanctification, and eschatology. The following five fundamentals represent evangelical orthodoxy: (a) the inspiration of scripture, (b) the virgin birth of Christ, (c) the substitutionary atonement, (d) the physical resurrection of Christ, and (e) his personal return. Billy Graham, America's most famous evangelical, is a good representative of evangelical orthodoxy, since his Christian thinking has been planted deeply in this theological soil (Croucher 2004).

## 2. Typologies of Niebuhr, Bloesch, and Berger

Utilising typology, as used in the sociology of knowledge, is probably the best method of describing contemporary theology, since it includes both the simplest and the most profound. This method was used effectively by Ernst Troeltsch in his *Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (1911, 1931) (Toon 1995:151).

## 2.1. The typology of Richard Niebuhr

The enduring problem of contemporary theology is the relationship between faith and culture. 'Most typologies are based on known systems of thought rather than on aprioristic constructions' (Toon 1995:152). Niebuhr (1951) proposed the following types after the study of many individual theologians: 'Christ against culture', 'the Christ of culture', 'Christ above culture', 'Christ and culture in paradox', and 'Christ the transformer of culture'.

## 2.2. The typology of Donald Bloesch

In the last chapter of his book, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, Bloesch (1992:250–272) presents his own typology of modern theology. He developed his typology from that of Niebuhr. However, he carefully adapted it to cover expositions of theology rather than the relation of Christianity to human cultures. He presents four types, namely, (a) a theology of *restoration*, (b) a theology of *accommodation*, (c) a theology of *correlation*, and (d) a theology of *confrontation*.

## 2.3. The typology of Peter Berger

While Niebuhr based his typology on Ernst Troeltsch's work, Berger, as a sociologist, based his typology on Max Weber. Since both Troeltsch and Weber said much the same about typology, as can be expected, Niebuhr and Berger had a similar approach to typology (Toon 1995:160).

In his book, *The Heretical Imperative*, Berger's (1979) analysis of theology since the Enlightenment led him to propose that, in the light of the range of possibilities from *Christianity identified with culture* to *Christianity against culture*, there are essentially only three basic types



of theology—the deductive, the reductive, and the inductive. These intellectual constructs allow one to understand the essential aspects of all forms of contemporary theology, from *dogmatic fundamentalism* to *extreme liberalism*.

In the next section, an attempt will be made to analyse Toon's four basic types of theology based on Berger's extended typology, in order to present as simply, but as accurately as possible, the range and content of contemporary theologies.

### **3. An Analysis of Toon's Four Basic Types of Theology: Berger's Extended Typology**

#### **3.1. The deductive approach (restorative)**

The deductive option can rightly be called the right-hand pole. According to Peter Berger (1979:61),

The deductive option is to reassert the authority of a religious tradition in the face of modern secularity.' Once the tradition has been restored to 'the status of a datum, of something given *a priori*, it is then possible to deduce religious affirmations from it at least more or less as was the norm before in premodern times (Berger 1979:62).

The deductive approach is similar to the theology of restoration in Bloesch's scheme. It focuses on what should be done when a religious tradition is restored—deductions are made regarding present duties. One reason for the attractiveness of this method is that in the contemporary world, it has 'the cognitive advantage of once more providing religious reflection with objective criteria of validity' (Berger 1979:62).

Against a background of unprecedented turbulence in religious and secular matters today, JD Myer, in his book, *Deductive Theology: a Reasoned Approach to a Reasonable God* (2006), composed a reasoned basis for Christianity that is able to endure the worst assaults of those who prefer to believe that Christians are unreasonable people. Myers' aim is to reclaim a vision of a merciful, triumphant, and rational Christianity, which is accessible to all through an evaluation of observable facts and traditions. Myers' bases his approach on an appeal to rationality, and it invites scientific scrutiny that rises above the deceit that is the inevitable defect of man-made religious institutions.

Toon (1995:177–180) provides the following examples of a deductive theology:

- Wherever one hears statements in a church, such as, 'the Bible says', 'the Word of God states', 'the church teaches', and 'tradition declares', one is probably encountering theology of the deductive type.
- When an evangelical pastor stands in the pulpit on Sunday with the open Bible in front of him and preaches an exegetical sermon from a passage of scripture, and his congregants sit with their Bibles on their laps, they are actually making an important assumption. They believe that expounding the Bible in the power of the Spirit clarifies its message and actually makes available the Word of God. From the sermon, the congregants deduce their present duties of faithfulness and obedience.
- If one were to visit a conservative evangelical seminary, one would find textbook(s) in systematic theology that also claim to provide a biblical theology—'a theology that is both faithful to the teaching of the Bible, and also arranged so as to present the truth of God in a rational form for today'. A good example of

such a textbook would be Millard J Erickson's *Christian Theology* (1986).

- Conservative evangelicals have, to a large extent, followed the Western exposition of doctrine based on the Athanasian Creed and the Confessions of faith that arose from the Protestant Reformation.

### 3.2. The inductive approach (empirical method)

The inductive option turns to experience as the ground of all religious affirmations—one's own experience and the experience embodied in a particular range of traditions. This range may be of varying scope—limited to one's own tradition or expanded to include the fullest available record of human religious history (Berger 1979:63).

The inductive method uses religious traditions (Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, and so on.) as bodies of evidence concerning religious experience and the insights derived from experience. The Bible naturally holds a primary place in the body of evidence, since it is a primary record of religious experience and the insights based on it. Berger (1979:63) indicates the advantage of the inductive method: 'The advantage of this option is its open-mindedness and the freshness that usually comes from a non-authoritarian approach to questions of truth.'

Induction is arguing from empirical evidence. According to Berger (1979:63), induction implies two things, namely, it means taking: '[H]uman experience as the starting point of religious reflection, and using the methods of the historian to uncover those human experiences that have become embodied in the various religious traditions.'

The great exponent of this approach is Schleiermacher. His lifelong endeavour was to formulate theology in terms of the experience of faith

(a theology from below). Schleiermacher never taught that religious experience was merely human self-consciousness. Instead, he insisted that religious consciousness is really consciousness of something far beyond itself. Berger (1979:133) elaborates, saying that 'the human subject feels himself to be utterly dependent on that other reality or being at the centre of the experience.'

So, to start with human consciousness does not mean that you actually end there. At the same time, human experience is before all doctrines and dogmas. Of this approach, pioneered by Schleiermacher, Berger (1979:135) writes:

The core of the inductive model is, quite simply, the assertion that a specific type of human experience defines the phenomenon called religion. The experience can be described and analyzed. Any theoretical reflection about religion (including the theoretical enterprise of theology) must begin with religious experience (so that, for theology, the unavoidable procedure is to go from the human to the metahuman, and not in the reverse direction).

Liberal theology, in general, may be said to have followed an inductive method, in that it speaks of God from the side of man. In other words, it takes the content of scripture as being a description of religious experience in the context of the Jews, Jesus, his apostles, and the early church. Toon (1995:185) explains:

It uses this—along with any other religious experience deemed appropriate (from the history of Christianity or from world religions or both)—as the basis for producing theology. In other words, it does not begin by assuming that God has revealed true statements about Himself and His activity and that these are contained in the texts of the Bible. Rather, it assumes that the Bible

is the record of religious experience within a changing history and context.

The inductive approach is an important method of theology pursued by the well-known Catholic theologians, Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan. It is closely related to their emphasis on the transcendence of the human spirit. Since Lonergan is so clearly committed to the inductive (empirical) method, it would be helpful to quote from his essay, *Theology in Its New Context*:

Theology was a deductive science in the sense that its theses were conclusions to be proven from the premises provided by Scripture and Tradition. It has become an empirical science in the sense that Scripture and Tradition now supply not premises but data. The data has to be viewed in its historical perspective. It has to be interpreted in the light of contemporary techniques and procedures. When before the step from premises to conclusions was brief, simple, and certain, today the steps from data to interpretation are long, arduous, and, at best, probable (Lonergan 1974:58).

Julian Reindor (2011) refers to the enormous gap that had opened up between the church and the lives of working people in England, in particular, between the church and the great mass of the working population. In this regard, he raises questions: how do we 'do' theology, how do we think about our faith? Where do we start?

In an attempt to answer these questions, Reindor (2011) quotes Archbishop Michael Ramsey regarding the inductive approach to theology:

It is a theological adventure—it is doing theology in the working areas of people's lives. It uses the 'inductive' approach to theology in contrast to the 'kerugmatik' or 'deductive' approach, which is a proclamation of the Gospel using traditional words and thought

forms. The inductive method starts from the world and from experience, and works back to propositions about God, the world and Christ. There is nothing new about inductive theology, but without it we perish today ... Christian theology has become stale, and there is a divine call to intellectual spring cleaning ... We get a foretaste of the inductive method in the parables of Jesus (and) in the Gospel of John where he begins with words and concepts recognised in the Gentile world, and works on them, and then points to Jesus as the fulfilment of them.

Toon (1995:185–186) provides the following example of a sermon that uses the inductive method:

The preacher would begin by referring to the changing situation of women in the modern world – how that apart from being mothers and wives they are also doctors and lawyers and engineers. He would proceed by saying that it is obvious that men and women are equal—different but equal. Therefore, if they are equal, and if the Christian religion is true, then the real Christian teaching must be that they are equal before God and in the church. Accordingly, this is really what the Bible actually teaches – despite appearances to the contrary.

### **3.3. The reductive (liberal) approach**

At the opposite end of the spectrum to the deductive approach is the reductive approach. Berger (1979:62) defines this approach as follows: 'the *reductive* option is to reinterpret the tradition in terms of modern secularity, which in turn is taken to be a compelling necessity of participating in modern consciousness.'

In this approach the researcher uses something much more radical than some or other contemporary intellectual tool, such as the historical-

critical method in the study of the Bible. It actually involves a radical exchange of authorities. The authority of contemporary thought and/or consciousness is substituted for the authority of the tradition, such as the Bible and the Creeds. Thus, teachings and affirmations derived from the biblical tradition are translated into terms which are acceptable to modern man and permissible within contemporary culture. This is similar to Bloesch's *theology of accommodation*, where Christ is made the *Christ of culture* (Toon 1995:161).

According to Berger (1979:62), 'The major advantage of this option is that it reduces cognitive dissonance, or seems to do'. In his book, *Theology the Lutheran Way*, Bayer indicates that the hermeneutical method implicit in this reductive approach to theology reduces content to form, and is similar to the type of 'interpretation' used in Freud's psychoanalysis. Theology is to be treated as a 'psychological pathology' for the purpose of therapy (Bayer 2007:151).

Bultmann's method of *demythologization* is a primary example of the reductive approach. He asserted that the essential content of the gospel of God concerning Jesus is couched in mythological language. According to Patzia and Petrotta (2002:34), Bultmann's method seeks to: 'strip away ancient mythical elements from the text, such as angels, demons, a three-storied universe, the virgin birth, resurrection, and the like, as objective realities and to interpret mythical language existentially, that is, asking what these myths say about human existence.'

Bultmann was convinced that the narratives of the life of Jesus were merely providing theology in story form, rather than historical events or accurate quotations from Jesus. According to this view, 'spiritual messages were taught in the familiar language of ancient myth, which has little meaning today' (Rudolf Bultmann 2010:§2). For example,

Bultmann (2000:34) said that 'Jesus Christ is certainly presented as the Son of God, a pre-existent divine being, and therefore to that extent a mythical figure. But, he is also a concrete figure of history—Jesus of Nazareth. His life is more than a mythical event; it is a human life which ended in the tragedy of the crucifixion.'

Bultmann argued that in a modern world, with a scientific worldview, Christianity has no future, unless it can be totally translated into an acceptable modern form. Since modern man cannot believe ancient mythology, Bultmann attempted to present the gospel in such a way (expressed in existentialist categories) that it was the dynamic equivalent of the message of the New Testament (expressed in ancient mythology). However, he went even further than this. He actually demythologized the act of God in Jesus Christ, making that act occur at the precise moment when there is a 'meeting between the proclamation of the Gospel and the response of human faith' (Toon 1995:191–192).

Ever since the 1960s, there has been an explosion of reductive (liberal) theologies, or at least theologies that combine the inductive and the reductive approaches. For example, much of what is called political, liberationist, black, and feminist theology, is reductive. Their aim is to translate (reduce) biblical categories and teaching into modern categories and teaching. In this way they will serve a fully modern, secular, political agenda.

Most contemporary liberal theologians prefer to read Jesus' miracles as metaphorical narratives for understanding the power of God (Brandom 2000:76). In his article entitled, *Liberal Theology*, Hodgson (2010) identifies six marks of a liberal theology for today, namely, (a) a free and open theology, (b) a critically constructive theology, (c) an experiential theology, (d) a visionary, spiritual, holistic theology, (e) a prophetic, culturally transformative theology, (f) and a mediating,



correlational theology. He argued, that by means of these marks, theology is made relevant to the contemporary world and therefore provides resources for church renewal.

Toon (1995:192) indicates the basic assumption of these reductive (liberal) theologies:

It is assumed that what is being desired (a new society, a just order, equality of the sexes, decolonization, and so forth) is superior to what has been, and remains, the present state of affairs. As a result, the Bible and the Christian tradition are used highly selectively to provide a model (e.g., exodus, deliverance) that is then translated into a secular model (e.g., social revolution) for modern society.

### **3.4. The regulative (narrative) approach**

Lucie-Smith (2007:1) defines *narrative theology* as 'one that starts not with abstract first principles, but rather with a particular story; it is inductive rather than deductive. The story it examines is "embodied" in a community's tradition.'

According to Green, *narrative theology* refers to a constellation of approaches to the theological task. These approaches are typically joined by: (a) their antagonism toward all forms of theology dealing with the systematic organisation of propositions and grounded in ahistorical principles, and (b) their attempt to identify an overall aim and on-going plot in God's ways, as these are revealed in scripture and continually communicated in history (Green 2005:531).

Toon (1995:203–204) maintains that to appreciate the narrative approach, expressed in a variety of forms in contemporary Christianity since the 1970s, the following basic aspects of this approach need to be grasped:

- The contents of the books of the Bible are primarily narrative or story. It is the narrative of the relationship of God to specific peoples—first the Hebrew people, and then, the Christian church.
- Each person also has a story—a story that continues and develops every day of one's life. When one speaks of 'the story of our lives', it implies a narrative interpretation of personal identity and personal history—a story that needs to be connected to God's story.
- The church, as the community of faith, also has a story that it tells each time it meets. The local church participates in this unique story in its reading of the Bible, in its listening to sermons based on the Bible, and in its act of worship, as the congregants recall the mighty works and words of God.
- Revelation from God occurs as the worshippers participate in the narrative of God's gracious activity, as recorded in the Bible. Primarily, however, 'the narrative in words makes possible the disclosure of the One who is the Word, even Jesus Christ.'

Using the narrative approach, in his book, *Biography as Theology*, McClendon emphasized the importance of our story intersecting with God's story. He presented a model of teaching doctrine by using life examples that are both exciting and potentially dangerous (McClendon 1974:36). In an interview conducted with Ched Meyers, McClendon reflected on his purpose for writing the book, 'I was just trying to show that there is theology present in everyone's life' (Myers 2000). In other words, according to McClendon, our life narrative is a source of theology. Hence, biography is viewed as theology.

George Lindbeck is another good example of the narrative approach. In his *The Nature of Doctrine*, Lindbeck (1984:33) proposed that a

religion be looked at as 'a kind of cultural and/or linguistic framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought.' He stated that its doctrines are best understood as communally authoritative rules of discourse, attitude, and action: 'The function of church doctrines that becomes most prominent in this perspective is their use, not as expressive symbols or as truth claims, but as communally authoritative rules of discourse, attitude and action' (Lindbeck 1984:18).

According to Lindbeck, therefore, doctrines are not talk about God, but rather, talk about the church's talk about God, salvation, and so on. The primary talk (narrative) is what one hears in worship, essentially from reading the Bible. Hence, doctrines function like the rules of a game, which regulate how the game is to be played—how believers are to think, speak, and act in a Christian manner. One may label his general position as intra-textual theology (Toon 1995:204).

Reflecting upon the first days of the Christian church, Lindbeck pointed out that it was not a different canon of scripture, but a distinctive method of reading it that differentiated the church from the synagogue:

Christians read the Bible they shared with the Jews in the light of their first orally transmitted stories of the crucified and resurrected Messiah ... It was not simply a source of precepts and truths, but the interpretative framework for all reality. They used typological and, less fundamentally, allegorical techniques derived from their Jewish and Greek milieu to apply the canonically fixed words to their ever-changing situations (Lindbeck 1989:76–77).

It is important to bear in mind that sound biblical interpretation is a complex process, which consists of the creative interaction between the following *three elements*: (a) the world of the author, (b) the world of the text, and (c) the reader's perception of them. Each of these elements requires special attention. Unfortunately, influenced by post-modern

subjectivity, some theologians have failed to ground imagination in historical background and the author's intent. For them, a text becomes an independent entity into which a reader pours meaning. However, it is irresponsible to interpret a Biblical text by casting it off from its historical moorings. This is called *eisegesis* not *exegesis* (Malbon 1992:35–36).

In the next section, is an attempt to evaluate the dangers of Toon's four basic types of theology, especially when these approaches are applied 'totally' as a research method.

## **4. An Evaluation of Contemporary Challenges to Evangelical Orthodoxy**

After analysing Toon's four basic types of theology based on Berger's extended typology, it is evident that these approaches, when applied 'totally' (in a total manner, to the exclusion of other approaches), raise serious concerns and pose challenges to evangelical orthodoxy. These challenges (inherent dangers) can be summarised as follows.

### **4.1. The deductive approach (restorative)**

Some have argued for a 'totally' deductive approach. The problem with this approach is that it is only concerned with the Christian tradition and takes no account of the advance of modern knowledge. This approach is critical of the contemporary situation, but uncritical of the Christian tradition. It is possible to regard such an approach as dogmatic fundamentalism. The researcher should rather opt for a generally deductive approach in theology, which does justice to both the Christian tradition, as well as the contemporary situation (Toon 1995:163, 164).

#### **4.2. The inductive approach (empirical method)**

An entirely inductive approach also poses problems. This approach tends to be thoroughly aware of the modern cultural situation, and tends to make that situation an authority for the Christian religion. Such an approach is critical of the Christian tradition, but uncritical of the contemporary situation. However, the researcher should rather adopt a generally inductive approach, in which he is relatively critical of both the Christian tradition and the contemporary situation. He/she must base theology on the study of the experience of God in the Bible and Christian tradition (Toon 1995:163, 164).

#### **4.3. The reductive (liberal) approach**

When the approach to theology is entirely reductive, its main concern is the contemporary situation. The problem with this approach is that it is critical of the Christian tradition, but uncritical of the contemporary situation. This approach presents theology from two possible perspectives, namely, (a) secularist theology, or (b) a form of philosophy. Christian tradition, thus, receives no weight (Toon 1995:163).

Some would argue for a generally reductive approach, which is relatively critical of the Christian tradition, but uncritical of the contemporary situation. Toon (1995:163) elaborates:

The concern here is to do justice to the Christian tradition by doing justice to the contemporary situation. Some weight is given to the Christian tradition ... The theologian works within the modern mind-set, but he is willing to grant that genuine truth is found in the Christian tradition. Thus his theology is not totally secular theology.

Both the total and general reductive approaches have inherent dangers and should be avoided by evangelical theologians.

#### **4.4. The regulative (narrative)**

On the positive side, what unites people from very different theological positions in the narrative approach is their commitment to the (a) primacy of the canon as canon, and to the (b) first-order language of the Bible itself. However, on the negative side, the narrative approach is rather restrictive, since it is 'a way of rendering the doctrines of any denomination to be valid, but only valid for that denomination in the sense that they guide or regulate its ways of worship, witness, and morality' (Toon 1995:208).

Furthermore, the problem with the narrative approach, when it is totally regulative, is that it fails to ground biblical interpretation in the historical background and the author's intent. According to Malbon (1992:35–36), the researcher should rather opt for a generally regulative (narrative) approach, which takes into account the three main elements of Biblical interpretation, namely, (a) the world of the author, (b) the world of the text, and (c) the reader's perception of them.

### **5. A Christian Response to Contemporary Challenges to Evangelical Orthodoxy**

It is clear from the above evaluation that evangelical orthodoxy faces many contemporary challenges, especially those posed by Toon's four basic types of theology when applied totally. The question arises: how should Christians, in particular evangelical theologians, respond to these challenges?

## 5.1. A return to biblical authority

Since contemporary theology is a maze of conflicting beliefs, there is an urgent need for evangelical theologians to return to the authority of the Bible. Because the Bible points beyond itself, to God, it has conferred or inherent authority. The Bible is therefore authoritative because God bestowed its authority. Most evangelicals go further than this, insisting that the Bible has a genuine authority 'as the authentic embodiment of God's self-disclosure' (McDonald 1999:139).

McDonald (1999:139) explains how liberal theologians reject this ontological authority of the Bible, at most granting it a borrowed authority:

Some, like Karl Barth, allow this authority to be bestowed by God while insisting that the Bible itself is essentially a human product. Others—e.g., Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich—regard the Bible as a fallible collection of religious writings on which the early church arbitrarily imposed an authority that evangelical piety has continued to uphold.

On the other hand, the apostle Paul affirms God's active involvement in the writing of scripture in 2 Timothy 3:16 (NIV): 'All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.' Barker (2007:1846) describes God's involvement in the writing of scripture as 'an involvement so powerful and pervasive that what is written is the infallible and authoritative word of God.'

The fact that all scripture is 'God-breathed' supports the *inspiration* of scripture. It also affirms *the authority of scripture*, since the entire Bible (every word in it) originates from God. This quality of scripture being 'God-breathed' includes the teachings expressed in the Bible. Andria (2006:1481) points out the purpose for which we have been given the

scriptures: 'Timothy must use them to teach believers, to refute false doctrines, to correct errors and to train believers so that they will be equipped to do good works.'

The authority of the Bible, therefore, refers to the concept that scripture is 'normative for the church in speech, thought, and practice.' In other words, the Bible is 'the sole and final authority for Christians in all matters of faith and practice' (*Authority of the Bible* 2011).

## 5.2. A return to biblical hermeneutics

In view of the diversity of conflicting approaches in contemporary theology, there is an urgent need for today's evangelical theologians to return to the valued principles of Biblical hermeneutics, accepted by the majority of conservative Protestants for many years. Biblical hermeneutics is perhaps best summarised by 2 Timothy 2:15. This verse implies that there are certain principles that enable us to handle accurately the Word of God. Paul exhorted young Timothy to follow his example: 'Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth' (2 Tim 2:15, NIV).

Improper methodology in interpreting the Bible is nothing new. Even in New Testament times, the apostle Peter warned of false teachers who deliberately misused Paul's writings, 'which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction' (2 Pet 3:16, NIV). This verse indicates that mishandling the Word of God can be highly dangerous, since it is the pathway towards destruction. Contrary to the practices of some false teachers in Corinth, the apostle Paul assured his readers that he faithfully handled the Word of God (2 Cor 4:2).



Hommel (2005) defined Biblical hermeneutics as, 'the science that teaches the principles and methods of interpreting the Word of God' and proposed, amongst others, the following principles for interpreting the Bible properly:

*The literal interpretation principle.* The golden rule of Biblical interpretation is this: 'When the plain sense of the scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense'. According to this principle, each word is taken at its primary and common meaning, unless the facts of the immediate context of the word clearly indicate otherwise. Biblical hermeneutics is thus, faithful to the intended meaning of scripture and avoids spiritualising Bible verses and passages that should be understood literally.

*The contextual principle.* DA Carson has been quoted as saying, 'A text without a context is a pretext for a proof text' (Gawiser and Witt 1994:111). The context is that which accompanies the text. The Bible is a perfect unit, in which all the books hang together in harmony. Hence, it cannot be broken up into smaller unrelated units. Scholars should, therefore, consider the verses immediately before and after a selected passage. In addition, a passage of scripture should be always be interpreted within the framework of the entire Bible.

*The genre principle.* Biblical hermeneutics takes into account that the fact that the Bible is made up of all kinds of literature, such as poetry, prose, prophecy, history, allegory, and so on. How one interprets a particular passage depends on what type of literature it is. The questions arise: is one dealing with poetry or prose? Is one dealing with history or prophecy?

*The grammatical principle.* The Bible was originally written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Hence, the study of word meanings, grammar, and

syntax of the original languages is essential for a proper understanding of a passage of scripture.

*The historical background principle.* The Bible was written within in a specific culture at a particular point in time. While scriptural passages have universal application, the truths in the Bible can only be fully realised when the surrounding culture and history are taken into account.

## Reference List

- Andria S 2006. 2 Timothy. In T Adeyemo (gen. ed.), *African Bible commentary*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Authority of the Bible.* 2011. Online Encyclopedia. Accessed from [www.theopedia.com/Authority\\_of\\_the\\_Bible](http://www.theopedia.com/Authority_of_the_Bible), 02-08-2011.
- Barker KL (gen. ed.) 2007. *Zondervan NIV study Bible. The Holy Bible, New International Version*. Grand Rapids: The Zondervan.
- Bayer O 2007. *Theology the Lutheran way*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Berger PL 1979. *The heretical imperative: contemporary possibilities of religious affirmation*. Garden City: Doubleday.
- Bloesch DG 1992. *A theology of Word and Spirit: authority and method in theology*. Downers Grove: IVP.
- Brandom A 2000. The role of language in religious education. In A Wright and A Brandom (eds.), *Learning to teach religious education in the secondary school: a companion to school experience*. London: Routledge.
- Bultmann R 2000. *Kerygma and myth*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Cowan DE 2003. *The remnant spirit: conservative reform in mainline Protestantism*. New York: Praeger.
- Croucher R 2004. *Recent trends among Evangelicals*. Online article. Accessed from [jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/12125.htm](http://jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/12125.htm), 2011-07-27.

- Gawiser SR and Witt GE 1994. *A journalist's guide to public opinion polls*. Westport: Praeger Publishers.
- Green JB 2005. Narrative theology. In K Vanhoozer (ed.), *Dictionary for theological interpretation of the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.
- Hodgson PC 2010. Liberal theology. *The Expository Times* 22(1):4–10.
- Hommel R 2005. *Biblical hermeneutics—an introduction*. Online article. Accessed from [www.theologue.org/BiblicalHermeneuticsIntroduction.htm](http://www.theologue.org/BiblicalHermeneuticsIntroduction.htm), 02-08-2011.
- Lindbeck GA 1984. *The Nature of doctrine: religion and theology in a postliberal age*. Philadelphia: Westminster.
- Lindbeck GA 1989. Scripture, consensus and community. In RJ Neuhaus (ed.), *Biblical interpretation in crisis*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Lonergan BJB 1974. Theology in its new context. In RJ Neuhaus (ed.), *second collection: Papers by Bernard J. F. Lonergan*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd.
- Lucie-Smith A 2007. *Narrative theology and moral theology: the infinite horizon*. Burlington: Ashgate.
- Malbon ES 1992. Narrative Criticism. In JC Anderson and SD Moore (eds.), *Mark and method*. Minneapolis: Fortress.
- McClendon J 1974. *Biography as theology*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.
- McDonald HD 1999. Authority of the Bible. In Elwell WA (ed.), *Evangelical dictionary of biblical Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker.
- Myer JD 2006. *Deductive theology: a reasoned approach to a reasonable God*. New York: Barnes and Noble.
- Myers C 2000. Embodying the great story: An interview with James W. McClendon. *The witness*. Online article. Accessed from [www.thewitness.org/archive/dec2000/mcclendon.html](http://www.thewitness.org/archive/dec2000/mcclendon.html), 27-07-2011.
- Niebuhr HR 1951. *Christ and culture*. New York: Harper.

Woodbridge, 'An Evaluation of Contemporary Challenges to Evangelical Orthodoxy'

Patzia AG and Petrotta AJ 2002. *Pocket dictionary of biblical studies*.  
Downers Grove: IVP.

Reindorp J 2011. Equipping Christians at work. *Ministry Today* (Issue 23). Online article. Accessed from [www.ministrytoday.org.uk/article.php?id=423&search=ring](http://www.ministrytoday.org.uk/article.php?id=423&search=ring), 25-07-2011.

*Rudolf Bultmann*. 2010. Online Encyclopedia. Accessed from:  
[www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Rudolf\\_Bultmann](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Rudolf_Bultmann), 17-09-2010.

Toon P 1995. *The end of liberal theology*. Wheaton: Crossway Books.

Troeltsch E 1911, 1931. *Social teaching of the Christian churches*.  
Translated by O Wyon. New York: Macmillan.

# Review of Hixson, *Getting the Gospel Wrong: The Evangelical Crisis No One is Talking About*

Roscoe Barnes III

Hixson JB 2008. *Getting the Gospel Wrong: the Evangelical Crisis No One Is Talking About*. Xulon Press.

## Introduction

At the time of the publication of this book, Hixson served as the executive director of Free Grace Alliance. He teaches theology at Grace School of Theology in The Woodlands, Texas, and Free Grace Seminary in Atlanta, Georgia. Hixson holds a Ph.D. from Baptist Bible Seminary, a Th.M. from Dallas Theological Seminary, and a B.A. from Houston Baptist University.

Hixson believes there is a crisis today in the presentation of the gospel, and that many churches, including their leaders, are confused about saving faith and the content of the gospel message.

In his book, *Getting the Gospel Wrong*, Hixson attempts to identify the problems and confusion surrounding the gospel and its presentation. In addition to analyzing some of the most popular beliefs and methods in evangelism, he defines the meaning of saving faith and presents what he considers to be the five essential components of the gospel message. He writes, 'Saving faith is the belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God who died and rose again to pay one's personal penalty for sin, and the one who gives eternal life to all who trust Him and Him alone for it' (84).

## 1. Summary of the Book

Hixson presents his argument in ten chapters. In chapters one and two, he offers an overview of his topic, and a survey of what he calls the present postmodern American landscape. This, he writes, ‘will help to contextualize the setting in which the gospel is being proclaimed’ (30). In chapter two, which he titles, ‘Surveying the Landscape’, he suggests that confusion about the message of the gospel is ‘a crisis of eternal proportions’ and that the important question for humanity is, ‘What precisely must someone believe about Jesus in order to obtain eternal life?’ (38–39).

In his survey of current views of the gospel, Hixson argues that problematic and confusing views of the gospel are related to postmodern thinking which ‘provides a fertile ground for erroneous gospel presentations’ (63). He elaborates, explaining that ‘the abandonment of certainty, as well as the corresponding embracement of uncertainty, has fostered ambivalence toward accuracy and purity in evangelical soteriological methodology’ (63).

Hixson is a leader in the Free Grace Movement. In his notes for chapter three, he provides a stinging critique of the Grace Evangelical Society (GES), noting that it promotes a ‘refined view’ of what people must believe in order to be saved (152). According to Hixson, the view of GES is that a belief in Jesus as the guarantor of eternal life is all that is needed for a person to receive salvation. The death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus are part of the gospel message, but a person does not have to believe these factors in order to be saved. In Hixson’s view, GES has ‘gone too far’ (153).

In chapters four through eight, Hixson presents what he considers the five erroneous versions of the gospel. He begins with the ‘purpose

gospel' category, focusing on one's personal fulfillment and meaning in this present life. He writes that this version places no emphasis on sin and its eternal consequences. Next, he features the 'puzzling gospel', which he suggests is vague, imprecise or inconsistent. This version is followed by the 'prosperity gospel', a version that stresses the promise of earthly blessings that include healing, health, and material wealth. The fourth version is the 'pluralistic gospel', which allows for different religions and different routes to heaven. In his discussion of the fifth version, the 'performance gospel', Hixson writes that this gospel type seems to place an emphasis on a person's good works, suggesting that good works are a prerequisite or post-requisite to saving faith.

In discussing the five erroneous versions of the gospel, Hixson uses prominent people and ministries as case studies. He elaborates, 'The case studies should not be read as a detailed soteriological defense as much as an illustrational reportage of the current state of soteriological affairs in American evangelicalism' (31).

His primary reason for this approach, he explains, is to 'validate the premise that erroneous soteriological methods are well entrenched in postmodern American evangelicalism, and to interact with each case study sufficiently to show that it fails to meet the standard of the biblical gospel' (31).

Under the category of the purpose gospel, Hixson places Rick Warren, a well-known pastor and author (*The Purpose-Driven Church*), together with Kerry Shook, founder of Fellowship of The Woodlands, and Gotlife.org.

In the chapter on the puzzling gospel, Hixson discusses Billy Graham and his two gospel tracts, *Steps to Peace with God* and *How to Become a Christian*. According to Hixson, the first tract, which urges readers to

‘trust in Christ as Lord and Savior’, and then to ‘receive him by personal invitation’, offers instructions that are puzzling and self-contradictory (227). Hixson interprets Graham as contending that salvation is a two-step process, instead of a single step of faith.

In his discussion of the prosperity gospel, Hixson delves into the gospel presentations of TD Jakes, pastor of the Potter’s House in Dallas, and Kirbyjon Caldwell, pastor of Windsor Village United Methodist Church, in Houston. He also mentions Benny Hinn, and a number of leaders in the Word of Faith movement (e.g. Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth Copeland, Paul Crouch, Frederick Price, and Charles Capps).

In the chapter on the pluralistic gospel, Hixson references media interviews in which Billy Graham and Joel Osteen appeared to take an inclusivist position on the issue of salvation. When asked if people of other religions would go to heaven, both said that God would decide who enters heaven. Neither Graham nor Osteen stated that Christ is the only way to the Father (279). Hixson also provides a case study of John Sanders, former professor of religion and philosophy at Huntington University, suggesting that Sanders’ ‘defense of inclusivism has been influenced to some degree by personal experience’ (285).

Finally, in his discussion of the performance gospel, Hixson examines the beliefs of John MacArthur, a popular author and pastor of Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, California, and a leading proponent of Lordship Salvation. Hixson includes Bill Bright (author of the Gospel tract, *Have You Heard of the Four Spiritual Laws?*), James Kennedy (founder of Evangelism Explosion), David Wells (the Andrew Mutch Distinguished Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary), James Montgomery Boice (author of *The Glory of God's Grace*), RC Sproul (Reformed Theologian and founder of Ligonier Ministries), and John Piper (senior



pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church). With the aforementioned names in view, Hixson ends this chapter by writing that ‘some evangelical leaders seem bent on adopting a soteriological method that makes man’s entrance into heaven contingent to varying degrees upon his own good behavior’ (321).

In the notes for this section, Hixson criticizes the evangelistic method of Ray Comfort, author of *Hell’s Best Kept Secret* (2004) as follows: ‘His suggested remedy to man’s sin problem is far from the biblical standard of grace’ (324).

Hixson concludes his book with ‘suggested correctives’ that call for action on the part of evangelicals. He writes, ‘Evangelicals must strive to combat erroneous soteriological methods by implementing various intentional correctives’ (33).

## 2. Strengths of the Book

Hixson argues that ‘postmodernism has cultivated a resurgence of interest in spiritual matters’ (28). He writes that while his book addresses and critiques postmodern ideology, it is actually ‘a polemic against erroneous gospels that permeate American evangelical Christianity in the *present culture*’ (30).

Hixson makes a strong case for his argument as he daringly analyzes some of the most prominent evangelical leaders of today. He takes them to task as he urges believers to be diligent in presenting the gospel with clarity and sound biblical principles. He clearly shows how the simplicity of the gospel can be, and indeed has been, a source of confusion for many in the church. He also explains in striking detail, and with much persuasion, the consequences of this confusion. Hixson’s argument, which is made through the lens of dispensational

theology, is effective and detailed. His attention to a good exegesis of the scriptures is to be commended.

Hixson's work takes believers back to the beginning—to a fundamental teaching of the Bible. In an interesting, yet fervent manner, he urges them to take a fresh look at what they believe about the gospel. He also challenges them to rethink their position in light of sound biblical doctrine. Aside from being a solid argument for truth as it relates to salvation, Hixson's book is a reminder that truth can become lost in the sea of a changing society.

### 3. Weakness of the Book

Hixson's use of case studies is a useful approach. However, even though this approach is commendable, it risks the danger of painting with a broad brush. In fairness to those he analyzed, some may not actually fit into the categories in which he placed them. For instance, one might question how TD Jakes could be labeled a prosperity preacher because of the sources cited by Hixson. Although Kenneth Hagin is listed among the prosperity preachers, it would have been fair to note that Hagin criticized some of the practices of prosperity preachers in his book, *The Midas Touch: A Balanced Approach to Biblical Prosperity* (2002).

### Conclusion

In spite of its weakness, *Getting the Gospel Wrong* is an important resource for church leaders and lay people alike, especially those in the evangelical tradition. While the author clearly identifies the current crisis involving confusion about the message of the gospels, he also takes great pain to provide advice and a practical solution.

Many churches, as the author indicates, appear to have fallen prey to different types of gospel messages. For this reason, there is an urgent need for clarity on saving faith and the essential content of the gospel.

Ultimately, this book is a thought-provoking treatise on the gospel message that deserves to be read by academic and popular audiences, or anyone who wants to accurately present the gospel. It is well researched, and presented with a sense of urgency.

## Reference List

Hixson JB 2008. *Getting the gospel wrong: the evangelical crisis no one is talking about*. Xulon Press.



# Review of Craig and Meister, *God is Good, God is Great: Why Believing in God is Reasonable and Responsible*

Zoltan L Erdey

Craig WL and Meister C 2010. *God is Good, God is Great: Why Believing in God is Reasonable and Responsible*. Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press.

## 1. The Four Horsemen (of rhetoric) and the New Atheism

For the proper understanding of the milieu of this book, it is important to introduce briefly a new atheistic movement. The contemporary context of apologetics was redefined in 2004 by Richard Dawkins' book, *The God Delusion*. It marked the commencement of an atheistic movement often referred to as the *New Atheism*. Broadly speaking, *New Atheism* is an 'expression used primarily to distinguish secular thinkers who argue that religious faith and belief in gods are dangerous and destructive because they are essentially irrational and encourage irrationality and anti-scientific thinking' ([www.skepticdictionary.com](http://www.skepticdictionary.com)). The unofficial chief-ambassador of the movement, Richard Dawkins, states the principal hypothesis as follows (2008:56):

I am not attacking the particular qualities of Yahweh, or Jesus, or Allah, or any other specific God such as Baal, Zeus, or Wotan. Instead I shall define the God Hypothesis more defensibly: there exists a super-human, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us.

This book [*The God Delusion*] will advocate an alternate view: any creative intelligence, of sufficient complexity to design anything, comes into existence only as the end product of an extended process of gradual evolution. Creative intelligences, being evolved, necessarily arrive late in the universe, and therefore cannot be responsible for designing it. God, in the sense defined, is a delusion.

This movement is an aggressive ‘intellectual’ movement targeted against deism and theism alike. The foremost authors associated with this movement (often referred to collectively as the *Four Horsemen*) include Sam Harris (*The End of Faith* and *A Letter to a Christian Nation*), Daniel Dennett (*Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*), Richard Dawkins (*The Bling Watchmaker*, *Climbing Mount Improbable*, and *The God Delusion*) and, most pertinent for the title of the reviewed book, Christopher Hitchens, the author of *God is Not Good, God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. The book by William Lane Craig and Chad Meister, *God is Good, God is Great: How Believing in God is Reasonable and Responsible*, is therefore not only the antithesis in terms of title, but also, it is the antithesis of the central sentiments of Hitchens’ book and the other similar New Atheist authors: God is good, and he is great ... and he has made himself known to us through his world and Word.

## 2. The Purpose of the Book

The stated primary purpose of the book is ‘to answer challenges advanced by the New Atheists and others raising objections to belief in God and the Christian faith’ (2009:9). Further, ‘our aim with this project is to provide a well-argued resource ... to offer positive engagement in the on-going dialogue between those who believe in God and Christ and those who do not’ (10).

Given the sheer number of people who have lost or doubted their faith in the Judeo-Christian God as a result of the evangelistic efforts of the apostles of the New Atheism, it is important to note that there are in fact rational and plausible answers available to the objections raised by the *intelligentsia* of this movement. Therefore, I believe that this book indeed achieves its intended resolution, and *more*. By ‘more’, I mean to say that digesting the book cover-to-cover has left me with a sense of surprise, *not* by the potency of the arguments presented against the objections of the New Atheist philosophy, but rather, by the ‘evangelistic’ accomplishment of such old, worn-out, and reprocessed arguments against the Christian faith.

I do not mean to suggest that the questions and objections raised by the New Atheist movement are irrelevant or silly, and therefore undeserving of a respectable answer. Rather, my noted sentiment is rooted in the reflection of CS Lewis (1949:50):

To be ignorant and simple now—not to be able to meet the enemies on their own ground—would be to throw down our weapons, and to betray our uneducated brethren who have, under God, no defense but us against the intellectual attacks of the heathen. Good philosophy must exist, if for no other reason, because *bad philosophy must be answered*.

From this perspective, then, the book *God is Good, God is Great* has delivered more than it promised.

### 3. Chapter-by-Chapter Content Summary

The book follows a four-part layout, each consisting of essays presented by distinguished intellectuals and Christian apologists. In the words of the editors (Craig and Meister 2009:9–10): ‘we have sought out leading

thinkers representing a wide range of expertise—from cosmology, astrophysics and biology to New Testament studies, theology and philosophy—to join us in responding to these arguments and claims.’

Part one (*God Is*) presents essays that deal with God’s existence; part two (*God is Good*) presents a treatise of God’s creative design as perceivable through the telescope and microscope; part three (*God is Great*) addresses atheistic allegations pertaining to God’s goodness in the face of all the evil in the world; part four (*Why it Matters*) brings together all the general theistic issues discussed via four essays that centre on Christianity in particular.

## 2.1. Part one: *God is*

*Richard Dawkins on arguments for God—William Lane Craig.* In this first, rather combative, essay, Craig presents a critical analysis of Dawkins’ attempted refutation of the cardinal arguments for the existence of God (the cosmological, teleological, moral, and ontological arguments), as evaluated according to the three criteria of what makes for a good argument. For an argument to qualify as a good argument, it ‘must meet three conditions: (1) it obeys the rules of logic; (2) its premises are true; (3) its premises are more plausible than their opposites’ (Craig 2009:14). One by one, Craig gives a succinct post-mortem of each of Dawkins’ refutations, highlighting (what he considers) numerous logical fallacies in his reasoning and conclusions. A prime example of such inconsistencies in Dawkins’ philosophy is the moral argument, which contains two premises, followed by a conclusion:

1. If God does not exist, objective moral values do not exist.
2. Objective moral values and duties do exist.
3. Therefore, God exists.



As summed up by Craig, ‘Dawkins himself seems to be committed to both premises (2009:18). But the affirmation of the objective values and duties is incompatible with his atheism, for under naturalism we are just animals, relatively advanced primates, and animals are not moral agents. Affirming both of the premises of the moral argument, Dawkins is thus, on pain of irrationality, committed to the argument’s conclusion, namely, that God exists’ (19).

Overall, the analysis of Dawkins’ (a biologist) engagement in philosophical debate by Craig (a professional philosopher and theologian) is telling and thought provoking. I tend to agree with Craig’s conclusion, namely, that ‘the objections raised by Richard Dawkins (30) to these [five] arguments are not even injurious, much less deadly.’<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Before moving on, allow me to make note of my initial impression on the tone of William Lane Craig in the first chapter of this book. Arguably, the two central torch-bearing representatives in the theist vs. (new) atheist debate are William Lane Craig and Richard Dawkins. Both men are first-rate scholars, with impressive publication records. However, William Lane Craig, in my opinion, is the central figure representing Christianity in the intellectual arena of university campus debate halls. In light of Dawkins’ refusal to accept a challenge to a debate from Craig for many years (until late last year, albeit as part of a group of three), it is understandable that this book would provide Craig with an opportunity to engage with Dawkins’ views and ideas presented in his book, *The God Delusion*. On this front, this chapter did not disappoint. However, on numerous occasions, I felt that Craig attacked the man, not (as it ought to be) his arguments. This character assassination reached a climax in the last few lines of his chapter: ‘I can just imagine Dawkins making a silly ass of himself at this professional conference with his spurious parody, just as he similarly embarrassed himself at the Templeton Foundation conference in Cambridge with his flyweight objections on the teleological argument (30).’ In my opinion, such remarks are uncalled for, and simply ill mannered. At this point of my reading, I sincerely hoped that the other contributors avoided such libel, for our testimony to the world is far more important than winning an argument.

*The image of God and the failure of scientific atheism—JP Moreland.*

The second essay provides an informative justification for the existence of God from the perspective of a Christian worldview, with specific reference to the ontological component of human beings, namely humans, as God's image bearers. Moreland explains that a worldview is an explanatory hypothesis, which must give an adequate justification for the way the world is. However, explains Moreland, 'a theory may explain some facts quite nicely, but there are recalcitrant facts that doggedly resist explanation by theory. No matter what a theory's advocate does, the recalcitrant fact just sits there and is not easily incorporated into the theory' (33). And so, according to Moreland's argument, 'the ontological nature of the image of God in man, among other things, implies that the makeup of human beings [endowment of reason, self-determination, moral action, personality and rational formation and so on] should provide a set of recalcitrant facts for other [non-Christian] worldviews' (33). A case in point is scientific naturalism, a worldview that cannot, naturalistically, provide an adequate explanation of the ontological nature of human beings.

In the body of his essay, Moreland makes it evident that the Christian worldview, with specific reference to the doctrine of the image of God in man, provides a far better existential and philosophical validation for the five recalcitrant features of the image of God, namely, (a) the conscientious mind, (b) free will, (c) rationality, (d) the mind or the soul, and (e) intrinsic, equal value and rights. In the words of Moreland, he concludes that '...given the epistemological and Grand Story constraints placed on scientific naturalist ontology, not a single one of these five fits naturally in a non-ad-hoc way' (47).

From the perspective of an explanatory hypothesis, I find this essay to be rich in content, both theologically and philosophically.

*Evidence of a morally perfect God—Paul K Moser.* To say that the question of God's existence is an old question is a gross understatement. Thus, the primary purpose of the article is to examine the epistemological question, *how do you know God exists?* In other words, 'it seeks an explanation for how the belief that God exists exceeds mere belief, or opinion, and achieves the status of genuine knowledge' (49). Moser's essay highlights the salient point that the ethical or moral facet of God has implications for what we should anticipate to discover as confirmation for the existence of God. Thus, a morally robust version of theism is cognitively more resilient than contemporary critics have supposed (49). Throughout the essay, Moser successfully 'seeks to reorient some presuppositions usually packed into inquiry or arguments about the existence of God' (Anderson 2010:Amazon reviewer).

## 2.2. Part two: God is great

*God and physics—John Polkinghorne.* This first essay of the second part of the book is, to my mind, one of the best articles in the book. Polkinghorne successfully highlights the intellectual inadequacy of naturalistic philosophies by demonstrating that it is precisely from a theistic worldview perspective that the universe makes sense in the first place. Thus, he advocates the following central thesis: naturalistic materialism is an inadequate explanatory proposition for the existence of the universe, especially in light of the rational intelligibility of the universe. He then provides the first of two metaphysical possibilities for this position, explaining that 'the laws of physics seem to point beyond themselves, calling for an explanation of why they have this rational character. ... The deep intelligibility of the cosmos can itself be made intelligible if behind its marvellous order is indeed the mind of its Creator.' (67) In addition to the laws of physics pointing beyond

themselves, the fine tuning of the universe likewise adds accumulative strength to the theistic hypothesis. In the words of Polkinghorne, ‘the collection of anthropic insights seems altogether too remarkable and precise to be treated as just a happy accident. It seems to point beyond the brute fact of physical law and requires to be set in a context of deeper intelligibility’ (70). However, in order to avoid the conclusion of a fine-tuned universe, that is, the conclusion that the nature of the universe requires a creator, some atheists have embraced the multiverse hypothesis. The third sub-segment is a refutation of the multiverse hypothesis, a hypothesis that amounts to no more than ‘a grossly extended form of naturalism ... to avoid the conclusions available from within its own overall worldview’ (71–72).

In the remaining few pages, Polkinghorne provides a brief but informative context of the contemporary science plethora, and the numerous advances in the way the universe is understood. His discussion includes epigrammatic notes on the seeming intrinsic indeterminacy of nature (as related to quantum theory), and culminates with the latest in physics discussions, complexity theory.

Overall, the irony of this article for the scientific naturalist is that even the rational intelligibility of various anti-theistic naturalistic theories are a testament that the existence of our universe, in which such thinking is conceivable, was an act of creation by an intelligent designer. The very starting point of the atheistic hypothesis is therefore innately contradictory and philosophically inadequate.

*God and evolution—Michael Behe.* The theory of evolution, which broadly speaking seeks to explain the complexity and diversity of life observable in the world, remains one of the top rationalisations for agnosticism at best, and atheism at worst. More sobering is that the pretext of denying the existence of God, based on the theory of

evolution, is to confuse mechanism with agency. In other words, understanding how something works does not dispense or, for that matter, even alleviate the necessity of an engineer or designer. In this chapter, Behe demonstrates the rationality of assuming that a creative mind is behind our mind-bogglingly complex biological world, rather than Darwin's theory of evolution. His article sets the context with a brief historical account of the human understanding of the complexity of the world, and pins down just how such ancient perceptions have *panned out* in view of modern scientific discoveries such as the microscope. To this end, the central thrust of this excellent essay is the question, 'how does the modern discovery and understanding of DNA and RNA support Darwin's theory?' The humble tone of Behe's presentation is a breath of fresh air from the seeming overconfident air that I perceived in the first chapter of this book.

The 'take-away' concept of this chapter was Behe's appeal to respect the complexity of the modern version of Darwin's theory of evolution, and distinguish its three most important ideas, namely, (a) random variation, or mutation, (b) natural selection, and (c) common descent (84). Random mutation (both those that are beneficial and unprofitable), according to Behe, is the single biggest challenge to the theory of evolution. The two examples that he provides from genetic mutations in malaria and *E. coli* are interesting, with implications for both sides of the debate.

Although the author does not state clearly the purpose of the article, allow me to make the following (perhaps unfair) final observation. If Behe's chief rationale for penning this chapter was merely to present two experiments which *seem* to contradict the success of random mutation to offer an adequate account for the complexity and genetic diversity of life, then this chapter is a success. However, if his purpose was more ambitious (i.e. to challenge the thinking of sceptics, or to

provide some ammunition for young apologists in their ‘war-of-words’ with informed atheists), the article falls desperately short. Little knowledge is dangerous indeed.

*Evolutionary explanations of religion*—Michael J Murray. The initial two thirds of this essay provide a succinct context of the debate in which Murray catalogues the various scientific accounts for religion into three categories, namely, (a) natural cognitive disposition, (b) adaptation (religious beliefs and practices increase the likelihood of survival and reproduction), and (c) a by-product of other adaptive traits. With limited space to introduce such a vast and complicated sub-category, the author provides a brief explanation of three adaptive hypotheses, namely, supernatural punishment theories, costly signalling theories, and group selection theories; moving on to recapping the major tenets of the contemporary standard model, the cognitive model. The cognitive model contends that ‘human beings have specific and identifiable mental tools that make religious belief easy and natural’ (100). The quotation of Matthew Alper (101) frames the conclusion and sentiments of the above explanations:

If belief in God is produced by a genetically inherited trait, if the human species is ‘hardwired’ to believe in a spirit world, this could suggest that God doesn’t exist as something ‘out there’, beyond and independent of us, but rather as a product of an inherent perception, the manifestation of an evolutionary adaptation that exists exclusively within the human brain. If true, this would imply that there is no actual spirit reality, no God of gods, no soul, or afterlife. Consequently, humankind can no longer be viewed as a product of God, but rather, God must be viewed as a product of human cognition.

Earlier in this review, I noted a common philosophical blunder, namely, the supposition that if something is explicable in terms of its

mechanical function(s), it abolishes the need to infer a designer (e.g. the theory of evolution, as an explanatory hypothesis, removes the need of a designer and sustainer of the biological system). This chapter, then, seems to highlight an analogous issue – a conjectural explanation for the natural affinity of human beings towards religion does not lead to the logical conclusion that religious beliefs are, therefore, necessarily disreputable and untrue. At best, the natural consequence of such scientific explanation of religions leads to agnosticism, not atheism. Murray's illustration of this point is simple, yet efficacious.

Unfortunately, much of this essay repeatedly raised pertinent issues without providing any contextual explanation. In fact, on numerous occasions, Murray noted that space does not permit elaboration. In light of this, I am afraid that this chapter is not even an introduction to the various sub-categories of the subject, and could leave more advanced readers somewhat frustrated. Perhaps I am looking at it back-to-front, for this chapter is merely a 'teaser' that leaves readers hungry for more.

### 2.3. Part three: God is good

*God, evil and morality—Chad Meister.* The essential concern of this chapter relates to underlining the rationalisation for morality that the New Atheists offer. Given that none of the Four Horsemen of New Atheism are moral relativists (seemingly that is), they genuinely believe that moral actions (e.g. kindness, compassion, murder, rape) are either objectively good, or objectively evil. The sensible question must surely be: what is the ethical basis of such convictions, if there is no God in whom such convictions are rooted? As Meister (110) points out, '...*believing* that something is right or wrong and *justifying* one's belief that something is right or wrong are two very different matters.' In this essay, Meister attempts to demonstrate that from an atheistic

epistemological perspective, there are no satisfactory answers. For example, if morality or ethics is merely a socio-biological by-product of one or more evolutionary developments, then morality is nothing more than a merely personal subjective preference. Any effort to ground it objectively, according to Meister, remains inadequate. I found the lengthy quotations and synopses of the views held by the Four Horsemen helpful.

*Is religion evil?—Alister McGrath.* In my opinion, this chapter is the most informative and academically astute essay of this book. The objectivity and intellectual integrity of the author's critical analysis of the New Atheist philosophies was inspiring, especially given the space constraints. Arguing against the naïve and unscientific notion that religion is inherently evil and the general cause of extreme wickedness (e.g. the crusades, Salem witch trials, etc.), McGrath proposes that the real issue at hand is absolutism or totalitarianism, not religion *per se*. He explains that 'people create and sustain absolutes out of fear of their own limitations, and people react with violence when others do not accept them. Religion may have a tendency towards absolutism, but the same tendency is innate in any human attempt to find or create meaning, especially when it is challenged' (122–123). This is not exclusive to religious convictions, but extends to politics, patriotism, democracy, race, gender, and yes, even New Atheism. Having carefully justified such sentiments, McGrath highlights two philosophical blind spots in the theoretical framework of New Atheist writers, namely, (a) the atheist violence committed against religion in an attempt to reach an atheistic social utopia, and (b) the creation, through their own philosophy of binary oppositions (in-groups [Atheists] and out-groups [the religious]).

Overall, McGrath makes a convincing case against the simplistic *sound bites* of Dawkins and his allies, 'ideally attuned to media-driven culture



which prefers breezy slogans to serious analysis: *religion is evil*' (119–120). As long as human nature remains depraved, social evils remain firmly on the doorstep of *people*, whether religious or not.

*Are Old Testament laws evil?—Paul Copan.* The top objection (by both philosophers and lay people alike) to the existence of God usually revolves around the problem of evil. Since such objections do not *stick* in light of the life and ministry of Jesus, objectors often skip the New Testament and ground this objection in various Old Testament passages which seem to exhibit (to *them* at least) the depravity and evil of its laws. In this chapter, Paul Copan provides much-needed context for such laws, demonstrating that the New Atheist 'sound bite' (borrowing McGrath's term), 'Old Testament laws are evil' is merely a trivialization of Yahweh's person, ethics, and character, and that a real inconsistency exists between 'their "objective" moral outrage and naturalism' (152).

At first glance, Copan's contentions that the Mosaic Law is not the ideal and *final* ethic, but rather, it 'reflects a meeting point between divine/creational ideals and the reality of human sin and evil societal structures' (138), seemed a meagre justification to me. But with some reflection upon the carefully argued and presented five sub-points, such reservations gave way, as the far-reaching consequences of sin became painfully obvious (in terms of both the past and the present). Old Testament laws make more sense viewed through the lenses of a gracious God tolerating unholy human behaviour, than a naturalistic universe.

*How could God create hell?—Jerry L Walls.* 'It is precisely because God is a God of love that people may wind up in hell' (160) is the thesis advocated in this article. To elaborate, only in a world in which a loving God freely permits humans to either love or reject him (a.k.a. free will),

can a hell exist by inevitability. The author developed this *recycled* (albeit still potent and persuasive) idea throughout the bulk of the article, with the support of a helpful dance metaphor. From an academic perspective, Walls' concluding considerations (i.e. it is irrational to reject God, for that is, in effect, choosing to go to hell) are *merely* the thoughts of CS Lewis and, thus, this article contains no original thinking or ideas (apart from a creative use of a metaphor in apologetics). From an evangelical perspective, it lacks any scriptural support, which is perhaps the gravest weakness of this apologetic. Notwithstanding, the essay is well-written and easy to follow, and is sure to leave readers with much to think about. Perhaps the examination of the scriptures could be the by-product of this read!?

#### 2.4. Part four: why it matters?

*Recognizing divine revelation—Charles Taliaferro.* The author offers an overview of the concept of divine revelation, and reviews four often-cited objections to it from the perspective of a 'framework of inquiry' (170). Taliaferro's short essay is an attempt to reveal that the rejection of divine revelation by the New Atheists (especially Daniel Dennett) is due to an atheistic presuppositional frame of analysis (i.e. view of nature, history, and values). The illustration from the life and convictions of David Hume is curious.

*The Messiah you never expected—Scot McKnight.* From the perception of first century observers, the words and works of Jesus permit for an array of beliefs as to who he was. In fact, Jesus asked his disciples this same question. Matthew records four possibilities, namely, John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets. McKnight takes this further and sketches ten possible 'items the contemporaries of Jesus most likely saw when they listened to and watched Jesus' (188). The

thrust of this article is evangelistic, in that it probes for an answer to a question that Christ asked of the disciples: ‘But who do you say that I am?’ (Mt 16:15b). The one line conclusion is powerful and effective.

*Tracing Jesus’ resurrection to its earliest eyewitness accounts—Gary R Habermas.* According to Habermas, 1 Corinthians 15:3–7 is an incredibly valuable passage of scripture within the context of Christ’s resurrection debate. In his careful historical exposition, he demonstrates that ‘the two epistles unanimously recognised as Paul’s, 1 Corinthians and Galatians, provide the basis for showing that the original resurrection proclamation was exceptionally early and linked to the initial eyewitnesses themselves’ (202), and thus, rooted in historical tradition. Post read his argument almost seems to make common sense.

A frequent objection advocated by the New Atheist contingent is the similarity of the various components of Christianity (e.g. supernatural events surrounding the virgin birth, the resurrection, etc.) to other ‘much earlier’ religions. Habermas’ epigrammatic thoughts on these objections are absorbing and informative.

*Why faith in Jesus matters—Mark Mittelberg.* This last article commences with the following contention: everyone (including the New Atheists) has faith in something, in spite of the absence of proof in the absolute sense.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, explains Mittelberg, the correct and

---

<sup>2</sup> William Craig highlighted this truth in a debate with Peter Atkins. ‘I think there are a good number of things that cannot be scientifically proven but are all rational to accept. Let me list five. Logical and mathematical truths cannot be proven by science. Science presupposes logic and maths, so that to try and prove them by science would be arguing in a circle. Metaphysical truths, like “there are other minds other than my own”, or “that the external world is real”, or “that the past was not created five minutes ago with the appearance of age”, are rational beliefs that cannot be scientifically proven. Ethical beliefs about statements of value are not accessible by

honest questions are: *why trust Jesus?* and *why does trusting Jesus matter?*

With respect to the first question, the reader is encouraged to answer only after carefully considering the trustworthiness of the object of our faith. Then, the author extracts certain truths from various New Testament passages, presenting Jesus as a worthy recipient of faith. ‘He [Jesus] is faithworthy’ (222).

Finally, why does faith in Jesus matter? Because God is great, God is good—but we’re neither (222) ... and we desperately need what he offers (225).<sup>3</sup>

### 3. Strengths of the Book

As a thematic synopsis of the contemporary apologetics landscape, this book is unparalleled. Simply stated, the book, *God is Good, God is*

---

the scientific method. You can’t show, by science, whether the Nazi scientists in the camps did anything evil as opposed to the scientists in the Western democracies. Aesthetic judgments (no. 4) cannot be accessed by the scientific method. And finally, and most remarkably, would be science itself. Science cannot be justified by the scientific method. Science is permeated with improveable assumptions’ (Craig, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=gkBD20edOco](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gkBD20edOco)).

<sup>3</sup> Albeit only mentioned in a footnote, the postscript is worthy of mention. The late Anthony Flew was arguably the world’s foremost philosophical atheist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After a lifetime of antagonism towards religion and faith (specifically the truth claims of Christianity), Flew converted to a rudimentary form of deism in his late 70’s. Incidentally, Richard Dawkins dismissed his conversion as a result of old age. In any case, although deism is still a long way from theism and Christianity in particular, the manuscript of the interview by Gary Habermas discussing Flew’s pilgrimage from atheism to theism makes for a fascinating and absorbing read. I could not help but smile while I imagined Richard Dawkins giving a similar account in an interview in the near future (whether in this life or the next).

*Great* is an outstanding resource that should form part of the library of any Christian believer who has wrestled with the difficult questions raised by the New Atheists. From the perspective of a theologian with interests in philosophy and the ‘art’ of apologetics, this book introduces coherently the key concepts and philosophies of the major players on the recent apologetics stage.

Secondly, since much of the *sound bites* of the Four Horsemen have reached popular domains, the worth of this book goes beyond the presentation of the dialogues between atheists and theists. It demonstrates that such discussions are not closed, but in fact open. Reading atheistic humanist literature, one may be persuaded to conclude that God is dead, and that the dazzling science of the New Atheists killed him. But in reality, nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, it seems that it is actually the New Atheists who rely on the ignorance of the general public about issues of theology and the philosophy of religion. It is the very thing that makes their arguments so evangelistically efficacious. Be that as it may, the various contributing authors of this book have demonstrated not only that oversimplified objections to Christianity (in specific) do not stand up to closer intellectual scrutiny, but that such explanations do not automatically eliminate God from existence. Thus, the book is apologetically relevant, intellectually stimulating, *and* faith edifying.

Lastly, this book should assist students to distinguish between true evidence and mere smokescreen rhetoric. New Atheist philosophers occasionally go beyond the logical and scientific presentation of evidence of presenting subjective objections about their personal dislikes of the notion of God and other associated topics (i.e. his ways and his character). It is not an overstatement to say that it is the ugly rhetoric of the New Atheists that fans the flames of agnosticism at best,

and atheism at worst. Such personal objections however, no matter how passionate they are, have no bearing on whether Christianity is true.

#### 4. Weaknesses of the Book

The first notable weakness, ironically, is also its strength. Although the book provides an excellent framework for the contemporary apologetics scene, it leaves more advanced and informed readers dissatisfied with the superficiality that may characterise *selected* chapters. The concise nature of the content of each chapter may leave more analytical readers unconvinced. Moreover, it is difficult to ascertain whether the authors were in fact setting up ‘straw man’ arguments, without first reading the primary sources that they have reviewed. For example, it is difficult to tell from a short article, such as Moreland’s essay (ch. 2), whether he is in fact demolishing the *best* naturalistic explanatory theory for each of the five ‘recalcitrant features of the image of God’, without additional research into scientific naturalism as an explanatory worldview. This is not to suggest that Moreland is one to erect straw men, but I recommend studying this book in conjunction with additional background research, otherwise the victory proclaimed in the various articles will be a hollow one indeed. Readers must avoid the danger of taking the lazy route by putting blind faith in the word of particular authors, without getting to know both sides of the arguments.

A major weakness that seriously affects the usability of this book relates to its context of use. Although the book would be a valuable addition to one’s library, its value remains chiefly within the framework of Western apologetics methods and answers. From the perspective of an African apologetics framework, the book remains practically unusable. Questions of God’s existence, the historicity of

biblical narratives, and similar questions are simply non-issues within the African context.

## Conclusion

From an apologetic perspective, the New Atheist movement is the most recent and belligerent movement that cannot be disregarded by Christians, especially in view of the unwarranted popularity it has received in lay circles. Undoubtedly, the majority of the objections to the Christian faith that will emerge in the near future will originate from the authors of this movement. Therefore, the book '*God is good, God is great*' is worth its weight in Rands.

## Reference List

Dawkins R 2008. *The God delusion*. New York: First Mariner Books.  
Lewis CS 1949. *The weight of glory*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.





# Review of Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief*

Mark Pretorius

Collins FS 2006. *The language of God: a scientist presents evidence for belief*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

## Introduction

Undoubtedly, the credentials of Francis Collins are impressive. As the former head of the Human Genome Project, he is one of the world's leading geneticists. He is also a Christian with strong convictions that theistic evolution is the best explanation of the creation aspects of the Bible. Notwithstanding my critique of a number of Collins' claims, *The Language of God* will certainly challenge the intellectually honest reader.

Although Collins deals with many issues throughout his book, especially on the human genome, I felt that it would be more pertinent to deal briefly with issues that are important, particularly those with regard to God and humanity.

## 1. Humanity

In his book, Collins attempts to answer many questions on humanity's roots, and its relation to the scriptural account of life. He endeavours to reconcile some of the many difficult aspects of scripture with biological research, such as the creation of Adam, Cain's wife; the successfully

integration of Darwin's idea of evolution with the scriptural account of creation, and so on. I gleaned much from his book, but I was somewhat disappointed by some of the claims he makes (e.g. his idea that we were created from pre-existent hominids, rather than a special creation by God, and that Genesis is poetic, rather than literal).

Nevertheless, his book is well laid out, starting with his impressive conversion to Christianity, and the subsequent results. He then moves on to the origin of the universe, culminating in a brief discourse on some of the ethical and moral sides of biological issues, and a review of his conversion.

## 2. Genesis

One must commend Collins for his effort to make sense of difficult issues surrounding the *science and theology* debate. However, many of his ideas fail closer academic scrutiny, which is a pity, since he has made a bold attempt to answer questions, specifically on the origin of humanity through his study and head of the Human Genome Project. In fact, one tends to have an uneasy feeling when reading how he strives to reconcile the so-called 'scriptural conundrums', especially around Adam and the creation acts of Genesis. On certain theological issues, it seems that his work tends to border on heresy. For example, when referring to the book of Genesis, he states that, 'Unquestionably the language is poetic' rather than literal (83). In this instance, Collins seems to disregard the interpretations and conclusions of scholars—better qualified to conduct Old Testament exegesis—who suggest that Genesis cannot but be seen as a historical account. A thorough discussion of the numerous interpretative models for the book of Genesis is missing. In all probability, including such discussions would have opened up other avenues of exploration, leading to different

conclusions. Therefore, his ability to correctly exegete the scriptural teaching on such difficult issues is, therefore, questionable.

### 3. Adam and Eve

Collins addresses the subject of Adam's creation, by presupposing that Adam and Eve were the continuation of some pre-Adamic race—an idea compelled by his strong belief in evolution, and probably based on his work around gene similarities. This, however, flies in the face of the scriptural account, teaching that Adam was a direct and unique creation of God, formed from the dust of the earth. Adam was not a by-product of some hominid or ape-like creature. In any case, Collins argues that human genes are not uniquely human—other animals have the same genes—thus strongly implying common descent (124–138). However, many in the scientific community have subsequently questioned his ideas, such as leading biologists, Hopi E Hoekstra and Jerry Coyne. The genome data does not present an overwhelming challenge to the view that God engaged in multiple creative acts at various points (*ex nihilo*), combined with evolution.

Collins further states that God probably 'supplied' Cain's wife from one of these (*hominoid* or ape-like) creatures. For example, he states 'Some biblical literalists insist the wives of Cain and Seth must have been their own sisters, but that is both in serious conflict with subsequent prohibitions against incest, and incompatible with a straightforward reading of the text (207).' This is a strange statement coming from someone, who is an expert on genes and gene mutation, since he would know the gene was free from mutation at that time of history. Moreover, the children of Adam and Eve merely followed God's mandate to replenish the earth.

## 4. The Moral Code

On the topic of ethics, it is clear from his writings that the moral code is important to Collins, dedicating a notable amount of space explaining it from the perspective of evil, bioethics, and atheism. His conclusions are theistic in nature (22–30; 36–37). However, his idea of stem cells and the moral code is a little problematical. For example, he states that although human embryos deserve moral status (he is big on this), there are hundreds of thousands of these embryos currently frozen away in in-vitro fertilization clinics. His view is that, instead of throwing them away, they should rather be used for good. Although he has a point, it leaves one with the idea of double standards. This is especially evident in his explanation of the way in which God infuses a soul into an embryo (249–259). He states: ‘No theologian would argue that identical twins lack souls, or that they share a single soul. In these cases, therefore, the insistence that the spiritual nature of a person is uniquely defined at the very moment of conception encounters difficulty’. The problem with this statement is that Collins supplies no scholarly references. His lack of the biblical data regarding the issues of the origin of the soul is problematic, and leads to confusion rather than clarity. In fact, his statements clearly reveal a non-Reformed or evangelical view of the scriptures, a view that would not only be considered unacceptable by most evangelical scholars, but also, contrary to many evangelical statements of faith.

In my view, Collins should have considered the biblical data carefully on this and engaged theologians who have written extensively on traducianism and creationism, two theories that, in my view, better explain the process.

## 5. The Fossil Record

One of the most important facets against an evolutionary process or common descent is the gaps found in the fossil records—especially after the Cambrian Explosion. Collins glosses over this important aspect of the evolutionary process (93–96), which probably leads to his views on Adam and Eve (i.e. descending from some previous evolutionary race of hominids). Unfortunately, Collins does not provide a careful study of the fossil record (perhaps because it is not his area of expertise). This is a serious weakness in his argument for common descent. One gets the impression throughout his writings that he may be a passionate supporter of a Darwinian type evolutionary process (as previously implied), especially since he strongly advocates a common descent theory.

## 6. Young Earth Creationists

Collins tends to make a few peculiar comments, especially around Young Earth Creationists. For instance, he states, ‘Some YEC advocates have more recently taken the tack of arguing that all of this evidence *for evolution* (emphasis mine) has been designed by God to mislead us, and therefore test our faith’ (176). Unfortunately, Collins does not supply references for this statement, thus, leaving the door open for speculation. Collins does, however, attempt to tidy up such sentiments by stating that theistic evolution (or *biologos* as he prefers to call it) is an important theory. He infers that it explains more about creation than other similar views do, and he vigorously defends it by dedicating an entire chapter to the subject (ch. 10).

Clearly, Collins is an unashamed theistic evolutionist, and he seemingly wrote his book from that philosophical perspective. Therefore, it will

certainly appeal to those who share similar ideas. The book will also appeal to those who would like a fairly detailed overview of the interaction between science and theology, and the evolution and biology debate. Moreover, his intentions are clear, thus successfully reconciling contemporary scientific advances with scripture. For this, I commend him.

## Conclusion

Although the book, *The Language of God*, is an interesting read, I would be reticent to recommend this book to 'new' Christians. My concern is rooted in the fear that uninformed readers, honestly seeking answers to touch questions on the topic of creation, may be persuaded to believe some of the extra-biblical claims made by Collins.

## Reference List

Collins FS 2006. *The language of God: a scientist presents evidence for belief*. New York: Simon and Schuster.