

# Conspectus

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

**Volume 13**

**March 2012**

ISSN 1996-8167

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# Modelling the Gospel in Joyful Partnership: Exemplars and the Uniting Theme of Philippians

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## Abstract

Most interpreters now recognize the literary unity and integrity of Paul's letter to the Philippians. This consensus has however made the question of the letter's uniting theme a matter of urgent inquiry for biblical scholars and preachers alike. Even here, significant advances have of late been made; but, questions remain. The aim of this article in the light of this progress is threefold. It will first evaluate some of the key proposals for the letter's uniting theme. Secondly, it will propose that 'modelling the gospel in joyful partnership' best represents the uniting theme of Philippians. And thirdly, it will demonstrate that Paul extensively employs positive and negative exemplars to illustrate this theme in each section of the letter. The article concludes by highlighting the contribution of Philippians to current reflections on New Testament ethics.

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<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. Background to the problem

Tremendous strides have been made towards resolving several of the hitherto uncertain introductory questions with regard to Paul's letter to the Philippians (Bockmuehl 1997:20–35; Fee 1995:1–15; Fowl 2005:8–12; Garland 2006:178–182; Hartog 2010:475–503; Hawthorne 1983:xl–xliv; O'Brien 1991:3–39; Silva 2005:1–36; Still 2011:1–12; Witherington III 2011:1–30). Therefore, it is appropriate to summarise these consensuses as a way of setting the background for the present investigation.

Firstly, most interpreters agree that Paul wrote this letter from a Roman prison to a group of Christians in Philippi. The chief occasion for the letter, most would also agree, was the reception of a generous gift from the Philippians, for which Paul expresses his heartfelt gratitude.

Secondly, the consensus also appears to be that in its overall form, this letter was largely influenced by the ancient Mediterranean 'letter of friendship' genre. So, in accordance with this genre, Paul, in the letter alternately discusses his affairs and those of the Philippians and employs moral exhortations to fulfil goals he mutually shared with the recipients. There are competing alternatives to this consensus on the genre, such as 'letter of consolation' (Holloway 2001), or 'family letter' (Alexander 1989:87–101; cf. Witherington III 2011:14). But by-and-large, most interpreters view these other suggestions as compatible with the 'letter of friendship' genre (cf. Hartog 2010:482).

Thirdly, most interpreters are in agreement that at the time of writing, the Philippian church was faced with a complex problem made up of three facets, namely, (a) they encountered opposition from without the

fellowship, (b) there were quarrels and rivalries between some influential members of the fellowship, a situation which in Paul's view was fuelled by lack of focus on the self-sacrificial demands of the gospel of Christ, and (c) a false teaching of some sort was at least imminent to arrive in Philippi, if not already influencing the internal rivalry. Broadly granted by contemporary interpreters, these three contingencies influenced Paul's exhortations in the letter.

Finally, and regarding the long-standing question of the literary integrity of the letter, the consensus is increasingly becoming established among both conservative and non-conservative interpreters that Philippians was originally penned by the apostle in the single unit that we now have it.

Of course, there are noteworthy dissenting views to these 'consensuses'. With regard to the integrity of the letter, for example, John Reumann (2008) has recently mounted a spirited defence of the partition theory in his *Anchor Bible commentary*, unfortunately published in a truncated form due to his premature death. Reumann argued that the letter, as we have it now, was a post-Pauline composite redacted from three earlier genuine letters of Paul to the Philippians.

These genuine letters, in his view, were (a) a thanksgiving letter now in 4:10–20, which Paul sent while not in prison, written perhaps in AD 54, (b) a letter of friendship he wrote from an Ephesian prison soon after the thanksgiving letter, which is now in 1:1–3:1, and maybe also including 4:1–9 and 21–23, and (c) a third polemical letter he wrote warning the Philippians of heterodox teachers and their practices now in 3:2–21. In Reumann's reckoning, the internal literary variations, changes in tone, and the lack of a leading idea binding these sections

together undermine the notion of literary integrity of Philippians and appear to support the partition theory (2008:12–15).<sup>2</sup>

Reumann's contribution has not gone unchallenged by reviewers, many pointing to the paucity of the evidence that he adduces in his defence of the partition theory (e.g. Dunn 2009:1–4; Fantin 2011:373–375; Krentz 2010:253–254; Ross 2009, 428–429; Tucker 2010:456–458). In any case, though quite fresh in its presentation, the essence of Reumann's argument is by no means new. As most reviewers have pointed out, it is essentially a rehearsal of the partition theory as it was first postulated seven decades ago (Beare 1959; Marxsen 1968:61–62; Schmithals 1957:297–341). All the same, Reumann's dissenting voice reminds interpreters convinced of the integrity of Philippians that there is still work to be done in persuading others about the merits of their case.

Some of the proponents of integrity have argued that, in a way, the partition theory is misguided; for, exegetes have no choice but to accept the letter in the canonical form in which it is now found (e.g. Fowl 2005:8; Silva 2005:13). Such a dismissive view of the partition theory however, fails to grapple with the implications of the theory to the exegesis of the letter. For, if the partition theory were correct, it would mean that exegetes may not expect literary and theological coherence to the letter. This, no doubt, hampers the exegetical enterprise, along with its detrimental effects on homiletic activities based on Philippians. The

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<sup>2</sup> Three categories of evidence are often adduced in support of the partition theory, namely, (a) the apparent suggestion by Polycarp that Paul wrote more than one letter to the Philippians, (b) the sudden change in tone between 3:1 and 3:2, together with the apostle's use of *Tò λοιπόν* (*finally*) in 3:1, and (c) the placement of the thanksgiving statement of 4:10–20 rather late in the letter while the so called 'travel plans' are placed early, in the middle 2:19–30. For a thorough discussion of these, see Garland (1985:141–173).

task of addressing the question of the literary integrity of Philippians is therefore crucial.

## 1.2. The problem

The argument against the partition theory has been effectively and eloquently made by many interpreters since the beginning of the 1960s (e.g. Alexander 1989:87–101; Black 1995:16–49; DeSilva 1995:27–54; Fowl 2005:8–9; Garland 1985:141–173; Hartog 2010:479–480; Holloway 2001:7–33; Jewett 1970:40–53; O'Brien 1991:10–18; Pollard 1966–1967:57–66; Watson 1988:57–88). This has significantly contributed to the increasing consensus in favour of integrity. Yet, as Bockmuehl (1997:24) has warned, some of the methodological sophistication employed as means of defending the literary integrity of Philippians mimic the convolutions of the partition theory itself, and so 'tax credulity and in the end prove very little indeed'.

Moreover, refuting the partition theory is not nearly enough for establishing the integrity of the letter. O'Brien (1991:15) eloquently made the point: the argument in favour of the integrity of Philippians remains incomplete as far as interpreters have not established a 'leading idea' that binds the whole epistle together. In other words, until interpreters establish a consistent theme running through the letter, weaving the ideas, concepts, and language into a united whole, dissenters are unlikely to be fully persuaded that Paul originally penned the letter as one unit.

Dalton (1979:99) threw down the following challenge to interpreters more than three decades ago: it is only when 'a regular pattern of words and ideas is repeated in a way which reveals the inner movement and meaning of the text, then we have a view which the hypothesis of division will find hard to explain'. That challenge remains true today

as when he first made it. To put the problem in a sharper manner: if Philippians is a united letter, what is its uniting theme?

### 1.3. Evaluation of some proposals

Since the middle of the nineteenth century, several suggestions towards addressing this problem have been made. Of these, four merit evaluation, namely, (a) preparing for martyrdom, (b) joy in suffering, (c) partnership in the gospel, and (d) good heavenly citizenship.

Two main criteria to be used for evaluating these proposals are as follows: (1) how widespread in the letter is the proposed theme; (2) whether the proposal would adequately address the problems that the Philippians faced. As will shortly become evident, while none of the above proposals fully satisfies these criteria, the best uniting theme combines their insights.

#### 1.3.1. *Preparing for martyrdom*

Several martyrological texts of the patristic era heavily utilized Paul's letter to the Philippians, suggesting that, at least some in early Christianity, detected a contribution of the epistle to a Christian doctrine of martyrdom (cf. Bloomquist 1993:18–26). It was, however, not until the middle of the nineteenth century that Ernst Lohmeyer (1954) proposed 'preparing for martyrdom' as the uniting theme of Philippians. As it happened, Lohmeyer's was also the very first proposal of a uniting theme for the letter (cf. Jewett 1970:49).

Deriving his insights from literature on martyrdom from Second Temple Judaism and second century Christianity, Lohmeyer argued that Paul's idea of martyrdom was not just the Christian witness's loss of physical life, but also, encompassed persecution that would have been in continuity with death, but does not necessarily result in death. Thus,

in Lohmeyer's reckoning, some of the persecuted Christians of Philippi who were still alive at the time would nevertheless have been regarded as martyrs. Some, indeed, became proud following their belief that they had attained 'perfection of martyrdom' (1954:4), and this resulted in the quarrels and rivalries in the fellowship. Paul's letter, then, sought to address this scenario both for the apostle himself awaiting his physical martyrdom, and the Christians in Philippi.

Within the epistle itself, Lohmeyer located specific martyrological terminologies scattered throughout the letter, for example, δούλοι (*slaves*) in 1:1, σωτηρίαν (*salvation*) in 2:12, τοῦ γινῶναι αὐτὸν (*that I may know him*) in 3:10, ταπεινοῦσθαι (to be abased), and περισσεύειν (*to abound*) in 4:12. Paul repeated, on several occasions in the letter, that he was aware of his impending martyrdom (e.g. 1:20–24; 2:17; 3:10–11). Similarly, some of the explicit examples that Paul lays out in the epistle, specifically of Jesus (2:6–11) and of Epaphroditus (2:25–30) are directly related to deaths in the service of the gospel. Furthermore, some of Paul's exhortations to the Philippians, Lohmeyer argued, called for living the Christian life in a sacrificial manner, and more so, in a mystical sense united with Christ as if one were martyred with him (1954:36–46).

Based on this, Lohmeyer (1954:5–6) proposed a literary structure of the letter which identified the following headings: introduction (1:1–11), Paul's martyrdom (1:12–26), the community's martyrdom (1:27–2:16), helpers in martyrdom (2:17–30), dangers in martyrdom (3:1–21), last advice on martyrdom (4:1–9), and the collection (4:10–20).

Contemporary interpreters have unanimously rejected Lohmeyer's thesis. His definition of martyrdom was rightly criticized as too complex, and heavily derived from later martyrological conceptions and not attested in New Testament times. Several of the terminologies,

which he labelled as specifically related to martyrdom, have also not attracted unanimous acceptance. And his suggestion that the source of the rivalry derived from the pride of those who believed they had attained perfection through martyrdom appears doubtful (Bloomquist 1993:50–52).

Yet, a full-scale rejection of Lohmeyer's insights is unwarranted. Though his martyrological thesis is overdone, his insistence that, at the mystical level, the Christian shares in the death and resurrection life of Christ is correct. The Christian life, as Paul stresses in his letters, is cruciform from its beginning to its completion.<sup>3</sup> And this idea is reflected in the self-sacrificial demands in response to the gospel which Paul underlines throughout Philippians (Gorman 2001:40; Gould 1975:93–101). In identifying this sacrificial witness theme in Philippians, Lohmeyer has underlined a key component of Paul's strategy for addressing the problems in the Philippian church.

Jewett (1970:51) is therefore correct in surmising, 'Although Lohmeyer confused the issue by inserting categories of later martyrdom ideology, he was correct in discerning continuity in the letter at the point of the references to suffering'. It is therefore paradoxical that Lohmeyer himself, and several of his former students subsequently suffered martyrdom at the hands of the Nazi persecutors of Germany (Blevins 1980:320; Martin 1959:41–42).

### *1.3.2. Joy in suffering*

In contrast to the martyrdom thesis, most popular expositions of Philippians regard 'joy in suffering' as the best representation of the

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<sup>3</sup> Examples include Romans 6:6; 1 Corinthians 1:18; 2 Corinthians 13:4; Galatians 2:20–21; Ephesians 2:16; Colossians 1:20; and Philippians 3:18. For an examination of 'cross theology' in Philippians, see Gould (1975:93–101).

uniting theme of the epistle (e.g. Bickel and Jantz 2004:11–20; Hooker 2000:469; Lloyd-Jones 1999:5; MacArthur 2001:2; Swindoll 1992; Wiersbe 2008:7–10). There are very good reasons to support this approach. The verb 'rejoice', for example, occurs on nine occasions in the letter, the noun 'joy' on five occasions, and several of their cognates widely recur throughout the letter (cf. Heil 2010:1–4). Nouns and verbs related to joy are 'the singularly most frequent word group in Philippians' (Witherington III 2011:2).

In this letter, Paul repeatedly instructs the Philippians to rejoice (1:25; 2:29; 3:1; 4:4), models this same instruction (1:4, 18; 2:2, 16–18; 4:1) and on many occasions, implies that there was the lack of this quality in his, and the Philippians' opponents (1:16; 3:3, 18). The apostle, as MacArthur (2001:11) puts it; 'wanted the Philippians to share in the fullest measure his deep, abiding joy in Jesus Christ' (cf. Thurston and Ryan 2009:144). The tone of the letter itself is ebullient. As Still (2011:16) notes, even though the apostle writes from prison, he nevertheless 'expresses joyful confidence and prayerful contentment'. The several exhortations are similarly presented in a joyful and even poetic manner (e.g. 2:1–3; 4:4–9). 'Joy in suffering' certainly appears to address a major component of the problems facing the Philippians at the time, that of opposition from outside the church.

It is this feature of the epistle that earned it the unique accolade as being 'more peaceful than Galatians, more personal and affectionate than Ephesians, less anxiously controversial than Colossians, more deliberate and symmetrical than Thessalonians, and, of course, larger in its applications than the personal messages to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon' (Moule 1908:4–5). Thus, there are good grounds for subscribing to this proposal.

Moreover, this idea of 'joy in suffering' as uniting theme of Philippians has been given academic treatment, both in socio-historical and literary terms, by a number of investigators. Holloway (2001:17) has, for example, argued that Philippians should be considered as 'an ancient letter of consolation' in which Paul 'confronts [the Philippians] with a moral ideal, and, ultimately scolds them for not behaving in a manner "worthy of the gospel"' (1:27). Similarly, Bloomquist (1993:138) has argued that Philippians is 'primarily an authoritative letter of comfort in which Paul reassures the Philippian believers of the gospel's advance in the light of Paul's imprisonment.'

Also cited in support of the 'joy in suffering' idea is the fact that Paul's sentiment when he, together with Silas, were earlier imprisoned in Philippi was one of joyful praise (Acts 16:25). As Fowl (2005:13) puts it, 'the joy in the midst of suffering which Paul and Silas display in the Philippian jail is precisely the joy that Paul displays for and seeks to cultivate in the Philippians in the epistle'. Thus, the idea that 'joy in suffering' is the uniting theme of the epistle, has a lot to its merit.

Two main criticisms have however been rightly levelled against this approach. Firstly, though very common, joy is not the only recurrent theme in Philippians (cf. Hartog 2010:478; Still 2011:11). Other similarly frequent themes in the epistle are: the work of the gospel, self-sacrifice, unity, fellowship, and humility. Emphasis on these other ideas in a uniting theme is particularly important for interpreters who consider the Christ-hymn of 2:6–11 as pivotal to Paul's argument in the epistle. As it stands, the theme of joy only indirectly relates to that pericope.

Some proponents of the 'joy in suffering' approach have supposed that the idea is implicit in Christ's voluntary self-sacrifice and eventual enthronement in the hymn (e.g. Heil 2010:91–92). Yet, if 'joy in

suffering' were a primary element for the apostle, why is it not explicitly highlighted in 2:6–11?

Secondly, while it is true that moral exhortations were part of consolation letters of antiquity, it is still difficult to see how consolation *per se* addresses all aspects of the problem the congregation faced. How does 'joy in suffering', for example, address the internal rivalry in the fellowship and prepare the believers for the doctrinal deviations about to assault them, and of which Paul shows grave concerns (cf. 3:2–21)?

In a recent approach along the line of 'joy in suffering', Heil (2010:1) has attempted to address this last criticism by proposing that 'Let us rejoice in being conformed to Christ' is the best uniting theme. However, while his suggestion goes some way to address some of the above criticisms, it remains inadequate on its own.

### *1.3.3. Partnership in the gospel*

A significant proportion of contemporary academic commentators take it that 'partnership in the gospel' best represents the uniting theme of Philippians (Bockmuehl 1997:2; Fowl 2005:8–9; Hartog 2010:478; Lyons and Malas Jr 2007:50–69; Luter 1989:1036; Swift 1984:234–254).

Several reasons have led to the popularity of this idea in academia. Firstly, Paul's epistolary thanksgiving begins with his expression of joyful thanksgiving because of the Philippians' *κοινωνία* (*partnership*, *communion*, or *fellowship*, 1:5) in the gospel. Given that it is Paul's usual practice to intimate some of the main themes of his letters in the thanksgiving report section (Jewett 1970:40–53; Schubert 1939:74), it may be that this statement was at least part of Paul's main theme for the epistle.

Secondly, the 'partnership in the gospel' idea fits the genre of the epistle as a letter of friendship very well. Thirdly, the language and idea of 'fellowship in the gospel' is very pervasive in the epistle. The word *κοινωνία* itself occurs in each of the four chapters of the epistle, associated on each occasion with a key movement of the letter (1:5, 7; 2:1; 3:10, 20; 4:14–15; cf. Swift 1984:234–254).

Similarly, the concept 'gospel' occurs more often in Philippians than any other of the apostle's epistles (1:5, 7, 12, 27ab; 2:22; 4:3, 15). Other words and their cognates which Paul uses in place of 'the gospel', such as 'work' (1:6), 'God's grace' (1:7), 'the word' (1:14), 'preach Christ' (1:17), and 'the word of life' (2:16) also recur frequently in the letter. Of course, the statement of the gospel is itself given a dramatic rendition in the Christ-hymn of 2:6–11 and again placed at the centre of Paul's polemics in chapter three.

Furthermore, many of the Christians, whom Paul identifies in the epistle, are underlined as 'co-labourers' who partner the apostle in the ministry of the gospel (e.g. 1:1, 14–16; 2:20–22, 25; 3:17; 4:2–3, 14–15). Thus, the gospel, in the form of its message, its demands, and its messengers who serve in partnership, features prominently in Paul's overall theme in the letter.

Finally, the idea of 'partnership in the gospel' would seem to directly address most of the issues in the situational context in the Philippian church at the time. It certainly underlines the need for unity, as well as the humility required for this unity. It also emphasizes Paul's concerns that it is in this united state that the church may be able to withstand the opposition it faced. Thus, largely, the common acceptance of this proposal in academia appears well earned.

However, there are two main drawbacks of the proposal. Firstly, while Paul often intimates elements of his main theme in the epistolary thanksgiving, his full statement of the purpose and theme of his epistles usually comes later in the letter, often, after the prayer-thanksgiving report and at the beginning of the body of the letter (Byrskog 1997:27–46). In other words, 'partnership in the gospel' may be intimating the uniting theme, but in itself, it is not the key statement of that theme. As I will shortly argue, Paul's statement of proposition in 1:27–30 links the 'partnership' idea with modelling of the gospel.

Secondly, the 'partnership in the gospel' idea omits a key concern of the apostle in addressing the moral issues at the heart of the quarrels and rivalries in the fellowship. As I will hopefully demonstrate, the bulk of the moral issues, Paul reckoned, was the lack of focus of the protagonists on the self-sacrificing demands of the gospel. 'Partnership in the gospel' does not directly address this fundamental issue.

#### *1.3.4. Good heavenly citizenship*

Recent epistolographic (Russell 1982:295–306), discourse (Black 1995:16–49), rhetorical (Debanne 2006:102; Watson 1988:57–88; Witherington III 2011:29) and socio-political (Geoffrion 1993; Marchal 2006; Perkins 1991; Reimer 1997:136) analyses of Philippians have all identified Philippians 1:27–30 as Paul's statement of his main purpose and theme of the epistle: the proposition of the letter. According to these verses, Paul's over-riding agenda in the letter was to exhort the Philippians to 'live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ' while striving together in unity against the opposition. In other words, 'model the gospel in Philippi with a united front against opposition.'

Based on this insight, a number of interpreters have argued that Paul's use of the distinctive politico-civic verb *πολιτεύομαι* (*to behave*

*appropriately as a citizen, or rightly administer civil affairs*)<sup>4</sup> in 1:27 points to the leading idea which holds the letter's exhortations together (Brewer 1954:76–83; Geoffrion 1993:23; Grieb 2007:256–269; Krentz 1993:105–127; Marchal 2006a:5-32; Schuster 1997:170–178; Zerbe 2009:193–208). In the words of Zerbe (2009:200), 'Philippians is an exhortation (discourse) on "the practice of Messianic citizenship" with 1:27 as the keynote theme'.

Geoffrion (1993:30–33) similarly identifies every word in 1:27–30 as directly related to military imagery usually associated with the maintenance of the empire, now clearly transferred by Paul to exhort the Philippians to serve Christ's kingdom. He also argues that, throughout the letter, Paul employed political *topoi*, terminology, and concepts to underpin corporate Christian identity as a 'heavenly citizenship'. The letter, he believes, is built 'chiefly upon a broad inclusive political/military concept of citizens/soldiers working together, working for each other, working for the advancement of the goals of their commonwealth (*politeuma*)' (1993:220).

In this reading, the apostle's initial identification of the readers as 'the saints in Philippi' (1:1) is meant to remind them that they constituted an alternative *polis* within the Roman colony of Philippi (Grieb 2007:260). They were to be mindful of their dual citizenship; for, they were citizens of Christ's heavenly kingdom who were temporarily resident in a hostile realm of Caesar. Their calling was to live as worthy ambassadors of the kingdom of Christ in Philippi (Oakes 2005:301–322; Thurston and Ryan 2009:8).

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<sup>4</sup> The TNIV's translation of 1:27a is therefore quite appropriate: 'Whatever happens, as citizens of heaven, live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ'.

The idea that Christians are citizens of the heavenly realm is explicitly repeated in 3:20, where Paul describes the Philippians as πολίτευμα ἐν οὐρανοῖς (*citizens of the heavenly commonwealth*). In contrast to the pagans who gather in expectation of Caesar's arrival at their public rallies, believers were rather awaiting the *Parousia* of Christ to transform their bodies (cf. Wright 2000:173–181). Thus, scholars have argued that these explicit politico-theological terminologies act as *inclusio* to the main body of the letter.

Interpreters who take this view also cite the repeated use of military, athletic, civic, and political administrative imageries in the epistle as consistently expressing this idea of heavenly citizenship throughout the epistle. The pointed references to the πραιτωρίῳ (*the Praetorium*, 1:13) and Καίσαρος οἰκίας (*Caesar's household*, 4:22) for example, are claimed to underline how the gospel, the message, and ethos of the kingdom of heaven had invaded the realm of the Roman Empire.

Paul's reference to his life as a σπένδομαι (*a libation*, 2:17) upon the Philippians' sacrifice is also claimed to allude to the Roman military sacrifice before a battle (Krentz 2008:259). His frequent use of the word κοινωνία is argued to allude to the language of civic alliances of the time (Schuster 1997:50–53). And the many positive exemplars in the letter are argued to be typical of statements made to encourage soldiers about to embark on military campaigns (Geoffrion 1993:33).

Other allusions to quasi-military terminologies that are claimed to be present in the epistle are στέφανός (*crown*, 4:1), συνήθλησάν (*strive or fight together*, 4:3), and φρουρήσει (*guard*, 4:7). That Philippi had a significant population of army veterans is also sometimes cited as a motivation for the apostle's use of such a theme as a means of exhorting the Philippians (Krentz 1993:127).

It is fair to say that reviewers have largely been constructive in their appraisal of this proposal, without fully endorsing some of the overtly political reading of the whole epistle. Paul's circumstances in oppressive chains of the Roman Empire would have reasonably reminded him of the conflict between his Christian ethos and those of the empire. Emphasizing the implications of this conflict in the service of the gospel to the Philippians would, therefore, have been in line with his aim to address the internal divisions, and the external opposition they faced. Moreover, the 'Romanness' (Hendrix 1992:5.315; Levick 1967:161) of Philippi would have made contrasts between Christ's kingdom and Caesar's realm very poignant to the first readers.

Yet, it is difficult to see the overtly political reading of Philippians as Paul's leading idea in the epistle. The apostle, no doubt, sought to inculcate virtues and behaviours in the Philippians that exhibited the ideals of heaven to which their citizenship belonged. However, it would appear that Paul uses the civic terminologies not as a way of politicizing the Philippians, but as metaphors to sharpen his message. Evidence for this is the fact that most of the examples of cited military or civic terminologies are largely allusive.

Marchal (2006:63) has, for example, questioned whether military and civic images in Philippians would have necessarily appealed to the non-military members of the fellowship, in the prominent manner in which some interpreters suppose. One could say the same of the possibly significant proportion of slaves in the fellowship,<sup>5</sup> who may well not have been enchanted by the elitist and aristocratic imageries that these terminologies sometimes evoke. The overall conclusion, therefore, is

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<sup>5</sup> If the Philippian church were representative of the population of Philippi at the time, it would have had the following proportion of classes: 37 percent service group (artisans, craftsmen, and businessmen and women), 20 percent slaves, 20 percent colonist farmers, 2 percent poor, and 3 percent elite (cf. Oakes 2001:43–46).

that Paul's over-riding concern was the advancement of the gospel. This advancement no doubt had political ramifications for the Philippians, and for the empire. But, these ramifications were not his primary emphases.

A second difficulty that proponents of the socio-political interpretation of Philippians encounter is how to configure the role of 2:6–11 in that reading. It is reasonable to infer that Jesus' exaltation as κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστός (*Lord Jesus Christ*, 2:11) was presented as an alternative contrast to the Emperor. While this is possible, this political reading nevertheless fails to explain the main point of the passage, that is, modelling the gospel as exemplified in Christ's self-sacrifice.

It is fair to conclude then, that the 'heavenly citizenship' idea is only valid in its socio-theological sense and not the political sense. Paul was certainly not setting the Philippian church up as an alternative government.

#### **1.4. The present proposal**

It is evident that each of the above proposals highlights an aspect of the uniting theme of Philippians, though none adequately summarizes it. Combining these proposals, the indication is that the uniting theme of Philippians should underline the themes of self-sacrifice for the sake of the advancement of the gospel, of joy in suffering on behalf of the gospel, of a common partnership in the service of the gospel, and of living in a manner worthy of this gospel.

One more recurring idea throughout the epistle is Paul's use of positive and negative exemplars to establish his hortatory agenda. In each chapter, for example, the apostle uses himself to exemplify the point he is establishing in that section (1:12–16; 2:17; 3:1–17; 4:9–13). He also

explicitly cites Jesus (2:6–11), Timothy (2:13–23), and Epaphroditus (2:25–30) as models of specific aspects of his exhortations to be emulated. Indeed, as will shortly be shown, the apostle, admittedly in an allusive manner, also sets forth God the Father (2:11–13; cf. 1:6), and God the Holy Spirit (2:1) as positive models of the particular virtues which he exhorts the believers to adopt.

In addition, the 'loyal yokefellow' (4:3) is by implication set out as an exemplar. So also are groups of persons such as the 'preachers with goodwill' (1:15) and the Philippians themselves (4:15). Thus, Paul's exhortation to the Philippians in 3:17 that they should 'join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do' (TNIV),<sup>6</sup> would seem to encapsulate a major component of Paul's theme in the epistle.

What is more, throughout the letter, Paul employs several negative exemplars in both explicit and implicit terms to sharpen his exhortations on modelling the gospel. He cites the 'envious preachers' (1:15–17), Old Testament Israel, admittedly through allusions (2:12–19), selfish Christians (2:21), the opponents of the gospel (3:2–3), the 'enemies of the cross' who caused him 'tears' (3:18), and Euodia and Syntyche (4:3), all as negative exemplars.

The title, *modelling the gospel in joyful partnership*, would therefore appear to be the most appropriate expression of the uniting theme, since it encapsulates all the themes surveyed. It is also right to conclude that exemplars are widely employed to practically model the message of the epistle.

This suggestion on exemplars in Philippians is not novel. The presence of the concept of modelling in Philippians is widely recognized by

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<sup>6</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all Bible quotations are from the NRSV.

interpreters. So, according to Witherington III (2011:14), for example, the letter 'is a clarion call to imitate good examples and avoid bad ones, and so to a unity of mind and purpose in the Philippian church' (cf. Debanne 2006:117; Kurz 1985:103–126).

Exemplification was, after all, a consistent rhetorical and pedagogical device in ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman literature (Clarke 1998:329–360; Fiore 1986; Gieschen 2008:3–18; Malherbe 1989:56–60; Neusner 1970:1; Stone and Bergen 1998). Moreover, elsewhere in his letters, Paul consistently implores his readers to imitate him (Martin 1999: 39–49; Plummer 2001:219–235).<sup>7</sup> It is therefore unsurprising that he should employ it in his exhortations in Philippians.

What the present proposal seeks to stress however, is that the exemplars of Philippians serve a wider function than as rhetorical devices. Much more, they embody the epistle's central theme of modelling the gospel in joyful partnership. In other words, in order to address the problems the Philippians faced, Paul sets out positive exemplars who model the gospel in a manner that he wished to project. And the negative exemplars enable him to sharpen this message for addressing the problems that the Philippians faced.

An exegetical summary of how Paul employs these exemplars in each of the sections of the letter to model the theme, and a brief commentary on the relevance of the proposal now follows in the subsequent chapter.

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<sup>7</sup> Of the eleven occasions that the explicit term of imitation occurs in the New Testament, eight are from the Pauline corpus. These are 1 Corinthians 4:16; 11:1; Ephesians 5:1; Philippians 3:17; 1 Thessalonians 1:6; 2:14; 2 Thessalonians 3:7, 9. The rest are Hebrews 6:12; 13:7; and 3 John 1:11.

## 2. Models of the Gospel in Philippians

A few interpreters have argued for a chiasmic structure for Philippians (e.g. Heil 2010; Porter and Reed 1998:213–231; Luter and Lee 1995:89–101), so that idea cannot be completely ruled out. However, most interpreters accept and use a linear literary structure which largely follows the apostle's albeit flexible epistolary conventions.

This structure has 1:1–11 as the introduction, 1:12–26 as Paul's narrative introduction, 1:27–30 as the main proposition, 2:1–11 as the call for unity, 2:12–18 exhortation on obedience, 2:19–30 as travel plans and missionary report, 3:1–21 as polemics against doctrinal opponents, 4:1–9 as specific exhortation towards harmony in the fellowship, 4:10–20 as thanksgiving note, and 4:21–23 as conclusion. I shall now take each section in turn.

### 2.1. Introduction 1:1-11

The introduction to Philippians is made up of three closely interwoven sections, namely, a salutation (1:1–2), a 'joyful' thanksgiving (1:3–8), and a prayer-report (1:9–11). As pointed out already, several commentators have argued that the thanksgiving-report intimates themes that would dominate the epistle, namely, joyful partnership in the gospel 1:4–5, the work of the gospel 1:6–8, love and unity in the fellowship 1:9, and a life of holiness as fruit of the gospel 1:10–11.

For our purposes, two of its key features require identification, namely, (a) the manner in which the passage expresses a tripartite partnership between Paul, the Philippians and God (or Christ), and (b) ideas associated with the gospel which are stated in relation to God and Paul are transferred to the Philippians in a modelling fashion (Fee 1995:73; 1999:21).

So, for example, Paul mentions the gospel explicitly on two occasions in the passage (1:5 and 1:7). On both occasions, it is underlined that Paul and the Philippians *κοινωνία*, participate in this gospel. Exactly what this participation or partnership practically involved, is not stated. Several interpreters reasonably take it that, in a specific sense, Paul was referring to their material support for the missionary work (4:15). In its support is the fact that Paul uses the word *κοινωνία* in 2 Corinthians 9:15 and its cognate in Philippians 4:15 to describe the material donation of the Philippians.

Paul also mentions their partnership 'in God's grace' in relation to his imprisonment, defence, and confirmation of the gospel (1:7). This suggests that the Philippians were supportive of Paul in those circumstances, perhaps through their prayers, their friendship, and their provision of material support (Silva 2005:44).

However, it is more likely that by *κοινωνία*, Paul was expressing the general and wider idea that the Philippians' participation went beyond their material giving. Panikulam (1979:85) is not far from wrong when he suggests that by *κοινωνία* Paul had in mind 'the entire response the Philippians gave to the good news they received' (cf. Fee 1995:85).

So, in stressing the participation of the Philippians, for example, Paul was intimating that the Philippians will have to continue to maintain their share of the defence and confirmation of the gospel through their own suffering. He certainly does so when he reminds them that they had been doing so 'from the first day until now' (1:5). Their participation was not limited to their material support. They co-shared in the work of the gospel, as well as its concomitant suffering (cf. 1:30).

Also, in the letter's introduction, the gospel is identified as *ἔργον ἀγαθόν* (*good work*, 1:6) which God begins, continues, and would bring

to perfection at the day of Christ (Silva 2005:45). Just as the Philippians had been continuing in their participation in the gospel 'from the first day', and so should, by implication, continue to the end, so also will God who began the gospel in them, continue until its eventual perfection when Christ returns. Hence, God, Paul, and the Philippians all participate in modelling the gospel in a continuing manner.

Later in 2:12–18, Paul would make this modelling of the gospel by God and the Philippians more explicit when he exhorts the Philippians that, as children of God, who by that virtue would be expected to imitate their Father (cf. Eph 5:1), they ought to 'continue' to work out their salvation, since God is also 'at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure'. Thus, from the introduction, Paul intimates not only his shared partnership with the Philippians in the gospel, but more so, that the gospel is being continuously modelled by God in and among the Philippians. Modelling occurs in a tripartite fashion.

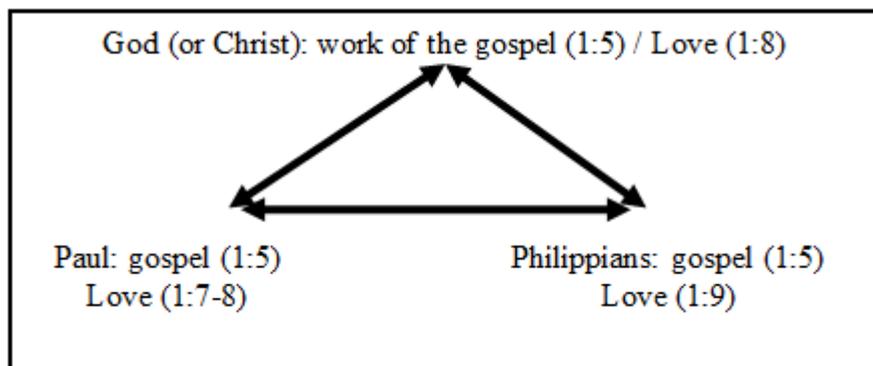
A similar tripartite transference of qualities associated with the gospel occurs with the idea of love in the introduction.<sup>8</sup> The idea of love is first introduced in 1:7b in an ambiguous manner, so that it is difficult to tell if by ἔχειν με ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ ὑμῶν, Paul meant 'I have you in my heart' or 'you have me in your heart'.<sup>9</sup> Whichever is the correct translation, this ambiguity in itself expresses the κοινωνία between Paul and the Philippians, since it indicates the bond of love mutually shared between them.

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<sup>8</sup> The other major theme in the introduction, i.e. bearing 'fruits of holiness' as part of the gospel, is not explicitly treated in the same tripartite manner as the other themes of joyful partnership and love and unity. It may well be that this is related to 'perfection at the day of Christ' (1:6). But this is not as explicitly elaborated as the others.

<sup>9</sup> See Fee (1995:90) on the grammatical difficulties.

A third party is introduced into the equation when this love is also underlined as emanating from Christ (1:8), who is thus the basis upon which Paul loves the Philippians. Paul serves as an exemplar of the love of Christ at work in the human soul. And when he turns to his petition, he prays for the transference of these qualities unto the Philippians: 'this is my prayer that your love may overflow more and more' (1:9).



*Fig 1: The Tripartite Partnership in Philippians 1:1–11*

Thus, as diagrammed above, the introduction to Philippians begins a recurrent pattern in the epistle, whereby God (or Christ, and occasionally, the Holy Spirit) models a virtue related to the gospel, and this is transferred to Paul and the Philippians, either in a petition, as it is here in the introduction, or as an explicit exhortation, or by implication. The idea of modelling in Philippians is therefore tripartite based on *κοινωνία* of the parties.

## 2.2. Narrative introduction and proposition 1:12–30

As is usual with Paul's epistolographic practice, the narrative introduction (1:12–26) of Philippians leads seamlessly into the proposition (1:27–30). It is thus appropriate to discuss these two

passages together. The gist of the *narratio* in 1:12–26 is Paul's explanation to the Philippians that 'what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel' (1:12). Rhetorically, his aim in this section was to reassure the Philippians of the advancement of the gospel in the context of opposition and his suffering.

Thus, appropriately, this passage pre-empts the proposition to follow, in which Paul would exhort the Philippians to 'strive side by side' to advance the same gospel amidst opposition. The Philippians were after all 'having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have' (1:30). Paul is not only an exemplar for the Philippians. His situation also models the advancement of the gospel in the context of opposition.

In its details, the narrative introduction also cites another exemplar of the advancement of the gospel amidst opposition. Paul states that most of the believers, presumably in Rome, have been emboldened to *τολμᾶν ἀφόβως τὸν λόγον λαλεῖν* (*fearlessly dare to speak the word*, 1:14). Deriving encouragement and mimesis from Paul's courageous witness in the Praetorium, these believers also advance the gospel in the face of opposition. They model after Paul and serve as exemplars to the Philippians who must also advance the gospel in the hostile environment of Philippi.

Paul then cites a group of negative exemplars in 1:15–17 as a way of sharpening this model. He refers to believers, who though they preached Christ, did so out of envy, rivalry, and selfish ambition. Given that some among the Philippians exhibited such negative qualities (cf. 2:3-5; 2:13; 2:21; 4:2), Paul's exemplification here is evidently meant to describe 'how *not* to advance the gospel'.

The question as to the identity of these 'envious preachers', and how in practical terms, they could preach the gospel in a manner as to increase Paul's suffering in prison has been widely discussed by commentators (cf. Bockmuehl 1997:77–78; Fee 1995:118–120; Silva 2005:63–65). Interpreters remain generally divided on the exact identity of these preachers.

On the whole, however, these preachers are likely to be Christians who were averse to suffering for the gospel. They may well therefore have interpreted the suffering of Paul as an indication of his culpability. This motivated their preaching, and so, aggravated Paul's suffering (cf. Silva 2005:65). The Philippians were thereby being exhorted that, to advance the gospel, they must be ready to accept the afflictions that came with that enterprise. They must also continue to do so alongside others who suffered accordingly, and not worsen their suffering through envy, strife, and rivalry (1:27).

Paul's response to this 'inside opposition' also models the attitude of joyful contentment while suffering for the sake of the gospel (1:18), and continuing in fearless proclamation of it even to the point of death (1:19–20). Rather than focusing his energies on responding to the 'inside' opposition, he rather focused on the fact that 'Christ is preached' (1:18). The Philippians are to take their cue from Paul as a model of focus on the gospel, and continue in their progress in the faith (1:25).

### **2.3. Exhortation to unity 2:1–11**

Paul's exhortation to unity in the fellowship consists of two subsections, namely, 2:1–4 and 2:5–11. Given some of the exegetical difficulties, it is appropriate to discuss these subsections separately, even though they are seamlessly linked.

### *2.3.1. The Godhead as source and model of unity 2:1–4*

In the prelude to the Christ's-hymn (2:1–4), Paul allusively sets forth the Godhead (God the Son, God the Father, and God the Holy Spirit) as source and model of the virtues of unity of mind and purpose which he exhorts the believers to cultivate. Because of the encouragement, love, and fellowship of the Godhead, the apostle points out that the Philippians are to pursue unity of mind and purpose, each eschewing selfish ambition, but seeking the well-being of each other.

Paul does not speculate on how exactly the Godhead models the attitude of unity of mind and purpose. But this does not diminish the idea that the believers were to draw their source and motivation for this virtue from the Godhead.

In exegetical terms, Philippians 2:1 does not make this concept of the Godhead as model for the believers as explicitly so as has just been described. For a start, 2:1 contains four and not three clauses. Moreover, God the Father is not explicitly cited in the verse. The ambiguity of the second clause of 2:1, εἰ τι παραμύθιον ἀγάπης (if some comfort of love, 2:1b), certainly leaves it open as to whether what Paul meant was (a) Christ's love, (b) the Father's love, (c) Paul's love, or (d) love in general, without a subject.

It is possible that (d) 'love' is cited on its own without a subject in mind (so ESV, NRSV, ASV, and NKJV). However, this approach leaves the clause rather vague. Given Paul's aim to provide a motivation in 2:1 for the upcoming exhortation, this vague rendition constitutes as the least favourable of the options. Similarly, (c) 'Paul's love' is less likely since the apostle subsequently appeals to the completion of his joy in the next verse (2:2a) as an additional motivation for the Philippians to pursue unity of mind and purpose.

The likelihood, then, is that what Paul had in mind in 2:1b was (a) Christ's or (b) God's love (so, NIV, TNIV, and AMP). In favour of (a) 'Christ's love' is the fact that the preceding verses (1:29–2:1a) are focused on Christ. Also, in 1:8, Paul refers to how he longs for the Philippians with 'the affections of Christ', even though in 1:8, he also appeals to God (the Father) as witness in that context. 'Christ's love' is hence likely in 2:1b; but, to be accepted with some vacillation.

On the other hand, there are very good reasons to prefer the notion that it is (b) God's love, which Paul has in view in 2:1b. Firstly, in placing references to Christ (2:1a) and the Spirit (2:1c) side by side, with a gap in between, the indication is that Paul believed the Philippians would naturally assume that 2:1b refers to God the Father's love as the source of comfort (Fee 1999:84).

Secondly, reference to God as the source of the Philippians' salvation is made in 1:28, just before the role of Christ in this salvation history is also made in the verses that follow. Given that 2:1 draws from these preceding references to motivate the believers, the reference to the whole Godhead in 2:1 is more likely than not. Thirdly, since Paul follows 2:1–4 with a reference to the incarnation (2:6), it is likely that the reference to the Godhead in 2:1 triggered his further explanation with the Christ-hymn.

Finally, 2:1 is analogous to the Trinitarian grace in 2 Corinthians 13:13, which employs similar words and phrases as Philippians 2:1. So, if, as is likely, the Philippians were familiar with the saying, 'the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with all of you' (2 Cor 13:13), then, they would have likewise regarded 'love' in 2:1b as emanating from God the Father. There are good reasons therefore to conclude that in Philippians 2:1–4, Paul sets forth the Godhead as source and model of unity of mind and purpose.

### 2.3.2. *Christ as model of self-sacrifice 2:5–11*

In Philippians 2:6–11, Paul summarizes the core statement of the gospel, namely, the incarnation, humiliation, death, resurrection, and exaltation of Christ. Whether this poetic statement of the gospel was a pre-existing hymn which Paul cites, or the apostle himself composed it, or it was not a hymn at all, the indication from 2:5 and 2:12 is that Paul uses it for his hortatory purposes. Specifically, he wished the Philippians to model the self-sacrificial humility that is at the centre of the gospel, and in so doing, addresses the problem festering within the church (Fee 1992:29–46; Hellerman 2005; MacLeod 2001: 308–330; Tobin 2006: 91–104; Wendland 2008: 350–378).

Not all interpreters agree that Paul sets forth Christ in 2:6–11 as model for the emulation of the Philippians. Beginning from the middle of the twentieth century, when Ernst Käsemann (1968:84) protested that 'Paul did not understand the hymn as though Christ were held up to the community as an ethical example', a number of interpreters have rejected the traditional view that the Christ-hymn is employed as an exemplar to motivate the readers (e.g. Martin 1997).

They base their objections on syntactical and theological grounds that I will only summarise here.<sup>10</sup> The key syntactical problem depends on how best to translate 2:5 τοῦτο φρονεῖτε ἐν ὑμῖν ὃ καὶ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ. The traditional view renders it as, for example, 'In your relationships with one another, have the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had' (TNIV; also CEB, NKJV, NRSV, DBY, Phi, KJV, NIV). The alternative soteriological view renders 2:5 as, for example, 'Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus' (ESV).

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<sup>10</sup> See Silva 2005:95–98 for a fuller discussion.

Thus, while the traditional view takes the passage as presenting Jesus' attitude of self-sacrificial humility as an example to emulate, the soteriological view highlights that such an attitude is made accessible through the believer's union with Christ, and not by emulation.

This syntactical problem evidently feeds into the theological debate as to whether Paul exhorts the Philippians to simply imitate Christ, without due concerns for the nature of the relationship between the readers and Christ; or, it is solely on the basis of that relationship with Christ that the believer acquires the attitude of humility? Theologically, the distinction relates inevitably to the nature of Christian sanctification.

A number of interpreters, quite rightly, opt for a combined view. So, Silva, for example, argues extensively in favour of the soteriological view, and so translates 2:5 as 'Be so disposed toward one another as is proper for those who are united in Christ Jesus' (2005:97). Nevertheless, he roundly rejects the idea that such a translation would conflict with the traditional approach. 'Those who are united with Christ live as he did (cf. 1 John 2:6), and so the notion of Jesus as an ethical example is implicit in Philippians 2:5 by the very nature of the subject matter' so he concludes (2005:97; cf. Bloomquist 1993:164–165; Hooker 1975:151–164; Hurtado 1984:113–126; O'Brien 1991: 272–273; Strimple 1978:247–268).

There are several other indications in the passage and elsewhere in Philippians which support the traditional view that Christ's self-sacrificial humility is upheld as supreme model to be emulated by the Philippians, on the *proviso* that they are in participation with him.

Firstly, several features of the exhorted attitude in 2:1–4 are modelled in the description of Christ's humiliation in 2:6–9. Secondly, 2:12 begins with the emphatic, Ὡστε (*therefore, or, so that*), indicating that Paul

draws on the preceding hymn to now exhort the Philippians. Paul was not merely stating the fact of the gospel, but using it to motivate his exhortation. Thirdly, the resulting exhortation that first occupies Paul's reflections in 2:12 is the call for obedience, a virtue which, as he had just stated in the Christ-hymn (2:8), was modelled in Christ. It follows, then, that Paul explicitly draws on the Christ-hymn as an example for the Philippians.

Fourthly, and as we shall shortly discuss, Paul follows on in 2:12–30 with references to his own impending sacrifice as a 'libation' (2:17), alluding to his readiness for martyrdom. He also refers to Epaphroditus' near-death sacrifice in the service of the gospel (2:27). Thus, by implication, Paul and Epaphroditus modelled Christ's self-sacrifice in the service of the gospel.

Fifthly, Christ's self-sacrifice also serves as a model for Paul in his autobiographical account of his Christian existence (3:4–12; cf. Asumang 2011:22–25; Dalton 1979:100; DeSilva 1995:40; Fee 1999:136; Garland 1985:157–159; Hawthorne 1996:163–179; Kurz 1985:103–126). It is evident then that the Christ-hymn is not just cited in the literary context in 2:1–11, but influences several other aspects of the idea of modelling in Philippians.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, the theological objection misses a key aspect of how Paul presents the idea of modelling in Philippians. At no point does Paul give the impression that anybody could model Christ. On the contrary, and as discussed with regard to the letter's introduction, modelling Christ is based on the premise of a pre-existing *κοινωνία*, union, or participation in Christ. Thus, the traditional view is correct, that Christ's

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<sup>11</sup> One would however not go as far as Perkins (1991:93–98) who argues that the hymn serves as the epistle's governing metaphor.

self-sacrifice in the gospel is held up as a supreme model to be emulated by the Philippians.

#### **2.4. Exhortation to obedience 2:12–18**

The Christ-hymn is followed by a passage in which Paul exhorts the Philippians to obedience, namely, to 'work out your own salvation with fear and trembling' (2:12). As stated earlier, in underlining the fact that the Philippians were 'children of God' (2:15), this passage implicitly presents God as exemplar of the work of salvation to his children.

This idea of a child imitating the parent receives further thrust when a few verses later, in 2:22; Paul describes Timothy thus, 'like a son with a father he has served with me in the work of the gospel'. Like Timothy, the Philippians' parent-child relationship with God is characterized by participation and modelling in the work of the gospel. They model God's working of salvation by working out their salvation. Also, as already described, the call to obedience in 2:12 is modelled after Christ's obedience that is stated earlier in 2:8.

In 2:17, Paul describes himself as 'being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith'. This, as has also been pointed out, models Christ's sacrifice in 2:6–11, regardless of whether by this description he meant martyrdom (so Lohmeyer 1968; Silva 2005:128) or his present suffering in prison (so Fee 1999:110).

Although allusive in its description, the passage also presents Old Testament Israel as a negative exemplar to sharpen the call on the Philippians to model the life of obedience and holiness. So, phrases such as 'fear and trembling' of 2:12 (cf. Exod 20:18–22; Deut 5:4–6), 'murmuring and arguing' of 2:14 (cf. Exod 16; Num 14), 'blameless and innocent' of 2:15a (cf. Deut 32:4–7 LXX; cf. Gen 17:1), 'stars in

the [dark] world' of 2:15c (cf. Gen 15:5; 22:17; 28:62; Dan 12:1–4), and the torch-bearers of 'the word of life' imagery in 2:16a (cf. Isa 60:1–5) all evoke comparisons and contrasts of the Philippians with Old Testament Israel.

In that case, Paul, as he does elsewhere in his letters (e.g. 1 Cor 10) utilizes the Old Testament exodus generation as negative exemplar to encourage the Philippians to a life of obedience, contentment, and holiness. If the Philippians indeed recognized this allusion, they would also have understood that many in that generation were destroyed due to their strife, murmuring, and argument. That warning also addressed the quarrelling Philippians.

## **2.5. The travel plans and missionary report 2:19–30**

The genre of 2:19–30 is debated among interpreters, some opting to describe it as a 'travelogue' (Funk 1966:264–269) and others as a 'missionary report' (Silva 2005:134). Regardless of its genre, the passage evidently sets out to explain the delay in Epaphroditus' return, and why Timothy would soon visit the Philippians, hopefully paving the way for Paul's own later visit.

It is however evident, by the nature of the commendations in the passage, that Paul himself, Timothy, and Epaphroditus are set forth as positive exemplars of self-sacrificial service for the sake of the gospel. Indeed, for Culpepper (1980:349–358), the primary objective of the section was to employ these members of the team as exemplars who illustrate the earlier teaching on the self-sacrificial mind of Christ (cf. Fee 1999:117–128).

Timothy, for example, in Silva's words (2005:134), 'models the qualities commended in 1:27–2:18'. His commendation employs some

of the words that Paul had earlier used to exhort the Philippians in 2:1–11. So, just as Paul exhorted them to be φρονῆτε (*likeminded*, 2:2), he now says of Timothy, 'there is no one as ἰσόψυχον (*equal-minded*, 2:20) like him'.

Likewise, in 2:4, Paul exhorts the Philippians to 'Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others'. Now, he says of Timothy in 2:20–21, 'I have no one like him who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. All of them are seeking their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ'. Timothy, in other words, modelled the exhortation to pursue unity of mind and purpose through self-sacrifice. He is very much opposite to the negative exemplars who seek their own interest and not the interest of Christ (2:21).

The commendation of Epaphroditus is even more wide-ranging. Not only does Paul underline the partnership of this particular individual in the service of the gospel (2:25–25),<sup>12</sup> but Paul particularly underlines how he risked his life in the service of the gospel as a commendable act worthy of emulation. 'Honour such people' (2:29b), calls upon the Philippians to regard Epaphroditus' self-sacrificial bravery as a model to emulate.

## 2.6. Polemics against opponents 3:1–21

The difficulties associated with the interpretation of Philippians 3 are well known.<sup>13</sup> However, interpreters generally agree that the chapter polemically addresses theological opponents of Paul, and perhaps also

<sup>12</sup> Philippians 2:25–26 employs language which model's Paul's earlier self-descriptions in 1:8 (cf. Fee 1999:121).

<sup>13</sup> These include the translation and implication of Τὸ λοιπὸν (*finally*) of 3:1, the dramatic break in tone between 3:1 and 3:2, the identity of the opponents described as 'dogs' in 3:2, and as 'enemies of the cross' in 3:18, and the ambiguities associated with 3:12–14 (see Asumang 2011:1–38).

of the Philippians, but employs the denunciations to also exhort the believers (DeSilva 1995:52–53). While the identity of the opponents themselves remain debated,<sup>14</sup> it appears that by their doctrine (3:2–14) and practice (3:15–21), these opponents subscribed to a 'cross-less' gospel. Paul's aim in this chapter then was to refute these doctrines and practices, and in so doing, establish the Philippians in the life of the true gospel of Christ.

To achieve these two-pronged objectives, Paul employs an autobiographical account of his Christian existence. His intention in this account was to encourage the Philippians to imitate him: 'join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us' (3:17). Stated another way, in Philippians 3, Paul presents his beliefs, spiritual ambitions, and motivations as a model, thereby refuting the 'cross-less' gospel, while exemplifying the cruciform gospel.

In its details however, and as argued by Asumang (2011:1–38), Paul's autobiography in Philippians 3 was modelled after Christ's incarnation, humiliation, death, and exaltation which are earlier presented in 2:6–11 (cf. Fee 1999:128–129; Silva 2005:143). Christ served as a model for Paul, who then serves as a model for the Philippians. The tripartite modelling partnership espoused in the beginning of the letter thus continues.

It is also in 3:2–21 that the concept of imitation, which Paul champions in Philippians, is made more evident. Imitation, according to Paul, is not just a matter of copying what Jesus did. Imitation is not mimickery. For Paul, imitation involved participating in union with Christ in a manner as to be conformed to him and through his power modelling the

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<sup>14</sup> Williams (2002:54–60) discusses eighteen different possible candidates for the

gospel and its implications. In his words, 'I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death' (3:10, NIV). So, it is only in the context of participating in Christ that modelling Christ occurs.

The capstone of this language of modelling in Philippians 3 occurs in 3:21, where Paul says that at the *parousia*, Christ 'will transform our lowly bodies so that they *will be like his glorious body*' (TNIV, italics added). At that eschatological event, the modelling of believers after Christ would be complete, and the good work of salvation, which God started and continues, will then be perfected (1:6). As several interpreters have pointed out, this final perfection of the modelling process is in itself presented in 3:20–21 with language that models the description of Jesus' glorification in 2:9–11 (Lincoln 1981:88; Reumann 1986:593–609; Silva 2005:183).

Also in this regard, the opponents who are indicted in Philippians 3, act as negative exemplars; the citation of whose doctrine and practice helps sharpen the positive exemplars in the chapter. The first reference to the opponents (3:2–3) underlines their cross-less doctrine which focuses rather on circumcision. In sharp contrast to God who begins, continues, and brings to perfection the modelling of *ἔργον ἀγαθόν* (*good work*; 1:6) in believers, these negative exemplars are described as *κακοῦς ἐργάτας* (*evil workers*, 3:2).

As many interpreters have pointed out, if these opponents were the Judaizers, then this contrast is poignant indeed (Bockmuehl 1997:188; Fee 1999:133; O'Brien 1991:355; Silva 2005:147). They claimed to obtain salvation through good works which, in Paul's view, lacked the emphasis on the gospel of the cross. But without participation in the

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identity of these opponents.

cross event, any 'good' work they performed was in fact, *κακούς* (*evil*). They were, in the words of Silva (2005:179), 'a pattern that must be avoided'.

The second reference to the opponents in the chapter describes them as living 'as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things' (3:18–19). Despite the difficulties in identifying the exact referents, it is evident that these believers avoided the self-sacrifice that the gospel of Christ demanded (cf. Fee 199:162; Silva 2005:179–182).

## 2.7. Specific exhortation towards harmony 4:1–9

In terms of epistolography, Philippians 4 represents the final paraenesis in the closing stages of Paul's letters in which he gives some specific but assorted exhortations to his readers. However, in Philippians, this is extensively modified so that the apostle deals with two specific issues on his agenda, namely, the discord between Euodia and Syntyche (4:1–9), and thanksgiving for the gift (4:10–20). Even so, in each case, Paul places these two objectives in the centre of exhortations to the fellowship.

It is evident that Paul regarded the discord between the two women as a very serious matter. While their exact roles in the church are not given, they must have been influential leaders.<sup>15</sup> After all, they were former co-workers of Paul who had 'struggled beside me in the work of the gospel' (4:3). In other words, they used to do what Paul now exhorts all the Philippians to continue doing (cf. 1:27–30). They used to be

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<sup>15</sup> For an examination of women leadership in the Philippian church and its implications, see Fee (1999:167–168), Koperski (1992:269–292), Luter (1996:411–420), Malinowsky (1985:60–64).

positive models of 'striving together' in the advancement of the gospel in the face of opposition. So, in naming and describing them in this fashion, Paul was publicly shaming these leaders for their discordant behaviour. By their discord, they were being negative models of the gospel.

To resolve the problem, Paul directly requests *γνήσιε σύζυγε* (*loyal yokefellow*, 4:3) to act as a peacemaker and reconcile the women. Interpreters have speculated on who exactly was this person.<sup>16</sup> Most, however, believe that *γνήσιε σύζυγε* did not represent the proper name of the person. If that is correct, then Paul designs his characterization of this peacemaker to include the whole fellowship in resolving the issue. This 'appellative, is in effect Paul's way of inviting the various members of the church to prove themselves loyal partners in the work of the gospel' (Silva 2005:193). In other words, *γνήσιε σύζυγε* (*loyal yokefellow*, 4:3) is held up to the Philippians as a positive model to be emulated.

In an allusive manner, Paul holds up Jesus as a positive model to be emulated in 4:5. So, just as in 2:1–11, the exhortation to seek the interest of others is modelled in Christ, so also in 4:5, the exhortation to let our *ἐπιεικὲς* (*forbearance*) be manifest to all, is exemplified in the return of Christ (cf. Fee 1999:174–175; Silva 2005:194).

## 2.8. Thanksgiving note and conclusion 4:10–23

In the thanksgiving note, Paul expresses his gratitude, but in such a manner as to not burden the congregation into feeling that they ought to

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<sup>16</sup> Suggestions have ranged from a person named Syzygos (O'Brien 1991:480–481), Paul's wife or Epaphroditus who was the bearer of the letter (cf. Silva 2005:193), and Luke (Fee 1995:394–395).

give more.<sup>17</sup> Even here, Paul is careful to place the thanksgiving in the context of the Philippians' participation with him in the work of the gospel (4:15). Furthermore, Paul draws out how the Philippians modelled this idea of participation in their giving to the missionary work from the beginning.

This model, he further emphasizes, imitates the sacrificial work of Christ. So, their donation, he says, was 'a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God' (4:18). In Ephesians 5:2, Paul describes the sacrificial death of Christ with similar words, as 'a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God' (TNIV). While he does not explicitly say so in Philippians, there is no doubt that Paul regarded the financial gift of the Philippians as modelling the self-sacrificial death of Jesus which is the essence of the gospel (2:5–11).<sup>18</sup>

Also within this section, Paul expresses his own attitude of contentment with regard to financial affairs (4:11–14; O'Brien 1991:523–525). No doubt, he does so as a way of modelling that virtue for the Philippians to emulate. 'Through [Christ] who strengthens me', Paul is enabled to model the virtue of joyful contentment (cf. 4:4–7).

In a summary, then, and as table one recaps, all sections of Philippians employ exemplars to focus on the modelling of the gospel, in a manner that reflects joyful partnership in Christ. *Modelling the gospel in joyful partnership*, therefore, fits the uniting theme of Philippians. I will now

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<sup>17</sup> The thanksgiving note presents interpreters with several challenges, namely, (a) why does it come so late in the letter, (b) what lies behind Paul's apparent caginess from expressing 'too much' gratitude, and (c) did the Philippians themselves feel burdened by having to support Paul, and if so why did they persist in it? For a recent discussion of these issues, see Briones (2011:47–69).

<sup>18</sup> Even though Paul mentions the failure of other churches to perform similar services, it is unlikely that he identifies them as negative exemplars.

briefly comment on the relevance of this proposal for the construction of New Testament ethics.

### 3. Modelling the Gospel: The Contribution of Philippians to New Testament Ethics

The effort to establish a paradigm through which Christian moral and social ethics can be constructed for the benefit of society has, lately, been given fresh urgency. This urgency has no doubt arisen because of the catastrophic collapse of moral and ethical standards in politics, business, and religion, both in the developed and developing countries. Many of these societies are therefore turning to religious leaders for some guidance on how to restore their moral and ethical compasses.

Passage	Gospel Theme	Positive Exemplars	Negative Exemplars
<b>1:1–11</b>	Joyful partnership, the gospel as God's 'work', and love and unity through the gospel	God (or Christ) and Paul	
<b>1:12–30</b>	Advancement of the gospel in Rome, in the face of opposition	Paul and the emboldened preachers of goodwill	The envious preachers
<b>2:1–11</b>	Self-sacrifice as model of the gospel	Christ, God the Father and the Holy Spirit	
<b>2:12–18</b>	Working out the gospel in contented obedience	God and Paul	Old Testament Israel

<b>2:19–30</b>	Service and self-sacrifice for the sake of the gospel	Paul, Timothy and Epaphroditus	Self-seeking Christians
<b>3:1–21</b>	Refuting a cross-less gospel	Jesus and Paul	The Judaizers and the 'enemies of the cross'
<b>4:1–9</b>	Correcting failure to strive together to advance the gospel	'Loyal yokefellow' and Christ	Euodia and Syntyche
<b>4:10–23</b>	Self-sacrificial giving for the work of the gospel	Philippians and Paul	

*Table 1: Exemplars Modelling the Gospel in Philippians*

This situation clearly offers biblical scholars excellent opportunities to influence such reflections. In this context, the debate in biblical scholarship, the correct methodological procedure for configuring the appropriate biblical ethical paradigms has been helpful, if not unduly deadlocked (cf. Zimmermann 2009:399–423).

The fact is, society cannot continue to wait while biblical scholars stalemate on investigative procedures. The exigencies of the times demand focusing our energies on making the voice of the New Testament heard on the current moral and ethical crises.

It is therefore commendable that a number of interpreters have already made very useful suggestions towards establishing this paradigm. Jan van der Watt and others (2006) have brought insights from the sociological and cognitive sciences to inform the enterprise. But that contribution seems to address more of the methodological issues.

Richard Hays (1997) places the worshipping community, the cross, and the new creation at the centre of New Testament ethical reflections. But that otherwise useful paradigm remains theoretical in its application. Richard Burrige's (2007) proposal, based on imitating the 'historical Jesus', is also an impressive concept. But, in its details, it dramatically falls short of stressing the key role of the cross for formulating such a paradigm.

In this context, it seems to me that Philippians has a very important contribution to make to these reflections. If the proposal that *modelling the gospel in joyful partnership* is the uniting theme of the letter is correct, then Philippians provides an important framework for constructing a biblically grounded Christian ethics.

The stress of the present proposal on participation in union with Christ underlines the key point that human ethical behaviour that is pleasing to God is to be grounded in the context of the gospel of Christ. The tripartite nature of this participation underlines the primary role of the communion of the saints in Christ in fostering and shaping this ethic. And the proposal's stress on imitation in this context underlines the call to discipleship and obedience to Christ who modelled the same gospel.

It is fair to say that conservative biblical scholars, certainly of a generation or so ago, have been uncertain about the concept of imitation as an ethical paradigm. The abuse of the idea during the medieval period, and its contemporary misuse outside the context of participation in Christ, has understandably led to a degree of reserve or even rejection by some.

Yet, the abuse of a biblical doctrine is not a good enough reason for its evasion. Surely, conservative Christians cannot continue to deny or

even diminish the essential role of modelling as part of the New Testament's paradigm of discipleship.

As this article has hopefully shown, Philippians certainly serves as the model for constructing a doctrine of imitation that gives thorough meaning to the cruciform nature of Christian existence, while at the same time insisting on the believer's responsibility to practically work out this truth in moral and ethical conduct.

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# **Witness to the End of the World: A Missional Reading of Acts 8:26–40**

Frank Jabini<sup>1</sup>

## **Abstract**

In Acts 1:8, Christ told his disciples that they will be his witness ‘to the ends of the earth’. The article argued that Philip’s encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:26–40 was the beginning of a witness among people who were considered to live at the end of the world. In this article, the biblical account was read from a missional exegetical perspective, and it discussed the sharing of Christ in a personal encounter and the Christ-centred message based on a translation of the Word of God. This event opened the door for an African to join the worldwide church, the body of Christ. The article concludes with the identification of five general principles that are significant for the church today in light of this passage.

## **Introduction**

In the first half of Acts chapter 8, Luke described how Philip introduced the gospel to the Samaritans.<sup>2</sup> In the second half of the chapter, he described an encounter that Philip had with an individual from Africa.

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<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.

<sup>2</sup> See Jabini 2010.

Bevan & Schroeder (2004:13, 21–22) listed the events of Acts 8 as stage four in their Seven Stages of Mission in Acts. This stage is where the 'Jewish identity of the community is transformed into the church as the community recognizes the Spirit among the Samaritans, in the Ethiopian eunuch' (p. 13). The two events in this chapter seem to be two different stages in the advance of the missions of the church. If my understanding is correct, the encounter with the eunuch is the beginning of missions to the end of the world. On the day of Pentecost, Jews were present from Egypt and Libya in North Africa (Acts 2:10). However, it is not clear from this passage whether they accepted the good news preached to them on that day. Even if that was the case, they were from the Jewish communities in North Africa.

This paper will analyse the encounter in Acts 8:26–40, the preaching of the gospel to an African, from a missional perspective. In the following pages, I will attempt to understand the identity of the man (the Ethiopian eunuch), the method, and the message of the encounter. In light of this, the paper concludes with five general principles for the contemporary church.

## 1. The Man

Acts 8:27 provides a brief introduction to the man in the encounter. He is described as an 'Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasury' (Acts 8:27). A few things may be said about this man.

Firstly, he was an Ethiopian. Ethiopia, in ancient documents, referred to the countries south of Egypt, present day Sudan and probably further south. Homer referred to the Ethiopians as people 'who are at the

world’s end’ (Odyssey 1.23).<sup>3</sup> Therefore, it is safe to assume that people living in the countries south of Egypt were referred to as Ethiopians. The region was known in Old Testament times as *Cush*.<sup>4</sup> From the Roman period, it was referred to as Nubia. Some scholars believe that Ethiopia means ‘land of the people of burnt faces’ (Smith 1996:665; see also LSJ, ‘properly burnt-face, i.e. an Ethiop, negro’). According to Herodotus (II.22.3), the men in Ethiopia are μέλανες (*black*). The dark-skinned people from Africa fascinated the Greeks and Romans. Martin (1989:110–116) discussed the Ethiopian’s identity and its ethnographic significance in details. He was a ‘black skin’ African. This point is often overlooked by expositors. The part of Africa from which this Ethiopian came can be safely assumed, since the text referred to Candace. ‘1<sup>st</sup> century readers would connect him specifically with the kingdom of Meroe, the queens of which traditionally were called “Candace”’ (Gaventa 1996:667). Homer’s understanding of the Ethiopians as the people ‘who are at the world’s end’ makes this encounter an important one. Here, Philip introduced the gospel to a person who lived on the end of the world, ἐσχάτου τῆς γῆς, *eschatou tēs gēs* (Acts 1:8). Interpreters differ in their understanding of the phrase. Views ranged from Rome (Haenchen 1971; Conzelmann 1987; Fitzmyer 1998), the land of Palestine (Schwartz 1986), the end of the earth in a general sense (Van Unnik 1966), and Spain (Ellis 1991). Ethiopia and the ‘eunuch’ was argued for by Thornton (1977–78).

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<sup>3</sup> References to the classical texts, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the user created BibleWorks modules. ‘Who are at the world’s end’ is based on Samuel Butler’s translation of Homer’s (Odyssey 1.22, 23) Greek phrase ‘τηλόθ’ ἐόντας ... ἐσχατοι ἀνδρῶν’ ‘being at a distance, (*far off, far away*) ... last, (*final*) of people’ (my own translation).

<sup>4</sup> The Hebrew כּוּשׁ, Cush, is translated Αἰθίοψ, Ethiopia, in the LXX.

It is therefore clear that the gospel does not know of geographic, ethnic, or racial barriers. Luke mentions another 'black' leader in the early church in Acts 13.

Perhaps it is worth mentioning that Scott (2009:767), however, argues that 'even after the eunuch's conversion, the church remains confined to the historic land and people of Israel'. The summary in Acts 9:31 according to him, does not speak about a church at the end of the world. Two issues should be taken into consideration here. In the first place, Acts 1:8 does not speak about establishing a church (ἐκκλησία) or churches (ἐκκλησίαι), even though that is important. The promise is to be a witness (μάρτυς) of Christ. As such the eunuch could have been a witness 'at the end of the world'. Furthermore, Acts 9:31 speaks about the church in 'Galilee'. Acts is silent about the planting of a church in Galilee (see Barrett 2004:473).

Secondly, he is further described as 'a eunuch'. Some scholars would argue that 'eunuch' should not be taken literally in Acts 8. Luke called him εὐνοῦχος δυνάστης (*eunouchos dunastēs*) 'a eunuch, a court official'.<sup>5</sup> These scholars interpreted this as follows: 'a eunuch that is a high official in government' (see Jer 34:19).<sup>6</sup> If that was Luke's intention, he did not have to include the word εὐνοῦχος, '*eunouchos*' (Polhill 1992:224; Witherington 1998:296; TDNT 2:768).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The LXX of Deut 23 used the word 'θλαδίας' for ט'רף. See however, Isaiah 56:3.

<sup>6</sup> Dutch translations seem to translate 'eunuch' as 'chamberlain' (NBG); 'an influential chamberlain' (LEI). This translation is defended by Van Eck (2003:207–208). Bruce (1998:175) is undecided when he stated that the 'term ... may have the more general sense of "chamberlain" or the stricter sense of "eunuch"'.  
<sup>7</sup> Some translations in the 'Today Versions' do not include the word 'eunuch' (see *Dios Habla Hoy*, CEV). See however TEV and GCL.

Thirdly, he came to Jerusalem to worship. This raised some questions about the religious identity of the man. Luke only tells us that ‘he had come to Jerusalem to worship’ (v. 27). As was the case with the Samaritans, religious background was not the focus of Luke. Scholars are not in agreement about his religious status. Was he a proselyte, a Gentile who became a follower of Judaism and was circumcised? This cannot be the case, since he was a eunuch. According to Deuteronomy 23:1, a eunuch may not enter the assembly (לְזָרָה, *qāhal*; LXX, ἑκκλησία) of the LORD.

Another option is that he was a God-fearer—a person who became a follower of Judaism, but was not circumcised. Scholars opposed this idea because the God-fearers were introduced to Christianity in Acts 10, with the conversion of Cornelius. Luke did not say that the Ethiopian was a God-fearer, as he did with others (Acts 10:1–3, 22; 13:16, 26, 43, 50; 16:4; 17:4, 17).

It seems that the eunuch was an adherent of Judaism. According to Bock (2007:342), he was a non-Jew who worshiped the Jewish God, a Diaspora God-fearer. Milkias (2011) gave an interesting overview of the religious situation in Ethiopia before Christ, from an Ethiopian perspective. In his view, ‘Ethiopia’ included ‘ancient Nubia and part of the Axumite Empire’ (which included present-day Ethiopia). According to him, Ethiopian sources indicated that the Queen of Sheba begot a son from Solomon (1 Kgs 10). He was called Menelik I. Menelik established the Solomonic dynasty in Ethiopia that lasted until the reign of Haille Selassie (pp. 171–172). He concluded that there were people in Ethiopia, who were monotheistic and associated with Judaism through the line of Menelik I, before Christ was born.<sup>8</sup> There is no

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<sup>8</sup> Milkias (2011:181) also referred to an Ethiopian tradition that called the wise man who visited the new born Christ, the Ethiopian king Balthasar.

doubt that Judaic influence and an Old Testament reflection had reached Ethiopia long before the introduction of Christianity in AD 340 and before the Bible was translated into Ethiopic (p. 170).

One writer even argues that 'it is highly probable that the whole of Abyssinia was of Jewish persuasion previous to its conversion (to Christianity)' (cited in Seligson 1965:91).

Whatever the connection with Judaism and the God of Israel may have been, this passage clearly showed that being an adherent of Judaism does not make one a believer in Christ. Furthermore, no matter what the man's physical status was, the door to Christ was open for him. In Judaism, he would be limited to the Court of the Gentiles at the temple or the synagogue (Bock 2007:342). In the new era that inaugurated with the coming of the Christ, things have changed. The Old Testament foresaw those changes. Solomon (1 Kgs 8:41–43) prayed for people like this foreigner.

Foreigners, who do not belong to your people Israel, will come from a distant land because of your reputation. When they hear about your great reputation and your ability to accomplish mighty deeds, they will come and direct their prayers toward this temple. Then listen from your heavenly dwelling place and answer all the prayers of the foreigners. Then all the nations of the earth will acknowledge your reputation, obey you like your people Israel do, and recognize that this temple I built belongs to you.

Isaiah also promised eunuchs and foreigners full blessings in the future (Isa 56:3–8). 'Isaiah 56:3–7 anticipates a time of "full class membership" for eunuchs—a move from communal isolation and marginality to communal inclusion and wholeness' (Martin 1989:109). In the church of Christ, there is room not only for the half-breed

Samaritans, but also for the eunuch who, in the past, was excluded from access to God (Martin 1989:109). Now, in Christ, this foreign eunuch had full access to God.

Finally, the man was ‘a court official of Candace’ and he ‘was in charge of all her treasury’.<sup>9</sup> He was a minister or secretary of finance. This means he was well-to-do and a man of authority. God will use a simple follower of Christ, to preach the gospel to him.

## 2. The Method

In the case of Samaria, Philip preached to a crowd (ὄχλος, v. 6). In this encounter, there was no crowd, but one man. In Samaria, he preached in a city (πόλις, v. 5). Now, Philip was told to go to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza, a desert (ἔρημος) road (Acts 8:26).<sup>10</sup> Here, he met one man.

[The angel of the Lord] directs him; for there were two roads, and an evangelist would not have chosen the one that was a desert. But the object of God's grace was travelling by this one; and an angel is employed as ever in God's providence, here objectively that we might not forget the truth or take account only of thoughts and feelings (Kelly 1890).

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<sup>9</sup> The Greek word used for ‘treasury’ is γάζα (*gaza*). The same word is used for the place in verse 26 Γάζα (*Gaza*). Barrett made the following remark: ‘It is not impossible that Luke intends a pun between Γάζα, the place, and γάζα, *treasure*’.

<sup>10</sup> The Greek word μεσημβρία (*mesēmbria*) can refer to time ‘midday, noon’ or place ‘south’. The major English translations (TEV; NAS; NET; NIV; ESV), the German (GLC) and Spanish (DH) good news translations all translate it ‘south’. The Dutch translations, all translated ‘midday’ (NBG; NBV; GNB; see however the HSV and WV). Barrett (2004:423) preferred ‘midday’. He argued: ‘It was by ordering such unusual action [into the desert in the hottest part of the day (Polhill 2001:223)] that the angel (as God’s agent) ensured that Philip should fall in with the Ethiopian’.

The method used in this encounter differs from the Samaritan encounter. Firstly, there was a divine arrangement of events. In verse 26, 'an angel of the Lord' spoke to Philip and in verse 29, 'the Spirit' spoke to him (see also v. 39). Furthermore, the eunuch was reading a specific passage that would allow Philip to preach Christ to him. God was clearly involved in this encounter. The involvement of angels in the life of the early believers is remarkable. An angel led John and Peter out of prison (Acts 5:19), came to Cornelius and spoke with him (10:3, 7, 22; 11:13), led Peter out of prison (12:7-15), struck Herod (12:23), and came to Paul and encouraged him (27:23, 24). Closely related to the angelic involvement is the leading of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit spoke to Peter about Cornelius and commanded him to go to him (Acts 10:19-20); demanded that Saul and Barnabas be set apart for missions (13:2); sent Paul and Barnabas to the mission field (13:4); prevented Paul to preach in the province of Asia and traveling to Bithynia (16:6, 7). God also directed the events in missions through dreams and visions. Mission belongs to God (*missio Dei*). He is involved in missions through supernatural means. The church's involvement in missions will be poor if the involvement of God is left out or not taken into consideration. God is at work. He was at work in the life of the eunuch and he was also at work in the life of Cornelius (see Acts 10). In fact, he was there before any messenger arrived, prepared the way, and sent his messengers to labour with him in missions. In Acts 9, there is another remarkable incident. The Lord spoke to a 'disciple in Damascus named Ananias ... in a vision' (Acts 9:10). In other words, the appearance of God in dreams, visions, or by the Holy Spirit causing one to fall into a trance, and was not limited to the leaders of the church.

There are a number of instances in the history of the church in which God, in his sovereignty, touched the lives of people without human intervention. After his intervention, God directed these people to human

messengers. The story of a 19<sup>th</sup> century Maroon in Suriname is an example of this.<sup>11</sup> Johannes King, 'a witchdoctor,' received a vision from God. In the vision, it became clear to him that if he continued in his way of living, he would go to hell. God gave him a vision of what life in hell would be. King was then directed to the Moravian missionaries in the vision, who were going to give him further explanation of what he should do. Consequently, King became a strong messenger and prophetic figure in the interior of Suriname, leading his entire tribe to Christianity.

I have, likewise, personally witnessed how God drew an old lady to himself. She could not read nor write and was often drunk. I have tried to witness to her, but because she was often drunk, I was not successful. One early Sunday morning, she came to me and told me she must go to church with me on that day. As she later explained, she had a dream in which a serpent was trying to devour her. She was told in the dream to join the boat in which I was travelling. If she obeyed, she would be saved. Later that day, she confessed Christ as her Lord and saviour. She was baptized and brought great joy to our church.

Secondly, there was a personal approach to evangelism. In verse 29, the Spirit told Philip to join the chariot. Philip heard the man reading from the scripture. He used that scripture reading as the point of departure for a conversation. Philip asked a question and the man asked a counter-question. 'To this eunuch fell the privilege of asking—and it is the first recorded instance of the question being asked—of whom the prophet in the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah was speaking. And to Philip was granted the privilege of giving a definite answer to the eunuch's question' (Young 1949:132).

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<sup>11</sup> See Freytag (1927) and the dissertation of Zamuel (1994) for the details on the life and ministry of Johannes King.

It is remarkable how the book of Acts pays attention to the crowd, household, and the individual. The gospel was meant to be shared with all. In the era of mega-crusades, personal evangelism seems to be out of focus. Even though circumstances will not always be like that of the eunuch, history has proven that God used, and is still using, the sharing of Christ on a one to one basis. In some contexts, that may be the only way for evangelism. Bosch (1991:10–11) gave the following detailed definition of evangelism: 'Evangelism is the proclamation of salvation in Christ to those who do not believe in him, calling them to repentance and conversion, announcing forgiveness of sin, and inviting them to become members of Christ's earthly community and to begin a life of service to others in the power of the Holy Spirit.'<sup>12</sup>

This event was a cross-cultural event. Philip, a simple Hellenistic Jew, was sent to preach the gospel to a well-to-do African. 'Simple Christians can share Christ with people who are different from them by simply loving them and by being humble and sensitive to their needs' (Fernando 1998:288).

Thirdly, he used a translated scripture. The text that the eunuch was reading, Isaiah 53:7–8, seems to have been the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament (vv. 32–33). The eunuch was able to read the word of God in a language that he could understand. This makes Bible translation an important tool in missions. The LXX was not without problems.<sup>13</sup> In this citation, it seems to differ from the original Masoretic text in a number of ways. And yet, Philip did not start by making corrections to the translation or pointing to its

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<sup>12</sup> The actual practice of an evangelist will not always include all these elements. The events in Acts 8 give evidence for this.

<sup>13</sup> See Fitzmyer (1998:413) who stated that the LXX is not 'an accurate rendering of the MT'.

imperfection.<sup>14</sup> Even though the words may differ, the intention of the passage in both texts is the same. Despite its shortcomings in some places, the Greek translation of the Old Testament was the Bible used by the Holy Spirit in missions to the Greek-speaking people.

Two things can be learnt from this. In the first place, scriptures should be translated in the language that people best understand. And secondly, evangelists should focus on the text that people are using. *That* text should be the point of departure.

Fourthly, there was a baptism. The preaching of Philip resulted in the eunuch asking the question of baptism. It is clear that Philip preached a full gospel to the man, in which he also explained the need for baptism. As they were travelling along the road, they arrived to some water, and the eunuch said, 'Look, there is water! What is to stop me from being baptized?' (Acts 8:36)

It is not clear how Philip responded. Some manuscripts record that Philip asked a question, followed by an answer from the eunuch. He said to him, 'If you believe with your whole heart, you may.' He replied, 'I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God' (v. 37).

Whether the conversation went along those lines cannot be established with certainty, due mainly to the lack of textual evidences.<sup>15</sup> This is

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<sup>14</sup> The Bible as a book is translatable. Sanneh (1989) sees Christianity in its very nature as a translatable religion. He argued for translation beyond textual work (p. 3). However, as Walls (1996:26) indicated, it is impossible to transmit meaning exactly from one linguistic medium to another. Translators have to make choices on almost every word in a translation.

<sup>15</sup> This verse is not found in some manuscripts and is omitted in modern translations. Metzger (2002:315) made the following observation: 'Although the earliest known New Testament manuscript that contains the words dates from the sixth century (ms. E), the tradition of the Ethiopian's confession of faith in Christ was current as early as the latter part of the second century, for Irenaeus quotes part of it (*Against Heresies*,

followed by his baptism. Baptism seems to have been an integral part of the message of Jesus. In the New Testament, baptism seems to follow confession of faith, without a time difference. This is seen in Peter's message on the day of Pentecost: 'Repent, and each one of you be baptized ... Those who accepted his message were baptised' (Acts 2:38, 41). Philip did the same in Samaria: 'When they believed ... they were baptised' (Acts 8:12 NIV). This is true for Cornelius (Acts 10) and the gaoler in Philippi (Acts 16). Baptism is an important aspect in the process of disciple-making (Matt 28:19). In all of the above examples, people were baptized after they confessed faith in Christ.

The words ἀνέβησαν (*went up*, 8:39) and κατέβησαν (*went down*, Acts 8:38), do not refer to the method of baptism ('sprinkling' versus 'immersion'). None of these two methods can be derived from this passage. Some would argue based on the phrase, 'When they came up out of the water' (Acts 8:39) implies that Philip immersed the eunuch. This is not necessarily the case, since the text does not refer to them being 'under the water'. They were 'in' the water and came 'out' of it. The mode of baptism is not explained in this verse.

When and how should one baptize once people respond to the good news? Should one follow the method of household baptism, as was done in the case of Cornelius (Acts 10), Lydia (Acts 16), the jailer (Acts 16), Crispus (Acts 18), and Stephanus (1 Cor 1:16)? Or, should one conduct believers' baptism in the sense of immersion? These questions

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III.xii:8)'. The NET has the following comments: 'The variant is significant in showing how some in the early church viewed a confession of faith'. See also Fitzmyer (1998:415), who stated that the reading is ancient.

should be settled in ecclesiology.<sup>16</sup> The evangelist, however, cannot deny people, who are reached with the gospel, baptism. Baptism is an important witness of the believer's connection to Jesus Christ.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, the messenger was taken away (v. 39). After he preached the message and baptized the convert, his assignment ended. Others will have to take over the responsibility from this evangelist. The Spirit had another assignment for him. Philip, however, found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through the area, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea (Acts 8:40).

The task of the evangelist from this passage seems to be: preaching Christ to the people, baptising them, and moving on to other assignments. Others, like Paul, spent some time with the new converts and instructed them in the teachings of the Lord. It is clear that there is no general method for the evangelist. Some will be called to preach from one place to another, as Billy Graham did in this generation. Others will be called to labour in one place for many years.

Some manuscripts add the following words in verse 39: 'the Holy Spirit fell on the eunuch, then the angel of the Lord snatched Philip away'.<sup>18</sup> This addition included a new Pentecost for the eunuch. Even though the text is not supported by the major manuscripts and is rejected by most

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<sup>16</sup> See Ouweneel (2011), who discussed the issue of baptism in his volume on the 'Covenant and kingdom of God'. He argues that there is a clear connection between baptism and the kingdom of God.

<sup>17</sup> It is remarkable that Philip did not call upon the church to come and baptize the Samaritans or the eunuch. Clearly, baptism was not reserved for a special group within the church. Paul was also not baptized by one of the pillars of the church, but by another disciple (Acts 9:10, 18).

<sup>18</sup> The phrase reads: 'πνεῦμα ἅγιον ἐπέπεσεν ἐπὶ τὸν εὐνοῦχον· ἄγγελος δὲ κυρίου ἤρπασεν τὸν Φίλιππον' (see the discussion in Metzger 2002:316; Van Eck 2003:212; Barrett 2004:435; Bock 2007:348).

translations, it is clear that the Holy Spirit played a critical role in the conversion of this man. This made it possible for him to go 'on his way rejoicing' (Acts 8:39).

### 3. The Message

What was the message of Philip? The text says that Philip, 'beginning with this scripture proclaimed the good news about Jesus to him' (Acts 8:35). The Greek reads: εὐηγγελίσσατο αὐτῷ τὸν Ἰησοῦν (*euēngeliasto autō ton Iēsou*), literally 'he proclaimed good news to him (about) Jesus'. L&N (33.215) translated this phrase as 'he told him the good news about Jesus'. BDAG (s.v. εὐαγγελίζω) listed our passage under: 'proclaim the divine message of salvation, proclaim the gospel' and added 'with mention of the thing proclaimed, as well as of the person who receives the message'. The message that was preached was 'Jesus'. Even though the audiences in Samaria and on this desert road were different, Philip's message was the same (vv. 12, 35). Cultural differences and circumstances may require a different approach to the preaching of the message. The subject of the message should always be Christ.

On May the 26<sup>th</sup> 1774, Benjamin Fawcett preached a sermon based on 2 Corinthians 4:5: 'For we do not proclaim ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake'. Fawcett's sermon was based on the following four points:

First, to show that faithful ministers of the gospel make it their grand concern to preach Christ Jesus the Lord. Secondly, that they dread the thought of preaching themselves, instead of Christ. Thirdly, that while they preached Christ, and not themselves, they are themselves the servant of immortal souls. And, fourthly that

their principal motive for engaging in such service of immortal souls, is for Jesus’ sake (Fawcett 1774:2).

Philip preached Christ based on Isaiah 53:7–8. However, the text seems to indicate that he utilised other passages too. The word translated ‘beginning’ ἀρξάμενος (*arxamenos*), seems to indicate that the Isaiah passage was only the point of departure.<sup>19</sup> Philip may have mimicked Peter’s actions on the day of Pentecost, where Peter started with Joel, but used other passages from scripture to develop his message. Or more specifically, Philip followed the example of the Lord Jesus Christ himself. Then, beginning (ἀρξάμενος) with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things written about himself in all the scriptures (Luke 24:27).

Philip based his preaching to this man on an exposition of passages from scripture. Did he use the same method in Samaria? It is not clear. The content of the message was the same, but the method may have been different. The result on both occasions was the same. In Samaria, there was great joy (χαρὰ μεγάλη, v. 8), and the Ethiopian went on his way ‘rejoicing’ (χαίρων, v. 39). According to Milkias (2011:180) ‘Ethiopian historical records assert that he [the eunuch] returned home and evangelized Christianity in Ethiopia’. A comment made by Irenaeus is worth citing.

This man was also sent into the regions of Ethiopia, to preach what he had himself believed, that there was one God preached by the prophets, but that the Son of this [God] had already made [His] appearance in human nature (*secundum hominem*), and had been led as a sheep to the slaughter; and all the other statements which the prophets made regarding Him (Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 3.12.8. See also 4.23.2).

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<sup>19</sup> See BDAG s.v. ἄρχω 2.c, ‘with indication of the starting point’.

Cadbury and Lake (1965:98) referred to Epiphanius, who said that he preached in 'Arabia Felix and on the coast of the Red Sea' and 'that he was martyred'. Scholars are not in agreement about the role that the eunuch played in taking Christianity back to Ethiopia. Luke does not make any reference to it in his record. A similar approach was also taken by him with regards to Simon in the first section of Acts 8. However, it may be safely assumed that the eunuch shared his new-found faith in Jesus Christ in his country. As such, he was a witness of Christ to the end of the earth.

#### 4. The Meaning

What are the lessons from this encounter for missions today? Scholars have raised questions about the appropriate approach in applying the message of the book of Acts. 'Are the practises of the early church given for later generations to follow and even imitate?' (Liefeld 1995:117) Or, are the events written in the book descriptive and 'not necessary to be followed by the church at all times and in all places?' (p. 117) Comparing the two events makes it clear that God does not always work in the same way. In other words, Philip could not use the Acts 2 model in Samaria or on the desert road. There was no need for an apostle to come to pray with the eunuch to receive the Holy Spirit. Liefeld (p. 124) raised the following caution: 'The interpreter of Acts must, however, be especially cautious lest methods that were appropriate in specific circumstances in the first century be absolutized for all time'. Yet, it is possible to draw some principles from the encounter that may be meaningful to the church today.

Interestingly, The Saint Thomas, born Eduard W Blyden, of Igbo (Nigerian) slave parents, drew different principles from this encounter. According to him, the encounter is symbolic of instruments and

methods of Africa's evangelism. 'The method, the simple holding up of Jesus Christ; the instrument, the African himself' (1888:184). Another symbol that he saw in the encounter was the future and experience of the eunuch's race. 'It was upholding Christ as the "man of sorrows and acquainted with grief," as if in anticipation of the great and unsurpassed trials of the Africa' (p. 185).

#### 4.1. The sovereignty of God in missions

In the current era of missions' strategies and methodologies, it is always important to recognize that 'missions' is the business of God, and that he is sovereign.<sup>20</sup> He can and should be allowed to by-pass our methods and strategies. In the case of Philip, he led him away from a ministry in which he was reaching a multitude, to 'go after' one individual. By doing this, God used Philip to preach Christ, so that there will be witnesses of Christ in Samaria and the ends of the earth.

#### 4.2. The importance of an obedient servant

In our age of convenience and 'few workers', the Lord of the harvest is looking for obedient servants. Obedient servants are willing to go wherever and whenever the Lord wants them to go. Missions is not only the mission of God (*missio Dei*), but also that of the obedient church and the responsive individual. Philip's call did not come through a church or the apostles. God sent him directly.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> E.g. Dayton & Fraser 1990 and various chapters in Terry, Smith & Anderson 1998. The call for reaching 'people' and 'people groups' should allow for reaching individuals.

<sup>21</sup> See however Saul and Barnabas in Acts 13 and the involvement of the apostles in the Samaria encounter (Acts 8).

### 4.3. The importance of personal evangelism

The Jerusalem missions conference in 1928 argued for a 'comprehensive approach' to missions, with preaching as its central aspect. Since then, missions have been defined very broadly. This led Stephen Neill to make the following remark in 1959, that became well known in missions circles: 'If everything is mission, nothing is mission'. In the midst of a comprehensive approach to missions, there should be room for a narrow, concentrated approach to one aspect of missions, such as personal evangelism. Paragraph six of the Lausanne Covenant contains the following statement: 'In the Church's mission of sacrificial service, evangelism is primary'. Philip's encounter with the eunuch illustrates that church planting is not always the goal of evangelism. Personal evangelism may focus on winning a soul for Christ.

### 4.4. The importance of the word of God

The word of God has always played a crucial part in missions and evangelism. Philip used the word as the point of departure for his teaching. He preached from a translated scripture. The scripture was probably not in the mother tongue of the eunuch. It is critical to give people the word of God in a language that they best understand. However, that language is not always the mother tongue. Globalization and, especially urbanization, make it possible for people of different languages to live together in one area, speaking a common *lingua franca*. However, there are still people groups who need a Bible in language that they best understand.

#### 4.5. The importance of a Christ-centred message

Philip and the evangelists of the early church preached Christ-centred messages. The multi-religious and multi-cultural society of their days did not prevent them from sharing Christ with their neighbours. Paragraph 3 of the Lausanne Covenant stated the following:

We also reject as derogatory to Christ and the gospel every kind of syncretism and dialogue which implies that Christ speaks equally through all religions and ideologies. Jesus Christ, being himself the only God-man, who gave himself as the only ransom for sinners, is the only mediator between God and people. There is no other name by which we must be saved.

As evangelists today follow in the footsteps of Philip, they will cause people from many nations to stretch out their hands to God in worship (cf. Ps 68:31). God's people should, in obedience to Christ (Acts 1:8), be witnesses of Christ to the whole world.

After these things I looked, and here was an enormous crowd that no one could count, made up of persons from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb dressed in long white robes, and with palm branches in their hands. They were shouting out in a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God, to the one seated on the throne, and to the Lamb! (Rev 7:9–10)

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# A Historical and Theological Framework for Understanding Word of Faith Theology

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## Abstract

This journal article offers a historical background and contemporary framework in order to facilitate a better understanding of word of faith theology. The essay first considers the historical origins of the word of faith movement. In this section, three principal sources are noted. Second, the essay offers several contextual influences which have affected the word of faith movement. Here, five influences are briefly assessed. Third, an assessment of four key persons in the development of the movement is presented. Fourth, key components in the development of the word of faith message are appraised. Finally, four primary tenets of word of faith theology are assessed per their continuity with orthodox evangelical theology.

## Introduction

The modern faith movement is referred to by many names. Those most frequently cited are the Prosperity Gospel, the Word of Faith Movement, the Faith-Formula Movement, the Health and Wealth

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

Gospel, and the Positive Confession Movement. Word of faith theology is not confined to a particular faith tradition, but has been assimilated into many evangelical churches, and even into congregations in the more liberal mainline denominations (Van Biema & Chu 2006). According to Farah (1982:15), the word of faith message is perhaps the most attractive message preached in the contemporary church. In the main, word of faith theology posits an anthropocentric worldview, in which Christians are entitled to health, wealth, and prosperity, all of which is obtainable by utilising one's faith. Because of its popularity, word of faith theology is often modified to suit the particular context of its adherents, producing various hybrid strands of the movement (Anderson 2004:158). While some assume that the word of faith movement finds its origins in the Pentecostal and Charismatic faith traditions, McConnell (1995:xx) argues that this assumption is not historically accurate; rather, that specific tenets of the movement can be traced historically to extra-biblical, non-biblical, even cultic sources. The following assessment of various aspects of the word of faith movement will hopefully facilitate a better understanding of its theology.

## **1. Historical Origins of the Word of Faith Movement**

Indeed, numerous sources have informed and influenced the word of faith movement. Consequently, identifying the origins of the movement is no minimal task. Although the influences often intersect in terms of specifics, research suggests that three primary sources provide the historical origins of the movement, namely, (a) the Pentecostal and Charismatic faith traditions, (b) 19<sup>th</sup> century American revivalism, and (c) specific cultic influences and teaching. The task of this article is to differentiate among the proposed sources.

## 1.1. Pentecostal and Charismatic faith traditions

Some suggest that the movement arose primarily within the Pentecostal and Charismatic faith traditions (cf. Barron 1990; DeArteaga 1996; Moriarty 1992). Even pre-Pentecostals (e.g. John Wesley, Charles Finney, and George Whitefield) are cited as having laid the groundwork that would later facilitate the formation of word of faith theology (Vreeland 2001:9). Because the word of faith movement utilises a large portion of evangelical and Pentecostal terminology, it often has the appearance of orthodoxy (Bjornstad 1986:69). Consequently, some assume that that the word of faith movement is the product of those traditions (Coleman 1993:355; Ezeigbo 1989:7; Sarles 1986:330). Unquestionably, some early adherents of the word of faith movement were connected to the Pentecostal and Charismatic traditions, if not through specific ecclesiastical ties, at the very least by embracing various tenets from those traditions. As a result, the word of faith movement currently enjoys influence within various sectors of the Pentecostal and Charismatic traditions (Smith 1987:27–30).

Specific tenets of both the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements are evident within the word of faith movement. While classical Pentecostalism emphasises the need for the baptism of the Holy Spirit, the elements of healing, signs and wonders, as well as an emphasis on spiritual gifts were at the heart of the movement from its earliest days (Hollinger 1997:20). Several distinguishing tenets of early Pentecostalism are evident within the word of faith movement, although in the latter, they are often manifested in more extremist terms (Moriarty 1992:27–29), namely, (a) the belief that God is reviving the church within the present generation, (b) the tendency to exalt spiritual manifestations, (c) a tendency to be personality centred, (d) a tendency to produce adherents who are theologically thin (this due primarily to

an anti-education mentality at the popular level), and (e) the belief that an outpouring of the Holy Spirit will bring unity to the church at large. Although elements of Pentecostalism at large exist within the word of faith movement, many of those elements are hermeneutically appropriated outside the mainstream of Pentecostal theology.

## 1.2. Mid-19<sup>th</sup> century revivalism in the United States

Some posit that the word of faith movement realises its antecedent in the revivals of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century in the United States (cf. Hollinger 1997; Perriman 2003 et al.). During the height of and immediately following the World War II era, numerous evangelistic associations were established, many founded by persons with Pentecostal roots (Harrell 1975:4). Under the leadership of persons who were dissatisfied with established denominational Pentecostalism, the Charismatic movement surged on the scene of post-World War II healing revivalism (Vreeland 2001:1). The healing revivals were often characterised by (Moriarty 1992:41–42) the following characteristics:

- Sensationalism and exaggerated announcements of supernatural intervention
- Cult-like figures who took centre stage of the meetings
- Exaggerated views of deliverance
- Scandalous fund-raising techniques
- A distorted view of faith
- A preoccupation with Satan and demons
- New revelations as a way to obtain spiritual truth

The word of faith movement does indeed contain elements of the healing revival movement, but here too, in terms of praxis, appropriation of these elements is often in more extreme forms.

### 1.3. Extra-biblical and cultic influences

A number of researchers (cf. Hanegraaff 2009; Neuman 1990; MacArthur 1992) argue that the word of faith movement is an infiltration of the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements via extra-biblical, even cultic influences. In making a distinction between cult and cultic, Ronald Enroth (1983:12–15) uses three approaches, namely, the sensational, the sociological, and the theological. The sensational approach highlights the more extreme and unconventional elements of a movement or teaching. The sociological approach lends itself to a descriptive focus on the social, cultural, and internal dynamics of a cult. The third approach, the theological, is primarily evaluative in that it compares and contrasts the teachings of a given group with scripture. A fourth approach has been posited by McConnell (1995:17–18), a historical approach, in which the history of a religious movement or group is assessed in conjunction with the theological approach. The intent is to determine whether or not specific teachings within a group are cultic in nature, an approach utilised in this research as it relates to specific tenets of word of faith theology. The array of cultic movements that emerged in 19<sup>th</sup> century America can be classified in two groups (Perriman 2003:66–67): the historically or eschatologically oriented cults such as Mormonism, the Jehovah's Witnesses, and so on, and, the ahistorical or gnostic cults, which originated from a fascination with the powers of the mental and spiritual worlds, ranging from transcendentalism to the occult. It is the latter group that profoundly influenced aspects of the word of faith movement.

Research (cf. Bloodsworth 2009; Bowman 2001; Ezeigbo 1989; Farah 1981; Matta 1987; McConnell 1995; Neuman 1990) suggests that due to its many evangelical tenets, the word of faith movement is not technically classifiable as a cult. Yet, specific aspects of the movement

may, indeed, be understood as cultic. For example, the movement holds to several tenets that place it within the broader parameters of evangelical orthodoxy. Vreeland (2001:3) notes two tenets, namely, its exaltation of the authority of scripture, and its partial origins in Holiness/Pentecostalism. Bowman (2001:226) argues that, firstly, none of the contemporary word of faith proponents explicitly reject the orthodox doctrines of salvation by grace or the Trinitarian concept of God, and, secondly, word of faith teachers at times affirm the orthodox doctrines of the virgin birth, Christ's physical death, bodily resurrection and Second Coming. At the same time, elements of the movement tend to stretch the boundaries of orthodoxy. McConnell (1995:19) suggests that the 'word of faith movement is not a cult in the sense and to the degree of Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, or Christian Science. No, the faith movement is not a cult, but it is cultic'.

Undeniably, elements from the Pentecostal and Charismatic faith traditions, the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century healing revival movement, as well as tenets of cultic teaching are found within the word of faith movement. The word of faith movement's extreme appropriation of elements from the first two sources, and the biblically deficient nature of the latter source, provide the framework for further analysis.

## **2. Contextual Influences on the Word of Faith Movement**

Beyond the primary religious sources, various contextual influences also contribute to the development of the word of faith movement. Three influences in particular provide a context favourable for the fostering of specific tenets of the movement (Bloodsworth 2009:75).

## 2.1. The American dream

The concept of the 'American dream', or America's fascination with all things material, facilitates certain tenets of the word of faith movement. More of a social than religious influence, the fascination with materialism offers context for the development of the movement. Coined by James Adams in his 1931 volume, *The Epic of America*, the phrase 'American dream' suggests that life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone (cf. Adams 1931). Written during the early part of the Great Depression, the concept articulates the hope of a brighter and better tomorrow. American society experienced profound socioeconomic changes in the post-World War II period. Rising from the dearth of the Great Depression, American culture began to experience a growing pragmatism that led to the active pursuit of anyone and anything that promised to impact personal wealth and health (Simmons 1997:195).

The optimism of the post-World War II years, along with an unprecedented economic surge, produced several factors that changed the religious landscape: (a) denominational divisions were no longer as significant as they were prior to World War II; and (b) transdenominational special-purpose groups, including those that tout the prosperity message, are proliferating (cf. Wuthnow 1988). The better and richer and fuller life suggested by the American dream came to be defined primarily in terms of money (Cullen 2003:7). The lure of materialism attracted not only those of minimal socio-economic status, but also many in the upper strata as well. During this time of economic transition, the Charismatic movement helped to widen social acceptance of the Pentecostal message, producing numerous converts from the middle and upper classes (Crews 1990:159). This singular influence produced a context ripe for the message of the word of faith movement.

## 2.2. Peale's positive thinking and Rogerian psychology

The word of faith movement owes much to the concept of positive thinking promoted by Norman Vincent Peale (Cox 2001:272). The mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, with its expanding post-World War II enthusiasm, produced numerous innovations regarding positivity and a focus on the possibilities of the individual (cf. Meyer 1965). Peale (1989–1993) served for fifty-two years as senior pastor of Marble Collegiate Church in New York City. Among his extensive writings is the book, *The power of positive thinking*, written in 1952. The book is actually an informal compilation of Peale's sermons, written to assist the reader in achieving a happy, satisfying, and worthwhile life. In the introduction, Peale (1952:xi) writes, 'this book is written to suggest...that you do not need to be defeated by anything, that you can have peace of mind, improved health, and a never-ceasing flow of energy. In short, that your life can be full of joy and satisfaction'. Peale's father, Charles Clifford Peale, a former physician turned Methodist minister, summarised the younger Peale's theology as 'a composite of New Thought, metaphysics, Christian Science, medical and psychological practice, Baptist evangelism, Methodist witnessing, and solid Dutch Reformed Calvinism' (Braden 1966:391). Peale's integration of New Thought principles with biblical theology provides the fertile soil later utilised in developing word of faith theology.

In addition, an innovative concept of psychology, a non-directive, person-centred, psychotherapeutic approach to counselling began to make its mark (cf. Rogers 1951). The goal of this novel approach was to facilitate self-actualisation. The Rogerian model emphasised the counselee's ability to determine what was best for him, while the role of the counsellor was to assist the counselee by encouraging and reinforcing positive thinking (Starnes 2006:394). Here, as in Peale's

positivity, there is an anthropocentric focus. Such elements of context are noted because of their ultimate influence, whether directly or indirectly, on the word of faith movement. The possibility thinking promoted by Peale, along with a novel approach to psychology promoted by Rogers (1902–1987), produced a climate ripe for the cultivation of specific tenets of word of faith theology.

### **2.3. Experience-centred Christianity**

Birthered in the mind of 19<sup>th</sup> century theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, experience-centred Christianity came to fruition in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements (Bloodsworth 2009:75). Because of the spontaneous spirituality, the two movements expanded rapidly at the popular level. The emphasis on experience spread via testimony and personal contact, affecting people emotionally (Anderson 2004:62). So much so, that the essence of Pentecostalism cannot be understood through dogma and doctrine alone, but through a narrative theology, whose central expression is the testimony (Cox 2001:58, 68–71). Theology and experience deeply influenced each other within the Pentecostal movement (Jacobsen 2003:5). While not all within the Pentecostal or Charismatic movements held an experience alone posture or an anti-education mentality, there was indeed an emphasis on experience-centred Christianity. Consequently, the word of faith movement was influenced by the religious context of one of its antecedents (cf. Anderson 2004:157).

## **3. Key Persons in the Development of the Word of Faith Movement**

Because the movement is so diverse, even complex in its many nuances, it is possible to cite numerous persons. Four in particular are

noteworthy because of their influence on specific biblical tenets of word of faith theology.

### 3.1. Phineas Parkhurst Quimby

The origins of the word of faith movement is traceable back to Phineas Parkhurst Quimby (1802–1866), whose teachings form the nucleus for numerous 19<sup>th</sup> century mind-cure healing movements, and who is considered the forefather of New Thought (Jacobsen 2003:396; Harley 1991:77–79 et al.). Although Quimby is not the sole founder of mental science, being only one of many mental healers plying the trade during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (Tucker 1989:153), his teachings fully embody the concept. After experiencing a personal illness, Quimby became disillusioned with the conventional medical practice of his time. In 1838, he witnessed a public demonstration of mesmeric healing. Quimby researched mesmeric healing for approximately two years before beginning the practice himself in 1840 (Smith 1995:58).

Quimby popularised the idea that disease and suffering originate from incorrect thinking, positing that illness is curable through healthy attitudes and positive thinking.

If I believe I am sick, I am sick, for my feelings are my sickness, and my sickness is my belief, and my belief is my mind. Therefore, all disease is in the mind or belief. Now as our belief or disease is made up of ideas, which are [spiritual] matter, it is necessary to know what beliefs we are in; for to cure the disease is to correct the error, and as disease is what follows the error, destroy the cause, and the effect will cease...Your error is the cause of your sickness or trouble. Now to cure your sickness or trouble is to correct the error (Quimby 1921:186).

Quimby held that one could create one's own reality via the power of positive affirmation (confession) (Braden 1966:121–123). As such, one could visualise health and wealth, affirm or confess them with one's words, with the result of intangible images becoming reality (Bristol 1948:122). This concept is espoused by other key persons cited in this section and is central to specific tenets of word of faith theology.

### **3.2. William Essek Kenyon**

The person who represents the genesis of the word of faith movement is William Essek Kenyon (1867–1948) (cf. Hanegraaff 2009; MacArthur 1992; McConnell 1995). Kenyon's early religious affiliation was with the Methodist Episcopal Church. He later established and pastored several Baptist churches, remaining a Baptist minister until his death. Kenyon enrolled in the Emerson College of Oratory in 1892, an institution known for its dissemination of metaphysical, transcendental, and New Thought teachings. Although some researchers (cf. DeArteaga 1992; Simmons 1997; Vreeland 2001) diminish this influence, others (cf. Cannon n.d.; Hanegraaff 2009; Matta 1987; McConnell 1995) posit that his association with Emerson greatly influenced the development of his theology. Believing the stale Protestant churches of his day were unable to offer what aspects of mind-science teaching could offer, Kenyon sought to forge a new kind of Christianity—a meld of Christianity and New Thought science (Geracie 1993:55).

Indeed, Kenyon's writings reveal influences beyond the scope of his Protestant theological affiliation. For example, Kenyon (1942:76–84) suggests that when David's soldiers appropriated the promises of the Abrahamic covenant, they became supermen and were shielded from death during warfare. Kenyon alludes to the formation of supermen, a master race of Christians no longer bound by external realities. He (Kenyon 1943:90) advances the notion of living in perfect health, free

from the limitations of the physical nature, and (Kenyon 1945:93) proposes that the creative ability of God observed in creation is imparted to believers in the present reality (cf. Rom 4:17). Although Kenyon believed he had rediscovered hidden/lost truths from scripture, his efforts to revitalise the churches of his day involved the incorporation of metaphysical religious concepts, i.e. a meld of evangelical Christianity and transcendental mind-science (Smith 1995:153–154, 168). Many of the phrases popularised by contemporary word of faith proponents, such as 'What I confess, I possess', were coined by Kenyon (Hanegraaff 2009:18).

### **3.3. William Marrion Branham**

The word of faith movement can be traced to the more extreme healing revivalists of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century such as William Marrion Branham (1909–1965) (Anderson 2004:157; Jacobsen 2003:396). Branham is called the second father of the modern word of faith movement (Bowman 2001:86). Since he was influenced by, and often quoted the works of Kenyon (Simmons 1985:386), aspects of Branham's ministry and teaching facilitate the development of the word of faith movement. Branham was the major influence on the Latter Rain movement, a movement characterised by the following seven tenets: (a) belief in a complete restoration of 1<sup>st</sup> century truths; (b) the restoration of the five-fold ministry of apostles and prophets to accompany pastors, evangelists and teachers; (c) the spiritual disciplines of deliverance, fasting and the laying on of hands for impartation; (d) restoration of personal prophecy to the church; (e) recovery of true worship in the church; (f) the belief that those operating in the truth of Latter Rain restorationism would be blessed with immortality before Christ's return; and (g) the belief that the various segments of the church will receive unity of the faith before Jesus returns (Bowman 2001:44–47).

Branham also held several highly controversial views. First, the belief that God's message to the seven churches in Revelation 2–3 were directed toward various epochs in history. He stated that Paul was the messenger to the Ephesian church, Irenaeus was messenger to the Smyranean church, Martin was messenger to the Pergamean church, Columba was messenger to the Thyatiran church, Luther was messenger to the Sardisean church, Wesley was messenger to the Philadelphian church, and that he (Branham) was messenger to the Laodicean church. Second, the bizarre serpent seed doctrine of Genesis 3, in which Eve is purported to have been sexually intimate with the serpent, with Cain produced as a result of the union. Third, an inordinate emphasis on supernatural manifestations, in which Branham is dependent on the presence of an angel to effectively minister to the attendees.

Branham is representative of numerous healing ministries of his day, many of which devolved into an emphasis on the miraculous that led to shameful showmanship, moral decadence, exaggerated and unsubstantiated claims of healing, and a triumphalism that betrayed the humility of the cross (Anderson 2004:59). Many contemporary word of faith televangelists are heavily indebted to the Latter Rain movement and especially to Branham (Bowman 2001:89).

### **3.4. Kenneth Erwin Hagin**

While EW Kenyon is often referenced as the father of the word of faith movement, Kenneth E Hagin (1917–2003) is initially responsible for disseminating Kenyon's material at the popular level (Hanegraaff 2009:17). Converted in 1933, Hagin purportedly received healing the following year of a congenital heart disease (Riss 2003:687). He began his ministry as a lay preacher in a multidenominational church. In 1937, Hagin was baptised in the Holy Spirit and began ministering in various

Pentecostal churches. An itinerant ministry began in 1949, culminating in the establishment of a ministry base in 1963 (Tang 2006:2). In 1974, Hagin founded Rhema Bible Training Centre, which, by 2000, boasted 16,500 graduates.

Hagin's influence among Pentecostals and Charismatics at large is important because of the implications of his theology, much of which is plagiarised from the writings of EW Kenyon. Researchers (cf. Hanegraaff 2009; McConnell 1995) cite extensive and frequent plagiarism from at least eight of Kenyon's books. Hagin, however, attributes his theological system (faith-formula theology) to visions, revelations, and personal visitations of Jesus (Moriarty 1992:83). Hagin's writings facilitate an understanding not only of the origin of many of his teachings, but also, the development of specific aspects of word of faith theology. Through his writings, mass media, and Rhema Bible Training Centre, Hagin influenced many within the broader Pentecostal and Charismatic traditions.

## **4. Key Components in the Development of the Word of Faith Message**

Having examined various origins and key persons in the development of the word of faith movement, the assessment now shifts to the message of the movement. Here, we suggest several influences as to why the word of faith message gained popularity and expanded in influence.

### **4.1. Various sources of the message**

A succinct treatment of mind-cure is prerequisite to the task of analysing the development of specific tenets of the word of faith

message. The mental healers of postbellum America used the term metaphysics in reference to the causative view of the mind and its control over matter. Said differently, the relationship between mind and matter was believed to enable one to experience bodily healing (Smith 1995:34). It is difficult to find an adequate term for this movement as it existed in the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century; however, the descriptive most often used is mind-cure (Gottschalk 1973:99). Within the mind-cure movement reside numerous streams of thought, from absolute monism to objective idealism (cf. Anderson 1991). The fundamental sources that contribute to the mind-cure worldview are: (a) philosophical idealism; (b) Swedenborgianism; (c) Mesmerism; (d) Unitarianism; and (e) Transcendentalism (Smith 1995:vi). What follows, is a brief assessment of each, as per its influence on specific aspects of the word of faith message.

First, philosophical idealism provides the core element of the mind-cure worldview. Here, the relationship between mind and matter is critical. Philosophical idealism is the view that matter does not exist in its own right, but is produced by the mind. Origins of this view are found as early as Plato (427–347 BC), who held that in addition to the world of sensible objects, there exists a world of ideas and forms (not merely ideas in the mind, but ideas which exist objectively or absolutely) (Smith 1995:36). Plato learned to focus his attention not on the fluctuating objects of sense experience, but on the fixed and abiding essence of things as the only possible objects of true knowledge; a practice assimilated by mind-cure in an attempt to harmonise the physical and ideal (Miller 1992:75). Although there are numerous variations of both objective and subjective idealism, the common thread within mind-cure is the belief that the mind defines matter. Mind is primary, while matter is secondary. Based on this premise, mind-cure, as well as myriad mental healers-at-large, proceed a step further by

claiming that matter is causative—hence, mind over matter (Smith 1995:37–38). This aspect of philosophical idealism provides a valid source for specific aspects of the word of faith message, namely, positive confession and physical healing.

The second source to influence the word of faith message is Swedenborgianism, officially known as The Church of New Jerusalem. A sect born during the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century from the writings and mystical experiences of Emmanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), Swedenborgianism is a heterogeneous theology, much of which is a corrective to orthodoxy. Like Joseph Smith, who founded Mormonism, Swedenborg was convinced he was a messenger from God to his generation. He authored more than thirty religious volumes, based on communication from spirit guides who offered new biblical interpretations and extra-biblical revelations (Tucker 1989:381). Swedenborg (Sigstedt 1952:211) writes, 'I have written entire pages, and the spirits did not dictate the words, but absolutely guided my hand, so that it was they who were doing the writing ... as flowed from God Messiah'. Smith (1995:39) argues that Swedenborg's spiritual approach to hermeneutics became a common feature among the exponents of mind-cure: the correction of the traditional, literal, sense-derived interpretation of scripture by a deeper, spiritually perceived understanding of revelation. This tenet of Swedenborgianism, a hermeneutic that seeks to correct orthodoxy, is also found in aspects of the word of faith message, and can therefore be listed among its myriad sources.

A third source to influence the word of faith message is Mesmerism. Holding doctorates in both medicine and philosophy, Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815) utilised magnetic cure to purportedly realign the body's electricity. Mesmer's theories and practices were rejected by the traditional medical community of his day, however, aspects of his

theory continued to be explored. In 1784, Count Maxime de Puysegur replaced the use of magnets with verbal commands and touch. Through mesmeric experimentation, Puysegur discovered two of the central elements of hypnosis: artificially induced somnambulism, and posthypnotic amnesia, which, according to Zweig (1932:72), birthed the modern science of psychology. The premise of this discovery is at the very least foundational to the theory of suggestion (subjective mental suggestion) in modern psychology. Although Mesmer is not considered the father of mind-cure, his discoveries provide the foundation for what becomes the scientific component of mental healing, a premise that is obviously transitional to Christian Science and mind-cure (Smith 1995:44). Mesmeric healing introduces Phineas Quimby to the concept of mental healing, which in turn influences EW Kenyon, and ultimately becomes a source for specific aspects of the word of faith message.

A fourth source to influence the word of faith message is Unitarianism. The Unitarian movement burst on the American scene with the election and installation of Henry Ware to Harvard's Divinity chair in 1805. Orthodox reaction to this event was the founding of Andover Seminary (1807), to train candidates for orthodox divinity, a task for which Harvard was no longer deemed adequate (Wright 1975:8). Unitarianism conveyed an overt anti-orthodox sentiment, embracing much of Enlightenment thinking, namely, a deistic worldview, utilitarian ethics, and an epistemology combining empiricism, rationalism, and scepticism (Smith 1995:46). Such emphases later influenced and affected the mind-cure movement (Atkins 1923:220–222). Mind-cure, while disregarding much of supernatural theology, understood the miraculous in terms of discovering and utilising various laws of the universe. Although mind-cure is not in the main Unitarian, indeed, aspects of Unitarian theology can be found to have influenced its development in that, it nurtured an anti-orthodox sentiment, it held a

deep reverence for natural law, it emphasised the employment of reason in the inner life, and, a number of leading figures in mind-cure were Unitarians or from that background (Atkins 1923:226). Consequently, Unitarianism is among the sources of the word of faith message.

A fifth source to influence the word of faith message is Transcendentalism, which brings together several core elements of mind-cure; specifically, the mystic character of eastern philosophy, a deified view of human potential, and the Swedenborgian understanding of cause and effect. Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882), a former Unitarian minister, pioneered the concepts of Transcendentalism in America, along with literary talents such as Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, William Channing, and Theodore Parker. In Transcendentalism credits the human spirit with unlimited potential. The physical senses are inadequate to reveal reality, which is knowable only by the inner perception of the human spirit. Gaining revelation knowledge is by direct influx of divine wisdom to the individual, transcending the natural science of the physical world (Judah 1967:26). Kenyon, ultimately finding its way into aspects of the word of faith message, champions the concept of revelation knowledge.

From the five sources briefly assessed emerge five characteristics that inform mind-cure as a worldview: (a) an idealism that stresses mind over matter; (b) a subjective epistemology aimed at the ascendancy of inner spiritual perception over external physical sensation (with application both to bodily conditions and word meanings); (c) the discovery and application of universal laws governing mind and matter (with application to bodily healing and spiritual enlightenment); (d) a mystic tendency concerning the nature of mind and matter and their underlying harmony tending to deify humanity; and (e) an on-going connection to the world of paranormal/occult knowledge and spiritism

in particular (Smith 1995:55). Indeed, elements of the religious climate of this period inform the development of the word of faith message by providing an atmosphere in which specific tenets of the movement are cultivated.

#### **4.2. Scripture with notes: the Dake annotated reference Bible**

Another factor in the development of the word of faith message is the popularity among its adherents of a particular study Bible. Study Bibles have the potential to significantly influence readers at the popular level. For example, the footnotes and marginal notations of the *Scofield study Bible* are viewed by many of its readers as containing absolute truth (Anderson 2004:21). Such is the case with the *Dake annotated reference Bible*, which profoundly influenced, at the popular level, many Pentecostals, Charismatics, and word of faith advocates. Written by Finis Jennings Dake (1902–1987), he published the New Testament portion in 1961, with the complete Bible published in 1963. The influence comes via the commentary notes and theology posited by this study Bible—more than 8,000 outlines, 35,000 commentary notes and over 500,000 references for study—as well as numerous ancillary books and booklets. Dake's efforts to systematise biblical teachings on numerous topics seem to be sincere, however, his over-simplistic, hyper-literal approach results in many incorrect interpretations (Spencer and Bright 2004). Many of the commentary notes are derived from the volume, *God's plan for man* (Dake 1949), originally a fifty-two week Bible study series compiled in book form. Dake's impact on conservative Pentecostalism cannot be overstated (Alexander 2003:569). Prior to the Dake's Bible, the Scofield Bible was a fixture among conservative Christians. Alexander (2003:569) argues that, after 1963, the notes contained in the Dake's Bible became the 'bread and butter of many prominent preachers'.

The Dake Bible is extremely popular among word of faith advocates, perhaps due to its embrace and usage by word of faith luminaries such as Kenneth Hagin and Kenneth Copeland (Ferraiuolo 1994:50). As a result, the Dake Bible has greatly influenced the development and escalation of the word of faith message. The Dake Bible has persuasively influenced numerous word of faith teachers, as noted by the following endorsements (Dake 2006):

- Joyce Meyer states, 'I thank God for the people who produced the Dake Bible, their hard work has made it easier for me to teach God's Word'.
- Marilyn Hickey states, 'the Dake Bible is the best reference and study Bible you can get. I have personally worn out four Dake Bibles'.
- Creflo Dollar states, 'the Dake Bible helped me build a solid foundation in the Word'.
- Rod Parsley states, 'the Dake Bible is one of the greatest literary works every made'.
- Benny Hinn and Kenneth Copeland have also utilised Dake as a source for certain of their quizzical doctrines (Spancer n.d.).

Dake's influence on the word of faith message in general is unmistakable. First, Dake (1950:91) asserts that God's blessing of Abraham with great wealth serves as an example that every believer has access to this aspect of the Abrahamic covenant. This is a resounding concept in the word of faith message. Second, Dake (1949:253; 1950:79) posits that the atonement of Christ guarantees physical healing to be God's will for every Christian who appropriates adequate faith. This, too, is a recurring theme within the word of faith message. Third, Dake (1950:53) suggests that the nature of faith reflects in the believer based on God's activity described in Romans 4:17, a calling into

existence things that are not. The word of faith message asserts that every believer, via positive confession, may enjoy the creative power (*ex nihilo*) of Romans 4:17. Fourth, Dake (1949:222; 1950:95; 1963:282) argues that God desires abundant prosperity and material wealth for every believer, a theme regularly disseminated within the word of faith message.

Evangelical scholars and apologists have expressed serious concern over Dake's teachings, some of which fail to align with historic Christian orthodoxy (Spencer and Bright 2004). Although Dake has influenced many Pentecostals, Charismatics, and word of faith adherents, not all within these communities have welcomed his theological suppositions. Indeed, many of Dake's theological assertions fail to align with classical Pentecostal theology, and some of his most fervent critics have arisen from within this tradition. Assemblies of God general secretary, George Wood, states that many of Dake's opinions are in direct conflict with the denomination's statement of fundamental truth (Ferraiuolo 1994:50).

#### **4.3. Significance of mass media**

Utilisation of mass media is a major contributing factor to the global influence of the word of faith message, particularly US-based religious media (Phiri and Maxwell 2007; cf. Folarin 2007:71). Each form of mass media is significant in its own right. The purpose of this section is to appraise the influence of two forms of mass media—radio and television—on the rapid dissemination of the word of faith message during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

First, the utilisation of radio as a form of mass media is significant in the propagation of the word of faith message, in that, radio laid the foundation for the subsequent media form of television. The potential of

radio for propagating the gospel received recognition early by forward thinking religious entrepreneurs. The purpose of Christian radio programming is to convert people to Christianity and to provide teaching and preaching opportunities for Christians. Initially, the clergy denounced the use of mass media and railed against it; however, the possibilities of this new form of media became evident. Congregationalist minister S Parkes Cadman (1864–1936) was one of the first religionists to utilise the medium of radio, pioneering the field in 1923 (cf. Radio 1946). In 1928, Cadman began a weekly Sunday radio broadcast on NBC, reaching a national audience of some five million (cf. Air 1931). Aimee Semple McPherson, a pioneering tent-revivalist, is another who utilised the medium of radio to reach a larger audience. McPherson was one of the first women to preach via radio, airing programming over her own radio station beginning in 1924. Roman Catholic priest, Father Charles Coughlin (1891–1979), reached millions of listeners in the early 1930's via a thirty-six station network (Severin and Tankard 2001:111). Other early Christian radio entrepreneurs in the United States include (dates of broadcast in parenthesis) Bob Jones, Sr. (1927–1962), Ralph Sockman (1928–1962), GE Lowman (1930–1965), and Charles E Fuller (1937–1968) (cf. Televangelism). Indeed, radio established the potential of utilising mass media as a platform for expanding the Christian message. Although, for the word of faith message, the full extent of this potential would not be realised through radio, but television; however, radio did provide the framework within which the potential of mass media could be visualised.

Second, television, and specifically the advent of religious television, most profoundly influenced the rapid dissemination of the word of faith message. American Roman Catholic archbishop, Fulton J Sheen (1895–1979), was perhaps the first professional religionist to realise the

immense potential of media as a means of shaping religion in the laity (Tickle 2008:68). Sheen hosted a night-time radio program from 1930–1950, then a television program from 1951–1968. Rex Humbard (1919–2007) was among the first Pentecostals to utilise television, beginning his broadcasting career in 1949 (Jenkins 2007), eventually being inducted into the Broadcasters Hall of Fame in 1993. Pentecostal evangelist Oral Roberts (1918–2009) began broadcasting via television in 1954, attracting millions of followers worldwide to his faith-healing ministry (Schneider 2009). Schneider (2009) further observes that Roberts trained and mentored several generations of younger word of faith preachers, who now have television, multimedia, corporation, and business empires of their own.

Throughout the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, word of faith-friendly ministries came to dominate religious media via television. Modern technology has given the word of faith message a potential global audience of multiple millions, via not only secular television stations, satellite, and cable networks, but also, through Christian television networks, which began to emerge in the early 1970s. The Inspiration Network (INSP), founded in the early 1970s as the PTL Satellite Network by televangelists Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, is available to over 66 million U.S. homes. Paul and Jan Crouch founded Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN), the largest Christian television network in the U.S., in 1973. TBN reaches over 100 million homes in the U. S., with programming translated into eleven languages and broadcast to over 75 countries. Daystar Television Network, which traces its roots to 1993, has a potential U.S. audience of over 80 million homes and a global potential audience of 670 million homes. The majority of broadcasts are from groups and individuals aligned with various Charismatic and Pentecostal movements (cf. Daystar). Much of the programming on these stations is word of faith in orientation.

Perhaps no version of televangelism is more clearly American than the word of faith message which, over the past several decades, has grown to represent over half of the highest-rated religious programming (Schultze 2003:133). Many Americans derive their sense of purpose from religious television, much of which is inherently word of faith in orientation (Schultze 2003:16–17). Religious programs contain much 'good cheer'. They celebrate affluence. Their featured players become celebrities. Though their messages are trivial, the shows have high ratings, or rather, because their messages are trivial, the shows have high ratings (Postman 1985:121). Religious media has become the venue from which many find a worldview that reflects their values and justifies their behaviour and way of life, producing a consumer-oriented spirituality (Fore 1987:24; Hull 1988:39). William Hendricks (1984:64) describes the theology of the electronic church as the hope that God is unambiguously on the side of the believer who claims the promises of faith.

Because of this, many newcomers to the faith are increasingly disciplined not by pastors, church discipleship programmes, or other believers, but by religious media (Bowers 2004:4–5). Superstitious, and often biblically illiterate, many Americans are easily persuaded to believe and hope for things that reflect America's affluence as a nation, express selfishness, and manifest individualism (Schultze 2003:131–132). Such a message reflects the American dream and the hope of attaining affluence. Through myriad fundraising methods, such as telethons, praise-a-thons, share-a-thons, and Christian-oriented infomercials, support is gleaned in order to continue such programming. Messages bombard viewers exhorting them to plant a seed of faith and believe that from it they will reap an unimaginable harvest of plenty (Folarin 2007:83; Lioy 2007:47; cf. Robison 2003; Sarles 1986:333). One study revealed that health-related issues remain the most frequent personal

concerns, including spiritual or religious concerns (Abelman and Neuendorf 1985:106). Many word of faith proponents excel in these types of communication methodologies.

Schultze (2003:81) argues that the reason for the current popularity of the Charismatic movement, and, by virtue of its doctrinal relationship the word of faith movement as well, is a culture increasingly dominated by the medium of television. WR Godfrey (1990:164–165), professor of church history at Westminster Theological Seminary, writes that the great danger posed by much of contemporary religious programming is twofold, namely, it threatens to replace the local church as the central place of religious life for many people, and, since religious television cannot do all that Christ commissions the local church to do, religious programming as one's sole source of spirituality will be a religion that is sub-Christian. Said differently, even if the doctrine is not errant (as it often is), it will certainly be incomplete. The utilisation of mass media in general, especially the two forms assessed in this section, has greatly enhanced and expanded the influence of the word of faith message.

## **5. Key Tenets of Word of Faith Theology: A Scriptural Assessment**

A core group of theological tenets is fundamental to word of faith theology. The essay will now focus on a brief assessment of these tenets, in terms of their continuity with orthodox evangelical theology. The tenets are (a) the Abrahamic covenant, (b) the atonement, (c) faith, and (d) prosperity.

## 5.1. The Abrahamic covenant

The significance of the Abrahamic covenant concerning particular aspects of word of faith theology cannot be overemphasized. Word of faith proponents often reference this covenant (Copeland G 1978:4–6; Copeland K 1974:51; Pousson 1992:158; et al.) as the biblical foundation for numerous theological assertions. Here, the various facets of God's covenant with Abraham hold equivalent and corresponding application for the contemporary Christian. According to word of faith theology, one of the primary purposes of this covenant is to bless Abraham with material possessions. Harvey Cox (2001:271) succinctly observes the word of faith perspective on this subject when he writes, 'through the crucifixion of Christ, Christians have inherited all the promises made to Abraham, and these include both spiritual and material well-being'. Copeland (1974:50–51; cf. Hagin 1963:1) argues that since God established the covenant, Christians too are entitled to its provisions. To support such a claim, Copeland appeals to Galatians 3:14, 'the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Jesus Christ'. Here, he concludes, Christians also have the promises defined within the covenant. The Galatians 3:13–14 passage is interpreted as meaning that all Christians are redeemed from the curses listed in Deuteronomy 28:15–68. Copeland (1987:28) posits that, 'all sickness and all disease, even those not mentioned there, come under the curse; therefore, we are redeemed from all sickness and disease'.

Evangelical theology recognises that specific components of the covenant are understood as extending solely to Abraham's biological posterity (e.g. the promise of a geographical location; the development of a great nation). Yet, other aspects of the covenant extend to all humankind, specifically, that 'all peoples on earth will be blessed' through Abraham (cf. Gen 12:3). This is critical in understanding the

issue of continuity between word of faith theology and orthodox evangelical theology. The former holds this specific aspect of the covenant as referencing primarily material or financial blessing. Although orthodox evangelical theology lifts up the blessing component, the issue is concerning how the blessing is defined and realised. From the position of the latter, living under the new covenant implies that one is a spiritual descendant of Abraham. The promise of blessing is understood primarily as soteriological rather than material. Recognising the blessing component as primarily redemptive in realisation, as opposed to guaranteed material entitlement, finds validation in several New Testament passages (cf. Gal 3:7–9; 3:11–14; Rom 11:17–24). The blessing inference reveals that privileges once available only to Israel are now available to Gentiles (Johnson 1999:765). This covenant establishes the fundamental premise of God's choice of Abraham, and ultimately his biological posterity, as the primary means of redemptive grace. Fulfilment of this covenant is first seen in Abraham, then through his posterity, and ultimately, through Christ's revelation of the new covenant (cf. Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25). However, the blessing component of the Abrahamic covenant is understood primarily as being fulfilled in redemptive terms, not a guarantee of material entitlement or financial prosperity. Consequently, regarding the Abrahamic covenant, word of faith theology fails to maintain continuity with orthodox evangelical theology. Clearly, it is an issue of hermeneutics.

## **5.2. The atonement**

Two primary components are essential in assessing word of faith theology in terms of continuity, namely, the nature of the atonement, and the results of the atonement. Regarding the nature of the atonement, word of faith theology suggests the following three things: (a) re-

creating Christ on the cross from a sinless deity to a symbol of Satan; (b) not the cross, but hell secures redemption; and (c) Jesus is born again in hell. Hagin (1979c:31) posits that, 'spiritual death also means having Satan's nature', providing Numbers 21:8–9 and John 3:14 to support the position that Jesus assumed the nature of Satan. Corroborating this position, Jesus is referenced as 'a sign of Satan that was hanging on the cross' (cf. Copeland 1990). Taken further, word of faith proponents suggest that the cross is inadequate to secure redemption; that Jesus must suffer as a sinner in hell, which means the work of redemption is completed in hell. 'Do you think that the punishment for sin was to die on a cross? If that were the case, the two thieves could have paid your price. No, the punishment was to go into hell itself and to serve time in hell separate from God' (Price 1980:7). Consequently, if Jesus assumes the nature of Satan, he must be born again.

Per the nature of atonement, did Jesus become sinful? Was he required to be born again? Did Christ's atoning work on the cross secure redemption? Orthodox evangelical theology posits that Christ lived a perfect [sinless] life (cf. Heb 4:15) and died a death of perfect obedience in order to satisfy the requirements of God's justice—a necessary sacrifice so that humankind could be saved from the penalty and guilt of rebellion against God (Sims 1995:147). Atonement in the Old Testament is based on the efficacy of a sacrificial offering (cf. Gen 4:4; Lev 17:2–11). Although the blood of animals is inadequate to cleanse from sin (cf. Heb 10:4), it symbolises the perfect sacrifice and his atoning blood (cf. Heb 9:11, 15; 10:12). Here, Christ did not become sin in the sense of becoming a sinner; rather, he became the sacrifice who bore the sin of humankind. Evangelical theology posits that the death of Christ dominates the New Testament as the central event of history and is the only sufficient ground to receive God's forgiveness

for sin. To suggest that Jesus had to experience additional suffering in hell is to misunderstand the nature of the atonement. For it was on the cross that Christ pays the full penalty for sin (cf. 1 John 4:10), decisively defeats Satan (cf. Heb 2:14), and publically humiliates the powers of evil (cf. Col 2:15) (Arrington 1993:61–79). Here, too, word of faith theology fails to maintain continuity with orthodox evangelical theology.

The second component focuses on the results and benefits of the atonement and how those benefits apply to the Christian, particularly the concepts of physical health and healing. Copeland (1996:6) teaches that 'the basic principle of the Christian life is to know that God put our sin, sickness, disease, sorrow, grief, and poverty on Jesus at Calvary'. He further suggests that 'the first step to spiritual maturity is to realize your position before God. You are a child of God and a joint-heir with Jesus. Consequently, you are entitled to all the rights and privileges in the kingdom of God, and one of their rights is health and healing' (Copeland 1979:25; cf. Dake 1949:244–245; 1963:282; Hagin 1974:53–54; Price 1976:20; Savelle 1982:9–10). Word of faith theology decrees divine healing as the right of every Christian and sets forth divine health as the norm for all who understand their rights and authority as a believer. This approach to physical sickness and disease enjoys wide acceptance among word of faith advocates.

Regarding the results or benefits of the atonement, several biblical passages lend support to the relationship between divine healing and the atonement (cf. Isa 53:5; Matt 8:16–17; 1 Pet 2:24). However, within evangelical theology, the critical issue is the timing and application of this provision. Rather than a guaranteed right, the following perspectives constitute the correct understanding of divine healing:

- God healed individuals throughout human history and does indeed heal in the present time.
- Christians enjoy the privilege and responsibility to pray for healing, for both themselves and others.
- Divine healing is not relegated to adherence to criteria of human origin (i.e. a set of laws or steps).
- God heals in many different ways.
- The provision of divine healing is not synonymous with a guarantee of divine healing, i.e. not everyone receives physical healing in this life.
- When healing does not occur, God gives the grace to successfully persevere.
- The believer receives ultimate healing in the life to come.

Regarding the atonement, aspects of word of faith theology fail to maintain continuity with evangelical theology.

### 5.3. Faith

The concept of faith as understood in word of faith theology is essential to the theological system it posits. From this perspective, faith is not merely a theocentric act of the will in which one exercises simple trust in God, but rather, it is an anthropocentric spiritual force one directs toward God. Here, the concept of creative faith is posited as the logical result of the believer's relationship with God. Based on Hebrews 11:3, which states, 'through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God' (KJV); per this theology, since words spoken in faith brought the universe into being, words are ruling the universe today. Just as God created the universe via his spoken word (cf. Rom 4:17), the believer is purported to have the same creative ability via words spoken in faith (Hagin 1974:74). This belief is central to

contemporary word of faith theology (cf. Kenyon 1969:67 Capps 1976:12–13; Copeland 1980:4–5 et al.). Hagin (1980:3–4) expands this understanding of faith to include not only Christians, but non-Christians as well, stating that 'it used to bother me when I'd see unsaved people getting results, but my church members not getting results. Then it dawned on me what the sinners were doing: They were cooperating with this law of God—the law of faith'.

The rendering of Mark 11:22, in order to validate this view of faith, is thus (KJV), 'have faith in God'. However, it is 'have the faith of God' based on Kenyon's (1942:103) writings. This is purported to include creative ability via the power of words spoken in faith. Hence, there is frequent use of the phrase 'the God kind of faith' (cf. Capps 1976:131; Copeland 1974:19). Here, faith and the spoken word are woven together to form the powerful force of positive confession, which allows one to write one's own ticket with God by saying it, doing it, receiving it, and telling it (cf. Copeland 1985; Hagin 1979:3–5). Based on this faith formula, one need only speak words of faith, that is, make a positive confession regarding whatever one desires. The spoken word, coupled with creative faith, initiates the process of obtaining the desires of one's heart. To further validate this view of faith, one that contradicts numerous biblical references (cf. 1 John 5:14; Rom 8:27, et al), Hagin (1983:10) writes, 'It is unscriptural to pray, "If it is the will of God." When you put an "if" in your prayer, you are praying in doubt'. In this theological system, faith is often reduced to faith in faith rather than faith in God. Such assertions are the result of faulty exegesis, and at times, blatant misrepresentation of the biblical text. Further, they serve to reinforce the anthropocentric nature of much of word of faith theology.

In contrast, orthodox evangelical theology understands faith as 'trust in the person of Jesus Christ, and the truth of his teaching, and the redemptive work he accomplished at Calvary' (cf. Douglas 1999). Indeed, faith is applicable to both orthodoxy and orthopraxy (cf. Heb 11:6). At all levels, faith finds its essence in God, who is the giver of faith. Reducing biblical faith to mere formula, that is, neatly packaged sets of principles, for the purpose of personal aggrandisement or material gain, is unwise. On the contrary, the very nature of biblical faith enhances the covenant relationship and communion with God. The focus of faith is ever on God, the source of all good things (cf. Jas 1:17). Here, faith is recognised as soteriologically essential and indispensable for effectively living the Christian life. As such, word of faith theology fails to maintain continuity with evangelical theology.

#### **5.4. Prosperity**

Word of faith theology is perhaps best known for its emphasis and teaching on prosperity, hence, the moniker 'prosperity gospel'. Allowing for differences among its numerous proponents, prosperity typically refers to an earthly life of health, wealth, and happiness as the divine, inalienable right of all who have faith in God and live in obedience to his commands (Starnier 2006:393). Luminaries of the movement encourage their followers to pray, and even demand, from God 'everything from modes of transportation (cars, vans, trucks, even planes), [to] homes, furniture, and large bank accounts' (cf. Pilgrim 1992:3). Dake (1963:282) offers numerous biblical references to suggest that God's will for every believer is material prosperity. To augment this position, he (Dake 1949:217) argues that, 'poverty ... should not exist [because] ... God wants you to be prosperous'.

Biblical support for guaranteed material prosperity is garnered from the Old Testament via the Abrahamic covenant. New Testament texts used

to support this view are 3 John 2, 'Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth' (KJV). Oral Roberts utilised this verse as the master key of his ministry (Harrell 1985:66). Because of Roberts' teaching on prosperity, such phrases as 'expect a miracle' and 'seed-faith' enjoy widespread popularity (Perriman 2003:64). Another passage used in support of material prosperity is John 10:10, where Jesus proclaims, 'I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly' (KJV). Prosperity proponents interpret this text as affirming the provision of 'financial prosperity and entrepreneurial success' (Lioy 2007:44) for all believers. Here, the abundant life is understood not as righteousness, peace, and joy through the Holy Spirit (cf. Rom 14:17), but rather, it is understood in terms of material abundance. Corroborating such an interpretation, Fred Price (cf. 1990b) writes, 'He has left us an example that we should follow His steps. That's the reason I drive a Rolls Royce. I'm following Jesus' steps'. Numerous word of faith proponents are fixated with the act of giving, specifically monetary giving. To support this fixation, myriad biblical references are utilised (Mark 10:30; Ecc 11:1; Pro 13:22; 2 Cor 9:6; Gal 6:7; 3 John 2 et al.), most all of which are taken out of context and interpreted via a faulty hermeneutic. For example, Gloria Copeland (1978:54) asserts, 'Give \$10 and receive \$1,000; give \$1,000 and receive \$100,000 ... in short, Mark 10:30 is a very good deal'. According to prosperity proponents, believers are to appropriate the promise of Proverbs 13:22, 'the wealth of the sinner is laid up for the just' (KJV) (cf. Pro 28:8; Job 27:13–17; Ecc 2:26; Isa 61:5–6).

Evangelical theology posits a different approach to prosperity. Indeed, God is a god of provision who promises to meet the needs of his own (cf. Gen 22:8; Phil 4:19). Here, the understanding of prosperity is, having success in a matter, or completion of a 'journey' (as εὐοδόω in

its primary usage implies). An evangelical perspective regarding prosperity encompasses, but is not limited to, the following:

- God promises to provide for his people.
- The focus of the Christian is primarily spiritual in nature.
- The motive for giving is not remuneration.
- Modesty, not excess, should govern the Christian's life and lifestyle.
- Inordinate attention to material possessions is contrary to the teachings of Christ.
- Christian integrity mandates the wise and frugal assessment of all things material.
- Christians who possess great material wealth have a greater responsibility to invest in the kingdom.

Regarding prosperity, aspects of word of faith theology fail to maintain continuity with evangelical theology.

## Conclusion

Miroslav Volf, professor of theology at Yale University, grew up in the home of a Pentecostal minister in Croatia. His father, who endured incarceration in a Communist concentration camp, fasted for weeks to receive the baptism in the Spirit, practised speaking in tongues, had a gift of interpretation, and practised laying on of hands and prayer for the sick. Volf was also active in Pentecostalism prior to his move to the United States in 1977. He soon found that much of American Pentecostalism differed greatly from what he had experienced in his native Croatia. While channel surfing, Volf stumbled upon a flamboyant televangelist engaged in bizarre antics. He saw that many were peddling a compromised gospel of health, wealth, and power,

which believers had a right to claim as their own via the medium of faith. Rather than promote a striving toward God, this brand of gospel fed the abyss of self-absorption and greed. Reflecting on his experience, Volf (2010:xvi–xviii) writes, 'my father's Pentecostal faith and American Pentecostalism clashed ... I knew, of course, that there was much more to it than the health and wealth gospel'.

This article was an attempt to facilitate a better understanding of word of faith theology. To accomplish this objective, the essay has considered the historical origins of the word of faith movement, offered several contextual influences which have impacted the word of faith movement, assessed four key persons in the development of the movement, appraised key components in the development of the word of faith message, and finally, it assessed key tenets of word of faith theology in terms of their continuity with orthodox evangelical theology. From these areas of assessment emerge several significant conclusions. First, word of faith theology originates from multiple sources, not all of which originate from orthodox Christianity. Second, persons embracing varied theologies were instrumental in the development of the word of faith movement. Third, numerous key components contributed to the development and expansion of the word of faith message. Fourth, specific tenets of word of faith theology differ significantly from their evangelical counterparts. According to Starner (2006:395), 'the church's constant theological task is retrospection and repair'. This is certainly true regarding specific tenets of word of faith theology.

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# The Christocentric Principle: A Jesus-Centred Hermeneutic

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## Abstract

There are many different understandings of the word ‘christocentric’, both among past and current scholars. In this article, the author aligns with those who regard the life, teaching, and person of the Lord Jesus Christ as the locus of doctrinal formulation and proclamation, but applies this approach specifically to the hermeneutic enterprise. The key contention is that scripture should be interpreted primarily from the perspective of either of Jesus’ character, values, principles, and priorities as revealed directly or indirectly by the biblical revelation of what he said and did. This is called the ‘christocentric principle’. The article proceeds from interacting with other scholars who hold a similar view, to identifying the biblical support for the argument, to a brief example of how the principle can be applied. Before concluding, the author deals briefly with some objections to the central idea espoused.

## Introduction

My intention in this article is, firstly, to examine the different understandings of the word ‘christocentric’, and then to provide a definition of what I have called the ‘christocentric principle’. I then interact with various scholarly understandings of similar hermeneutical

formulations before providing biblical support for my contentions and considering the practical application of the christocentric principle. Before concluding, I address some possible objections to what I have proposed.

The term 'christocentric' means different things to different people, applied to the theologies of past scholars such as Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Barth, Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard, and Bonhoeffer. The wide range of theological positions flying under the flag of 'christocentricity' indicates that the word does not mean the same to everyone and it does not necessarily imply a uniform hermeneutical approach.

Bruce McCormack identifies a difference between what he calls 'formal' and 'material' christological centrality. Formally, christocentricity means that christology is central to a particular theology. However, materially, the meaning of christocentricity differs because the doctrine of Christ, although central, differs from one christocentric theologian to the next (Cortez 2007:2). This partially explains why one may regard both Barth and Schleiermacher as christocentric in their approach to theology, although their theologies are substantially different.

Cortez quotes McCormack's definition of Barth's particular form of christocentrism as his

attempt to understand every doctrine from a centre in God's Self-revelation in Jesus Christ; i.e. from a centre in God's act of veiling and unveiling in Christ... 'Christocentrism', for him, was a methodological rule ... in accordance with which one presupposes a particular understanding of God's Self-revelation in reflecting upon each and every other doctrinal topic, and seeks to interpret

those topics in the light of what is already known of Jesus Christ (2007:5).

In his monumental work *Church dogmatics*, Barth wrote that 'theology must begin with Jesus Christ, and not with general principles, however better, or, at any rate, more relevant and illuminating they may appear to be: as though He were a continuation of the knowledge and Word of God, and not its root and origin, not indeed the very Word of God itself' (1957:II.2.p. fn. 4)

A christocentric focus is not just the distinctive of past theologians and Christian practitioners such as Barth. Dane Orland (2009:3) comments on recent christocentric enterprises and notes that their common denominator is 'a conviction that the Bible will be properly understood, faithfully preached, and rightly applied only if the enfleshed second person of the Trinity is seen as the integrative North Star to Christian doctrine and practice.' However, just as there were differences in the understanding of christocentricity, as practised by past theologians, so there are equally marked differences in the understandings of current scholars. For instance, Alan Miller (2010:3) cites Goldsworthy's view that 'all texts in the whole bible bear a discernible relationship to Christ and are primarily intended as a testimony to Christ'. The way Miller states this approach is that 'Christ must stand as the big idea of *every* text' (p. 2). However, other current christocentric scholars see things differently. For instance, Bryan Chapell, influenced by the work of Sidney Griedanus, has written a book titled *Christ-centred preaching*, in which he warns of attempting to find Jesus in every biblical account (1994:292). He contends that a passage of scripture retains its christocentric focus not because of its implied or imagined reference to Christ, but rather, because the text serves to contribute to the great unfolding revelation of the divine work in and through Jesus Christ. In

other words, all parts of the Bible are christocentric because the Bible is an integrated and progressive revelation which has Christ as its central theme.

Essentially, the various past and current christocentric approaches fall into two categories:

1. Those who regard the life, teaching, and person of the Lord Jesus Christ as the locus of doctrinal formulation and proclamation, i.e. Barth and Chapell.
2. Those who hold that all of scripture must be read as revealing something about Jesus Christ and his saving work, i.e. Augustine and Goldsworthy.

My own understanding of christocentricity embraces the first of these categories, but the christocentric principle applies this approach specifically to the hermeneutic enterprise.

## 1. Definition

What I refer to as the Christocentric Principle is an approach to biblical interpretation that seeks to understand all parts of scripture from a Jesus-perspective. In other words, it is a way of *interpreting scripture primarily from the perspective of what Jesus taught and modelled, and from what he revealed concerning the nature, character, values, principles, and priorities of the Godhead.*

The main idea here is that we should interpret all of scripture from the perspective of what Jesus reveals of the nature of the Godhead. What we know of God's character, values, principles, and priorities must govern our understanding of what we believe the Bible is teaching in all its parts. Jesus Christ is the 'exact representation' of God's being (Heb

1:3) and so we know God's nature by considering the words and works of the Lord Jesus Christ as recorded in the New Testament.

In his article 'The canonical sense of scripture: Trinitarian or Christocentric?' Alan Padgett (2006:39) quotes TF Torrance as writing in 'The Trinitarian faith' that, 'Since the Scriptures are the result of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit by the will of the Father through Jesus Christ, and since the Word of God who speaks through all the Scriptures became incarnate in Jesus Christ, it is Jesus Christ himself who must constitute the controlling centre in all right interpretation of the Scriptures'. I concur with this.

Roger Olson (2011:105), writing in *Against Calvinism: rescuing God's reputation from radical Reformed Theology*, states the case even more forcibly from a negative perspective; 'the doctrine of the incarnation proves that God's character is fully revealed in Jesus such that "No interpretation of any passage [in the Bible] that undercuts the revelations of the divine mind inculcated by Jesus can be accepted as valid. What he says and does is what God says and does"'. He is quoting here from WG MacDonald's article, 'The biblical doctrine of Election'.

Padgett, Torrance, Olson, and MacDonald seem to hold to a similar definition of Christocentricism as mine.

The christocentric principle is an attempt to interpret the Bible primarily through the lens of Jesus's life and teaching. In this way, Jesus is placed as the author, dominant subject, and principle interpreter of scripture. Most of the other forms of christocentricity that I have mentioned tend to see Jesus Christ as the object of scripture, but not necessarily as its interpreter. In other words, they see the Bible as a revelation of Jesus Christ, but not Jesus as the 'revealer' of what the Bible teaches.

Ray Anderson (2001) adopts a similar position to mine, but focuses additionally and more specifically on establishing biblical interpretation through the lens of the current work of the Spirit in the life of Christians and the church. He calls this 'Christopraxis', and defines it essentially in two dimensions. First, he says it is 'the normative and authoritative grounding of all theological reflection in the divine act of God consummated in Jesus Christ' (p. 54). He then completes his definition with a second dimension: 'and continued through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit in the body of Christ' (p. 54). He writes further that 'we must remember that Jesus is not only the "author" of Scripture through the power of the Spirit, but he himself is a "reader" and interpreter of Scripture in every contemporary moment' (p. 54). Anderson's christopraxis includes the idea of interpreting life through the lens of what Jesus taught and modelled, but focuses more on what the living Lord is saying through contemporary church life. His hermeneutical approach, therefore, entails reading back into scripture what he finds as Spirit-authenticated in modern life. Although this is consistent with the concept of the 'hermeneutic circle', it does make interpretation vulnerable to current context bias.

I concede that our understanding of scripture is influenced by our current cultures and conditions, but I contend strongly that we should interpret life primarily from a christocentric understanding of scripture, rather than interpret the Bible from an understanding of what the Holy Spirit appears to be authenticating in modern life. Anderson's (2001) method appears to start with what he believes the Holy Spirit is enlivening in modern life, and then adopts this as an interpretive key, unless scripture directly contradicts his observations. My approach is rather to attempt to interpret the scriptures from a 'what does Jesus reveal concerning this' perspective, and then, seek to apply this to the current church and to life.

Dane Ortlund (2009:7), in *Christocentrism: an asymmetrical Trinitarianism?*, under the heading 'hermeneutical Christocentrism' writes that 'mature Christian interaction with the Bible necessarily reads and interprets it through a Christological lens in which the incarnate Christ is seen to be the ultimate interpretive key to accessing the full meaning(s) of the biblical text'. I am not sure that he meant exactly what I understand by 'hermeneutical christocentrism', but I concur totally with his statement as it stands.

More important than the thoughts and formulations of scholars, both past and present, is an appreciation of what the Bible reveals concerning the validity of the christocentric principle.

## 2. Biblical Underpinning

It is obvious from the biblical record itself that Jesus is its unifying theme and central object. For instance, Jesus said to the Pharisees, 'You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life' (John 5:39–40<sup>1</sup>). Another example is where Jesus took the two disciples on the road to Emmaus on a Bible root-march and 'beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself' (Luke 24:27).

The biblical underpinning of my definition of the christocentric principle is simple and straightforward. If the Bible is the inspired and authoritative written Word of God, and it declares that Jesus Christ is the source and sustainer of all things, the locus of revelation, and the

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<sup>1</sup> All scriptural quotations are from the NIV, unless otherwise indicated.

primary subject and unifying theme of scripture, then he must surely be its primary interpreter.

I do not intend to make a case here for the inspiration and authority of scripture. This, for me, is a given and therefore an underlying presupposition for this article. However, what the Bible says about Jesus and his role as its hermeneutical key requires analysis.

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul describes the Lord Jesus Christ in the following terms:

*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross (Col 1:15–20).*

Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God, for God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him. Colossians 2:9 states this again with the words, 'for in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form'. These statements position Christ Jesus not just as *an* expression of divinity, but also as *the* expression of the deity to humanity. If we want to know what God is like, how he thinks, and what his values are, then we need to look to Jesus.

In his interaction with his disciple Philip, Jesus confirmed this contention:

Philip said, 'Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.' Jesus answered: 'Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? *Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.* How can you say, "Show us the Father"? Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? *The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work.* Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves' (John 14:8–12).

Jesus claimed to be what Paul later described as 'the image of the invisible God'. He also stated that his words and actions were a true demonstration of the Father's words and actions. This must mean that we should regard what Jesus said and did as genuine and an authoritative revelation of the nature, principles, values, and priorities of the triune Godhead.

In the Colossians passage, Paul also states that 'by him all things were created' and 'in him all things hold together'. The Amplified Bible expresses the second part of this statement as 'in him all things consist (cohere, are held together)'. In his commentary on Colossians, Curtis Vaughan (1978:183) gives a fairly typical scholarly interpretation of verse 17 when he writes 'that all things "hold together" in Christ means that he is both the unifying principle and the personal sustainer of all creation. It springs from him and finds in him its common bond and centre.' This same contention must surely apply to a vital part of God's creation, the Bible.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews also addresses the divine centrality of Jesus Christ, but focuses it more sharply on his revelatory role:

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days *he has spoken to us by his Son*, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word (Heb 1:1–3).

Karl Barth (1957, vol. IV.3:99) wrote in an appendix to *Church dogmatics* that 'there is only one Prophet who speaks the Word of God as He is Himself this Word, and this One is called and is Jesus ... That Jesus is the one Word of God means first that He is the total and complete declaration of God concerning Himself.' In this statement, Barth contends that Jesus is the 'total and complete declaration of God concerning Himself'. This means that everything that is to be known of the nature and character of the Triune God is to be found in Christ Jesus. I believe this to be true and I understand this to be the teaching of Colossians 1:19, where it states that 'God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him'. However, the scriptures give an incomplete account of all that Jesus is and all that he did. John writes that 'Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written' (21:25). We do, however, have an accurate and sufficient revelation of God in Christ Jesus, and so, we can apply what the gospels reveal of him to interpret and reconcile what other portions of scripture state concerning God's nature and character or reflections of his nature in the accounts of his actions and instructions.

God has spoken to us by his Son. In the past, he spoke through his prophets, but now, he speaks in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. In his commentary on Hebrews, Leon Morris (1978:13) translates the Greek for 'has spoken in the Son' and then comments that

it is noteworthy that in the Greek there is no article or possessive; there is nothing corresponding to the NIV's 'his'. In essence the writer is saying God spoke 'in one who has the quality of being Son.' It is the Son's essential nature that is stressed. This stands in contrast to 'the prophets' in the preceding verse. The consummation of the revelatory process, the definitive revelation, took place when he who was not one of 'the goodly fellowship of the prophets' but the very Son of God came.

This leads to my second contention. Jesus is not only the creator-author of the scriptures; he is also their preeminent interpreter.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus stated that he had not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, but to fulfil them (Matt 5:17). He then referenced the sixth Commandment concerning murder and proceeded to interpret it with the words, 'but I tell you ...' He did the same concerning the seventh Commandment concerning adultery. He was effectively claiming to be the one who correctly understood the Law and was, therefore, able to interpret it. Another notable example of this is Jesus giving the correct understanding of the fourth Commandment concerning Sabbath keeping. The Pharisees were criticising him for allowing his disciples to pick grain on the Sabbath, and Jesus responded with 'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath' (Mark 2:27–28). On the mountain of Transfiguration, the voice of God the Father validated Jesus's authoritative interpretation of the Law and the Prophets when he said, 'This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!' (Mark 9:7). These instances vividly illustrate an aspect of the christocentric principle in action.

In summary, the biblical text affirms Jesus as the fullness of the deity, the source, and sense-maker of all things, the Word of God, the locus of

revelation, the primary subject, and unifying theme of scripture, and its primary interpreter.

An example would help concretise my contention that Jesus is the primary interpreter of scripture.

### 3. Application Example

An article of this nature allows me to give just one brief example of interpreting a passage of scripture using the christocentric principle. In this example, I seek to illustrate the methodology of applying the christocentric principle within the context of Jesus's own words and actions. It is therefore a recursive example that has the additional benefit of demonstrating the consistency and reliability of Jesus as the interpretive 'plumb-line'.

Matthew 19:16–26 and Luke 18:18–30 tell the story of Jesus's encounter with a rich young man. In these accounts, Jesus appears to come across as somewhat harsh, cold, and judgemental. It seems like he was purposefully setting the young man a challenge guaranteed to prick his religious bubble and send him off condemned. In the light of this, Jesus's conclusion seems to be, 'See then, there is no chance of a rich man entering the kingdom of God.'

I have defined the christocentric principle as, *interpreting scripture primarily from the perspective of what Jesus taught and modelled, and from what he revealed concerning the nature, character, values, principles, and priorities of the Godhead*. In the case in question, we have Jesus's recorded words, yet, his attitude seems to contradict his consistent presentation of God's nature, character, and values.

Jesus dealt very firmly and judiciously with the Scribes and Pharisees who tried to trick and condemn him, but he was gracious and compassionate towards all others. It was not in character for him to be dismissive of a man who obviously wanted to learn from him. Is this whole encounter simply to make the points that keeping the law does not merit salvation and that the supposedly advantaged rich were in fact spiritually even worse off than the poor were? Is Jesus's invitation to follow him just a dramatic device for making his point? This all seems lacking in compassion and genuine concern, not to mention disingenuous.

If we were to apply the christocentric principle to the Matthew and Luke accounts alone, then we would come to the conclusion that we were misunderstanding the Lord's attitude and, therefore, probably missing the point of his teaching. However, Mark also records the story of Jesus and the rich young man (Mark 10:17-27), but he includes something of vital importance that the other two writers omit. In verse 21, he writes, 'Jesus looked at him and loved him.' These seven words change everything! In the light of this, we can read the story again and understand it from a very different perspective.

Jesus wanted the young man to understand that rigorous obedience to the Law could not procure eternal life, so he cited the law, elicited a response, and then showed the man that perfect law keeping was just not possible or eternally effective. He also wanted to make it clear to the young man that the one who stood before him was more than a teacher of the law; he was in fact God, the only one worthy of being called 'good'. Then he, God the Son, made the man the offer of a lifetime—'Come, follow me.' Money, land, title, and law all pale into relative insignificance compared to the privilege and eternal blessing of following Jesus!

Mark makes it clear, but even if we did not have his account we would come to a similar conclusion by prayerfully applying the christocentric principle.

The christocentric principle can be applied to other more complex and controversial passages of scripture, such as the Acts 5 account of the 'killing' of Ananias and Sapphira, where the question to be asked is 'would the God revealed perfectly in Jesus Christ kill two of his sincere followers because they lied to Peter?' This matter requires a more extensive treatment, but this is beyond the scope of this article.

Before concluding, I need to touch briefly on the main objections to a christocentric focus.

## 4. Objections

Most of the objections raised against a christocentric hermeneutic centre on countering the more common understanding of that term. My definition of the christocentric principle, and those of other similar-minded scholars, was not promoted widely enough or long enough to attract specific criticism. However, two of the usual objections to christocentricism in general could be legitimately levelled at the christocentric principle as I have stated it. A third objection needs to be briefly stated and countered.

### 4.1. Trinitarian or theocentric hermeneutics

One major criticism of any form of christocentricism is the belief that it devalues the other two divine personages and detracts from the importance of the Trinity. The basic contention is this: because God is triune in nature, we should be interpreting scripture from a Trinitarian perspective.

A key question here is, 'what does the triune God of scripture reveal to us about the locus of revelation?'

John 8:54 records Jesus's declaration that, 'If I glorify myself, my glory means nothing. My Father, whom you claim as your God, is the one who glorifies me'. Peter later affirmed this when he wrote, 'for he received honour and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."' (2 Pet 1:17) So, God the Father points us to his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is even clearer in scripture that God the Holy Spirit points us to Jesus (e.g. John 15:26). John 16:14 refers to the Holy Spirit with the words, 'he will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you.' In summarising this idea, Ortlund (2009:6) writes, 'in short, the Spirit himself is Christ-centred'.

God the Father pointed us to Jesus when on the Mount of Transfiguration, he instructed us to listen to him (Mark 9:7) and God the Holy Spirit testified concerning Jesus (1 John 5:6-7). Jesus himself confirmed that he had the approval of both the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Conversely, it is only through Jesus that we have any real knowledge of the triune Godhead, for it is Jesus who said that 'no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him' (Matt 11:27).

Padgett (2006:40) argues that there is no incompatibility between christocentric and Trinitarian hermeneutics, and he cites Karl Barth as arguing that 'Jesus is the incarnation of the Word of God, the personal and historical self-revelation of God; and this divine self-revelation

itself requires us to understand God in his revelation as a Trinity'. Padgett writes further that 'once we begin to read the whole Bible together, with Christ as the key or centre of our interpretive understanding, the doctrine of the Triunity of God is not far from sight' (p. 41).

I do not believe that there is any conflict between a conservative evangelical Trinitarian hermeneutic and a christocentric approach to scripture, as the one implies the other and subsumed in the other.

#### **4.2. Canonical hermeneutics**

Another objection to christocentrism is based on the contention that the Bible should rather be understood by applying the well-accepted principle of authorial hermeneutics, whereby the inner thoughts of the original authors determine the meaning of any text. Of course, the perceived original intent of a text must influence our understanding, yet we all discount this principle to some extent when we interpret texts in the light of the entire biblical revelation. Padgett (2006:37) writes, 'by putting the whole Bible together and reading it as a unity, we are already going beyond anything that could have been in the mind and intention of any individual author or redactor'. Similarly, by acknowledging that Jesus Christ is the central figure of all of scripture, we are compelled to interpret texts from an essentially Christ-centred perspective. Miller (2010:2) cites Goldsworthy's contention when he writes, 'since Jesus is the climax of scripture's overarching storyline, he must be held as the theological centre which necessarily pervades all scripture'.

In his 'A sketch of the factors determining current hermeneutical debate in cross-cultural contexts', DA Carson (1993) warns of the dangers of having a Canon within a Canon. The christocentric principle does, in a

sense, necessitate a form of Canon within a Canon. Most of the information we have on the life and words of Jesus Christ is located in the gospels; so, from this perspective, the gospels become a Canon within the larger Canon of the whole Bible. However, Acts, the Epistles and even the book of Revelation contain information and insights into the nature and character of the Godhead as revealed in and through the Lord Jesus Christ. The gospels, interpreted and completed by the rest of the New Testament and the Old Testament, forms a background and context for the words and works of Jesus Christ. The record of the life and teaching of the Lord Jesus does not then form a Canon within a Canon of the type against which Carson cautions.

The real dangers of adopting a Canon within a Canon are the implications of man-made schemes of interpretation utilised to determine the meaning of scripture. In this article, I have tried to emphasise that the scriptures themselves support a christocentric hermeneutic, and so, a gospel Canon within a Canon is a divine prerequisite rather than a human contrivance.

I need to mention one further potential objection.

### **4.3. Dogmatic hermeneutical systems**

Most proponents of any dogmatic hermeneutical system would oppose a christocentric hermeneutic by arguing for the superiority of their particular interpretive grid. Five-point Calvinism and Dispensationalism are, in my opinion, two such examples, although there are other systems such as Liberation, Feminist, and Reconstructionist theologies that would also qualify. Whilst these philosophical formulations do not necessarily base their dogmas on any particular books of the Bible, their tightly integrated systematic theologies constitute an effective Canon within a Canon of precisely the type that Carson highlights as

problematic. It is likely that promoters of such systems would see the christocentric principle as a competing hermeneutical system, but that would be a misunderstanding of what I am proposing. My contention is that all scripture and all theological systems should be viewed through the lens of God's character and nature as revealed in and through the Lord Jesus Christ. The christocentric principle is not yet another hermeneutical system, but something that should test, inform, and influence all such systems.

## Conclusion

Christianity is, by its very nature, christocentric. The Bible, the written Word of God, is christocentric and is intended to be understood primarily from a christocentric perspective. Because of this, and the other contentions expressed in this article, the life, teaching, and person of the Lord Jesus Christ should be the locus of biblical interpretation and doctrinal formulation and proclamation. In this article, I have argued that, because Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God and the fullness of the Deity in bodily form, all scripture should be interpreted primarily from the perspective of what he taught, modelled, or revealed to us concerning the nature and character of God. I have called this the 'christocentric principle'.

I have qualified my definition of the Christocentric Principle, and my comments on its application, with the word 'primarily'. Interpretation should be primarily, but not exclusively or exhaustively, from a christocentric perspective. I understand and accept that the hermeneutic task must start with a grammatical-historical approach to determining the first-intended meaning of any given text. However, once this has been reasonably determined from context, linguistics, and so on, the interpreter still needs to understand the text within some larger frame of

reference. My conviction is that the christocentric principle provides this larger frame of reference, a more reliable and consistent frame of reference than any dogmatic theological system.

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# Reconciling the Personal and Social Dimensions of the Gospel

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## Abstract

Historically, there has been considerable awkwardness and difficulty in harmonising the personal and social dimensions of the gospel. The purpose of this article is to develop an integrative motif through which it may be possible to set these dimensions on the same conceptual footing. In terms of this motif, our world is fundamentally relational. Further, it contains an infinity of relations. Within this infinity of relations, we employ thematic perspectives to trace finite microcosms of relations. However, thematic perspectives, both personal and social, are ontologically flawed, and drive us to despair. This is interpreted theologically in terms of sin and repentance.

## Introduction

The New Testament reveals the need for a counterbalance between the personal and social dimensions of the gospel—most famously in the epistle of James, where the believer is said to be justified by deeds, ‘and not by faith alone’ (Jas 2:24, NIV). Similarly, in the Old Testament, one

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<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.

finds the call both to personal piety and social conscience: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice' (Hos 6:6).

Historically, however, there has been considerable awkwardness and difficulty in harmonising the personal and social dimensions of the gospel—which at their extremes have been described as 'a purely religious salvation and a purely politico-social liberation' (Schwarz 2000:156). Hans Kessler refers to a 'dualistic split' between the two (Schwarz 2000:156), while Madeleine Cousineau comments: 'Christianity emphasizes eternal salvation, which results in a concern of the clergy for ministering to the spiritual needs of the laity. This individual pastoral outreach is not always easy to combine with a prophetic demand for justice' (Cousineau 1998:476).

José Comblin poses the question which represents the core interest here: 'How to connect eternal salvation to temporal liberation, and salvation in heaven to liberation on earth?' (Comblin 1998:49).

With this in mind, this article seeks to explore a possible conceptual basis for the integration of the social and personal dimensions of the gospel. Specifically, it will suggest the theological integrative motif as a means by which this may be achieved. This is thought to hold the potential, further, of reconciling environmental interests with personal and social ones—which are frequently overlooked in the debate.

## **1. Theological Integrative Motifs**

Stanley Grenz outlines two broad approaches which a theologian may take towards systematic theology. The first is to work from specific sources: 'the Bible as canonized by the church, the flow of church history as it describes the conclusions of past theological discussions,

and thought-forms of contemporary culture' (Grenz 1994:16). The second is to order the presentation of the Christian faith around an integrative motif. Grenz writes: 'In short, the integrative motif is the central idea that provides the thematic perspective in light of which all other theological concepts are understood and given their relative meaning or value' (Grenz 1994:20).

Each integrative motif may propose to address a particular problem or problems—for example, the problem of sin, the problem of purpose, or the problem of the poor. Further, the integrative motif is of course intended to achieve integration, which is the core interest here.

Grenz himself lists the following integrative motifs: God as the *telos* of the human person (Thomas Aquinas), justification by faith (Martin Luther), the glory of God (John Calvin), responsible grace (John Wesley), human religious experience (Friedrich Schleiermacher), and the self-disclosure of the triune God (Karl Barth) (Grenz 1994:21). One may add to these: the eschatological hope (Moltmann 1996:xv), the preference for the poor (Gutierrez 1983:128), black power (Cone 1997:xiv), religious values (Dewey, Hickman and Alexander 1998:409), and the community of God (Grenz 1994:23)—among others (Hillyer 1998:231).

Such integrative motifs are well developed, and have stood the test of time. The purpose here is merely to develop the sketch of an integrative motif which is here named 'relations'. This refers to the relation of everything to everything else (Capra 1982:321)—and is to be distinguished from 'relationality', which tends to refer to 'how people connect with one another' (Relationality 2012).

The integrative motif of 'relations' differs in one fundamental respect from all the integrative motifs advanced above. Each of these motifs

seeks to relate Christian faith to a core concept—such as justification by faith, or the community of God. By way of contrast, the integrative motif which is here proposed does not have a central idea. One might say that it is not, therefore, enthralled by metaphysics (Hart 2004:117). Rather, it removes the central concept, and leaves behind relations *per se*.

## 2. Relations as Integrative Motif

The Bible itself portrays a world of all-encompassing relations. Not only does it speak, in the early chapters of Genesis, of the sequence of creation, but it also speaks of an integrated creation, where earth and sky, flora and fauna—not least the human race—are all inter-dependent (Isa 42:5). More than this, it speaks of the relation of all things to Christ: 'For from him and through him and to him are all things' (Rom 11:36).

In the theological context, 'relations' refers to the relation of everything to everything else and to God. Nancey Murphy (1996:144) summarises Arthur Peacocke: 'Theology is the intellectual discipline whose subject matter is the relation of God to everything else, both the natural world and the human world. Thus, theology studies the most complex and all-encompassing system possible.'

Through the power of the natural and human sciences, our human awareness of relations, in recent centuries, has increased exponentially. There has been a growing awareness that this world represents 'an inseparable net of endless, mutually conditioned relations' (Capra 1982:143). In short, we live in a world which is fundamentally relational. Philosopher Mel Thompson (2007:100) explains it as follows: 'Each action has a theoretically infinite number of causes.'

Equally, each action may produce a theoretically infinite number of results. At any moment, we move within a seamless web of causality that goes forwards and backward in time and outwards in space'.

Yet, it is not only the world itself that is fundamentally relational. It is uniquely the practice of *Homo sapiens* to seek to articulate such relations—and this is accomplished primarily by means of language. Hence, the term *Homo loquens* (*talking man*) (McClendon 1971).

In pondering the uniquely human activity of language, the philosopher and linguist Max Black considered: 'The secret seems to lie in something no less fundamental than the apprehension of relationships in general' Black 1968:66). One might say, therefore, that humanity is 'wired' for relations. *Homo sapiens* is *Homo connectens*: a relation-tracing hominid.

Whether one should say, 'Hope is grounded in the eschaton,' 'Héloïse loved Abelard', or 'Mass and energy are equivalent', one traces relations. In fact, it may be said that the primary activity of language-users is to relate concepts one to the other. People draw together the scattered strands of their existence with daily compulsion—whether engaging in social networking, studying the stock markets, or conducting scientific research.

### 3. The Problematic of Relations

It stands to reason that it is impossible to trace an infinity of relations simultaneously—and yet, it stands to reason that it is necessary to trace relations. It is necessary, in the midst of an infinity of relations, to adopt a few thematic perspectives (Grenz's term), and to use these to trace what will here be termed microcosms of relations—that is, finite

arrangements of relations which are less than the totality of relations. Such thematic perspectives serve to create an 'understanding of reality' (Hiebert 1994:38).

Thus, one may trace relations between imports and exports (thematic perspective: trade), or relations between numbers (thematic perspective: arithmetic). There may similarly be thematic perspectives of great scope (the New World Order), or of very personal purview (personal ambition). A vast number of such thematic perspectives thus serves to trace a vast number of microcosms of relations.

However, certain fundamental problems attach to thematic perspectives—which ultimately have a deep theological significance. These are treated here as ontological problems—that is, problems which have to do with being as such (Mautner 2000:401)—they do not, apparently, vary according to place and time. Four such problems are here surveyed, namely, (a) arbitrariness, (b) exclusion, (c) totalising tendencies, and (d) trauma.

### 3.1. Arbitrariness

In principle, since everything is related to everything else, it should be possible to select any starting point at all—any thematic perspective at all—and to relate it to all things. That is, it is possible that any and every thematic perspective is by its very nature arbitrary. In fact, at best, there would seem to be an impossible burden of proof that any given thematic perspective is not arbitrary.

Theological integrative motifs are not excluded from this problematic. In his classic work *Either/Or*, Søren Kierkegaard (1987:76) poked fun at the integrative motif: 'Experienced people maintain that it is very reasonable to proceed from a principle; I yield to them and begin with

the principle that all men are boring. Or would there be anyone who would be so boring to dispute me on this?'

The creation of the world, he explained, may be accounted for by the boredom of the gods; the creation of Eve may be explained in terms of the boredom of Adam in his loneliness; the story of Babel evidences that all of humanity was bored, therefore building a tower to alleviate their boredom—and so on. In short, any thematic perspective is by its very nature suspect, and should be treated as temporary and tentative at best.

This corresponds with the tenor of the New Testament, which suggests that every human philosophy is 'hollow and deceptive' (Col 2:8)—by which is implied that such philosophies are baseless, and have the mere appearance of reality. Similarly, the Old Testament refers to those who, though purportedly wise, may dwell on 'empty notions' (Job 15:2–3).

### **3.2. Exclusion**

A second problem arises. If one selects a particular thematic perspective by which to arrange a microcosm of relations, other thematic perspectives tend to be excluded, marginalised, or repressed. This has been well recognised by postmodernism (Jones, Natter, and Schatzki 1993:106). For example, innovation may exclude the environment (Gutierrez 1971:244), humane treatment may be marginalised by national policy (Lisova 2006), or one's spouse may become secondary to one's personal ambition, and so on.

The problem again arises with theological integrative motifs. For instance, the integrative motif of the community of God tends to repress justification by faith (Grenz 1994:197), while the integrative motif of religious values tends to repress the glory of God (Dewey, Hickman,

and Alexander 1998:410). In fact, in the context of this article, there are 'a number of views which do not accept that it is possible to relate the gospel directly to the social order' (Gladwin 1988:231). Thus, the social order is excluded from certain thematic perspectives of the gospel.

The exclusion to which thematic perspectives gives rise is well illustrated by what is known as 'textuality'. Textuality may be defined as 'the property of written material to form a coherent whole; the nature or identifying quality of a text' (Textuality 2012), and 'the reduction of everything to the text' (Textuality 2002).

Thus, if one were to drop a nursery rhyme into the middle of this article: 'Two little kittens, one stormy night, began to quarrel, and then to fight', there would be bafflement and confusion. That is, thematic perspectives have a natural, in fact, a powerful tendency to exclude certain aspects of reality—in other words, other microcosms of relations.

Scripture is replete with examples of exclusion, marginalisation, and repression on account of one or another thematic perspective. For instance, idolatry leads to the exclusion of the Lord's prophets (1 Kgs 18:4), undue dependence on diplomacy marginalises human rights (Obad 8, 10), or social justice fails where personal gain becomes the central narrative (Mic 3:11).

### **4.3. Totalising Tendencies**

A third problem arises, again relating to the potentially infinite number of relations in this world. While a thematic perspective is capable of encompassing a finite microcosm of relations, whether large or small, it cannot encompass all relations. This means that there will always be relations which lie beyond the explanation of a thematic perspective,

and beyond its control. 'All abstraction involves omission, turning a blind eye to elements in experience...' (Toulmin 1990:200).

Therefore, thematic perspectives inevitably create unintended historical consequences which elude their understanding and control, both in society and nature. If thematic perspectives are viewed as axiomatic systems, then 'only in exceptional cases' can the results of the application of an axiomatic system be predicted (Little 1995:614). Without here analysing the mechanisms which lie behind such unintended historical consequences, one may list, as a few examples, ozone depletion, biodiversity reduction, and global poverty.

With this in mind, there is a powerful tendency of thematic perspectives to develop totalising tendencies. Infinite control is required to master infinite relations. This drives humanity unrelentingly toward 'systematic totality' (Adorno and Kierkegaard 2011). The world is full of symptoms of the same, among them the increasing invasion of privacy (Robinson 2010), the over-management of nature reserves (Gilbert and Dodds 1992:313), or to-the-second employee monitoring (Employee Inspector 2012).

In the New Testament, the ultimate totalising tendency is witnessed as the Beast places his mark on 'everyone, small and great, rich and poor, free and slave' (Rev 13:16). This tendency is evidenced in the Old Testament, too, *inter alia* as David counts the fighting men (2 Sam 24:1), or as Athaliah purges the royal household (2 Kgs 11:1).

### 3.4. Trauma

Fourthly, the arbitrariness, exclusion, and totalising tendencies of thematic perspectives all tend in reality to do harm or violence to people. John Caputo notes: 'Exclusion and marginalization are never

merely formal ideas (but) always have to do with damaged lives and disasters...' (Caputo 1993:119).

To give application to earlier examples: where the environment becomes irrelevant to business interests, there the environment suffers degradation, or where one's spouse becomes secondary to one's personal ambitions, there one's spouse suffers neglect. Human trauma is thus a symptom of the ontological problems which attach to thematic perspectives. As an example of such trauma, David Korten (2001:233) observes, in an oft-quoted passage:

In the name of modernity we are creating dysfunctional societies that are breeding pathological behavior—violence, extreme competitiveness, suicide, drug abuse, greed, and environmental degradation—at every hand... The threefold crisis of deepening poverty, environmental destruction, and social disintegration manifests this dysfunction... Corporate globalization is being advanced by the conscious choices of those who see the world through the lens of the corporate interest.

It is interesting to note, in particular, Korten's specific link between 'the lens' of corporate interest (a thematic perspective) and pathological behaviour. In fact, this applies not only to the lens of corporate interest, but too many other lenses, such as the national interest (Schonberg 2003:230), social customs (Christmas 2001:150), or personal enrichment (Unjust Enrichment 2012).

In scripture, too, the thematic perspectives of sinful people lead to oppression (Exod 2:23), impoverishment (Judg 6:6), slaughter (Judg 9:5), enslavement (Neh 5:5), or persecution (Acts 8:3)—among other things.

The question now arises as to the theological significance of these observations.

## 4. Application to Theology

The purpose of the previous section was to sketch some of the problems which inhere in relations. On the one hand, there has been a growing awareness that this world represents 'an inseparable net of endless, mutually conditioned relations' (Capra 1982:155). On the other hand, it would seem that any attempt to develop a thematic perspective or perspectives within this infinity of relations is bound to be pervaded by arbitrariness, exclusion, totalising tendencies, and trauma.

I will now consider how this may serve to integrate the personal and social dimensions of the gospel—first by drawing a parallel between the concepts 'thematic perspectives' and 'original sin', then, by exploring despair—here related to repentance—as the only appropriate response.

### 4.1. Original sin

Original sin is described as 'the state of alienation from God into which all humans are born' (Grenz, Guretzki, and Nordling 1999:87). This is based chiefly on the doctrine of the inheritance of sin (Rom 5:12), which implies that 'even from birth the wicked go astray' (Ps 58:3). This can now be accounted for theologically as the adoption of thematic perspectives—many of which one is born into.

Whether one participates in the perpetuation of an unequal society, or inherits a lifestyle which plunders the environment; whether one defrauds one's employer, or neglects one's children; all of these acts, and many more, require the adoption of certain thematic perspectives which, by their nature, are prone to arbitrariness, exclusion, totalising

tendencies, and trauma. That is, through the adoption of thematic perspectives—any thematic perspectives at all—one is likely to do harm and violence to one's fellow humans. Not only this, but if theological integrative motifs represent thematic perspectives, then theological integrative motifs are not exempt from the problematic.

In these terms, original sin has a very wide compass. No matter whether one should employ the thematic perspective of the national interest, or of corporate advancement, of personal ambition, or of any of the thousands of thematic perspectives one encounters in day to day life, one does harm and violence to others, through these thematic perspectives. In short, original sin involves not only the personal dimensions of the gospel. It involves its social dimensions also. Any 'unhealthy separation between social and personal sin' is thus done away with (Kärkkäinen 2002:191).

## 4.2. Repentance

Thematic perspectives are deeply flawed, and it would seem that they lead naturally and inherently to serious abuses. At the same time, it may be one of the most daunting challenges for humans to relinquish thematic perspectives, as this may threaten the loss of meaning, and may even seem to threaten their very existence.

David Bosch considers that, too often, we do not understand 'the grip [that plausibility structures] ... have on us' (1995:48). These hold such power because they represent the means 'by which reality is managed and pursued' (Bosch 1995:49). In a similar vein, Paul Hiebert states: 'People are willing to die for beliefs that make their lives and deaths meaningful' (Hiebert 1994:38). That is, when people sense that their thematic perspectives are threatened, they are ready to struggle with might and main to protect them.

Religious integrative motifs, too, may serve the purpose of resisting fear. As an example, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin viewed any alternative to his eschatological views as looking into 'an abyss'—a terrifying despair (959:251)—while Hans Schwarz similarly considers that 'divine promises of liberation' save us from 'despair' (Schwarz 2000:154).

By way of contrast, it is here suggested that it is precisely despair which needs to be embraced. Unless one is ready to walk through the door of despair over one's thematic perspectives—including those which seem closer to one than life itself—one cannot be saved. Unless one is ready to enter into despair, one cannot be liberated—nor can others. One needs, wrote Paul Tillich, 'the courage of despair' (Tillich 1952:137). One needs to despair over one's thematic perspectives, without prejudice. One needs to despair over every relation one has ever traced. Moreover, not only is this true at conversion, but 'even Christians have to be open to conversion, conversion to a fuller truth' (Kärkkäinen 2002:218).

Such despair is not, however, a blind alley, but represents a door to the greatest gift available to humankind. On the other side of such despair one discovers that 'underneath are the everlasting arms' (Deut 33:27, NIV)—that is, that God himself sustains life beyond despair.

To cast this in biblical terms, one needs the courage of repentance. Repentance is introduced by despair—which is to be 'cut to the heart' over previous articles of faith (Acts 2:36–37), and to move beyond them (Rom 12:1–2). Such despair may be closer to many people than they imagined, since they already exist 'in a despair they are not consciously aware of' (Bosch 1995:44).

Thus, as one rearranges the microcosms of relations that constitute thematic perspectives, this must hold consequences both for the personal and social dimensions of the gospel. Further, theology as 'relations' may have the potential of reconciling other, major aspects of Christian faith which are of contemporary interest—not least the environment.

## 5. Philosophical Questions

Finally, a few philosophical questions would seem to require some attention.

Firstly, the question arises as to whether it is possible to relinquish thematic perspectives, or to escape them. In this regard, a solution may lie in considering thematic perspectives to be 'always-in-flux'—as opposed to *idées fixes*. Just as postmodernism proposes a 'play of opposites' (Anderson 2011), so one might conceive of a 'play of perspectives'—or perspectives which emerge and recede. An idea of postmodern theology is that the scriptures should become a decentralised buzz of revelation which one seeks to leave 'as is' with minimal interpretation—a 'postmodern Bible' (Hart 2004:93).

Secondly, there is the question as to whether thematic perspectives—and with them microcosms of relations—are ontologically flawed, and inevitably lead to human trauma. If they are not ontologically flawed, then one would need to determine what it is that distinguishes good thematic perspectives from bad ones. The assumption of this article has been that the problems of arbitrariness, exclusion, totalising tendencies, and therefore trauma, are inescapable where thematic perspectives are present.

Thirdly, the question arises as to what lies beyond theological integrative motifs where these are relinquished. In this regard, every theological integrative motif, if it is specifically theological and specifically Christian, will be rooted in the scriptures. Thus the scriptures may be thought of as the 'ground' from which all theological integrative motifs are derived—and if theological integrative motifs are dissolved, what remains is the 'raw' scriptures which lie beneath them. In other words, the integrative motif of 'relations' permits the scriptures to be the scriptures, without the mediation of thematic perspectives.

Finally, the question arises as to whether the repentance described above represents a natural transition or a supernatural one—engendered, as the Bible has it, by the Holy Spirit of God through the cross of Christ. Since repentance has been described here as the relinquishment of thematic perspectives, which seem closer to one than life itself, it needs to be considered whether this is a transition that lies beyond the natural—that is, whether such a transition can be brought about through a natural process, or whether a transcendent impulse or influence is required.

## Conclusion

We live in a world which is fundamentally relational. However, the way in which humans trace this infinity of relations through thematic perspectives—that is, through microcosms of relations—is fundamentally and ontologically flawed, and is akin to original sin in its personal, social, and environmental manifestations.

This article thus proposes a theological integrative motif without a central idea—an integrative motif which is not, one might say, enthralled by metaphysics (Hart 2004:117), but, in fact, removes the

central concept, and leaves behind relations *per se*. It 'imposes [no] artificial viewpoint instead of allowing [the Bible] to speak for itself' (Parratt 1995:63).

However, by removing the central idea—in fact by despairing over and repenting of the central idea—one creates a kind of integrative motif that is an anti-motif. As this integrative motif challenges thematic perspectives—and with them any number of microcosms of relations—it promises not only to address the personal dimensions of the gospel, but also, its social and environmental dimensions.

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# The Christocentric Principle: Promise, Pitfalls, and Proposal

Kevin G Smith

## Abstract

This article is a response to ‘The Christocentric Principle: A Jesus-Centred Hermeneutic’ (Peppler 2012). The author argues that the christocentric principle holds much promise as an interpretive tool for all branches of evangelical theology. The article then identifies two potential pitfalls in the way the christocentric principle might be used, namely, (a) treating the gospels as a canon within a canon and (b) imposing a distorted picture of Christ upon other biblical texts. It is proposed that these pitfalls can be avoided if the rest of the canon is allowed to inform the christocentric principle, just as the christocentric principle often guides our interpretation of the rest of the canon.

## Introduction

Dr Christopher Peppler founded the South African Theological Seminary (SATS) on three pillars, summed in our by-line as Bible-based, Christ-centred, and Spirit-led. As an evangelical seminary offering Master’s and Doctoral degrees in theology, we have stressed the Bible-based aspect, partly to distinguish ourselves from the more liberal approaches that predominate in the theological departments of South African universities. In 2011, Peppler challenged the seminary to

think about what it means for us to be Christ-centred. Four points emerged:

- In all we do, we seek to give due honour and glory to the Lord Jesus Christ.
- The goal of the Christian life is to become like the Lord Jesus Christ.
- The person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ is central to all Christian life, doctrine, and ministry.
- The nature of God as revealed in the words and works of the Lord Jesus Christ is a lens for interpreting God's word and discerning his will.

The first three points were readily agreed, but a robust debate ensued around the fourth point, which takes christocentricity as a hermeneutic. The debate culminated in Peppler's (2012) article 'The Christocentric Principle: A Jesus-Centred Hermeneutic'.

This article is a response to Peppler's proposals for a christocentric hermeneutic. It has three objectives: to (a) affirm the promise of the christocentric principle as a hermeneutical tool; (b) identify two potential pitfalls; and (c) propose a refinement to prevent the pitfalls producing problems.

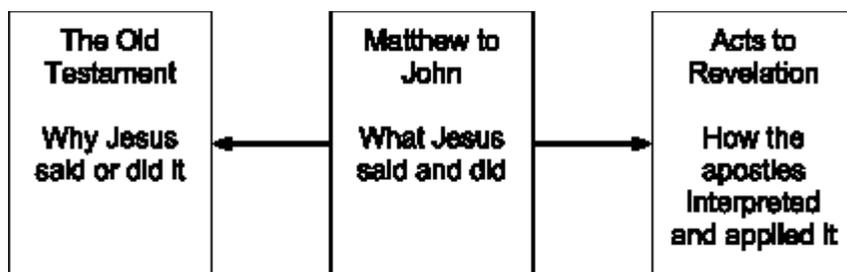
## 1. The Promise

The christocentric principle holds much promise for the way we undertake the tasks of evangelical theology. As I understand it, the overarching task of theology is to discern God's nature, will, and purposes so that his people might respond in ways that are faithful (Hendriks 2004; Osborne 2006; Sailhamer 2010; Smith 2011a). This is

the task of all the sub-disciplines of theology, with each sub-discipline contributing a particular perspective to the overall task of discerning God's will (Heyns and Pieterse 1991:4). Therefore, any hermeneutical tool that helps us to discern the will of God and respond faithfully is a valuable addition to our theological toolkit.

The christocentric principle, as developed and described by Pepler (2012), can aid theological reflection in all branches of theology. It is a hermeneutical tool to help God's people to interpret texts, practices, and situations. It serves as something of a hermeneutical compass, orienting us towards a proper understanding of God's will and purposes for his people.

Pepler (2007:177–188) originally formulated the christocentric principle as a model for doing a topical study of what the Word of God teaches. His original model looked like this:



The idea was simple. Since the words and works of the Lord Jesus Christ constituted the climax of God's acts of self-revelation, providing the clearest picture of the nature, will, and purposes of God, we should begin a topical study by considering what Jesus said and did. We should then turn to the Old Testament, which enables us to contextualise Christ's words and works within the unfolding plan and purposes of God. The Old Testament provides the rationale for Jesus's words and

works; it helps us to understand 'the why' behind his revelatory life and deeds. Last, we should consider the remainder of the New Testament (Acts to Revelation). These books reveal how the inspired writers of the New Testament interpreted and applied the words and works of Jesus Christ to various situations and contexts.

This 'first edition' of the christocentric principle was essentially a model for doing systematic theology, a way of considering what the whole Bible taught about a given question or topic. It is Christ-centred in two senses. First, unlike the more traditional way of tracing the teachings of God's Word, either canonically or chronologically, it starts with the words and works of the Lord Jesus Christ. Each order of study has its merits, and each will likely result in some unique emphases and perspectives. Second, it provides a Christ-centred vision of the canon, and the relationship between the major *corpi* within the canon. These two factors increase the likelihood that we shall interpret the totality of God's revelation in the light of his climactic self-disclosure in Christ. This makes it an appealing way of doing evangelical systematic theology, because it is both canonical and christocentric. It promises a theological interpretation that is based on the whole Bible, but which also gives due credence to the christocentric nature of all God's revelation.

With respect to the twin fields of Old and New Testament studies, the christocentric principle is once again a helpful hermeneutical compass. Many texts take on a clearer meaning if we read them with the presupposition that their Spirit-inspired, God-intended meaning is in full harmony with all that we know about the nature, will, and purposes of the triune God as most fully unveiled in the life and teachings of God the Son. We are less likely to misinterpret difficult texts if we continuously ask ourselves: how does everything I know about God

through his incarnation (Christ's words and works) inform what the Spirit was saying through the text I am studying?

In practical theology, we study both present and preferred praxis in an attempt to ensure that it is faithful to the nature and purposes of God (Swinton and Mowatt 2006:6). In this regard, the christocentric principle seems to be a valuable lens for interpreting present praxis and envisioning preferred praxis. With reference to present praxis, we can attempt to discern what Christ is doing in the church, on the premise that he is continuing his mission and ministry (John 20:21; Acts 1:1–3; Heb 13:8). Anderson (2001) calls this 'christopraxis'. We are essentially analysing present praxis by asking two questions: (1) what is Jesus saying and doing? (2) What would Jesus say and do? With respect to the preferred praxis, practical theological reflection should culminate with answers to Browning's (1993) two key questions: (1) What should we do? (2) How should we live? By focusing attention on the canonical portrait of Jesus Christ as the fullest revelation of God's nature, will, and purposes, the christocentric principle ought to be a valuable aid to for interpreting Christian praxis.

As an interpretive lens, the christocentric principle thus holds promise for various branches of theology. It helps with our interpretation of scripture, theology, ethics, and praxis. For the past three years, I have been working on models of integrated theology—approaches to theological reflection that bring together insights and perspectives from multiple sub-disciplines. Pepler's (2012) christocentric principle promises to be a helpful building block in that quest.

Part of its promise is that the christocentric principle may well approach the way in which the apostles 'did theology'. Did they not interpret the Old Testament and interpret their contemporary obligations through the light provided by Christ, with special reference to his death and

resurrection? They were reflective practitioners whose beliefs and practices were pervasively shaped by their relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. The New Testament writings, from Acts to Revelation, are themselves applications of the christocentric principle. How did Luke, Paul, Peter, John, and so on formulate their theology? They were pastoral theologians doing integrated theology using a christocentric approach. They interpreted the mission of God, the Old Testament scriptures, their present praxis, and the church's responsibilities christocentrically.

Paver (2006:27) proposes a vision of integrated theology that sees pastoral leaders as practical theologians, using the twin terms 'practical Christian thinker' and 'reflective practitioner' to describe them. This description certainly fits the authors of the New Testament, with the additional observation that their thinking was thoroughly christocentric. How wonderful it would be if the outcome of our theological education were practical Christian thinkers and reflective practitioners who interpret every aspect of the Word and the world christocentrically (Smith 2011b).

## **2. The Pitfalls**

The preceding discussion should make it clear that the christocentric principle holds great promise as an interpretive key for evangelical theology. However, there are two potential pitfalls to avoid.

### **2.1. The danger of a canon within a canon**

The christocentric principle might leave us vulnerable to forming a canon within a canon. We might develop a two-tier approach to the scriptures in which we treat the gospels as superior revelation to the

remainder of the scriptures. As evangelical interpreters, the whole canon of scripture, soundly interpreted, is our norm for belief and behaviour. The completed canon is the Word of God to the people of God. We are the people of the book, and the completed canon is our final and sufficient record of God's revelation to us. Therefore, we have a canonical approach to theology. The completed canon is the locus of theology.

The danger is red-letter theology. In emphasising Christ as the full and final revelation of the God (which he is), the christocentric principle can lead to a theological praxis in which the gospels are treated as more inspired than the other scriptures. What Jesus said and did is 'grade A' revelation. What Moses or Paul wrote is 'grade B'—still inspired, but less important. This could lead to the glorification of the gospels, and theology based on a canon within the canon. Theologians who do not accept the full inspiration and authority of all scripture sometimes adopt a similar approach, viewing the gospel (the Christ-life or the Christ-event) as the true revelation that corrects the misrepresentation of God in earlier writings. However, for those who hold the entire canon to be trustworthy and authoritative, singling out the gospels as somehow superior will create problems. Because of the principle of progressive revelation and the promise-fulfilment plot line of the Bible, we do recognise that the gospels are more pivotal to the formulation of Christian theology than the Old Testament Scriptures (Heb. 1:1-3). However, I do not think it is sound to adopt a similar attitude towards the relationship between the gospels and the rest of the New Testament.

To see the christocentric principle as endorsing a canon within a canon is *to confuse revelation with inspiration*. The incarnation is the focal point of all God's acts of revelation. In Old Testament times, he revealed himself piecemeal through his words and works across time,

but in Christ, he provided us with the most concrete and comprehensive unveiling of his nature, will, and purposes. The Old Testament as a whole finds its full explanation in Christ, and the whole New Testament interprets the significance of Christ. Christ is the key to understanding the full canon correctly, but the gospels are not the 'real' canon. The life of Christ is the supreme locus of revelation, but the canon must remain the locus of theology.

Peppler (2012) is *not* advocating a canon within a canon. The christocentric principle provides a hermeneutical key to unlock the proper interpretation of the canon. The canon as a whole remains the inspired, truthful, and authoritative Word of God. The canon provides the normative source material for theology. The christocentric principle recognises that the life of Christ provides the clearest understanding of the nature, will, and purposes of God, and thus, serves as a lens for interpreting the whole canon correctly. Thus the christocentric principle presupposes a canonical approach to doing theology, but contends that Christ is the interpretive key to understanding the canonical message correctly.

## **2.2. The danger of a distorted portrait of Christ**

The christocentric principle advocates that we interpret all scripture in the light of the full and final revelation of God in Christ. Since Jesus Christ was God incarnate, the nature, will, and purposes of God most clearly seen through his words and works. When Jesus taught clearly and definitively regarding a particular matter, we have a sound basis for deploying the christocentric principle as an interpretive key. However, when Jesus did not speak or act in a way that directly reveals God's attitude and heart regarding something, the christocentric principle relies on abstracting an understanding of how Jesus would view the matter or what he might have said about it. Deploying the christocentric

principle in such instances may still be helpful, but it is more vulnerable to error since the interpreter is imposing an abstracted portrait of Christ upon the subject matter.

In Numbers 15:32–36, Yahweh commands the congregation to stone a man who was caught gathering sticks on the Sabbath. If we take seriously that God's nature does not change (Mal 3:6; Heb 13:8) and that Jesus Christ revealed God's nature, then, Yahweh's command in Numbers 15:35 must be consistent with Jesus's declaration that 'the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath' (Mark 2:27). According to the christocentric principle, any interpretation of Numbers 15:35 that does not harmonise with the clear teaching of Jesus must be deemed inadequate. The Numbers text cannot mean that God was a vindictive, pedantic legalist in 1400 BC, since the life and teaching of Jesus Christ clearly show that he is not.<sup>1</sup> There must be more to the Numbers text. The christocentric principle calls us to dig deeper, and it guides our excavation. In this example from Numbers, the christocentric principle works optimally because the Lord Jesus Christ taught clearly about the will of God with respect to the Sabbath.

However, there are instances in which we do not have such definitive statements from Christ. In 1 Corinthians 7:12–16 Paul acknowledged that he did not have a word from Christ to guide his thinking; he was left to offer his own Spirit-guided perspective. In these cases, the christocentric principle can still be helpful in that we know enough

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<sup>1</sup> Theologians who do not hold a high view of scripture would say that the Numbers text is in error, and Jesus's teaching is corrective. For those of us who believe that the Holy Spirit stands behind all scripture as its ultimate Author, such an explanation is unacceptable. We must assume that God holds a united perspective regarding the Sabbath, and that the two seemingly conflicting texts can be harmonised—with the perspective Jesus provides somehow serving as the key to resolution.

about the life and teaching of Jesus Christ to offer a calculated guess as to how we might handle the case. Although it is speculation, it seems likely that Paul's prayerful consideration of what to say to believers in the situation he addresses in verses 12–16 would have included asking the question: how does all that I know about the words and works of Jesus Christ help me to understand the Lord's will in this case?

The potential pitfall here is that we have to extract or abstract our understanding of Jesus Christ from the gospels (and the rest of the New Testament). The abstracted vision of Jesus Christ then becomes a basis for evaluating potential interpretations of other texts. If our interpretation of the nature of Christ is flawed, we shall superimpose that flawed understanding upon the teaching of other texts, thus, distorting their meaning too.

For the sake of argument, let us imagine that there were no texts in the gospels in which Christ taught about eternal judgement. Let us also imagine that an interpreter concludes from her study of the gospels that eternal judgement is incompatible with the love of God as embodied in the life of Christ. When the same interpreter then encounters Revelation 20:11–15, she may wrongly conclude that it cannot be teaching eternal judgement, since that would be incompatible with her view of Christ. This hypothetical example illustrates the potential pitfall—assuming that the natural meaning of a text of scripture cannot be the intended meaning because it does not seem to fit *our view* of Christ.

### 3. The Proposal

The two pitfalls outlined in the previous section by no means invalidate the christocentric principle. The principle remains a valuable hermeneutical tool. In this section, I want to propose one refinement to

the christocentric principle as outlined by Peppler (2012). I hope the refinement will help to minimise the risk of the two pitfalls. The refinement is that, *to some extent, and in some instances, the rest of the canon needs to inform the christocentric principle, just as the christocentric principle often guides our interpretation of the rest of the canon.*

To some extent, we need to extract our portrait of Jesus Christ from the whole New Testament, and not just from the gospels. As eye-witnesses and first-hand recipients of revelation, the apostles interpreted and applied the life of Christ in the church under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. All the New Testament writings are overtly christocentric, and are based on first-hand apostolic interpretations of Christ's life. For example, the gospels contain no teachings by Jesus about order within marriage and family, but they do contain many examples of Jesus treating women with dignity and value atypical of his time and culture. Some may conclude that Jesus did not believe in male headship. Having reached this conclusion about Jesus, they might use the christocentric principle to argue that Old and New Testament texts which appear to teach male headship in marriage must be interpreted otherwise. This, however, would be an irresponsible and invalid application of the christocentric principle. We should not use a dubious assumption about Jesus abstracted from indirect evidence to nullify the plain meaning of other scriptures. Rather, we must allow passages like Ephesians 5:22–33 and 1 Peter 3:1–7 to complement the picture of Jesus painted in the gospels. The Lord Jesus Christ affirmed the dignity and value of women and opposed all forms of abuse and exploitation, but he did not overturn the other biblical teachings about family order. Allowing other texts to round out our understanding of Christ in areas where the gospels are silent or ambiguous does not undermine the intent of the christocentric principle; it strengthens and affirms it.

The christocentric principle needs to cut both ways—Christ's life informs our interpretation of other scriptures, but other scriptures also inform our interpretation of Christ's life. As formulated, the principle advocates that we interpret all scripture in the light of what the words and works of Jesus Christ reveal about the nature, will, and purposes of God. Since the life of Christ is the climactic self-revelation of God to man, it rightly serves as a framework and a lens for understanding God's other acts of self-disclosure. With this, I am in full agreement. However, sometimes the gospels provide us with an incomplete or inconclusive portrait of Christ's attitudes or thoughts regarding something. In such cases, it is dangerous to reinterpret what seem to be clear teachings in other scriptures to conform to our abstracted understanding of what Jesus Christ is like. Rather, we should take those clear teachings as reliable records of God's nature, and use them to correct or complete our portrait of Christ.

1 Peter 3:1–6 furnishes another example of the proposed refinement to the christocentric principle. If the gospels are read in isolation, the radical, confrontational ministry style of Jesus, together with his claims that he had come to divide families (e.g. Matt 10:34–36; Luke 14:26–27), might lead us to believe that Jesus would want believing wives to evangelise their unbelieving husbands aggressively. Peter, however, writing as one who knew Jesus rather well, shows that the Lord does not expect wives to use confrontational method of witnessing to their unsaved husbands. Instead, Peter tells believing wives to 'be subject to your own husbands, so that ... they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives' (1 Pet 3:1, ESV). Peter knew the Lord Jesus Christ intimately, and here he interprets and applies what he understood of the Lord's will and ways to the question of how unbelieving wives should witness to their husbands. Peter's counsel here must be understood as part of the New Testament's interpretation of the Lord

Jesus Christ. In this instance, we must allow Peter's letter to help us interpret the gospel accounts of Christ, not the other way around.

## Conclusion

This article affirms the potential and promise of the christocentric principle as a hermeneutical tool for doing evangelical theology. It has direct value for rightly interpreting the Word of God, which affects the fields of biblical studies and systematic theology. It has less direct value for interpreting present and preferred praxis—what Christ is doing and what he would have his people do. If the objective of theological formation is to equip thinking practitioners who can do integrated theology, then the christocentric principle is a valuable tool.

There are two pitfalls for practitioners wishing to deploy the christocentric principle. The first is the danger of allowing the gospels to become a canon within the canon, treating them as superior revelation to the rest of the Bible, even to the rest of the New Testament. The second danger is that a flawed portrait of Christ might be imposed upon the clear teachings of other texts, resulting in distortion rather than clarity. The proposed solution is that, to some extent, and in some instances, the rest of the canon needs to inform the christocentric principle, just as the christocentric principle often guides our interpretation of the rest of the canon. This refinement is in keeping with the spirit of the christocentric principle, which presupposes a canonical approach to doing theology, but contends that Christ is the interpretive key to understanding the canonical message correctly.

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# Interpreting Peter's Vision in Acts 10:9–16

David B Woods<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The paper challenges the traditional Christian interpretation of Peter's vision in Acts 10:9–16. The text, in its biblical context, and together with related developments in early church history, point conclusively to a single interpretation: that the Gentiles have been cleansed by God. The vision does not nullify Jewish dietary laws or the Mosaic Law in general, since there is no support for the interpretation that the vision also pertains to the cleansing of unclean food. This conclusion contradicts the traditional Christian interpretation that the vision has a two-fold meaning, though it is not unique in the literature. The main implication is that Christians need to reassess their reading of the New Testament, and especially Paul, on the Law, in the light of recent literature which challenges traditional interpretations and posits various solutions to age-old disputes.

## Introduction

Acts 10:1–11:18, or 'the Cornelius incident', presents the circumstances, content, and meaning of Peter's vision of the 'sheet' full of animals and, therefore, forms the key text of this study. This paper examines the meaning of the vision to determine whether it pertains to

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<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.

Gentiles—that they are not to be regarded as unclean by Jewish believers—or to do with unclean foods specified in the Mosaic Law. The traditional Christian interpretation is that the vision refers to both Gentiles and unclean food; by implication, the Law as a whole is taken to be annulled, for which the selected passage is commonly used as a proof text. In fact, the two are often regarded as inextricably connected. There are various problems with this dual interpretation, however, and the text itself testifies that only the first interpretation is true: the vision pertains to the cleansing of Gentiles, not unclean food. Supporting this conclusion is a wealth of contextual evidence in the book of Acts and the rest of the New Testament, as well as post-canonical history. Ultimately, however, the strongest support for this interpretation is within the text itself, Acts 10:1–11:18.

Scriptural quotes are taken from the Lexham English Bible (LEB) unless otherwise indicated, and footnotes in quoted texts have been omitted or given separately. Much of the ancient literature is freely available online at the Christian Classics Ethereal Library, including that used herein (by 'Barnabas', Irenaeus, and Augustine).

A synchronic exegetical approach is taken, meaning that the Greek text is taken 'as-is', without regard for how it developed. My hermeneutic is literal for the narrative and symbolic for the vision, as I will justify, and I have adopted a simple grammatico-historical method of exegesis. I seek to establish the meaning of the text in its own right, principally in the context of the book of Acts—as the original audience would have—and to test this against other contextual evidence in the New Testament and early church history.

## 1. Literary Elements

The genre of Acts is historical narrative. This is surely the easiest genre to interpret, and the reason I believe a simple, literal reading of the text—in its historical and literary context—is sufficient to interpret it correctly. The vision Peter saw in Acts 10 was a type of prophetic revelation, exposing God's will for the body of Christ from that time onward. It was not a prophecy in the form of an utterance, like those of Israel's prophets. In addition to hearing a voice from heaven, Peter 'saw' strange and supernatural things whilst in a trance. Elements of the vision are symbolic of real-world entities, not a literal presentation of the entities themselves. Also, the events of the vision were not real (i.e. they were not acted out as prophetic actions [compare with Ezek 5:1–4]). Though the implication of the vision continues even today, the vision itself was not future orientated; rather, it contained a commandment to Peter for that present moment, inducing a critical and permanent change in the constituency of church membership. In Ramm's terminology, the prophecy was essentially didactic, not predictive (1970:250, cited in Osborne 2006:272). That is, it was a 'forthtelling' or proclamation of God's will, as opposed to a foretelling or prediction of the future. Biblical visions are generally not polyvalent; each one has a specific meaning and is not overloaded with additional meanings for the reader to determine. This is especially pertinent because the vision was prescriptive, not descriptive; the revelation of a foundational principle of the New Covenant ought not to be ambiguous.

Acts 10:1–11:18 describes five closely bound primary events:

1. An angelic appearance to Cornelius in Caesarea, instructing him to send for Peter;

2. Peter's visions of the 'sheet' during his stay with Simon, the tanner, in Joppa;
3. Peter's visit and preaching to Gentiles (Cornelius and his household) in Caesarea;
4. The Gentiles' reception of the gospel and baptism in the Holy Spirit and in water under Peter's supervision;
5. Peter's defence of his actions to Jewish believers in Jerusalem, resulting in their acceptance of the revelation that God calls even Gentiles into his kingdom.

Thus, Peter is the central figure and the Gentiles' entry into the kingdom is the primary outcome. Each of the points above indicates a surprising event, three of which involved divine intervention. Taken together, these events indicate a radical change in the New Covenant order from the prevailing *status quo* of the Mosaic Covenant. Also, at the time of Peter's arrival in Caesarea, neither he nor Cornelius nor any of their companions knew what God was about to do—in spite of the angelic appearance and the vision. The familiarity of the story amongst Christians detracts from the element of surprise that it would convey at the time, and the infusion of meaning by Christians using other New Testament texts anachronously (since most of them were still unwritten) has obscured its simplicity.

## 2. Historical and Literary Context

The events narrated in Acts 10:1–11:18 took place at a crucial time in the spread of the gospel to every nation. Carson and Moo (2005:323) point out that one of Luke's primary concerns in writing Acts was to tell of God's plan to include Gentiles among his people. The divide between Jews and Gentiles was very marked, as indicated in both extra-biblical and biblical texts of the period, including Acts itself (*J.W.*

*passim*; Matthew 15:22-26; Acts 15:1-31). The Roman occupation of Israel and the oppression of Jews at times throughout the Empire during the period covered by Acts (c.30-62 AD) exacerbated tensions between Jews and Gentiles.

After the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Jesus' disciples in Acts 2, the new-born church was fervently evangelising its native people, the Jews. Later, in Acts 8, Philip presented the gospel to the people of Samaria who received it, believed in the name of Jesus and were baptised in water. This is significant in that, though Samaritans were partly Jewish and had a very similar faith, the Jews did not accept them as true Jews. Shortly after this, they were baptised in the Holy Spirit through the ministry of Peter and John. These apostles returned to Jerusalem proclaiming the gospel among other Samaritans as they went. Philip, meanwhile, evangelised and baptised the Ethiopian eunuch and then spread the gospel from town to town, all the way up the coast from Azotus in the south to Caesarea in the north (also Acts 8). Acts 9 describes Paul's coming to faith in Jesus, allowing 'the church throughout all of Judea and Galilee and Samaria' to have peace, be built up, and multiply (9:31); note that 'and Samaria' suggests the church's growth amongst semi-Jews. Peter undertook an itinerant ministry among these churches, which brought him to Joppa where he stayed for some time with Simon, the tanner, after his prayer for the resurrection of Tabitha was answered (9:32-43).

The narrative under investigation, Acts 10:1-11:18, is immediately followed by Luke's account of the spread of the gospel to Jews in Cypress and Cyrene, and then to Antioch, resulting in Barnabas moving there. Paul, who had been ministering in Tarsus, presumably to both Jews and Gentiles (according to his calling, Acts 9:15), then joined Barnabas in Antioch, which became known for the establishment of a

predominantly Gentile community of believers. Acts 12 moves on to describe Herod's persecution of the church in Jerusalem and his death, leading to Paul's mission to the Gentiles described in the remainder of the book. The ruling of the apostolic council in Acts 15:1–31 concerning Gentiles' obligation to the Law is particularly significant.

It is no exaggeration, therefore, that Acts 10:1–11:18 is embedded in a matrix of events telling of the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles.

### 3. Interpretations in the Literature

Historically, Christians have usually interpreted Peter's vision to mean that both unclean food and Gentiles have been pronounced clean by God. From at least the time of the Reformation this dual interpretation was well established. Calvin's commentary on Acts 10:15 (1585:322) makes this clear:

He speaketh of meats; but this sentence must be extended unto all parts of the life. It is word for word, *That which God hath made clean, do not thou make profane*; but the sense is, it is not for us to allow or condemn any thing; but as we stand and fall by the judgment of God alone, so is he judge of all things (Romans 14:4). As touching meats, after the abrogating of the law, God pronounceth that they are all pure and clean.

Later influential Christian writers such as Matthew Henry continued in this vein (Henry 1994, originally 1706) as have many modern scholars, including FF Bruce (1988:206), Darrell Bock (2007:390, 394) and Robert Stein (2011:106). Furthermore, this view is often published in marginal notes of study Bibles commenting on Acts 10:15, such as the NIV (1985) and the *ESV study Bible*. Also common is the argument that the issues of food and the Gentiles are inextricably related (see Bruce

and Bock, for example). Rudolph Bultmann's *Theology of the New Testament* summarized in Zetterholm (2009:74), presents the traditional Christian interpretation of Paul's writings in general, in which 'Paul makes no distinction between Jews and non-Jews', and contrasts law and works with grace and faith—the law now leading to death (p. 75), and hence, no longer applicable to anyone. Evidently, Bultmann could not reconcile texts like Romans 10:12, in which Paul says there is no distinction between Jews and Gentiles, from those where Paul explicitly differentiated between Jews and Gentiles (such as Rom 9–11 and, speaking of believers in both groups, 1 Cor 1:23), so he ignored the latter. The antinomian tradition which Bultmann reinforced is so deeply entrenched in Christian theology that some Bibles (HCSB; LEB; NRSV) are careful to use an alternate interpretation of *torah*, 'instruction', rather than the usual 'law' in Isaiah's eschatological prophecy, 'out of Zion will go forth the law' (Isa 2:3, KJV). The NET goes so far as to supply 'moral': 'For Zion will be the centre for moral instruction...'

In *An introduction to the New Testament*, however, Carson and Moo (2005:287) are silent on the interpretation of unclean food, preferring simply to state that it was about Gentiles. It is difficult to imagine that this silence is unintentional, given the gravity of the vision. Some other biblical scholars such as Jacob Jervell (cited in Bock 2007:390) limit the vision's interpretation to Gentiles and deny that food is in view (Jervell uses food distinctions in Acts 15 to support his case). John Moxton's (2011) doctoral thesis on Peter's vision focuses not so much on the meaning of the vision as on the dilemma it placed Peter in—at least at that point in time—referring to it as a nightmare. He does however conclude, that 'its target was certainly Peter's misconceptions about Jew-Gentile contact' (p. 209). The NET Bible's study note on Acts 10:28 states, 'Peter sees the significance of his vision as not about

food, but about open fellowship between Jewish Christians and Gentiles.' Notably, the commentators refrain from 'correcting' Peter.

It is not surprising that Messianic Jews—many of whom observe laws that distinguish Jews from Gentiles (especially circumcision, Sabbath, and food laws)—commonly argue that the vision is not about food, only about Gentiles. Michael Brown (2011:206), David Stern (1992:257–261), and Mark Kinzer (2005:68–71), for example, are all in agreement about this.

The literature reveals only two principal interpretations of Peter's vision; there is universal consensus that it pertains to the cleansing of Gentiles, but disagreement over whether it also pertains to cleansing of unclean food. The following section examines what the text itself says regarding the interpretation.

## 4. Textual Analysis: Acts 10:1–11:18

### 4.1. The key question: what was cleansed?

Peter's repeated vision ended each time with a voice from heaven saying, '*The things* which God has made clean, you must not consider unclean!' (Acts 10:15–16). It is important to note that the voice did not specify explicitly what God cleansed; the LEB supplies '*the things*' (hence the italics) whilst most translations supply 'what'. For example, the NET says, 'What God has made clean...' The key question is obvious: *what did God make clean?* Was it unclean food, or was it the Gentiles, or was it both? Christian tradition answers 'both', and uses this text to argue that Jewish dietary laws—and the whole Law in general—were abrogated by God at that point in time. The events that followed, however, indicate that Peter came to a different conclusion.

## 4.2. Vision genre

The scripture tells us that even 'Peter was doubting within himself what the vision which he saw might be...' (Acts 10:17) and pondering its meaning (Acts 10:19) when he was instructed by the Spirit to go with the messengers from Cornelius. Unlike many readers of Acts, Peter did not automatically assume the vision was about food laws. Rather, he reflected on its meaning, which immediately suggests he sought to interpret it figuratively. 'Like the seer of the book of Daniel, Peter realizes he has received a symbolic vision that requires interpretation. As a practicing Jew and a knowledgeable reader of scripture, Peter presumes that the vision is not to be taken at face value' (Kinzer 2005:69).

Each biblical genre has its own interpretive hermeneutic; parables, poetry, and prophecy are all interpreted differently. Unlike historical narrative, visions are interpreted symbolically, not literally. Jeremiah's vision of the boiling cauldron (Jer 1:13) had nothing to do with food. Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones (Ezek 37:1–14) had nothing to do with bones. Zechariah's vision of the woman in the basket (Zech 5:5–11) had nothing to do with women or baskets. Amos' vision of summer fruit (Amos 8) concerned neither summer nor fruit. And Peter's vision had nothing to do with unclean food any more than it did with sheets. The unclean food in the vision was a metaphor. I demonstrate, repeatedly below, that it was a metaphor for the Gentiles. Jews, on moral grounds, regarded Gentiles as unclean, whilst the uncleanness of certain animal species was a ritual uncleanness as defined by the Torah (Deut 14:3–19; Lev 11:1–23). The claim that Acts 10:1–11:18 abrogates the Mosaic Law is based on an allusion that is nowhere made explicit in the text, and originates in a visionary symbol being interpreted literally in spite

of Peter explicitly interpreting it differently (10:28), with demonstrable divine endorsement (10:44).

Bock (2007:389) argues that the Old Testament gives precedents for offensive divine commandments to be taken literally, citing Genesis 22:1–2, Hosea 1:2–3, and Isaiah 20:2–3, and therefore that Peter's vision is to have literal application to the cleansing of unclean food (Bock could have added Ezek 4:12; note the similarity between Ezekiel's protest in Ezek 4:12 and that of Peter in Acts 10:14). His case is undermined in several ways. Firstly, these examples are descriptive not prescriptive, exceptional cases for the purpose of illustration, not normative. There is no suggestion that they received their revelation in bizarre visions, unlike Peter. Hosea's and Isaiah's actions were *intended to offend* in order to shock Israel into repentance to *conform* their conduct to the Law (thus affirming it), not to *change or nullify* the Torah—not a *yod* nor a *kots* of a *yod*!<sup>2</sup> They were action parables (i.e. literally acted out), and that only by the prophet himself. Peter's revelation, on the other hand, was in a trance and had an element of mystery. Also, unlike Bock's examples, its meaning was unclear to the recipient afterwards (10:17). Moreover, Peter did not get up, slaughter and eat as commanded, unlike the obedience shown in Bock's three proof texts. Clearly, Peter did not take this as a positive command<sup>3</sup> to be literally obeyed, but rather, he understood that the negative command ('*The things* which God has made clean, you must not consider unclean!') conveyed the message. Finally, while the positive command to Peter was clearly illegal, none of the Old Testament examples given contained such a command: Abraham was not under Mosaic Law;

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<sup>2</sup> Better known as 'not a jot or a tittle', this well-known Hebraic expression was used by Jesus to stress *the same point*, possibly in Hebrew (Matt 5:18; Bivin 2007:94–96).

<sup>3</sup> One of Kinzer's (2005:69) key questions on this text is, 'Does the vision entail a positive command that Jews now eat nonkosher meat?'

although prostitution is contrary to the Law, marrying a prostitute is not; neither is going about in one's undergarments.<sup>4</sup>

Peter saw the vision three times over. Repetition in the Bible is a technique to emphasise something. Thus, Peter was assured that his vision bore a message of great importance and one might expect it to relate to the Gentiles, because of the hints Luke inserted in leading up to the Cornelius incident (see 5.1.1 below).

### 4.3. Breaking the Law?

Peter was a devout, Law-abiding Jew who, by his own words, had 'never eaten anything common and unclean' (Acts 10:14). Yet, Acts 10:28–29 tells us,

And [Peter] said to [Cornelius' household], 'You know that it is forbidden for a Jewish man to associate with or to approach a foreigner. And to me God has shown *that* I should call no man common or unclean. Therefore—and without raising any objection—I came *when I* was sent for. So I ask for what reason you sent for me.'

Furthermore, Peter was the head apostle. His ritual purity and leadership role were critical elements of his selection by God to be the witness of the vision and the first bearer of the gospel to the Gentiles (see Stern 1992:261). The testimony of a Jewish believer who was defiled or had no position of authority would not have carried the weight of someone with Peter's qualities and position.

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<sup>4</sup> Probably not literally 'naked' as many translations say (Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown 1997; Smith 1992).

Peter claimed that it is unlawful (10:28 in many English translations including the NIV, NASB, ESV, and NET<sup>5</sup>) for Jews to associate with Gentiles—yet, there is nothing written in the Law of Moses against it. Could Peter be referring to the Oral Law, regarded as authoritative even by Jesus (Matt 23:3)? Jewish association with Gentiles was not contrary to the Oral Law either, but rather, to strongly-held social customs enforced as *halakha*. Luke's choice of words implicitly supports this contention: it is ἀθέμιτος (*athemitos*) 'forbidden', as per the Holman Christian Standard Bible and LEB, not ἄνομος (*anomos*), 'unlawful'.<sup>6</sup> Tannaic *halakha* concerning Jew-Gentile fellowship was complicated by differences between Jewish sects following conflicting halakhot: some condemned it whilst others condoned it under certain conditions. Tomson (1990:230–236) gives examples of both sides, explaining that the rabbis, who ruled against Jews having fellowship with Gentiles, were a minority, even within the Land. It would appear from Acts 10:28 that Peter held to this more conservative view, as did the circumcision party (11:2–3), and probably James (Gal 2:12–13) prior to the apostolic council in Acts 15. Thus, Jew-Gentile association could be regarded as 'unlawful', but only concerning a disputed *halakha* held by minority sects, not covenant law.

Stern (1992:258) goes further by saying even that 'forbidden' is too strong: 'the word "*athemitos*", used only twice in the New Testament, does not mean 'unlawful, forbidden, against Jewish law', ... but rather

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<sup>5</sup> The ESV Study Bible comments on the word 'unlawful', 'Not in terms of violating OT commands but in the sense of not following the later customs of strict Jewish traditions about uncleanness. The Jewish traditions of purity made it virtually impossible for them to associate with Gentiles without becoming ritually unclean.'

<sup>6</sup> William Tyndale's Worms octavo edition of 1526 was probably the first English Bible to use the word 'unlawful' in Acts 10:28: 'an unlawfull thinge', followed similarly by the Matthew's (1537) Bishops (1568), Geneva (1587) and KJV (1611)

“taboo, out of the question, not considered right, against standard practice, contrary to cultural norms.” Bruce (1988:209), Witherington (1998:353), and Stott (1990:189) all agree that ‘taboo’ is preferred. Judaism has never formally classified Gentiles as ontologically unclean; rather, the prevalence of idolatry and sexual immorality in Gentile society—especially the pagan Greco-Roman society of the time—resulted in their uncleanness. For these reasons, Jewish rules were introduced to dissociate from Gentiles, reflected anachronistically in Jubilees 22:16, for example. Although such regulations did not carry scriptural authority, they did become engrained in Jewish thinking (see John 18:28). As Stern explains (1992:259), the classification of Gentile products and practices as unclean for Jews was probably extended to include Gentiles themselves, resulting in pervasive negative attitudes toward Gentiles. But contamination through Gentile-association was not automatic. Trade between Jews and Gentiles was common. Table fellowship between Jews and Gentiles is even mentioned in the Mishnah (Avodah Zarah 5:5) since ‘the coexistence with gentiles was accepted as a fact of life’ (Tomson 1990:158). The point here is that it was not, in fact, *unlawful* for Peter ‘to associate with or to approach a foreigner’, nor was Peter pronouncing the Law null and void by doing so. Instead, God had revealed to him that Gentiles are not intrinsically unclean and thus, the taboo of associating with them was invalidated.

Bock (2007:389–390) mentions the Jewish tradition in Midrash Psalms 146:4 that God would one day (alluding to the days of the Messiah) declare all animals clean. This is not convincing evidence for his interpretation of Peter’s vision. Firstly, the reference is to ‘Yahweh sets prisoners free’ in Psalm 146:7; clearly, the link to cleansing of unclean

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Bibles. Other early translations including the 14<sup>th</sup> century Wycliffe follow the Vulgate (‘abominatum’) to render ‘abhominable’ (abominable).

food is tenuous at best. Moreover, the midrash is not decisive on this; it says '*Some say* that every creature that is considered unclean in the present world, the Holy One blessed be He will declare clean in the age to come' (cited in Brown 2007:282, emphasis added). *Aggadic* material is not authoritative, at least not in the evangelical tradition. The midrash is arguably contrary to Jeremiah 31:33; moreover, we are not living in 'the age to come', under the Messiah's reign over the nations from Jerusalem, as the tradition anticipated. Brown (2007:277) similarly objects to this application of the midrash to Mark 7:19 because, first of all, 'the disciples, for many years after this teaching, continued to follow the Torah, and second, that changing the law would contradict Yeshua's rebuke of the Pharisees', referring to Matthew 15:3–9.<sup>7</sup>

Returning to the point that Jew-Gentile relations were not truly unlawful, it is important to note that Cornelius and almost certainly 'his relatives and close friends' who had come to hear Peter were God-fearers.<sup>8</sup> They were thus respectful of Jewish Law, likely keeping the food laws themselves (Bruce 1952:215; NET Study Note on Acts 10:2 quoted in fn. 8 above). They certainly were not rank, immoral, pagan idolaters. Peter indicated that they were acceptable to God because they feared him and did what was right (10:35).<sup>9</sup> This being the case, it is

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<sup>7</sup> *Yeshua* is the Hebrew name for Jesus.

<sup>8</sup> The NET study note on Acts 10:2 explains: 'The description of Cornelius as a *devout, God-fearing man* probably means that he belonged to the category called "God-fearers", Gentiles who worshiped the God of Israel and in many cases kept the Mosaic law, but did not take the final step of circumcision necessary to become a proselyte to Judaism'. Contrary to other authors (Skarsaune 2002:82; Dunn 2006:166), Bock (2007:386) argues that Luke is probably not using 'God-fearer' as a technical term and that Cornelius may not have been a regular worshipper in the local synagogue. In light of the usual use of the word, this seems unlikely. Either way, Luke records that Cornelius feared, honoured, and prayed to the God of Israel.

<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Paul's hearers in Acts 13:46–49, 18:6 and 28:28 were 'not just any Gentiles, but "God-fearers"' (Skarsaune 2002:171). Skarsaune (p. 172) justifies this claim by observing that 'Only twice in the whole of Acts does Paul address Gentiles

unlikely that there was any unclean food in Cornelius' house at all (Kinzer 2005:70). He used to do many charitable deeds for 'the people', almost certainly meaning the Jewish people (Bruce 1952:215; Stern 1992:257).<sup>10</sup> He also prayed 'continually' (LEB; ESV) or 'regularly' (NET), literally, 'through everything' (διὰ παντός, *dia pantos*). He probably even prayed in accordance with the regular Jewish prayer times, since the angel appeared to him while he was praying at three o'clock in the afternoon (Acts 10:3, 30)—the hour for daily Jewish prayer. His piety was noted by God himself (10:4). At the time of the angelic encounter (Acts 10:3), Cornelius had no reason to believe that the Law was nullified though he must have realized that obeying God's instruction ran contrary to Jewish social mores. To him, as a Law-respecting God-fearer and one who esteemed Peter supremely (Acts 10:25), it would have been unthinkable to insult his Jewish guests by offering them unclean food. On three occasions, Luke mentioned the story of the Gentile, Cornelius, and his household believing the gospel and receiving the Holy Spirit (10:1–48; 11:1–18; 15:7–7). This triplet calls attention to the Gentile-cleansing theme, whilst ignoring food completely.

Taken together, these facts refute the traditional Christian claim that Peter broke the law by eating with Cornelius, and further, that this proves he ate unclean food. 'The vision concerned men, not the menu' (Rudolph 2011:48). Dietary laws are not in scope in these events at all;

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who do not belong to the God-fearers'; on the first occasion (Acts 14:8) he was forced to, and the second occasion (Acts 17:16–34) was not his initiative either.

<sup>10</sup> In Acts 10:35, Cornelius together with his family and close friends are described by Peter as those who did what was right. As noted by Bruce (1952:224), this may be an allusion to almsgiving since the Hebrew equivalent of the Greek word δικαιοσύνη (*dikaïosunē*: righteousness) is נְדָבָה (*ṣ<sup>e</sup>dāqāh*), which was (and still is) commonly used in Jewish parlance to denote acts of charity.

the focus is entirely on a change in Jewish-Gentile relations, not being a change in the Law but in cultural tradition.

#### 4.4. Events resulting from the vision

Acts 10:20 provides a clue to the meaning of the vision; the Spirit said to Peter, 'go down, and go with them—not hesitating at all, because I have sent them.' Peter was explicitly instructed by the Holy Spirit to go with the messengers from Cornelius, 'not hesitating', 'without doubting', 'not discriminating', as various translations say. Why would he have hesitated or doubted whether he should go with them, or discriminated against them? Because they were Gentiles: Cornelius was a Roman centurion (Acts 10:1), and his messengers were 'two of the household slaves and a devout soldier' (Acts 10:7). So, from the outset, we have a strong indication that the vision was about Gentiles.

FF Bruce (1988:206) appears to contradict himself in some measure: 'The divine cleansing of food in the vision is a parable of the divine cleansing of human beings in the incident to which the vision leads up. It did not take Peter long to understand this: "God has taught me", he says later in the present narrative, "to call *no human being* profane or unclean" (v. 30).'<sup>11</sup> Why does Bruce write that the events of the vision were a parable and then take them literally? Bruce himself applied the italics to emphasize that the vision's message is about people, yet, he unquestioningly assumes it *also* to be about animals. He does, however, explain that there is a link between the two: consumption of unclean food by Gentiles makes them unclean, so the supposed cleansing of unclean animals thus also cleanses Gentiles. This intertwined relationship is certainly of concern, but does not justify his conclusion. As already discussed, Gentiles are not defiled by eating unclean food

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<sup>11</sup> The reference to Acts 10:30 should be 10:28.

because it is not unclean for them, and social relations between them and Jews do not defile the latter. The uncleanness of the Gentiles derived from immorality and idolatry, so the supposed cleansing of unclean animals would not have the effect that Bruce claims.

Stern (1992:258) notes on Acts 10:28 that Peter sought to avoid offending his Gentile hearers by referring to them not by the usual term, ἔθνος (*ethnos*: nation—typically used by Jews of any nation except Israel), which 'could be interpreted as having a deprecatory nuance' (citing Matthew 5:47) but rather by ἀλλόφυλος (*alloghulos*), 'someone who belongs to another tribe'. As a *hapax legomenon* in the New Testament this is particularly notable, and it hints that Peter has grasped the meaning of the vision. His comment, 'God has shown *that* I should call no man common or unclean' in 10:28 makes it explicit. This cannot be overemphasized, and Luke here used direct speech to stress the point. Peter explained that God showed him, through the vision, that Gentiles are not to be regarded as unclean. *The text interprets itself* without relying on other books of the New Testament, as the traditional Christian interpretation does—at risk. There is no indication whatsoever that the vision pertains to cleansing of unclean food. Thus, Peter's own uncertainty on the meaning of the vision (Acts 10:17, 19) was resolved by Acts 10:20 (discussed above) and 10:28. This is greatly reinforced by Acts 10:34–36:

So Peter opened *his* mouth *and* said, 'In truth I understand that God is not one who shows partiality, but in every nation the one who fears him and who does what is right is acceptable to him. *As for* the message that he sent to the sons of Israel, proclaiming the good news of peace through Jesus Christ—this one is Lord of all ...'

Often overlooked is the fact that the 'sheet' Peter saw also contained clean animals; this is implicit in the reference to 'all the four-footed

animals ... of the earth'. Why would God pronounce clean animals which were never unclean to begin with? It is far more persuasive to interpret the mix of clean and unclean animals contained together in the 'sheet' as an image of the mixture of Jews and Gentiles, respectively, together in the Body of Christ—especially considering that Jews who believe in Christ are cleansed from sin in the same manner as Gentiles.

#### 4.5. God's confirmation of Peter's interpretation

Acts 10:34–35 makes it clear, yet again, that the vision had taught Peter that God is not partial to Jews, but accepts anyone from any nation who 'fears him and does what is right.' It is worth noting that God's cleansing was not a universal cleansing of all people regardless of their behaviour; those who did not fear God or do what was right were not automatically cleansed.<sup>12</sup> In Luke's wording, Peter 'opened *his* mouth', which indicates 'a solemn expression' (Bock 2007:295) or something of importance; Matthew used the same expression to introduce Jesus' benediction in Matthew 5:2. In addition, Peter's opening words 'in truth' (effectively a translation of 'amen') are used in scripture to convey importance. This is a meta-comment which serves 'to alert the reader that what follows the meta-comment is especially important' (Runge 2008a). Peter was not still pondering what the vision meant; he had fully grasped the meaning and presented it in the same sentence. His choice of words, whether in Greek or else in Aramaic (or even Hebrew) via an interpreter,<sup>13</sup> suggests that such people are not in any way inferior to the people of God; the Greek *προσωπολήπτῆς*

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<sup>12</sup> In this regard, I have already presented the godly lifestyle of Cornelius, who clearly harboured no anti-Semitic sentiment. Similarly, those Gentiles who first heard the gospel in Antioch were probably God-fearers who heard it being preached when they went to worship in the local synagogue (Skarsaune 2002:167).

<sup>13</sup> Bruce (1988:213) mentions there are a number of 'Aramaisms' in Peter's speech, suggesting that it may have originally been given in Aramaic.

(*prosōpolēemptēs*, literally *lifter of faces*) in verse 34 alludes to the priestly blessing in which God is called upon to lift up his face on, or show favour to, the Israelites (Num 6:26; Bruce 1988:210). This emphasizes that God does not favour Israel over the Gentiles in charging sin (Bock 2007:396) and 'why judgment and accountability before God are keys to Peter's speech' (p. 402). Acts 10:36 carries this through: Jesus Christ is Lord of all—that is, *all nations*, not only Israel. God's *international* reign was anticipated by Israel's prophets (Isa 2:2–4; 25:6; 60:1–3; 66:18–20 and Zech 14:9; also see Bruce 1988:211–212) and commonly in the Psalms (22:27–28, 46:10 for example); a widely-held Jewish belief was that the Messiah would bring the nations under the reign of the one true God. Luke's description of the vision and subsequent events portrays God's kingdom as universal and non-discriminatory toward different *ethnos*, not that dietary laws are cancelled.

Peter went on immediately to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles (10:37–43), upon which the Holy Spirit fell upon Peter's Gentile hearers (Acts 10:44), resulting in them speaking in tongues and praising God. By contrast, although the Samaritans and Ethiopian eunuch described in Acts 8 had believed the gospel and been baptised in water, they had not yet been given the Holy Spirit. Thus, God confirmed that Peter's interpretation of the vision was correct: the Gentiles were not to be regarded as unclean or common. This astonished the circumcised believers who accompanied Peter. They discussed the matter and concluded immediately that the believing Gentiles must be baptised. Yet again, the discourse is about Gentiles. Not a word has been spoken about cleansing of unclean food since the vision itself, nor have any events alluded to it.

#### 4.6. Peter's defence and the church leaders' conclusion

Chapter 11 opens with news of a scandal: 'that the Gentiles too had accepted the word of God'—not that the Law had come to an end. Acts 11:3 appears to raise both concerns—that Peter associated with uncircumcised men and ate with them, therefore, possibly eating unclean food. Yet, there is no explicit accusation that Peter broke the dietary regulations, only that he ate with uncircumcised men. Even if Cornelius and his household had eaten unclean food (most unlikely, as demonstrated earlier), this does not prove that Peter himself ate unclean food any more than a vegetarian sharing a meal with non-vegetarians proves that he ate meat. Note that Peter's defence (11:4-17) does not include any defence for eating unclean food; rather, he explains why he had gone to the Gentiles, preached to them, and baptised them. Peter's explanation in 11:12, that 'the Spirit told me to accompany them, not hesitating *at all*', or perhaps, 'making no distinction' (ESV) brings Jew-Gentile relations into focus. The silence on food speaks too loudly to be ignored. Indeed, one can infer that Peter did not, in fact, eat non-kosher food at Cornelius' home. He produced six witnesses in his defence<sup>14</sup> (11:12): 'three times more than what would normally be required' by Jewish Law (NET study notes, alluding to Deut 19:15). This suggests that he had, by no means, broken or disregarded any of the written Law.

Luke created a tension for the reader in Acts 11:17 by describing how the former opponents of the Gentile mission first 'became silent' and then 'praised God', before the climax and conclusion of the entire pericope in verse 18: 'God has granted the repentance *leading* to life to the Gentiles also!' The Gentiles, though grammatically the indirect object, are brought to the front of the sentence (not counting the

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<sup>14</sup> Or seven by Jewish reckoning (that is, including Peter's own testimony); see Bruce 1952:232.

conjunctions)—before the subject 'God', verb ('has granted') and object ('repentance *leading* to life'). Such fronting is typical in Koinē Greek as a means of stressing a term, in this case, *the Gentiles*. Further, Luke uses direct speech to emphasize this conclusion. All these literary devices convey the profundity of the conclusion. The final verse contains no hint whatsoever that those charging Peter concluded that their dietary laws had been rescinded, only that God has granted repentance unto life to Gentiles 'also'. The 'also' that Luke uses is *καί* (*kai*), which when used adverbially (as here) indicates that additional information is provided (Runge 2008b), the content of which is explicitly stated. To add matters of food laws to it is simply eisegesis.

#### 4.7. Conclusion of the textual analysis

The information that can be derived directly from the text, Acts 10:1–11:18, points clearly to a single meaning of Peter's vision, namely, that Gentiles are no longer to be regarded as unclean. Contrary to the traditional Christian interpretation, the meaning is not obviously that unclean foods have been cleansed, as revealed in the fact that Peter was puzzled about the meaning of the vision, and the fact that visions are symbolically interpreted, and that they generally have one primary meaning. That primary meaning has to be that the vision pertains to Gentiles, since it is the only undisputed meaning. The derivation of the traditional interpretation leans heavily on the misunderstanding that it was 'unlawful' for Jews to associate with Gentiles, which was neither according to Mosaic Law nor according to Oral Law. The events which followed the vision also confirm the 'Gentile' interpretation by virtue of the gift of the Spirit to them and by Peter's own confession in 10:28, 34–35. The assumption that Peter ate unclean food with Cornelius has been shown to be very unlikely, Cornelius being a God-fearer who had the greatest respect for Peter. The accusation against Peter by the

church leaders and 'those of the circumcision' (11:2–3) in Jerusalem did not explicitly state that he ate unclean food, but rather, that he had table fellowship with them. Neither did his defence (11:4–17) contain any justification for his supposed eating of unclean food, thus undermining the abovementioned assumption. Finally, I noted that Luke used several literary devices to emphasize the one and only conclusion reached by all his hearers, that 'God has granted the repentance *leading* to life to the Gentiles also' (11:18).

## 5. Analysis of the Contextual Evidence

### 5.1. Contextual evidence in Acts

#### 5.1.1. *Preceding context*

There is little contention that the Jewish believers in Jesus remained Torah-observant, at least until the events of Acts 10. The great Pharisee, who formerly had disciples Paul, Gamaliel the Elder, bravely protected the apostles from execution, suggesting that the Jesus-movement might even be 'of God' (Acts 5:27–40). This would be most unlikely if they were living contrary to Jewish law. Skarsaune (2002:154–155) explains the reasons for the two waves of persecution of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 5:17–41; 7:54–8:3), neither of which had anything to do with abandoning the Law. In fact, Acts 6:8–15 describes how Diaspora Jews residing in Jerusalem *falsely* accused Steven of speaking against the law and the temple. Skarsaune (2002:160–162) further presents a case for the early Jewish believers continuing in Torah-observance except for the cult—at least *atonement* sacrifices which were 'superfluous' (p. 161)—long after Peter's vision. For example, Paul's sacrifice in Acts 21:23–26 was 'votive'—a type of thanksgiving offering—not atoning (p. 157, fn. 22).

The historical context reveals an ever-widening circle of peoples to whom the gospel was proclaimed, from Jews in Jerusalem to Samaritans (semi-Jewish but widely regarded by Jews as outcasts) in Acts 8 and then, in the same chapter, to the Ethiopian eunuch. His pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost indicates that he was either a proselyte to Judaism or a God-fearer (though in either case he was unable to enter the Temple due to his emasculation, Deut 23:1). In Acts 10, the gospel was preached more widely to a select group of God-fearers and by the time of Acts 18:6-11, Paul was ministering freely to Gentiles in Corinth. Peter's vision of the 'sheet' was pivotal to this development which changed the course of history forever. On the other hand, the presumed abrogation of Jewish dietary laws by means of Peter's vision is not even mentioned within the broader historical context of events described in Acts,<sup>15</sup> nor is the Law as a whole abolished.

While in Joppa, Peter was hosted by Simon the tanner. Luke mentioned Simon's occupation three times (Acts 9:43, 10:6 and 10:32) which hints at something significant. 'Some degree of uncleanness was reckoned to attach to a tanner's work, because it involved regular contact with the skins of dead animals' (Bruce 1988:200). 'Tanning was an unpleasant and despised trade, regarded as a defect and ground for divorce, or to be kept at a distance, like corpses and graves (*m. Ketuboth* 7.10; *Baba Bathra* 2.9)' (Dunn 2006:97 fn. 70). Simon's potential uncleanness derived from his trade; there is no suggestion that he ate anything unclean—given Peter's convictions (Acts 10:14); he would not have stayed with Simon if that were the case. The issue Luke was preparing his readers for was that those regarded as unclean were, in fact, not.

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<sup>15</sup> Acts 15:1-31 is discussed under the next section below.

Luke provides another clue as to the meaning of Peter's vision by way of parallel in the story of Paul's encounter with the Lord, resulting in his coming to faith (Acts 9:1-20). The Lord told Ananias to seek Paul 'because this man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel' (9:15). The surprise is not only in the fact that the very man who hated Jesus' disciples would be chosen, but also, in the fact that he is chosen to testify of Jesus to *Gentiles* and their kings (since Israel had no king). Luke was careful to emphasize this in his ordering of those who would hear Paul: first Gentiles, then Gentile kings, and lastly the sons of Israel. Again, the focus is on Gentiles, not food.

The story immediately confirms this with the account of an angelic appearance (Acts 10:3) to Cornelius, who was not only Gentile but also a centurion of the Roman army occupying the Jewish homeland. However, Luke is careful to qualify Cornelius as 'devout and fearing God together with all his household, doing many charitable deeds for the people and praying to God [continually]' (Acts 10:1). Though Luke is simply following chronological order, in the stories of Paul's divine encounter, the mention of Simon's tanning business, and the angelic appearance to Cornelius, the reader is being prepared for a significant shift in the Gentiles' relation to God. None of these incidents allude to a change in Jewish dietary law, or the Law in general.

The events described in Acts 11:19-26 may have occurred after those of 10:1-11:18, but it would appear that they took place earlier, and that Luke deliberately told the story of Peter's vision first so that the reader was prepared for 11:20, in which the gospel was proclaimed to Gentiles in Antioch.

Luke certainly highlights the significance of the Cornelius episode with the benefit of hindsight: he has inserted it (Acts 9.32-11.18)

together with the account of Paul's conversion (Acts 9.1–31) into the otherwise unbroken sequence of Hellenist history (Acts 6.1–8.40; 11.19–30) so that in his narrative at least it clearly precedes the breakthrough at Antioch (Dunn 2006:165).

Two hints that the evangelising of Hellenists<sup>16</sup> in Antioch in Acts 11:20 took place before the Cornelius incident are given. Firstly, the evangelists from Cyprus and Cyrene are described as moving to Antioch right after the scattering of believers from Jerusalem 'because of the persecution that took place over Stephen' (11:19, see 8:1). This was before Peter and John's trip to Samaria, the time of peace in the region (9:31) and Peter's work in the coastal areas (9:32–43), and it triggered the Jerusalem church to send Barnabas to Antioch to inspect the matter, who evidently approved (11:22–24). Secondly, there is no indication that the Spirit was given to the Hellenists in Antioch at that time. If the Hellenists were indeed Gentiles, it implies their acceptance by those who formerly considered them unclean, which may have motivated Luke to delay the narration till after the Cornelius incident. This would support the interpretation of the unclean animals in Peter's vision as representing Gentiles, being an example of their acceptance by Jews, whilst adding nothing to the claim that the animals also represented unclean food.

### 5.1.2. *Post-vision evidence*

Interpreting Peter's vision as an abolition of the food laws runs contrary to the whole of Luke's writings, the *Gospel of Luke* and the *Acts of the*

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<sup>16</sup> The interpretation of Hellenists as 'Greeks', that is, Gentiles, is not certain because the word Ἑλληνιστῆς (*Hellēnistēs*) could refer to Greek-speaking Jews (as in Acts 6:1), according to the LEB study notes. Other study Bibles such as the ESV and NET disregard this possibility. Given the placement of this passage relative to the Cornelius

*Apostles*, which constitute one quarter of the New Testament. Luke and the apostles, whose story he narrates, uphold the Law at every point. James especially was known for his Torah-observance (James 2:8–12 [see Bauckham 1999:142 on this]; Painter 2001:54–57; *Ant. 20.200–201*<sup>17</sup>). Hegesippus, cited in Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* 2.23.2–18, indicates that James was highly regarded by devout Jewish leaders. As for Paul, Carson and Moo (2005:293) state, 'the Paul of Acts is utterly loyal to the law ...' The central question of the 'Jerusalem council', or 'apostolic council', described in Acts 15:1–31 is whether or not the *Gentile* believers in Jesus are to be subjected to the Law. This would make no sense if the Jewish believers had concluded from Peter's vision that the Law was abrogated for themselves; in that case the group of Pharisees mentioned in 15:5 would have criticised the apostles for forsaking the Law. Rather, 'the Jewish obligation to maintain Jewish identity was universally presupposed' (Soulen 1996:171). Kinzer (2005:67) argues, 'If one was a Jew, one was not just free to live as a Jew, one was obligated to do so. Otherwise, the issue of Gentile obligation to live as a Jew would have been nonsensical.' Moreover, Peter's address to the council in 15:7–11 refers to God's acceptance of Cornelius' household without coming under the Law, yet Peter retained a crisp distinction between 'we' (Jewish believers) and 'they' (Gentile believers). This too would be meaningless if the Law had been abolished. God made 'no distinction' (15:9) in terms of how Jews and Gentiles are saved, yet Peter, in his speech to the council in Jerusalem, made a distinction between Israel and the nations, consistent with the rest of scripture (discussed below).

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incident, and the fact that the disciples in Antioch were called Christians (11:26) instead of Nazarenes or Jews, I submit that the Hellenists were, in fact, Gentiles.

Skarsaune is most helpful in showing that the aim is to remove any remaining cause for offence prohibiting table fellowship between Jews and Gentiles. A lengthy quote from Skarsaune (2002:170) concerning the stipulations imposed by the Jerusalem council upon Gentile believers is warranted:

Gentile believers are told to make a concession to their Jewish brethren: they should not eat meat sacrificed to idols, or meat from strangled animals, that is, meat with blood in it (Acts 15:20, 29; 21:25). In the Torah the stranger living among Israelites, the 'resident alien,' was told to observe these commandments: 'If anyone of the house of Israel or of the aliens that reside among them eats any blood, I will set my face against that person who eats blood' (Lev 17:10; cf. further Lev 18:26; 20:2).

In the light of this, the meaning of the 'apostolic decree' becomes clear: the Gentiles need not become circumcised Jews in order to be fully accepted into the people of God, but they are requested to keep those commandments of the Torah which are obligatory for Gentiles living among Jews. Among these commands, special emphasis is laid on those related to *table fellowship*—*in other words, the decree is specifically aimed at the unity of mixed congregations* [emphasis added]. The Jewish believers are asked to recognize their uncircumcised brethren as belonging fully to the new people of the Messiah, while the Gentiles are asked to respect the sensitivities of their Jewish brethren and not to violate the Torah commandments valid for Gentiles living among Israelites.

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<sup>17</sup> Here, James is falsely accused of breaking the law, but later (too late to spare his life), he was defended by those most committed to the Law—probably the Pharisees (see Skarsaune 2002:160).

It is important to note that James' implicit appeal to the Torah validates its continuing authority over Jews, rather than disregarding it. It would be incongruent for James to use the Torah as a basis for a commandment to Gentile believers if the Torah itself had been abrogated. Moreover, we see once again that the context is about Jew-Gentile relations, which were ultimately made possible because of the message of Peter's vision in which the unclean animals clearly portray Gentiles. Indeed, it is in this context that Peter's interpretation of his vision (10:28) is implicitly referred to; apparently, he had explained it to James (15:14), who further validated it from the prophets Amos (9:11-12) and Isaiah (45:21). The NET study note on Acts 15:17 points out that James 'demonstrated a high degree of cultural sensitivity when he cited a version of the text (the Septuagint) that Gentiles would use'. Clearly, James understood Peter's vision to pertain to the cleansing of Gentiles, not unclean food.

In Acts 18:7-11, Luke records that Paul lived for a year and a half with Titius Justus, 'a worshiper of God', or 'a God-fearer', as the LEB footnote to verse 7 explains. Acts 21:17-26 further refutes the theory that the apostles deduced from Peter's vision that the Law was nullified. In 21:20, 'James, and all the elders' listened gladly to the success of Paul's Gentile mission before proudly telling him how their Jewish mission was prospering. In it, they boasted that many myriads of Jews had come to faith in Jesus, 'and they are all zealous adherents of the law.' Stern (1992:300) points out that *πόσαι μυριάδες* literally means 'many tens of thousands', not just 'many thousands' as English Bibles usually say. Instead of despairing of such fanaticism for the Law, they raised a concern to the contrary: that Paul was *falsely accused* of 'teaching all the Jews *who are* among the Gentiles *the* abandonment of Moses, telling them not to circumcise *their* children or to live according to *our* customs' (10:21). The remainder of the passage describes steps

taken to prove just the opposite; these were proposed by James and the elders, and willingly accepted by Paul. Later, in Acts 28:17–18, Paul adamantly denied doing anything contrary to Judaism; how could he do so if he had abandoned the Law? On the other hand, the joyous reception of news about Paul's Gentile mission shows that the elders acknowledged that Gentiles had been cleansed by their faith. Often overlooked is the fact that the Jewish mission would have been hindered by abrogation of the Law, since Jews would be offended by it. If Jew-Gentile table fellowship was not prohibited by Mosaic Law in the first place, as I have already shown, then, the net effect of repealing food laws would be detrimental to the growth of the church.

There can be no doubt, therefore, that Luke portrays the apostles, elders, and myriads of other Jewish believers as continuing in a strictly Torah-observant lifestyle, whilst accepting on equal terms Gentiles who had come to faith even without taking on the Law—except the few regulations specified in Acts 15:20 which enabled table fellowship between Jewish and Gentile believers.

## **5.2. Contextual evidence in the New Testament**

The New Testament contains a number of references to the eating of unclean—or potentially unclean—food (e.g. Mark 7:19; Rom 14:14–15; 1 Cor 8–10), and the traditional Christian interpretation is that all foods have been cleansed for all believers. This has been challenged by a number of scholars (among others, Brown 2007; Lemans 2005; Kinzer 2005; Nanos 1996; Rudolph 2011; Stern 2007; Zetterholm 2009). They argue that these verses indicate that all foods (except strangled animals; see Acts 15:20<sup>18</sup>) are clean for Gentiles—as they always have been.

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<sup>18</sup> Strangled animals might be forbidden because they are not drained of their blood, the drinking of which appears to be precluded in this verse (for reasons discussed

This does not imply they are *ritually* clean for Jews—even Jewish believers in Jesus. The uncleanness of these animals stems not from some quality they possess, but from God's intention to separate a people, Israel, unto himself. Animals cannot be intrinsically unclean because God made them (see Mark 7:18–19 and Rom 14:14; Brown 2011:205–206). 'The Hebrew expressions *tohoRAH* (cleanness, purity) and *tumAH* (uncleanness, impurity) are technical terms that have no positive or negative connotations' (Safrai 2012).

The fact that Peter and other Jewish believers withdrew from eating with the Gentiles in Galatians 2:12–13 does not prove that they ate the same food; the issue at hand was table fellowship, not food laws (see Lancaster 2011:82–83; Rudolph 2011:47–48; Tomson 1990:221–281; Zetterholm 2005); the same argument is used of Peter eating with Gentiles in Acts 10, as discussed below. Referring to the Paul-Peter conflict in Galatians 2:11–14, Rudolph (2011:49) says the assumption 'that Paul consistently lived as a Gentile and expected Peter to do the same is contradicted by the standard interpretation of 1 Cor 9:19–23 that Paul sometimes lived like a Jew. But, if Paul 'occasionally conformed to Jewish law' to win others, how could he correct Peter for doing what appears to be the same thing?' Thus, the cause for the conflict was indeed close association with Gentiles, not the eating of unclean food.

Table fellowship was a major cultural issue in the Middle East; it was something Jesus' atonement addressed (Eph 2:14–16) but the unity he created does not necessarily imply homogeneity. R Kendall Soulen

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above), though 'blood' may also refer to bloodshed (Stern 1992:277–279; Bivin 2007:141–144). Food sacrificed to idols may also be forbidden in this verse—as the NIV translates it—but the argument for this is not conclusive.

explains, 'the gospel and the table fellowship it founds *confirms* rather than *annuls* the different and mutual dependence of Israel and the nations' (1996:169). Indeed, Paul's allusions to the *Shema* (Deut 6:4) in 1 Corinthians 8:6, Ephesians 4:6, and 1 Timothy 2:5 implicitly require an on-going differentiation between Israel and the nations: if Gentiles have to become Jewish to follow Jesus, then God is not the God of the nations, but only of Israel; if Jews have to lose their Jewish identity to follow Jesus, then God is no longer the God of Israel (Rom 3:3; 11:1, 29).<sup>19</sup> Jewish believers, who forsake the Law, neglect Paul's 'rule in all the churches' (1 Cor 7:17–24) in which he instructed Jewish believers to remain Jewish. His comment in verse 18 is often misinterpreted to mean the Law is annulled, whereas he was really proclaiming equality of circumcised and uncircumcised. 7:18b actually emphasizes the importance of keeping the commandments of God, that is, the Torah.<sup>20</sup>

Jesus neither broke the food laws nor taught that they would be rescinded (Matt 5:18). Following a discussion on Mark 7:19b, in which he argues that it is written for Gentiles, Kinzer (2005:57) writes, 'the Gospel of Mark as a whole presents Yeshua as an observant Jew who never undercuts accepted Jewish practice.' Further, 'Matthew and Luke give no support to the view that Yeshua abolished the Jewish food laws' (p. 58). As for Acts and the Pauline writings, Kinzer continues, they 'show that eating with Gentiles was a major hurdle for Jewish Yeshua-believers—even apart from the issue of nonkosher food. If Yeshua abolished the Jewish dietary laws, then why did his Jewish followers (such as Peter in Acts 10) require special divine intervention before they would even sit at table with non-Jews?' Rudolph (2011:48) concurs: 'Three times Peter rejects Jesus' instruction to kill and eat

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<sup>19</sup> For further discussion on the oneness of God in relation to his reign over all nations, see Nanos 1996:184 and Bauckham 2008:94–106. Also refer to Zechariah 14:9.

<sup>20</sup> For a comprehensive study on this text, refer to Rudolph 2010.

impure (κοινόν) and unclean (ἀκάθαρτον) animals (Acts 10:14–16). This implies that Peter had never received such a teaching or example from Jesus.' Validating or disproving whether these New Testament verses abrogate the Jewish food laws is not my concern here; my point is that there is a strong case against the traditional view that requires consideration. More importantly, none of the food-related texts outside of Acts refer to Peter's vision. Even if it were conclusively shown that dietary laws have been rescinded in other books of the New Testament, they do not derive from Peter's vision.

God's purpose in the cleansing proclaimed in the vision also needs serious consideration. Few would argue with Bock (2007:390) that it was 'to expand the gospel'. However, the object of cleansing dictates how one understands this. Bock follows the traditional Christian interpretation that the vision pertains to both food and Gentiles; he believes table fellowship between Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus was impossible if they were subject to different dietary regulations. Cleansing of unclean animals would not affect Gentiles, so the purpose would be to release Jews from their kosher diet, thereby allowing them to eat with Gentiles. As discussed above, however, the Mosaic Law does not prohibit Jew-Gentile table fellowship, on condition that those Gentiles keep to basic morals that Jews believed God required of all humanity. These minimal moral regulations 'are simply an early version of the so-called Noahide commandments, described in later rabbinic literature (first in *t. 'Abod. Zar.* 8.4), defining who could be considered a righteous non-Jew' (Zetterholm 2009:151, summarizing Nanos 1996).

Judaism has never required Gentiles to observe what have been called 'identity markers' or 'boundary markers' (Dunn 1990:196, 2006:139 respectively), 'border lines' (Boyarin 2006) or 'sign laws' (meaning laws identifying members of the Mosaic Covenant) that distinguish

Jews from Gentiles: primarily circumcision, Sabbath, and food laws. Instead, as the apostle James later formalized, it was enough for Gentiles to 'abstain from the pollution of idols and from sexual immorality and from what has been strangled and from blood' (Acts 15:20). The issue that the Jerusalem council sought to address was how unity (particularly as exhibited in table fellowship) between Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus may be achieved; the decree it issued did not indicate that all foods have been cleansed, and therefore, Gentiles who eat unclean foods. Rather, it stated that Jews and Gentiles are saved by the same grace (Acts 15:11), that 'God first concerned himself to take from among the Gentiles a people for his name' (15:14), alluding to Peter's vision and interpreting it as pertaining to Gentiles, not foods. This implied that Gentiles are acceptable (not unclean) if only they observe the very minimum of moral laws.

It is difficult to comprehend why God would annul the very laws he had recently affirmed in Matthew 5:17–19,<sup>21</sup> and which he uses to distinguish Israel from the nations for his purposes, regardless of its spiritual condition (Rom 11:28–29). Indeed, 'the author of Romans 9:4–5 and 11:1–6 ... could not possibly have told believing Jews to stop being Jews' (Skarsaune 2002:173). 'Tomson argues that all of Paul's letters were exclusively directed to non-Jewish Jesus believers and concerned problems pertaining to their specific situation' (Zetterholm 2009:1535, referring to Tomson [1990]). By retaining a distinction between Jews and Gentiles within the body of Christ, there is no contradiction between the enduring validity of the Law (for Jews) and

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<sup>21</sup> I find the traditional Christian interpretation—that the Law is annulled by Christ's fulfillment of it—unconvincing; fulfillment does not mean nullification. Matthew 5:18 clearly states that the Law will prevail 'until heaven and earth pass away'. Christians wrongly nullify this strong statement of Jesus by arguing that the Law remains but is no longer applicable. If Jesus berated the Pharisees and the scribes for nullifying the word of God for the sake of their tradition, what would he say to the church?

New Testament scriptures which give instructions (to Gentiles) not to take on the Law. The apostles also retained Jew-Gentile distinction after Peter's vision *even amongst believers* in Acts 21:18–25. Such distinction is entirely consistent with God's promises in Jeremiah 31:35–37 and 33:25–26, and since it is precisely observance of the Law which creates that distinction—outwardly, at least—one has to question whether God would cancel the sign laws. Exodus 31:12–17 provides a good example of a 'sign' that God commanded Israel to keep 'forever'. The setting apart of Israel from the nations and the question of on-going Torah-observance for Jewish believers in Jesus are beyond the scope of this paper,<sup>22</sup> but, were nevertheless taken for granted by Peter and the leaders of the church in Jerusalem.

### 5.3. Conclusion of the contextual evidence

There is no biblical evidence outside of the Acts 10:1–11:18 pericope that Peter's vision was to have a double interpretation (relating both to Gentiles and to food), neither elsewhere in Acts nor in the rest of the New Testament. To the contrary, Jewish believers described in the New Testament—and *especially* in Acts—sought to keep the Mosaic Law, indicating that they understood Peter's vision to mean that Gentiles had been cleansed, not unclean food. The contextual evidence presented provides supporting evidence for the conclusion reached in the textual analysis of the pericope itself. What remains is to examine the history of the early church for any further evidence to support or contradict this outcome.

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<sup>22</sup> I intend to examine these matters in later papers. Suffice it to say the 'unity' texts (Gal 3:28; Eph 2:14–16; Col 3:9–11) do not speak of Jew-Gentile homogenisation, and the 'no distinction' texts (Acts 15:9; Rom 3:22–23; 10:12) relate to common human sinfulness and means of salvation, not dissolution of Jew-Gentile boundaries.

## 6. Historical Analysis

### 6.1. The testimony of history as a hermeneutic

If the interpretation derived above is correct, one would expect it to be supported by subsequent church history. In the introduction to *Elusive Israel*, Charles Cosgrove (1997:xi) asks, 'What ought Christians do when faced with conflicting interpretations of scripture?' He explains that the 'plain grammatical sense' of a text—as sought after by the Reformers—is not always adequate to determine its meaning. Thus, theologians turned to 'historical biblical theology' late in the eighteenth century, hoping that 'sound and honest exegesis could provide clarity and certainty about obscure texts.' This, too, was inadequate in some cases, leaving the church to rely on earlier scholarship, which itself was not always in consensus (xii); 'many questions of exegesis cannot be historically resolved, because the texts themselves are irreducibly ambiguous.' A solution Cosgrove offers is that 'canonical interpretation requires, by its very nature, a hermeneutic of use' to adjudicate between 'competing plausible interpretations' (xiii). He proposes that Christians should consider the *purpose* of scripture as expressed in Matthew 22:37–40; that is, 'interpretive judgments should be guided by the command 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' Using this, Kinzer (2005:33–38) develops 'hermeneutics of ethical accountability' in which 'we must not only employ abstract and theoretical criteria for evaluating theological claims; we must also have recourse to practical or functional criteria for determining theological truth' (p. 33). In short, bad hermeneutics results in bad ethics and a failure to fulfil what Jesus called the second greatest commandment, referring to Leviticus 19:18. Given the textual and contextual evidence already presented in this paper, I do not believe there remains any ambiguity in the meaning of

Peter's vision. Nevertheless, if my case is sound then Cosgrove's 'hermeneutic of use' should confirm it.

## 6.2. Historical evidence

Historical evidence shows conclusively that many Jewish believers continued to observe the law for several centuries after the canon was closed, or at least as much of it as possible after the razing of the temple in 70 AD. These included the Nazarenes who, unlike the Ebionites, held to a high christology (Juster 1995:135–140). Kinzer (2005:181–209) describes on-going difficulties within the *ekklesia* to resolve this matter as late as Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century. Obviously, Jewish believers did not believe that the Law was abrogated, nor had they been taught that through the apostolic tradition. Rather, they believed that they were to continue to live as Jews in unity with Gentile believers who observed at least the four commandments of the Jerusalem council (Acts 15:20). They clearly did not take Peter's vision to mean that food laws were abrogated. Applying Cosgrove's hermeneutic of use; one would conclude that the Law is still binding on Jewish believers.

After the first century, the Jewish believers suffered a great loss in numbers (Juster 1995:139–140), whereas the Gentile mission prospered in spite of numerous Roman persecutions. Once the church came to be dominated and led by Gentiles, scriptures, warning Gentiles against becoming Jewish to be better or 'more complete' Christians (that is, Judaising, as in Galatians) were applied to Jewish believers; they were sometimes forced to abandon the sign laws, including kosher diets. The anti-Jewish polemics of some of the Church Fathers (particularly Ignatius of Antioch and Justin Martyr) show that they wished that Jewish believers would cut all ties with Judaism. Kinzer (2005:187–197) presents a synopsis of anti-Jewish and antinomian writings in five ante-Nicene fathers, who were all seeking to oppose the 'Judaising' of

believers, namely, Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and the authors of the *Epistle of Barnabas* and the *Epistle to Diognetus*. As far as I can ascertain, their writings do not contain any reference to the abolition of food laws in connection with Peter's vision, in spite of their beliefs. The writer of the *Epistle of Barnabas* (Barnabas 10) validated the Mosaic Law as eternally binding, but then allegorized it altogether. Skarsaune (2002:221) suggests that whoever wrote *Barnabas* was unable to reconcile his own life outside the Law with his belief in its eternal validity; thus, he spiritualised all the purity laws. Irenaeus (*A.H. III* 12.7) was the only one who commented on Peter's vision, interpreting the unclean animals as a reference to Gentiles. He gave no hint that it should be taken also as a literal reference to the cleansing of unclean food. His main concern at that point was to demonstrate that the God of the Mosaic Covenant is the same God as that of the New Covenant, stating that the vision was to teach Peter that the same God who distinguished between clean and unclean through the Law was the God who had cleansed Gentiles by the blood of Jesus.

Kinzer (2005:201-205) refers to an exchange of letters between Augustine and Jerome around the start of the fifth century concerning the permissibility, even appropriateness, of Jewish 'Yeshua-believers' observing the Law. In the 426 AD, Augustine completed the fourth book of *On Christian Doctrine*. In 20.39, where he argued against Christian subjection to the Law, he quoted from Galatians 4, but did not mention Acts 10. Similarly, in his writings against the Manichaeans (14.35), he referred to both Paul's comments on unclean food in 1 Corinthians 8:7-13, but did not mention Peter's vision. From this we can assume that although he took the Law to be annulled, he did not reach that conclusion from Peter's vision. Kinzer (2005:206) argues that 'like Irenaeus and Augustine ... Aquinas seeks to combine reverence for the ceremonies of the Mosaic law with the firm conviction that their

observance is no longer valid.' This is similar to the explanation Skarsaune posits about the dilemma that led to the author of *Barnabas* allegorizing Jewish ceremonial laws, though Aquinas apparently used a different approach, comparing Jewish observance with fulfilled prophecy. Paraphrasing Michael Wyschogrod, Kinzer (2005:207) demonstrates that 'both Thomas [Aquinas] and Augustine ... begin with their conclusion, which is for them an incontrovertible article of ecclesiastical tradition, and then work backward. They struggle to find theological justification for an established teaching that is difficult to defend.'

### 6.3. Conclusion of the historical evidence

There seems to be no historical evidence from the patristic period that Peter's vision was used to justify the requirement for Jewish believers to forsake the sign laws. Not even the Apostolic Fathers, let alone the later Church Fathers, appealed to Acts 10:9–16 in arguing against Christian Torah-observance. Moreover, the fact that Jewish believers continued for centuries to keep the sign laws, including food laws, testifies against the dual interpretation of Peter's vision. Cosgrove's test of love for one's neighbour, and Kinzer's hermeneutic of ethical accountability, applied to the church's efforts to 'Gentilize' its Jewish members—sometimes forcibly—agree with this conclusion. Bad attitudes and ethical behaviour towards Jews, including Messianic Jews, exposes bad exegesis concerning the validity of the Torah for them. This, in turn, undermines the interpretation that the cleansing of unclean animals in Peter's vision literally meant that unclean foods have been cleansed for Jews.

## Conclusion and Implications

The long-term and widespread propagation of the traditional dual interpretation of Peter's vision has become so deeply ingrained in collective Christian psyche that it is difficult to challenge, regardless of the evidence. Yet, there is nothing in this passage (Acts 10:1–11:18) to support the argument that the Law is done away with, nor that Peter's vision was an injunction by God to forsake the food commandments. On the contrary, the text repeatedly affirms that the vision was about God's cleansing of the Gentiles. This passage, and specifically the vision it describes, does not address the Law at all. As I have sought to show, the narrative itself contains the interpretation of the vision, as indeed confirmed by God himself. Moreover, the study of the context of the passage within Acts strongly supports the contention that Gentile inclusion is the vision's theme, and that the Law was assumed to remain in force for Jewish believers in Jesus. I also showed the same is true in the broader context of the New Testament, and that this understanding did not simply disappear after the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, but continued amongst Jewish believers throughout the patristic period. Even movements to 'de-Judaize' Jewish believers did not use that text to justify their intentions. Modern Gentile readers have difficulty in grasping the enormity that termination of the Mosaic Law would have meant for the Jewish believers. Such a dramatic change would certainly have had to be made by the apostles in an *explicit* proclamation to all Jewry, yet, the book of Acts nowhere mentions any such announcement.

In the light of all the evidence presented, I submit that readers who insist that the vision annulled food laws are 'shoe-horning' the text onto their belief system, projecting it onto their predetermined theological grid. I would also call for serious review of food- and law-related

passages in the New Testament in the light of work done by modern scholars<sup>23</sup> who challenge the notion that the Mosaic Law is abrogated for Jews, particularly those in the New Covenant. Their work deserves a hearing in mainstream Christian theology, particularly since they have responded thoroughly and respectfully to this aspect of traditional Christian theology.

Many Christians are troubled by the suggestion that certain aspects of the Law are still binding on Jews, especially Jews who believe in Jesus. Paul wrote that 'Christ *is the* end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes' (Rom 10:4), yet, he also argued that our faith upholds the law (Rom 3:28). In my estimation, the church's traditional explanation of the apparent contradictions so common in Paul (both his life as recorded in Acts, and his writings) and the Torah-faithfulness of the other apostles is inadequate. It is based largely on an antinomian reading of 1 Corinthians 9:19-23. Rudolph (2011) attacks the use of 1 Corinthians 9:19-24 to explain Paul as a so-called 'chameleon' evangelist who only pretended to be Jewish when evangelising Jews. Plausible alternative interpretations of Paul's understanding and application of the Law *are* found in the literature, sometimes referred to as the 'radical new perspective on Paul', conveniently summarized in Zetterholm (2009). I would call upon troubled readers to seriously examine these alternatives without pre-commitment to a particular faith tradition.

The Holocaust triggered a marked change in Christian theology, particularly Replacement Theology, and initiated a renewal of the Jewish mission, which has been particularly fruitful over the past four

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<sup>23</sup> To name a few: Mark Kinzer, Joseph Shulam, Hilary Le Cornu, David Rudolph, Mark Nanos, Peter Tomson, Michael Wyschogrod, Jacob Jervell, Daniel Thomas Lancaster, Derek Leman, Markus Bockmuehl, Daniel Juster, and David Stern.

decades (Harvey 2009:2). The hermeneutic of ethical accountability (Kinzer 2005) and test of love (Cosgrove 1997) should be applied by the church to its doctrines pertaining to Israel and the Law. I submit that this would engender a restoration of Jewish-Christian relations in which the church not only abandons the triumphalist attitude that emerged in the time of Constantine, but also adopts the humble attitude of indebtedness and gratitude to the Jewish people that Paul promoted (Rom 9:1–5; 11:17–18; 15:25–27). To some extent, this has already begun, but there are deeper dimensions to explore, including the nature and composition of the *ekklesia* (e.g. Kinzer 2005). Further to this, I would call on Christian theologians to review the doctrines which they have inherited from tradition after serious study of first-century *halakha*; the lack of understanding of *halakha* played a very significant role in the church's (mis-)interpretation of what was 'unlawful' about Peter's visit to Cornelius (Acts 10:28), resulting in an uncritical reinforcement of the very texts used to sustain this misinterpretation.

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# Review of Dixon, *Science and Religion: A Very Short Introduction*

Mark Pretorius

Dixon T 2008. *Science and religion: a very short introduction*.  
New York: Oxford University Press.

## Introduction

I have read many books on the theme of the science and religion debate. Some have enthralled, while others have disappointed. This book, however, is one of the more delightful and informative introductory books I have read and reviewed on the subject. This particular book is part of the *Very short introduction* (VSI) series printed by Oxford University Press. All the subjects in the series (which number a few hundred) are written by experts in various fields, with the purpose of giving a brief, but fairly concise introductory synopsis of a particular subject. It seems that the authors endeavor to make the information accessible to lay people, helping them grasp the basics content of the particular subject.

In the case of this book in the series, the author's insight and historical background to the intriguing interaction between science and theology are, simply put, a wonderful breath of fresh air. Unfortunately, there are many books written on the subject of science and religion which do not highlight and comprehend just how complicated and politically motivated these debates have become. More often than not, books on the subject tend to concentrate on the arguments—creating in the

process their own arguments—rather than on the ‘why’ of the argument.

Dixon, a senior lecturer in history at Queen Mary University of London, and a member of the International Society for Science and Religion, skillfully unpacks the debate (as best he can in such a short volume), and focuses on issues pertaining to the motivation and intentions of the science and religion arguments. He then repacks it in a way that even a layperson, with little knowledge of the subject, can grasp the fundamental issues, and why the debates are often so emotionally charged.

## **1. Chapter 1: What Are Science-Religion Debates Really About?**

The opening chapter immediately answers the question that is, in my view, often missed in the science and religion debate, namely, what is the debate really about? In other words, what is each group arguing about, and what is the motivation behind the often heated arguments on the subject? From the outset, one must understand that this book focuses more on the history of the argument (with many test cases explored), rather than the arguments themselves. Having read several reviews of this book, I found that most criticism centered on the author’s non-criticism of the debates themselves. However, the book clearly states that this is *a very short introduction*, not a lengthy treatise on the subject.

Chapter one commences with one of the most famous historic cases on the conflict between science and religion, that being between the Catholic Inquisition and Galileo Galilei that took place in June 1633. Dixon explains what the trial consisted of, and how it impacted on the

Catholic Church and the scientific fraternity at the time. The main focus is on what the conflict was about, that is, who was actually responsible for disseminating knowledge? Is it the Church, or is it the scientific fraternity? In Dixon's view, it was about the politics of knowledge, rather than a scientific and religious concern. It is political, in the sense that it has to do with the nature of reality and who has the authority to discover and describe it, and by what methods. One quickly realises that the Catholic Church at the time was more of a political establishment (which in my view it still is today), rather than a purely religious one with religious concerns.

Dixon then discusses briefly the controversy surrounding Darwin's *Origin of Species*. Here, Dixon makes a curious observation, namely, that the Darwin debate was not religious, but rather, it was one about science and religion. By this, he means that Darwinian ideology maintains that humans are nothing more than evolved animals, which is not only seen as an insult to religious beliefs, but also to human morality and ethics. However, it must be stated that Dixon is an agnostic, not a Christian. Therefore, it seems that his rationale for writing this book is not to weigh religion against science, or *vice-versa*, but rather, to deal with the bigger question: why is the debate continuing, and why is it so intense? Thus, this book is objectively written, and for this, I commend him.

## 2. Chapter 2: Galileo and the Philosophy of Science

Chapter two is the commencement of in-depth historical case studies, specifically Galileo Galilei *vis-à-vis* a philosophy of science. The main question that Dixon explores in this chapter is this: how do we know anything? Providing a credible answer to his question is clearly a task for the philosopher. Dixon demonstrates how knowledge is acquired

(epistemology), and suggests four sources, namely: one's senses, one's power of rational thought, the testimony of others, and one's memory. I found this idea to be quite enlightening. In a Christian conception of general revelation within a philosophy of theology, the three sources for acquiring knowledge are nature, God's work in history, and the human make-up. This section, then, rightly argues against these four principles of source, by stating that one's senses may deceive, one's reasoning can be faulty, other people can knowingly or accidentally mislead, and lastly, with increasing age, one's memories can certainly become partial and distorted.

A claim is set forth, that human knowledge of the natural kind, is made rather than found. This is another interesting statement, since Psalm 19 clearly states that what may be known of God is revealed in nature. To solidify this claim, Dixon cites the 17<sup>th</sup> century advocate of science, Francis Bacon, who wrote that 'all knowledge appeareth to be a plant of God's own planting whose spread and flourishing then had been divinely ordained'. In other words, what people would perceive as mere nature, is divinely orchestrated to reveal God. In the chapter, Dixon goes on to explain what is meant by this, that is, natural theology is a form of discourse about God, based on human reason rather than on revelation (I suspect that the work of William Paley was consulted here).

The chapter then moves on to explain the rise and fall of Galileo, expressing that Galileo belonged to this last category of believers, seeking harmony between the Bible and knowledge of nature. The chapter further identifies something of which many are unaware, namely, Galileo endorsed the view that the Bible communicates how to go to heaven, rather than how the heavens go. In other words, if one wanted to know about matters pertaining to salvation, one should

consult scripture. However, if you were interested in the detailed working of the natural world, then, there are better starting points, namely, empirical observations and reasoned demonstrations. It is here that Dixon initiates his case study on Galileo, and what took place historically.

Galileo, after observing that the world was not the centre of the universe (as taught by the Catholic Church), presented his findings and began his brief crusade of trying to convince the church that they were wrong, and that the scriptures they were utilizing in order to prove geocentricity needed reinterpretation. It is here that Dixon states that the argument was rather political. In other words, who had the authority to make such statements; Galileo or the church? Clearly, the church had much power over the people. According to the Catholic Church, they were the custodians of knowledge and were the only authorised vehicle to disseminate this knowledge to the people. Galileo had no right then, in their view, to make any public statements that contradicted this.

Unfortunately, Galileo came against an institution that had the political power to make creeds and orders, and to call people to judicial meetings. The church, at the time, answered to no one, except the hierarchy within it (I do believe that not much has changed today). Galileo, unfortunately, as a scientist and philosopher seeking truth, had walked into a virtual minefield of political power. Clearly, he did not stand a chance. Galileo's views and actions led to him being tried by the Inquisition. It must be added that Galileo did have a friend in the cultured and educated Maffeo Barberini, Pope Urban VIII, as brought out by Dixon. However, history shows that Galileo, against the express desire of this Pope, printed his findings (using the mathematical equations of Copernicus to validate his findings), which led to the Pope censuring Galileo's work.

### 3. Chapter 3: Does God Act in Nature?

In my view, this is a fascinating chapter, perhaps because, as a theologian, nature has a special place in my heart. Loosely, I also believe that God and nature are one, but not in the mode of pantheism, but rather, panentheism. God certainly uses his creation to further his plans, but the life of nature flows from him. This is made clear in how God, throughout scripture, uses the elements to speak and guide people in his providence. Dixon shows this by numerous references to how God does this, including the ability of God to either directly or indirectly, through specially chosen prophets, contravenes the laws of nature to achieve his will. Some references are made to parting the Red Sea, the plagues, manna from heaven, Jesus walking on water, and so on.

Dixon then moves on to what he terms *the theologians' dilemma*. By this, he means that theologians are faced with a seemingly impossible task of making sense of divine actions in the world. The part that caught my attention is his discussion on the question, why God acts in some cases, and not in others. His answer is interesting. Perhaps it is a method that God uses to keep people focused on him in faith, meaning that if God intervened in all situations, why would people need faith? He further states that perhaps God is now working through secondary channels, that is, through structures such as the medical profession in dealing with sickness and disease. I have always upheld, in my own practice of theology, that this is the case, especially in this day and age of technological advancements.

Next, Dixon turns his attention to the laws of nature, and deals with the icons of revolutionary science, such as Isaac Newton, Robert Boyle, René Descartes (to mention but a few), and discusses the following

question that is probably asked by many Christians today: did the discoveries of these men relegate God to a ‘God-of-the-gaps’? By this, Dixon means to investigate whether the laws that govern nature give the expression that Deism is a preferred belief? Deism simply states that God set up the universe through a set of prescribed laws to bring about creation of life, and was has not seen since.

There are different ways of thinking about the laws of nature, explains Dixon. They need not be seen as entities or forces that somehow constrain all of reality. Instead, they can be interpreted as God’s mechanism of keeping order. For God to perform any miracle, he only has to tweak the laws (e.g. the floating axe head, or Jesus walking on water). I sensed a little of CS Lewis’s book, *Miracles*, being expressed here, a work that I highly recommend.

Dixon moves on to a subject that, I feel, is best left to physicists, namely, quantum mechanics and the fine-tuning of the universe. I am currently reading Brian Greene’s, *The elegant universe*, which is a book on string theory, an offshoot of quantum mechanics. I can categorically state, that I find the subject very difficult to understand. But be that as it may, I certainly stand in agreement with Dixon when he observed that this branch of physics has done much to overturn the cemented ideas of Newtonian laws. Overall, this chapter was interesting and informative.

#### 4. Chapter 4: Darwin and Evolution

The chapter commences with a brief review of Darwin and considers the way his work impacted society.<sup>67</sup> Dixon spends a fair amount of

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<sup>67</sup> I have much passion for this subject, and perhaps a person for whom I have much empathy. If anyone has not read anything on Darwin and would like to, I would

time discussing Darwin's religious odyssey, and how this impacted his work. He further gives details of Darwin's family, and the pain he went through in dealing with an influential father and elder brother, who both rejected Christianity, and a wife, who was faithful to her belief in God. Without studying Darwin's personal life, few would understand what he went through and perhaps why he was an agnostic rather than believe in the existence of a personal God. Having read much on Darwin, I found Dixon's information to be accurate and sympathetic.

The chapter then describes concisely and accurately Darwin's theory of evolution and natural selection. Dixon commences with Darwin's discoveries during his Beagle voyage and how this influenced him, and then moves on to highlight the scientists and intellectuals of his era that inspired him while developing his theory, i.e. Charles Lyell (geological principles), William Paley (how things can change slowly across long periods of time) and Thomas Malthus (on population). It was Lyell's work on geological principles that had the most effect on Darwin, and led him to develop his theory of 'evolution over long periods of time'. In fact, Lyell and Darwin became good friends, leading Lyell to be the first scientist to support Darwin's work.

The final segment of the chapter is an account of the furious 1860 debate on evolution between Darwin's friend Thomas Huxley, and Bishop Samuel Wilberforce. Often, it is acknowledged that Huxley's argument for Darwin's work is still a force to be reckoned with in debates today. However, with the 'evolution' of knowledge, and how we understand the world to have come about, Darwinism seems to be

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suggest the other excellent *VSI* book, *Darwin*, which is only 125 pages, but provides a good survey of Darwin, who he was, and what his work was about.

losing ground. This is especially so with the rise of Intelligent Design (ID) and other alternative ways of looking at the science of life.

## 5. Chapter 5: Creationism and Intelligent Design

The chapter begins with a brief scientific introduction to ID, and how the movement arose. It also explains what the movement is about, and briefly discusses some of its proponents, including some of their controversies. One of the controversies specifically dealt with is the ID movement's attempt to get their view of evolution accepted into the American schooling system. To give a background account of this, Dixon addresses a controversy that has generated much debate, namely, the March 1925 Scopes Trial held in the American town of Dayton. The debate generated so much publicity over time that it resulted in making the 1960 film *Inherit the Wind*, a loosely based biography of the event. The trial was often referred to in the media as 'The Monkey Trial', an obvious reference to the Darwinian idea of evolution from ape-like creatures. In this chapter, Dixon does a fairly thorough examination of the trial and the subsequent results and fall-out. Much unnecessary controversy was created by this trial, which has led more people to take a 'dim' view of evolution. The chapter clearly exposes the underlying motives for the trial, and why it had little to do with the science versus religion theme.

On the 21<sup>st</sup> of March 1925, Austin Pay, the governor of Tennessee, signed an Act that made it unlawful for a teacher employed by the State of Tennessee to teach any subject—especially evolution—that was contrary to divine creation as taught by the Bible. This is where Dixon makes the right connections. He shows that it had little to do with science and religion, and more to do with greedy businessmen and lawyers.

The American Civil Liberties Union saw the passing of this legislation as an excuse to take a stand for intellectual freedom. They placed an advertisement asking for a volunteer to bring a test case. Some of the lawyers and businessmen from Daytona saw this as an opportunity to put their town on the map, and persuaded a local science teacher, John Scopes, to be the volunteer. Although John Scopes was convicted for teaching something that is contrary to divine creation as taught by the Bible, and the businessmen and lawyers got their fame and fortune, it would be another forty years before another trial pitting evolution against creationism would take place. This subsequent trial is often referred to as the Dover School Trial and probably created just as much controversy as the Scopes Trial had.

The Dover School trial is possibly the most widely known trial to have taken place in America, perhaps because of the vast technology available to disseminate information. It pitted ID against scientific evolution. The idea behind the ID movement was to demonstrate that the science it presents could be taught in schools, yet it would not push a creationist belief. This meant that the term 'Intelligent Design' could refer to anything, and upheld that when understood correctly, it was a viable alternative to the strict biblical creationist view rejected by the American school system. The ID movement further maintained that it held no specific loyalty to any organisation or view, and that its methods in presenting science were legitimate. Dixon unpacks the arguments carefully, taking no one's side in the debate.

The results of the Dover trial, was that ID was shown to be nothing more than creationism packaged in a different format. Its use of science, especially biology, was shown to be flawed and unacceptable as an alternative to the Darwinian science and biology currently being taught in American schools. The chapter concludes with Dixon seemingly

making a veiled call for acceptable scientific systems to reassess at the tenability of teaching intelligent design in schools, and expressing hope that some good may still come of this peculiar American controversy.

## 6. Chapter 6: Mind and Morality

This last chapter in the book is probably the most difficult to understand, although it is the shortest. I would reason that it is perhaps a subject matter which is best left to philosophers of the mind and ethicists of morality.

But be that as it may, Dixon commences his final chapter with a statement that religious responses to evolution in all traditions continue to centre on questions about human nature. For example, how can human beings, created in God's image, also be nothing more than improved apes with mushrooms for cousins? Although this is an interesting and humorous statement, it is non-the-less a statement that has been answered reasonably, in my view, by a growing number of biologists and scientists affiliated to Biologos, an organisation that promotes a belief in theistic evolution. Dixon further comments that since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, scientific studies of the brain and mind (there is a difference) have provided further challenges to religious beliefs. By this, presumably Dixon means that science is attempting to show that the soul, so important in Christian belief, is nothing but a product of brain activity. It seemingly suggests we are nothing but products of materialism, determinism, and blank atheism, dictated by neurotransmitters in the brain and events surrounding ones environment. He then poses the question pertaining to what does this mean for belief. It is these types of questions he attempts to answer in this chapter. He begins with the idea of the soul being immortal, and cites ideas of other

religions as proof that humanity collectively believes that wisdom and salvation are found in the life of the mind.

Next, Dixon discusses issues relating to the brain and mind, dealing with the question that scientists began posing as early as the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: if the brain is a product of the mind, how is it possible for an immortal soul to exist? The mind and the soul seem to co-exist. It may seem complicated, but the study of ‘craniology’ or ‘phrenology’ appears to imply that the traits which many hold as indicators of God’s image in humans would be questionable.

Although many scientists since then have raised questions as to the methods used to come to these conclusions, the basic ideas of phrenology, showing that mental functions do correlate with different parts of the brain, seems to be fruitful. Dixon, however, does not leave the question hanging. He goes on to explain that although there have been many recent studies undertaken on brain activity; it now seems as if there are parts of the brain that are involved in religious experiences.

Dixon continues and delves into the philosophical belief systems of dualism and physicalism, two concepts that differ much when applied to theology especially. The idea that he explores here is the compromise of science when utilizing and applying the idea(s) of dualism. Since some scientists have come to realise that there is a realm beyond this one, they have had to dig deep to explain it, without becoming ‘religious’. Their reluctance to accept a spiritual realm has led to the formation of the following idea: the ‘spiritual’ realm is not spiritual *per se*, but rather, dual—mental and physical.

However, this does not solve the argument, as correctly stated by Dixon. Having evaluated dualism from many angles and perspectives, I find it to be a weak compromise. Dixon rightly states that the problem

with dualism is the following: how can the physical and the non-physical causally interact with each other, and why should dualism be preferred to the simpler alternative of physicalism?

This is where Dixon highlights an interesting idea. Even if all mental experiences are, in some sense, physical, it is still not a straightforward explanation of what that sense is. Why is it that some parts of matter, that is, complex nerve cells within animals, exhibit the property of consciousness, while others, such as rocks, vegetables, and even computers, do not? This is an interesting question, and one that I have studied extensively. Dixon rightly states that philosophers and theologians have attempted to answer this question by utilising concepts such as ‘emergence’ and ‘supervenience’. This simply means that the mind, although autonomous (i.e. it can live independently from the brain), cannot be reduced to a neurological level. Although I would have liked Dixon to explore this in more depth, he stops short of saying that, or perhaps even alluding to the idea, God works at molecular levels, and brings up and upon people his presence and will.<sup>68</sup>

Other topics in this chapter include issues around the bodily resurrection of Jesus and subjective immortality, topics which are best left to philosophers or theologians. Thus, Dixon’s ideas seem a little offbeat, as he over relies on neuroscience to explain issues that are religious in nature. Perhaps only now are some scientists beginning to realise the depth of the subject matter.

Finally, Dixon addresses the issues of selfishness and altruism, two thought-provoking subjects which, as stated earlier, are also best left to ethicists. Although this topic is too vast to explain in a few paragraphs,

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<sup>68</sup> See my article, Human Freedom and God’s Providence: Is there Conflict? *Conspectus* 8(2):62-75.

he must be commended for trying. However, I would have non-the-less preferred that Dixon left this chapter out, and replaced it with something that is more in line with the overall subject matter.

## 7. Negatives

Perhaps Dixon could have gone into a more detailed analysis the medieval age, and how the discoveries of that era affected the way we do our theology and science today. Also, I would have welcomed the addition of material that explores how the unfolding ideas of philosophers of the last three centuries have shaped our current understanding of cosmology, for this is an important part of the science and religion debate today. Lastly, I suspect that Dixon errs disproportionately on the side of science. However, he may be forgiven, for like Darwin, he is an agnostic and a historian. The positive aspects of the book far outweigh the negatives.

## Conclusion

Overall, this is a great little book that does much in bringing one a little closer to understanding, and maybe, having a greater respect for the science and religion debate. This would, I hope, also include a little sympathy for those scientists, especially Galileo and Darwin, who, over time, have taken such unnecessary criticism from the public and religious organisations in general, because they have been misunderstood, or misrepresented.

# Review of Hitchcock, *2012, the Bible and the End of the World*

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Hitchcock M 2009. *2012, the Bible and the end of the world*.  
Eugene: Harvest House Publishers.

## 1. Introduction to the Author and the Book

Mark Hitchcock, whose books have sold more than 300,000 copies, is the pastor of Faith Bible Church in Edmond, Oklahoma. He earned his law degree from Oklahoma State University, and a PhD from Dallas Theological Seminary. He is uniquely equipped to present the various 2012 end-time scenarios, in addition to the Bible's last-days prophecies. Moreover, many consider him to be the foremost expert on Bible prophecy today. He has written over a dozen books on the Bible and the end times, including *The complete book of bible prophecy*, *Cashless*, *Iran: the coming crisis*, *101 answers to the most asked questions about the end times*, *The coming Islamic invasion of Israel*, *Is America in Bible prophecy?*, and *What on earth is going on?*

The prediction that the world will end on the 21<sup>st</sup> December 2012 has spawned a growing number of fringe-element books, web sites, and even a major movie (p. 9). The author points out the explosion of information about the subject of 2012. He writes that 187 books appeared when he searched Amazon on the topic. He indicates that when he googled '2012', there were almost 60,000 hits. He writes that

new books are appearing on the internet and in bookstores almost every month.

Hitchcock, as a writer in the Bible prophecy genre, has tackled the hype surrounding the 2012 spectre. With his calming perspective based thoroughly on what the Bible teaches, he makes unmistakably clear and understandable the truth regarding the Mayan calendar prophecy. In 192 pages, he gets to the heart of the doomsday prediction presented by shamans who have been dead for centuries. In this masterful work, while other authors of voluminous tomes on the 2012 matters consider writing second, and even third volumes, Hitchcock points with precision in this tightly crafted book to where the reader should devote concentration about 2012.

Hitchcock writes (p. 24):

So, why another book? What could I possibly say that has not already been said? Perhaps the best way to answer this question is to point to the title of the book. As the title suggests, my focus is to examine the 2012 phenomenon from a biblical perspective, primarily from the vantage point of end-times Bible prophecy ... While many other 2012 books mention the Bible or Bible codes, they don't look at 2012 through the lens of Scripture; rather, they look at Scripture through the lens of 2012. They pick and choose selected verses from the Bible, especially from the Book of Revelation, to support their vision of what the future holds ... This book is written with one purpose in mind: to examine and expose the 2012 deadline in light of Bible prophecy and present what I believe the Bible reveals about the end of the age.

## 2. A Summary of the Book

Mark Hitchcock presents an extremely well researched book from a conservative biblical position. In *2012, the Bible and the end of the world*, this best-selling prophecy expert explores a fascinating last-days controversy that is gaining the attention of millions all over the globe. The question arises: what should Christians make of the rapidly spreading speculations that the world will end on the 21<sup>st</sup> of December 2012?

The book provides a fascinating survey of both the historical past and the prophetic future. Readers will discover how to counter effectively baseless speculation with biblical fact. Missing in today's furore about the prophecy is a biblical perspective. In his book, Bible teacher Hitchcock provides the above perspective as he examines the following questions:

- Why 21 December 2012?
- Can we trust the Mayan alarm clock?
- Does the Bible say anything about 2012?
- What signs will tell us that Armageddon is near?

Hitchcock first gives a thorough explanation of, and later, a good critique of the ideas behind the recent 2012 end-of-the-world scare in this educational read. This end-time scare is closely associated with the belief that the ancient Mayans were expert astronomers and their advanced calendar cycles predicted the 21<sup>st</sup> of December 2012 as a catastrophic day of apocalypse. A large group of people today would like you to believe that it is true; they are selling books and making movies to spread their message and, in the process, they are making a lot of money.

The whole hype has to do with 2012 marking the end of the Mayan calendar. Well, at least the end of the latest 5,125-year cycle of one of the Mayan calendars. There were actually twenty Mayan calendars. The end of this particular calendar, however, comes with the added bonus that it ends at roughly the same time as the once-in-every-26,000 year alignment when, according to the author, ‘the winter solstice for the Northern hemisphere, the sun and earth will line up with the galactic centre of the Milky Way’ (p. 34).

For those who did not major in astronomy, these calculations are not exactly self-evident or even very clear. Furthermore, a certain 2012 website states that the last time this alignment occurred was on the 27<sup>th</sup> of July 9,792 BC, allegedly, the day that Atlantis was destroyed. There is, of course, no consensus that there ever was an Atlantis, much less that it fell into the sea as a result of this alignment.

The Mayan prophecy paints a scary picture of the coming catastrophe. One senses the fear building, as the end of the world approaches. Because of powerful astral alignment dynamics, planet earth is most likely about to suffer instant pole reversals, thus, horrific tectonic plate shifts. This will cause the catastrophic end for most, perhaps all, human life. This is the fear of the proponents of ancient Mayan calendar’s predictions.

To understand the type of people who believe in this 2012 scare, one should take note that the first 2012 conference was held in Hollywood, and the second, in San Francisco. There seems to be a strong connection with the New Age group. The last scheduled conference is set for the 12<sup>th</sup> of December 2012 at the Mayan pyramids.

Hitchcock divides his book into twelve chapters. The theme of these chapters is as follows:

1. The end of the world as we know it
2. An ancient doomsday clock
3. Apocalypse now?
4. The last book of Nostradamus
5. Bible codes, the book of Revelation
6. Computers and 2012
7. Does anybody really know what time it is?
8. Can anyone know the future?
9. Future tense
10. In the end, God
11. Scanning the horizon
12. 2012 and you

### 3. Strengths of the Book

The two strongest parts of the book are the fairly detailed explanation of the history of Mayan calendars' history and what exactly it entails, and the fascinating details of numerous-yet-failed 'we know the date of the end of the world' predictions that have been made. The first end prediction mentioned dates back almost 5,000 years.

More modern predictions include Pope Innocent III predicting the end times in 1284, preacher William Miller focusing on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of October 1844 (later know in American Christian circles as the Great Disappointment), and the Jehovah's Witnesses zeroing in on, so far, nine different dates. However, nine different dates is not exactly zeroing in on anything, since all of these predictions failed to come true.

Hitchcock also explains various claims of secret messages encoded in the Bible leading to the 2012 date. According to one secret decoding, David Koresh was mentioned 2,729 times in the first five books of the

Bible. A word of advice is given to the wise: believing in encoded Bible messages is like believing someone who thinks that all of Nostradamus' predictions were quite clear. The final word to those predicting Christ's coming and/or the end of the world should be Matthew 24:44 (KJV): 'For this reason you also must be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will.'

Good features of the book also include the following: this book answers numerous questions about the 2012 end-time speculations; it is full of biblical wisdom; it informs why the Bible is God's Word, accurate, true, and trustworthy; it shows how current events are lining up to set the stage for God's end-time plan; it tells what one can do right now to face 2012 and one's future in these uncertain times; it gives peace and comfort by reminding us that God is in control and not man. In short: it is short, concise, and an easy read.

#### **4. Weakness of the Book**

A little more than halfway through the book, Hitchcock changes gears from explaining what 2012 is all about, and begins to explain what the Bible foretells, at least according to his view. Not all Christians will agree with his interpretations, and, at times, it appears that he seems as sure about his predictions as the 2012-ers are about theirs. Hitchcock's views are biblical, but far from unanimously agreed upon by Christian scholars.

#### **Conclusion**

*2012, the Bible and the end of the world* is an interesting, informative read, especially for those who know very little about the 2012 talk, which will undoubtedly grow stronger as the day of the 21<sup>st</sup> of

December 2012 draws closer. It is the book on the 2012 matter that I can recommend to best bring you understanding of what the future holds.

Mark Hitchcock, in dynamic fashion—yet with his trademark graceful use of reason tempered by a profound understanding of God's prophetic Word—shines the spotlight of truth on the ominous things of the 2012 prophecy. For those interested in the controversies surrounding the end of the Mayan calendar, this book is 'a must'. To get a quick, thorough, and easy-to-read, Bible-based understanding of what the growing 2012 hysteria is all about, this is the only book one needs.

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