

## **A prophetic proposal: Theology and the future of method**

If history teaches anything, it is that its turns are unpredictable. Who in 1980 would have imagined the fall of the Berlin Wall by the end of the decade? Trends in theology come more slowly, but can be just as startling. Karl Adam described how Barth's Romans commentary 'fell like a bomb on the playground of the theologians'. Suddenly (at least suddenly for theology) the field was different. The 1960s concerns with 'the death of God' and demythologisation, were replaced with a resurgent confessional Trinitarianism. So I am not going to suggest what theology will be in the future, but suggest what it should aspire to be.

This chapter will survey four metaphors for how theology can be conceived and suggest a new one: 'prophecy'. The metaphors are not an exhaustive analysis and no theologian is entirely described by a single metaphor. Each of the descriptions of the metaphors is something of an exaggerated summary for the sake of discussion. One of my proposals is that theology should address the imagination, shaping how we picture the world and our place in it. In that sense, I hope my suggestion will be imaginative.

### **[A] Theology as wisdom**

The first Christian theologians presented themselves as philosophers: lovers of wisdom. Justin Martyr (d. c. 165) dressed as a philosopher and argued that the philosophical quest led to Christianity as the 'only reliable and profitable philosophy'. The *logos* was at work in Greek philosophy and in the Hebrew Scriptures, and both are fulfilled in the gospel.<sup>1</sup> The early church borrowed language and concepts of classical philosophy, but saw that it competed with and completed philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Wisdom showed how to live well and the Christians were convinced only revelation and salvation in Christ made the good life possible.

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition: Studies in Justin, Clement, and Origen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp.10-19.

<sup>2</sup> Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought*, p.19, says of Justin 'There is no sign in Justin of any tendency to mitigate or to attenuate traditional beliefs, above all, his doctrines of Creation, revelation in history, and eschatology, in order to meet philosophical criticism'.

Sapiential theology adopts the ‘Athens’ model of theological education in which Christianity is *paideia*, a way of ‘culturing’ the soul and forming virtuous character.<sup>3</sup> It is contemplative, emphasising a transforming encounter with God; and ecclesial, emphasising that God is known by and in the church. It is practical, developing the Christian life growth in Christ-like character from a deepening knowledge of God. Scripture and other texts are studied, not to catalogue their ideas but to allow them to lead into an encounter with God.

This understanding of theology with its focus on both God and virtue has new attraction for contemporary theology.<sup>4</sup> One danger is that it may focus on formation rather than God, implying that theology talks about God in order to be shaped by him, rather than because he demands to be our goal. Contemplation may also subvert proclamation. The Christian message is an announcement of what God has done and will do, we know him in and through that, not primarily in contemplation.

### **[A] Theology as science**

In the high Middle Ages, theologians began to express a different self-understanding. Without rejecting the importance of *sapientia* and virtue, they sought and offered *scientia*. Aquinas commences his *Summa Theologica* arguing that theology is the science of God, working with ‘demonstrative argument’ from ‘premises that are somehow naturally evident to us’.<sup>5</sup> Muller, describing the post-Reformation thought appropriation says, similarly, ‘a science is a discipline in which truth appears as rationally verifiable’.<sup>6</sup> Scientific theology is ‘more concerned with divine things than with human

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<sup>3</sup> D. H. Kelsey, *Between Athens and Berlin: The Theological Education Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), pp. 6-12.

<sup>4</sup> Ellen T. Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds : The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); D.J. Treier, *Virtue and the Voice of God: Toward Theology as Wisdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006); Paul Allen, *Theological Method, Guide for the Perplexed* (London ; New York: T & T Clark, 2012), pp. 207-28.

<sup>5</sup> See Aquinas, *Summa*, I.1.2 and Brian Davies, *Thomas Aquinas on God and Evil* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 141.

<sup>6</sup> R. A. Muller, ‘Scholasticism Protestant and Catholic: Francis Turretin on the Object and Principles of Theology’, *Church History* 55/2 (1986), pp. 193-205.

acts'.<sup>7</sup> We do not seek to know God for the sake of something else, but simply so that we might know him.<sup>8</sup>

Scientific theology became even more attractive after the 'scientific revolution', although 'science' was understood in different ways.<sup>9</sup> Despite great variety in method and content F. D. E. Schleiermacher, Charles Hodge, T. F. Torrance and W. Pannenberg could each describe theology as a science.<sup>10</sup> All hold that theology must be a critical discipline and its concepts must be held open to question and development. Ideas and theological formulations must be tested against the reality they seek to describe and interrogated for their coherence with other claims. Theology as science seeks to bring the intellectual rigour and investigative care of other disciplines to theology. Theology as science corresponds to Kelsey's description of theological education in 'Berlin'. This education involves critical research with academic freedom supporting professional application.<sup>11</sup> Positioned in the wider academy, scientific theology will tend to be inter-disciplinary.<sup>12</sup>

Theology as a science asserts that God is not found through contemplation. God exists independently of us and to that extent our knowledge of him is 'objective'.<sup>13</sup> In contemporary theology this must be insisted on against what Lindbeck calls the 'experiential-expressive' view that doctrines are 'noninformative and nondiscursive symbols' of religious experiences.<sup>14</sup> McGrath

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<sup>7</sup> Aquinas, *Summa*, III.1.4 resp.

<sup>8</sup> J. Peterson, *Aquinas: A New Introduction* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2008), pp. 33-34.

<sup>9</sup> 'Once theology was sapiential, then strove to be scientific as the very notion of 'science greatly changed', D. J. Treier, *Virtue and the Voice of God*, p. 27.

<sup>10</sup> See. F. Schleiermacher, *Brief Outline of Theology as a Field of Study* (ed. T. N. Tice; Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 1990), p. 3 (§5). and C. Helmer, 'Schleiermacher', *The Blackwell Companion to Nineteenth-Century Theology* (ed. D. Fergusson; Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 46-54; C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (London: James Clarke, 1960), pp. 1-17 and M. A. Noll, 'Introduction', in Charles Hodge, *Charles Hodge: The Way of Life* (ed. M. A. Noll; New York: Paulist Press, 1987), pp. 1-44; T. F. Torrance, *Theological Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969) and D. W. Hardy, 'T. F. Torrance', *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918* (ed. D. F. Ford and R. Muers Malden/Oxford: Blackwell, 2005, 3rd ed.), pp.167-72; W. Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science* (trans. F. McDonagh; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), pp. 297-345 and J. McClean, *From the Future: Getting to Grips with Pannenberg's Thought* (Paternoster: Milton Keynes, 2013), pp. 11-13.

<sup>11</sup> Kelsey, *Between Athens and Berlin*, pp. 12-19.

<sup>12</sup> Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, pp. 299–300, and see Philip Clayton, 'Anticipation and Theological Method,' pp. 122–50 in *Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg* (ed. C. Braaten and P. Clayton; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988).

<sup>13</sup> See D. K. Clark, *To Know and Love God: Method for Theology, Foundations of Evangelical Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003), pp. 212-19, for a defense of 'chastened objectivity' in theology.

<sup>14</sup> G. A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984), p. 16

appeals to Luther's theology of the cross to argue that Christian theology should know that 'experience and reality are, at least potentially, to be radically opposed'.<sup>15</sup>

One weakness of scientific theology is its separation of knowledge of God from self-knowledge.<sup>16</sup> When we consider the One in whom 'we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17.28) self-knowledge is involved far more directly than in any other discipline. This is Calvin's famous point in the opening paragraphs of his *Institutes*. It is not that self-knowledge is a direct path to God but that true knowledge of God must lead to self-recognition as a dependent and rebellious creature. So 'we shall not say that, properly speaking, God is known where there is no religion or piety'.<sup>17</sup> Theology as science easily loses sight of its aretegenic (virtue forming) role and becomes a body of knowledge which stands in the academy apart from the life and faith of the church.

### **[A] Theology as art**

A more recent description of theology is to view it as 'art'. Schleiermacher is one inspiration for this, from his association with the Romantic movement rather than his concern with the place of theology in the academy. In Romanticism the imagination is the meeting point of the infinite and the finite. It asserts 'the active reality of the "living deity"', but hold that an encounter with God produces quite different experiences and responses in different people.<sup>18</sup> For the Romantics the imagination is both receptive and spontaneously productive and is involved with realisation of knowledge of God in much the same way that it is in artistic expression. Schleiermacher declared that 'that belief in God depends on the direction of the imagination'.<sup>19</sup>

Balthasar is perhaps the most famous for insisting that theology is aesthetic. He is clearer than the Romantics that knowledge of God is not found directly in an experience of beauty, but he

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<sup>15</sup> A. E. McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine: A Study in the Foundation of Doctrinal Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 25.

<sup>16</sup> All science requires a level of self-involvement from the investigator. Cf. M. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>17</sup> J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. J. T. McNeill; trans. F. L. Battles; LCC, 20–21; 2 vols; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), I.2, p. 37.

<sup>18</sup> J. A. Lamm, 'Romanticism and Pantheism', *The Blackwell Companion to Nineteenth-Century Theology* (ed. D. Fergusson; Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 165-86 (178).

<sup>19</sup> F. Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (ed. and trans. R. Crouter; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 138.

does insist that theology is called to recognise, respond to and reflect the beauty of God in his revelation. 'Intellectual cognition is part of this response but it has a holistic character which gives powerful expression to the existential or even experiential claim laid upon us by our encounter with the incarnate Word. We are drawn "under the spell" of the incarnate Word much as a particular work of art can compellingly absorb our senses, mind, and imagination.'<sup>20</sup> For Balthasar theology as art is an alternative to the rationalistic 'scientific' theology of Scholasticism.

I will call this approach aesthetic theology, but I mean by it what von Balthasar denoted 'theological aesthetics'.<sup>21</sup> Aesthetic theology seeks to 'feel' and 'see', not simply understand, or rather to feel and see as a key part of understanding. It experiences the tragedy, sorrow and pain of life and the ugliness of the cross as well as the joy of salvation and the beauty of God and knows that we do not know those till we feel them. It will be more interested in expression than investigation or argument. As scientific theology seeks to relate to the other 'sciences', artistic theology engages with the other 'arts'.

The power of aesthetic theology is that it recognises the connection of truth and beauty and that there are aspects of knowledge which cannot be expressed in propositions. The aesthetic dimension is particularly important in a personal relationship to truth. The Puritans recognised this and the need to speak to and move 'the heart'. Pre-eminently Jonathan Edwards understood the importance of the 'religious affections' moved by God's beauty. He often points out the symmetry, proportion, agreement and harmony of God's character and his works.<sup>22</sup>

Wolterstorff points out some of the possible weaknesses of conceiving theology as art. Since the nineteenth century 'art' has come to be treated as an object of contemplation with an inherent value as 'art for art's sake'.<sup>23</sup> And this is not a good analogue for theology. Theology is more a craft,

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<sup>20</sup> See O. Davies, 'The theological aesthetics', *The Cambridge companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar* (ed. E. T. Oakes and D. Moss; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 131-42 (135) and K. Mongrain, 'Von Balthasar's Way from Doxology to Theology', *Theology Today* 64 (2007), pp. 58-70.

<sup>21</sup> H. U. von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* (7 vols; San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), vol. 1, pp. 79-117.

<sup>22</sup> L. Mitchell, 'The Theological Aesthetics of Jonathan Edwards', *Theology Today* 64 (2007), pp.36-46.

<sup>23</sup> N. Wolterstorff, 'Beyond Beauty and the Aesthetic in the Engagement of Religion and Art', *Theological Aesthetics after Von Balthasar* (ed. O. V. Bychkov and J. Fodor; Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 119-33.

in which all God's people should share, and its value is instrumental in helping us turning to God to know and live for him. Kevin Vanhoozer notes that aesthetic theology often has the effect of isolating the biblical text from God as author and displacing the divine meaning with the creative response of the theologian.<sup>24</sup>

### **[A] Theology as dramaturgy**

Vanhoozer suggests that theology is dramaturgy. This suggestion follows a recent trend, found in thinkers as diverse as Balthasar, Horton and Wright to view theology as dealing with a 'drama'.<sup>25</sup>

Vanhoozer has taken this general insight and used it to generate a specific metaphor for theology.

Dramaturgy studies a play to help with its performance. 'Broadly speaking, the dramaturg's duties

are (1) to select and prepare play texts for performance; (2) to advise directors and actors; and (3) to

educate the audience.'<sup>26</sup> Vanhoozer suggests this is an analogy to the work of theology which is

called to understand a drama. 'What the church seeks to understand is a true story ... a series of

events that, when taken together, as a unified drama, serve as a lens or interpretative framework

through which Christians think, make sense of their experience, and decide what to do and how to

do it.'<sup>27</sup> God reveals in and through actions, including speech-acts. He is both the Author of and

primary Actor in the drama. An integrated account of God's revelation is not found in an abstracted

discussion of divine essence and attributes but in an account of a drama in which God shows his

identity. Theology helps the church understand God and his acts and how to participate in God's

drama, it is 'God-centred biblical interpretation that issues in performance knowledge on the world

stage to the glory of God'.<sup>28</sup> Vanhoozer explicitly contrasts his view with accounts of theology as

'teaching' or 'factual propositions' (theology as science) and as 'an expression of religious experience'

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<sup>24</sup> K. J. Vanhoozer 'A Lamp In The Labyrinth: The Hermeneutics Of "Aesthetic" Theology', *Trinity Journal* 8/1 (Spring 1987), pp. 25-56.

<sup>25</sup> See H. U. von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory* (trans. Graham Harrison; 4 vols; San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988-98); M. S. Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002); N. T. Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God* (New York: Harper One, 2011); C. B. Bartholomew and M. W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004).

<sup>26</sup> Bert Cardullo (ed.), *What Is Dramaturgy?* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), p. 3

<sup>27</sup> K. J. Vanhoozer, 'Playing new scenes: the drama-of-redemption approach', *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology* (ed. Gary Meadors; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), pp. 151-199 (155).

<sup>28</sup> Vanhoozer, 'Playing new scenes', p. 161.

(theology as art). His criticism of 'propositional' theology as science is not that it wrong but is 'reductive, too one-dimensional'.<sup>29</sup>

Theologians must allow their minds to be 'nurtured by the canon' and understand the classic performances of the past in the creeds and councils and then seek fitting improvisations which draw together the canonical text and the present context. Vanhoozer explains 'there is no shortcut or formula for judging fittingness'. What is required is sanctification and readiness to discern what God is doing in Christ and willingness to fit in to that, not a technique.<sup>30</sup> Dramaturgy has an aesthetic dimension like that of theology as art. Vanhoozer's primary criteria is 'fittingness', an aesthetic judgement.

Unlike aesthetic theology, this approach looks to God as the Artist, and specifically the Author and Actor of a great drama. The church meets God in his words and actions given in Scripture and Scripture is concerned about the ongoing 'performance' of the people of God. Many features of the text of Scripture show its purpose to inspire and guide later generations. The dramaturgy metaphor 'fits' the Bible well.

This metaphor calls theology to guide the church in word and speech on the basis of God's acts. Where theology as science is primarily focussed on description of God from which ethics is derivative, and theology as art is likely to be focussed on response, theology as dramaturgy requires a focus on both aspects. It is interested in God's acts and our part in the ongoing drama.<sup>31</sup>

Where does theology as dramaturgy fall short? There is a risk that it might focus on the church's action rather than the Actor and author. The metaphor also sets the theologian off-stage, commentating and advising but not, in their vocation, participating in the drama. These are two concerns which a prophetic metaphor could address.

### **[A] How do the metaphors guide theology?**

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<sup>29</sup> K. J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), pp. 87-90.

<sup>30</sup> Vanhoozer, 'Playing new scenes', pp. 179-86; see also *Drama*, pp. 108-10.

<sup>31</sup> See similar comments in M. D. Williams, 'Theology as witness: reading scripture in a new era of evangelical thought, Part II: Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*', *Presbyterian* 37/1 (Spring 2011), p. 21.

None of the metaphors has dictated a strict correspondence with the analogue. Some of the early theologians wrote imitated the philosophers, yet they also used distinctively Christian forms—sermons, commentaries and letters. A scientific theology does not have to be presented as a scientific treatise; nor does aesthetic theology have no arguments. Theology as dramaturgy does not have to be produced as a series of annotations on biblical texts. The metaphors are not strict descriptions and do not place restrictions on the form or method of theology. Further, none of the descriptions, in themselves, determine the orthodoxy of a theological proposal. It is possible to do theology following any of the metaphors and to remain within the great tradition or to abandon it. While there is scope to consider if one or some approaches are more ‘fitting’, none of the metaphors ensures orthodoxy or demands heterodoxy.

The various images give theology an orientation, expressing the aspirations of practitioners and the expectations of recipients. Theology conceived as wisdom is likely to invite its public to reflect and contemplate. Theology as art will be inventive and exploratory in both its method and its forms and to invite readers (or listeners or watchers) on an imaginative journey. Theology as science focuses on rational analysis, the accumulation of evidence and apologetic argument. It is no surprise that Schleiermacher’s aesthetic theology is directed to the cultured despisers of the romantic movement, or that Justin presents himself as a philosopher to second century Rome. The metaphors orient theological method in a range of ways, shaping the goals, style, questions, interests, arguments, appeals, audience and presentation of theology.

### **[A] Theology as prophecy**

I am proposing that theology can be Christian prophecy, taking the book of Revelation as a guide. Bauckham understanding the Revelation as prophecy in two ways. John was probably one of a circle of prophets among the churches of Asia Minor (somewhat like the prophets mentioned in 1 Corinthians), and the book is an extension of the visionary reports and oracles which would have been the usual revelations of the prophets.<sup>32</sup> John’s work is also a literary one, following the pattern

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<sup>32</sup> R. Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 2-3.



of the Hebrew writing prophets and presenting the visions and oracles in ‘a literary work composed with astonishing care and skill’.<sup>33</sup>

### **[B] Theology and drama**

Prophetic theology accepts Vanhoozer’s view that theology engages with a drama and it can claim the advantages of Vanhoozer’s approach. The book of Revelation traces the drama of history from its origins in throne room of God, through the conflicts of history to the marriage of the Lamb when the ‘the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city’ (Rev. 22.3). And it shows God’s people how to act in the drama.

The metaphor of prophecy goes beyond that of dramaturgy because it calls theology to step into the drama. Prophecy participates; it bears witness to Jesus (Rev. 19.10) and demands careful attention from the churches because their faithfulness and witness depend on in it (Rev. 22.6-7, 10, 18, 19).<sup>34</sup> The prophets stand among the church and bears witness as part of God’s drama, they suffer with the church (Rev. 1.9) and face martyrdom (Rev. 11.7–10).

It is common enough to stress that theology must be for the sake of the church. But perhaps it is time for theology to see itself as part of the church, bearing witness for the church and suffering with it. This heightens the stakes for theology. Contemporary theology often consists of detailed examination of the thought of others, producing innumerable studies to help us understand how the discipline has developed. There is a place for these kind of studies but they are not the primary calling of theology. Understanding theology as prophecy calls theology from the timidity of commentary.

As a ministry for the church and in the church, theology must accept the discipline of the church. Paul tells the Corinthians, ‘others should weigh carefully’ the message of the prophets (1 Cor. 14.29). It is too easy for the vocational theologian to imagine that she serves the church on her own terms. While the prophetic theologian will challenge the church, she must allow the church to

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<sup>33</sup> Bauckham, *Revelation*, p. 3.

<sup>34</sup> ‘The testimony about Jesus is what constitutes Spirit-inspired prophecy. If prophecy is not Christ-centered, then it has veered away from the gospel’, T. R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), p. 420.

assess her ministry. Is it faithful to the good deposit? Does it comply with the rule of faith, the rule of love and rule of prayer? Theology as prophecy is dogmatics, it does not draw up the foundational beliefs of the church and determine our confession. The theologian is to call God's people to grasp those beliefs, to make their confession and to live in light of it.

### **[B] Theology and the Triune God**

The book of Revelation offers a theocentric vision. The heavenly throne room sets the perspective. God is gloriously sovereign and beyond direct description. He appears like 'jasper and ruby' on a throne from which came 'flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder', standing on a sea of crystalline glass and encircled by an emerald rainbow (Rev. 4.2-6). In his beauty and majesty he deserves 'glory and honour and power' (Rev. 4.11) and receives the worship of the whole of creation and his redeemed people. Bauckham observes how this opening vision puts humanity in its proper place. 'At its heart and in its eschatological goal the creation is theocentric, orientated in worship towards its Creator'. Humanity does not even take the pre-eminent role in worshipping God, the four creatures are more beastly than human and 'the circle of worship' expands to include 'every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea' (Rev. 5.13).<sup>35</sup> Before the opening vision, God is announced as 'the Alpha and the Omega', 'the Lord God', 'who is, and who was, and who is to come' and 'the Almighty' (Rev. 1.8). Each title is repeated through the book, and set the tone and message of the book.

Whatever is happening in the experience of John's readers, God is unchallenged and utterly unsurpassable. All things come from him and return to him, he embraces, sustains and rules all things. John's vision of God which enables him to 'enlarge his readers' perspective on their own situation by setting it within the broader context of God's universal purpose of overcoming all opposition to his rule and establishing his kingdom in the world'.<sup>36</sup> On the basis of this theology his readers are called to continue to offer their lives in service of the true and living God as his priests (Rev. 1.6; 5.10; 14.1-7; 20.6) and to resist the demand to worship the beast (Rev. 13.4, 8, 12, 15).

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<sup>35</sup> Bauckham, *Revelation*, pp. 35-36.

<sup>36</sup> Bauckham, *Revelation*, p. 31

Christ is central in the theocentric vision of Revelation Christ, literally central in the second part of the throne room vision (Rev. 5.6). John's apocalypse is from the glorious risen Christ (Rev. 1.1, 13-18). Throughout the book Christ occupies God's throne (Rev. 5.6, 8, 12-13; 6.1, 16; 7.9-11, 14, 17; 12.11; 13.8; 14.1, 4, 4, 10; 15.3; 17:14, 14; 19.7, 9; 21.9, 14, 22-23, 27; 22.1, 3). He is the Lion (Rev. 5.5); the holy, true and faithful one (Rev. 1.5; 3.7, 14; 19.11); the conquering King who rules all kings (Rev. 1.5; 17.14; 19.11-16). The opening salutation summarises what Jesus has done and will do, he is 'the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth', he loves his people and by his death has freed them and made them 'a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father', and he will return to redeem his people and judge the world (Rev. 1.5-7). He is proclaimed the 'the first and the last' (Rev. 1.17-18; 2.8; 22.13) and 'the Alpha and Omega' (Rev. 22.13) and is worshipped with God (Rev. 5.9-14; 7.10; 12.10; 20.6; 21.22).<sup>37</sup>

In comparison with God and Christ, the Spirit may seem less prominent in Revelation, but theological significance is not measured by textual statistics. In fact 'the Spirit plays an essential role in the divine activity of establishing God's kingdom in the world'.<sup>38</sup> The opening greetings speak of the 'seven Spirits' (or seven-fold Spirit) before God's throne (Rev 1.4), fulfilling the promise of Zechariah that God will accomplish his purpose 'not by might, nor by power' but by his Spirit (Zech. 4.6).<sup>39</sup> So all the acts of divine acts of power in the book are works of the Spirit. The Spirit give John his vision of God's work (Rev 1.10; 4.2; 17.3; 21.10) and gives the church its prayer and witness (Rev. 14.13; 19.10; 22.17).

Prophetic theology, following Revelation, will be Trinitarian in method as well as content. It will show that the drama in which it shares is the act of the One God, Father, Son and Spirit. Theology in the twentieth century has often been anthropological rather than theological, not only programmatically anthropological approaches but even theology in a more orthodox strain offers 'theologies of' which say little about God. The trinitarian revival of the late twentieth century has

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<sup>37</sup> Bauckham, *Revelation*, p. 63.

<sup>38</sup> Bauckham, *Revelation*, p. 109.

<sup>39</sup> Bauckham, *Revelation*, pp. 110-15.

helped to halt this trend, to some extent, though as Holmes argues even this revival still insists on ‘involving God in history’ and does not capture the transcendence of the God of the Apocalypse.<sup>40</sup> Prophetic theology should continue and extend the proclamation of God, the lamb and the seven-fold Spirit on the throne and ruling the world.

Because of its exalted view of the Triune God, theology has to deal with metaphysical claims, since these are required to assert the identity of the true and living God.<sup>41</sup> Framing theology as prophecy does not limit the concerns of theology to the explicit concerns of the biblical text. In John’s day the presentation of the true God had to deal with political implications. That will be true now. It will also have to deal with metaphysical implications, since we live on the other side of the demise of metaphysics. Theology is not required to offer a full metaphysical scheme, it will have to assert that God who is beyond our grasp has spoken and calls us to worship.

### **[B] Theology and Hope**

Theology as prophecy speaks with hope and the truth of theology rests in the fulfilment of God’s purposes.<sup>42</sup> Christian theology makes claims which cannot be directly tested and determined and always speaks in hope. Theology as prophecy answers the demands of theology as science, because it directs attention to the full revelation when God is all in all. More immediately theology calls God’s people to live in hope. Despite the revival of interest in eschatology in the twentieth century, its has not yet been given its full place in theological presentations.<sup>43</sup> The task of theology must be to declare to and for the church the hope grounded in God’s rule and Christ’s victory; and to describe the ‘patient endurance’ this hope underwrites (Rev. 1.9; 13.10; 14.12).

### **[B] Theology and Scripture**

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<sup>40</sup> See the survey in Stephen R. Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity: The Doctrine of God in Scripture, History, and Modernity* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012), pp. 1-33, 198-200.

<sup>41</sup> See the extended argument in W. Pannenberg, *Metaphysics and the Idea of God* (trans. Philip Clayton; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

<sup>42</sup> See J. McClean, *From the Future: Getting to Grips with Pannenberg’s Thought* (Paternoster: Milton Keynes, 2013), pp. 70-90.

<sup>43</sup> On the revival see C. Schwöbel ‘Last things First? The Century of Eschatology in Retrospect’, *The Future as God’s Gift: Explorations in Christian Eschatology* (ed. D. Ferguson and M. Sarot; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), pp. 217-41.

Christian prophecy is grounded in the promises of God and draws from the Scriptures. The book of Revelation appropriates the imagery of the Old Testament and states the great themes of the Bible in an apocalyptic mode. Christian Theology is always been related to Scripture, one way or another, yet some metaphors encourage theology to always speak in a different idiom. Prophetic theology will follow Barth's call to speak in Scriptural terms. Barth was not suggesting theology simply quote and re-quote the Bible. He insisted that theology begins with the Bible and proceeds by continuing to understand the Bible. Theology as prophecy will see this as its proper task.

### **[B] Church and the world**

Revelation has several audiences in view. Chapters 2–3 of Revelation relate the message of the book, that Christ has conquered, to the different situations of each of the seven churches, 'the message to each church alerts that church to what is specific about its section of the battlefield'.<sup>44</sup> The seven churches are representative of the churches not only Asia Minor but through out the Roman Empire.<sup>45</sup> Bauckham observes that this is the likely significance of choosing to address seven churches (since seven is the number of completeness in the book) and that there are other indications that John writes for the widest possible Christian audience. For instance, John presents his work as 'the final culmination of the whole biblical prophetic tradition' and uses the refrain 'whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches' (2.7, 11, 17, 29; 3.6, 13, 22).<sup>46</sup> The inclusion of the book in the canon is the affirmation by the whole church that the message of the Apocalypse is global.

So, the book of Revelation presents a fascinating model of contextualised theology. It is both highly particular and it presents the drama which involves every person. It is global, even cosmic in scope and specifically local.

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<sup>44</sup> Bauckham, *Revelation*, p. 14.

<sup>45</sup> Bauckham, *Revelation* p.14, see D. A. Carson and D. J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), pp. 707-11 for an overview of various views about the precise circumstances addressed by Revelation.

<sup>46</sup> Bauckham, *Revelation*, p. 16.

Prophetic theology follows this lead. Not satisfied with repeating the language and concerns of other times and places, it seeks to discern what the Lord's people need to hear in their churches and cities, what temptations they face and what encouragement they need. At the same time it contextualises a message about the great drama in which Christ has redeemed his people, now rules and protects them and will return to judge and recreate. Contextualisation does not mean reading the context as the text, but addressing the eternal gospel to the circumstance of the churches (Rev. 14.6).

On an even wider horizon, Revelation has a message for the whole world. The two witnesses of chapter 11 represent the church in its prophetic role. 'Confronted with a world addicted to idolatry and evil, they proclaim the one true God and his coming judgment on evil, but they do so as a call to repentance'.<sup>47</sup> The eternal gospel is for 'those who live on the earth—to every nation, tribe, language and people' (Rev. 14.6). Christian prophecy calls the whole world to 'Worship God!' (Rev. 19.10).<sup>48</sup> Revelation is a public theology. When theology follows the lead of the Apocalypse it will follow a call to speak beyond the church and to help the church speak beyond itself.

### **[B] Re-imagining the world in worship**

Much of the book of Revelation is concerned with offering the reader a new interpretation of the world in the light of God's rule and Christ's victory in 'a vivid symbolic world'.<sup>49</sup> 'In order to break Satan's power of illusion, Revelation must reimagine the world ... the book's imaginative power annihilates the plausibility structure on which the *status quo* rests and replaces it with the vision of a new world. The authority of the Roman Empire is thereby delegitimated, and the way is prepared for the community to receive the truth about God's coming order.'<sup>50</sup> The book of Revelation is often the book of suffering church because of the power of its imaginative power.

Like aesthetic theology, prophetic theology works on the imagination. J. K. A. Smith offers a persuasive account of the 'imagination' as a 'quasi-faculty whereby we construe the world on a

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<sup>47</sup> Bauckham, *Revelation*, pp. 84-88.

<sup>48</sup> Bauckham, *Revelation*, pp. 121.

<sup>49</sup> R. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), p.181.

<sup>50</sup> Hays, *Moral Vision*, p.183.

precognitive level, on a register that is fundamentally *aesthetic* precisely because it is so closely tied to the body'.<sup>51</sup> For Smith imagination is formed by the practices of worship. Revelation calls for these. First it requires reading and hearing, then it calls us to join in heavenly worship (Rev. 1.17; 4.8-11; 5.8-14; 7.9-12; 11.15-19; 12.10-12; 14.1-5; 15.2-4; 19.1-10; 22.8-9) while it offers a drama infused with liturgy.<sup>52</sup> It is precisely the kind of text which, when read and heard as worship, may shape believers in just the way Smith hopes. It certainly helps to guide the kind of worship Smith envisions. Prophetic theology, then, will be concerned with how and why God's people worship and see in worship the avenue for shaping the imagination for service of God.

### **[B] Theologian as prophet**

Finally, prophetic theology demands that the theologian be fully involved. In Revelation John is brother and companion in suffering with the church (Rev. 1.9), he falls as if dead at the feet of the glorified Jesus (Rev. 1.17), he is taken into heaven to see and hear (Rev. 4.1) and he weeps when he thinks the scroll cannot be opened (Rev. 5.4) and he measures the temple (Rev. 11.1). True prophets can never stand apart from their message, they are always drawn into it and changed by it. So theology as prophecy demands a spirituality. Theology as science allow the theologian to report from a distance, even theology as dramaturgy might suggest that is possible, but not theology as prophecy. Prophetic theology can only be done from within the life and suffering of the church at prayer it requires spiritual formation.<sup>53</sup>

### **[A] The prospect of prophetic theology**

What prospect is there for the development of a prophetic theology? As I observed in the introduction, it is impossible to predict what will happen. I hope that what I have suggested engages with some of the current developments in theology and suggests ways in which they might be

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<sup>51</sup> J. K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works, Cultural Liturgies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), Kindle loc. 590.

<sup>52</sup> M. M. Thompson, 'Worship in the Book of Revelation', *Ex Auditu* 8 (1992), pp.45-54; M. Cowan, 'New World, New Temple, New Worship: the Book of Revelation in the Theology and Practice of Christian Worship—Part 1', *Churchman* 119/4 (2005), pp. 297-312.

<sup>53</sup> It is remarkable how rarely discussions of theological method have any extended reflection on the need for spiritual formation. For an exception see J. Frame, *Salvation belongs to the Lord: An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2006), pp. 72-78.

continued and extended. The metaphors are not blueprints for the production of theology, but images to spark imagination. I am convinced that the image of theology as prophecy deserves continued reflection. It calls theology to recognise that it is caught up in the drama of the Triune God, it shares the worship and mission of the church, it look to God's future and speaks in light of that, calling the church to live for God's new creation.



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