

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

¹ 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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