

Michael Bird, *Evangelical Theology*: A Review Essay

Michael Bird is the *wunderkind* of Australian evangelicalism. In less than ten years, he has published a substantial body of work in NT scholarship (and a commentary on 1 Esdras!).¹ Now he has produced a single volume Systematic Theology: the kind of book which usually

¹ *Jesus and the Origins of the Gentile Mission* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark/Continuum, 2006); *The Saving Righteousness of God: Studies in Paul, Justification and the New Perspective* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2007); *A Bird's-Eye View of Paul: The Man, His Mission and His Message* (Nottingham: IVP, 2008); with James Crossley, *How Did Christianity Begin? A Believer and Non-believer Examine the Evidence* (London: SPCK/Peabody, Hendrickson, 2008); *Are You the One who is to Come? The Historical Jesus and the Messianic Question* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009); with Preston M. Sprinkle, eds, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: Exegetical, Biblical and Theological Studies* (Carlisle: Paternoster/Peabody, Hendrickson, 2009); *Colossians and Philemon: A New Covenant Commentary* (Eugene: Cascade, 2009); *Crossing Over Sea and Land: Jewish Proselytizing Activity in the Second-Temple Period* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2009); with Michael Pahl, eds, *The Sacred Text: Excavating the Texts, Exploring the Interpretations, and Engaging the Theologies of the Christian Scriptures* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2010); with Joel Willitts, eds, *Paul and the Gospels: Christologies, Conflicts, and Convergences* (London: T&T Clark, 2011); with Joseph R. Dodson, eds, *Paul and the Second Century: The Legacy of Paul's Life, Letters, and Teaching* (London: T&T Clark, 2011); with Jason Maston, eds, *Earliest Christianity: History, Literature, and Theology. Essays from the Tyndale Fellowship in Honour of Martin Hengel* (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 2012); ed., *Four Views on the Apostle Paul* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012); *First Esdras* (Leiden: Brill, 2012); *Jesus is the Christ: The Messianic Testimony of the Gospels* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2012); *Bourgeois Babes, Bossy Wives, and Bobby Haircuts: A Modest Case for Gender Equality in Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012) [ebook]; with Gordon Preece, eds, *Sexegesis: An Evangelical Response to Five Uneasy Pieces on Homosexuality* (Sydney: CEP, 2012); ed., *How God Became Jesus: The Real Origins of Belief in Jesus' Divine Nature in Response to Bart Ehrman* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014); *The Gospels of the Lord: How the Early Church Wrote the Story of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014).

appears far later in an academic career.² *Evangelical Theology* is an impressive achievement, and deserves to be celebrated and used. It is also a landmark for Australian theology. I do not believe that any other Australian, certainly not in reformed evangelicalism, has written a substantial systematic theology. (T. C. Hammond's, *In Understanding Be Men*, was written while he was still in Ireland, and is not a substantial systematic theology). In recognition of this achievement, I offer this extended review of *Evangelical Theology* (henceforth, *ET*). Even in the scope I have allowed myself, it is impossible to deal in detail with a work the body of which runs to almost 800 pages. I will outline some of the general features of *ET*, noting its strengths and offering some comments on its approach to theology. Then I will consider a few of particular areas of thought in which Bird's conclusions are particularly interesting (at least to me) and in which I have some significant concerns or questions.

The strengths of *Evangelical Theology*

Let me begin with the most obvious failure of *ET*. Most volumes of systematic theology, as well as offering an understanding of the Christian faith, have the added virtue of providing a powerful antidote to insomnia. On this count, *ET* fails badly. It is far too engaging! Its positions are usually clear, often interesting, and consistently developed with vigour. It is full of lively writing. Indeed, it charts new territory stylistically for its genre. It even has jokes. I am not sure that they are all successful jokes, but they are far better than the jokes in most theology textbooks.

ET has several other strengths which deserve to be highlighted. First, it is very accessible. Michael Bird is a teacher, and that shines through, not only in the many references to his students and their questions (and confusion), but in very clear explanations, useful illustrations, and some great diagrams. (He diagrams heretical Christologies, yet wisely refrains from trying to do one for orthodoxy.) Almost every chapter offers a lucid and thoughtful summary of complex material and labyrinthine debates.

² *Evangelical Theology: A Systematic and Biblical Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013). Mike honoured me with an invitation to launch *Evangelical Theology* in November, 2013, and asked me to 'say something critical/interactive'. This essay is an extended and more considered version of those comments. Page references to *ET* are in brackets in the body of the text.

I intend to highlight many of the sections for my students as very useful introductions to important topics.

Secondly, *ET* is a genuine work of systematic theology, not simply a doctrine handbook. It develops an argument about the centrality of the gospel, and aims to show how this can serve as the guiding motif for systematics. Within this overarching argument, there are a host of other claims developed. Each chapter brings us into a discussion, often with careful summaries of various views, with their argument, and a presentation of Bird's own view. Attentive readers will learn about how to think, not just what to think, and will be pressed to come to their own conclusions.

Bird's explanation of the need for systematic theology makes a clear and convincing case (pp 55–58). His assertion that the gospel must be central in an account of the Christian faith is right, and overall, he executes this approach convincingly. One way this is apparent is that eschatology is central to the structure and presentation of the book. Of the eight sections, the discussion of eschatology occupies the third, following a prolegomena and the doctrine of God. Bird opts to establish an eschatological framework before developing the rest of his theology, because the gospel is about kingdom and we cannot think about the rest of the topics of theology properly unless we view them in relation to the kingdom.

Thirdly, Bird is somewhat eclectic both in his method and conclusions, which is a virtue. He warns against a method which simply takes biblical texts, grinds them into propositions, and produces 'pristine and pure theological doctrine'—the 'Theological Sausage Maker 3000' (p 77). Systematic theology is an art which calls for thoughtful interweaving of historical theology, confessional thought, the insights of the fathers of the church, contemporary debates and philosophical reflection, all on the foundation of biblical theology and under the authority of Scripture. Bird recognises that different theological loci demand different angles of approach: biblical, historical, contextual, practical. His arguments appeal to each of these aspects in different ways and to varying extents.

Likewise, his conclusions are not entirely predictable. At many points, he affirms classic reformed and evangelical positions. He affirms

classical Trinitarian theism (pp 92–124). God is eternal, self-sufficient, immutable, impassible, omnipresent, omnipotent, omnibenevolent and omniscient (pp 126–134).³ His Christology is Chalcedonian (pp 482–485). He affirms the fundamental importance of Jesus death for sin (pp 385–388), and defends penal substitution (pp 402–410) as well as the historicity and equal importance of the resurrection (pp 435–448). He affirms the reformed doctrines of election (pp 514–530), effectual calling (pp 531–532) and monergistic regeneration (pp 532–537). He asserts total depravity (pp 674–677), with humanity corrupted and guilty in Adam (pp 677–683). Bird holds to Christ’s historical, personal, bodily return as central to Christian hope (pp 258–269), a classic view of the intermediate state (pp 317–325) and ‘eternal and punitive’ hell (pp 333–337).

On the other hand, *ET* contains some views which are not usually found in reformed evangelical works, or are not usually found in combination. Bird questions classic reformed covenant theology (pp 223–224) and traditional reformed formulations of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness (pp 562–564). He hesitates over describing Scripture as inerrant, seeking to distance himself from the American debate, which has focussed on the term (pp 642–644). He holds to historical pre-millennialism (pp 281–291); not so unusual in an American setting, but somewhat surprising in British-Australian reformed evangelicalism. He is open to a range of forms of church government, though he hints that the New Testament evidence leans to a proto-episcopalian ‘threefold office’ (p 753). Having himself changed from being a credobaptist, he defends paedobaptism (pp 761–765), but advocates that churches should practice a ‘dual baptism’ approach (pp 768–771). *ET* presents an interesting mix of approaches and conclusions.

Fourthly, *ET* shows that good theology is communal and catholic. Bird does not seek to give the impression that he has worked it all out

³ Admittedly, omnibenevolence (i.e. goodness) is not usually listed as an incommunicable attribute, and his treatment misses simplicity, which along with aseity, is a key attribute for classical theism. Nevertheless, Bird’s is clearly a (modified) classical theism in the line of Packer. See J. I. Packer, ‘Theism in our Time’, *God Who is Rich in Mercy*, P. O’Brien and D. Peterson, eds (Sydney: Lancer, 1986), 1–23.

himself. He has learned from others and he is committed to a catholic theology. As well as summaries of various views, there are well-chosen quotes from a range of writers and very thoughtful suggestions for further reading (suggestions I am planning to consult regularly). It is intriguing to see the range of authors with whom he engages. As well as early fathers, especially Augustine, he deals with Aquinas and the Reformers. Warfield, Hodge and L. Berkhof receive some attention; Karl Barth a great deal. Moltmann, Pannenberg and Webster figure largely, as do biblical scholars such as Bauckham, Dunn, Blomberg, Hays, Moo, Morris, Witherington and N. T. Wright. Alongside these are significant names in recent reformed evangelical theology: Henry, Packer, Carson, Horton, Sproul, Cole, Piper and Vanhoozer; as well as blogs and *Briefing* articles. It is a fascinating mix of interlocutors, and shows the evangelical student that it not enough to simply read the members of the Gospel Coalition, but also that there is no need to be so besotted by the 'greats' that we ignore those closer to home.

Fifthly, the great strength of the work is its basis in biblical exposition. I cannot think of a single-volume theology with the same depth in this area. We are led by a highly competent, thoughtful, well-informed, serious exegete, and the discussions of the biblical material are a delight. Bird does not offer proof-texting in the sense that is often derided, nor general assertions about the teaching of the Bible. He identifies relevant passages and deals with them in their literary and historical context, sensitive to their purpose, aware of interpretive debates and the major scholars. I could offer a long list of examples where *ET* gives compelling discussions of biblical material. One outstanding instance is the summary of the biblical basis of the Trinity (pp 100–113).

ET not only deals with important biblical texts, it also develops biblical-theological discussions. The focus on the gospel commits Bird to viewing Scripture in terms of biblical theology, and to relating the narrative arc of Scripture to its themes (pp 57–58). The story of Israel appears far more often than in most Reformed systematics, calling us back to major concerns in the biblical text. Highlights in this area include the section on creation, which traces the theme through resurrection and regeneration to new creation eschatology, and the holistic account of salvation within a now/not yet eschatology.

With typical humorous vigour, Bird observes that ‘after seeing a few of the things the systematicians do with Scripture, I have generally come to the conclusion that some theologians should routinely be slapped in the face with a soggy fish in order to try to smack some exegetical sense into them.’ (Did I say *ET* charts new stylistic territory for the genre?) He explains that ‘you can only watch someone struggling to push a round peg into a square hole for so long before you finally snatch the peg away from them and say, ‘Just give it here; I’ll do it for you’ ’ (p 26). No doubt, the metaphor is too confident. It is not as if Bird has ‘done’ the job of getting all the correct exegetical pegs into their respective systematic holes. Still, his ambition has borne rich fruit. In my judgement, *ET* will serve as an excellent source to help students discover how contemporary biblical studies interacts with evangelical theology. Despite the espoused commitment of evangelicalism to a biblically informed theology, and the involvement of many evangelical scholars in biblical studies, evangelical systematic theology often does not work with a deep interaction with biblical studies. *ET* helps to bridge the gap, and can serve as a source and model for students in this area. Even when students come to different conclusions to Bird or pursue interaction with other biblical scholars, *ET* will serve well as a starting point.

Sixthly, *ET* is historically informed. Bird is committed to interaction with the tradition of the church (pp 22, 64–70). He deals with historical theology, and is committed to a catholic theology and the recovery of tradition. In many instances, he carefully marks his position in relation to the tradition.

It is in this area, though, that I register my first significant criticism of *ET*. On the Zondervan video promoting the book, Bird says ‘Systematics was my first love, New Testament was my true love, and Church History is my mother-in-law who likes to tell me I have yet to have an original idea.’⁴ I do not know Mike’s mother-in-law or how they get on, but the description does not indicate great intimacy. The lack of delight with historical theology shows at points. It is not that the book is short of historical discussions, but some of them lack the precision evident in the biblical discussions, and so do not serve the purpose of theological

⁴ Available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_detailpage&v=EtXofha3kxw. Accessed 29 June, 2014.

exposition as well as they could. For instance, we are told that the Reformers threw ‘off the yoke of medieval philosophy... only by smuggling in a more anthropocentric philosophy that would eventually flower into refined philosophical rationalism... eventually yield[ing] an even more antireligious philosophy in succeeding centuries’ (p 34). There is no further explanation of this historical sketch. We are left to wonder if Bird is repeating the accusation of Radical Orthodoxy that the Reformation continued the late medieval commitment to nominalism.⁵ Alternatively, is the ‘anthropocentric philosophy’ renaissance humanism? The idea that the Reformation led directly to the rise of the Enlightenment is an old and overdrawn historical trope that deserves to be presented far more carefully.

Similarly, some of the descriptions of contemporary positions risk being caricatures. For instance, we read that the evangelical left is ‘buying into the postmodern mantra of ‘there is no god but pluralism and diversity is his prophet’... holding doubt a key virtue’, while the right is ‘defined mostly by what they are against’, ‘impose[s] Christian ethics on people who are not Christian’ and ‘invent[s] shibboleths and code words that one must utter in order to be one of the accepted few’ (p 22). Both the evangelical ‘left’ and the ‘right’ are more complex than this, and deserve a more careful description, which would promote better interaction with the positions.

There is scope in another edition for more careful historical theology, with the surveys more clearly based on strong scholarship, rather than general impressions, and worked into the discussion more closely.⁶ This would help readers see more clearly how theology has responded to the changing streams of thought.

Finally, in my list of general strengths, *ET* is contextual. It is clearly written for early 21st century Christians. Bird has not allowed the context to become the text, but he is aware of the questions and issues of our time: both in the evangelical tribe(s) and also more widely. Therefore, he deals

⁵ See J. Milbank, ‘Alternative Protestantism: Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition’, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology*, J. K. A. Smith, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004) 25–41.

⁶ M. Foord notes other weaknesses in the historical discussions in his review in *Essentials* (Winter, 2014), 10.

with, among many contemporary issues: postmodernism, inclusivism, apologetic issues, gender debates and historical Jesus research. *ET* features helpful discussion of implications of theology for our lives, here and now. It does not purport to be a global theology, but includes a few voices from the non-western world. We are certainly not left thinking that theology only comes from Cambridge, Berlin and Princeton.

Theology from the gospel: the Bird method

If a work as vast as a systematic theology may be said to have a theme, then the theme of the *ET* is that theology must be done from the gospel. The title is not coincidental nor merely to signal that the work comes from a particular theological tradition.

In the end, evangelical theology is a *theologia evangelii*—a theology of the gospel. The gospel comprises the beginning point, boundary, and unifying theme for all theology. It is also the interpretive grid through which our reading of Scripture takes place. The first ‘word’ in theology should be the ‘word of the gospel’... Doctrine is that which springs from the word of the gospel and provides the basic core teaching of the faith shared by all major Christian groups. Obviously an evangelical theology is one that lunges, leaps, works, worships, prays, and preaches the gospel from itself. Where a theology cannot trace its trajectory back to the gospel, there it is not evangelical. The gospel is the rule of faith for the evangelical churches as it provides the lens through which we understand the mission of the Triune God and his work for us in salvation. (p 45)

The reasons Bird gives for focussing on the gospel are not surprising, but are no less persuasive for that. The most important is that ‘the contours of the New Testament point to the gospel as the integrative core to Christian belief’ and that ‘the Christian canon is gospel-shaped’ (pp 42–45). *ET* executes this brief explicitly, often reminding the reader how various topics in theology are related to the gospel. Making the gospel the explicit centre of the theological task brings many strengths. It leads the discussion to seek to give a sense of the shape of theology moulded by the gospel. Speculation is moderated, because the constant question to be answered is as to how the discussion flows from, expounds and helps us to grasp the gospel.

ET argues that there is a relative need for theological prolegomena, at least to help orient us to the task of theology, and that Barth gives us the best approach in not attempting to justify theology as a science but by starting with God (p 40). From this point, the discussion of prolegomena focusses on the gospel. While, clearly, I applaud this focus, I would like to see it coupled with an equally explicit *theological* emphasis that makes it clear that theology is determined by God (*à la* Barth). The nature of theology will be shaped not only by the gospel, but by the God of the gospel—not that these two are at odds. I share with Bird the conviction that the gospel is God’s word about himself, and so in the gospel, we encounter God. Still, an evangelical theology is a properly theological theology. I consider *ET* genuinely theological, and when Bird discusses the goal of theology, he says that it is ‘our attempt to deepen our relationship with God by having a more profound knowledge of his person and workings’ (p 58). This could be made more explicit in the discussion of prolegomena.⁷

The focus on the gospel makes the discussion, ‘What is the gospel?’, crucial for the whole project. Bird’s definition is thus:

The gospel is the announcement that God’s kingdom has come in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah, in fulfilment of Israel’s Scriptures. The gospel evokes faith, repentance, and discipleship; its accompanying effects include salvation and the gift of the Holy Spirit. (p 52)

The strength of this definition is that it makes it clear that the gospel is an announcement, and one that focusses on Jesus’ identity and achievement, understood in the context of Israel and her scriptures. These are important features of the biblical gospel that are not always recognised in theological discussions. Definitions of the gospel can extend endlessly, so I am hesitant to contest the definition. Yet I do, because it

⁷ See J. Webster, ‘Principles of Systematic Theology’, *IJST*, 11.1 (2009): 56–71, for the argument that ‘The Holy Trinity is the ontological principle (*principium essendi*) of Christian theology; its external or objective cognitive principle (*principium cognoscendi externum*) is the Word of God presented through the embassy of the prophets and apostles; its internal or subjective cognitive principle (*principium cognoscendi internum*) is the redeemed intelligence of the saints’ (58).

is not sufficient to view salvation and the Spirit as ‘accompanying effects’ of the gospel. Redemption or salvation, implicit in the announcement of the kingdom, is basic to the gospel. God’s kingdom is established against the kingdom of darkness. It comes from God’s work to redeem his people from sin and its rule (Col 1:12–14). Similarly, the gospel includes the declaration of the coming of the Spirit (Matt 3:11; Acts 2:32–39; cf 2 Cor 11:4). The reception of salvation by the church is an effect of the gospel. Redemption in Christ is the message of the kingdom. A definition of the gospel should make this explicit.

The lack of an explicit mention of redemption in the definition of the gospel seems to have an effect on *ET*. The discussion of sin is delayed until Part 7 (§7.4, pp 666–683). To be fair, I should note that the discussion of salvation gives a brief outline of the ‘bad news’ (p 491). Also, any account of sin and salvation will be recursive. Our understanding of the solution reflects our view of the plight, and our insight into the plight develops as we reflect on the solution, so there is no absolute order in which the topics must be considered. Nevertheless, there are good reasons to think that the ‘theo-logic’ of the account and the depth of treatment of other topics would be strengthened if the salvific nature of the gospel was more explicit, and if this structured the whole work more completely.⁸

Similarly, it would strengthen the Trinitarian structure of *ET* if the *ordo salutis* was systematically presented as the work of the Spirit (along the lines of Calvin in *Institutes* Book 3 or John Murray’s *Redemption: Accomplished and Applied*). Bird certainly shows that effectual calling and regeneration are the work of the Spirit. However, there is more to be said than that. We rightly appropriate the undivided work of God to the persons of the Trinity: creation and redemption are purposed by the Father, achieved by the Son and perfected by the Spirit. If this is made clear, by presenting the perfection of the redemption in the church as the work of the Spirit, then students are helped to see that all of theology is about God, and to see the deep connections between every aspect of creation and redemption.

Given the focus on the gospel and God’s economy of redemption, it is surprising that *ET* does not include a discussion of the essential Trinity

⁸ See similar comments by S. N. Williams in his review of *ET* in *Themelios*, 39.1 (2014): 139.

and the economic Trinity. That seems to me to be a key question for Bird's method: how do we think about God as he shows himself in the work of redemption, and what are the implications of language about God being analogical? (The issue of analogy is only mentioned in relationship to gender terms.) *ET* affirms God's aseity, and stresses that holiness is the sheer 'godness' of God. Still, given the cultural pressure to make God more like us, we need to press harder against that and allow aseity and holiness to structure the doctrine of God. At one point, Bird suggests we can describe the essence of God (p 139). He would be wiser to take Calvin's view that we cannot know the divine essence.

The interesting and engaging language helps to make the book readable. At points, however, the 'systematic' aspect of theology suffers because of it. Conceptual coherence is a key aspect of systematics, and that often requires precise use of terms. It is sometimes difficult to tell how Bird proposes to relate various concepts, when the discussion is coloured by a series of metaphors about their relationship. It would be useful (although sadly less entertaining) if the connections were described in more formal terms. Even when he uses more formal, technical terminology, the relationships are not always clear. For instance, what does it mean to say that justification and transformation are linked 'logically' not 'conceptually' (p 561)?⁹

Some theological loci

The doctrine of revelation and Scripture

The account of the doctrine of revelation and Scripture in *ET* is frustrating. It offers many good insights, and the different angles of discussion are stimulating, but it is not easy to work out where Bird lands on some important questions. If the discussion were differently structured and more integrated, some of the frustration might be reduced and some of the criticism mitigated. In the first place, it would be better to deal with 'extra-extra special revelation' (the incarnate Christ) as a central topic, rather than the last mode of revelation (pp 205–212). God's self-revelation in Christ makes the gospel and the Scriptures the kind of revelation that they are. Bird's discussion of Christological

⁹ Foord, 'Review', 10, points out that this feature means that the presentation is not always clear.

revelation inevitably references Barth. It would be good to learn from Barth, who named Christ the ‘third form’ of revelation, but who also made it very clear that he is ‘the singular Word spoken... really directly by God himself’, and so is materially the ‘first form’ of the Word of God.¹⁰ Such a recognition allows the whole doctrine of revelation to develop explicitly around Christ.

Secondly, it would be wise to keep the discussion of revelation and inspiration together, rather than splitting a discussion of Scripture as revelation (pp 196–202) from the discussion of the inspiration and attributes of Scripture (pp 638–646). I can see no gain from this separation, and it exposes Bird to the charge that he holds that Scripture can function as revelation apart from its identity as God’s word (which is the central affirmation of the doctrine of inspiration).

Further, it is not accurate to present inerrancy as a local, North American theology, which other evangelicals can ignore. No doubt, the doctrine of ‘inerrancy’ has been developed in a particular theological context, but that context is not limited to North America, whether in the 19th, 20th or 21st centuries. The scepticism about the reliability of the Scriptures that led evangelicals to affirm its ‘inerrancy’ has been just as challenging and destructive in Europe and Australia, and has had its effects in the majority world as well. Bird’s relatively brief comments on the veracity of Scripture affirm the position of the Chicago Statement of 1978. Indeed, he quotes Chicago as one of a series of illustrations that ‘Christian tradition, in diverse ways, has affirmed the biblical testimony the Scripture is inspired, authoritative, and reliable’. He states that ‘the Word of God is fully truthful in all it affirms’, and that the language is ‘accommodated’ to the original readers, ‘but the accommodation is never a capitulation to error’. He concludes that ‘the concept of inerrancy is a thoroughly ancient idea, though the actual word is a relatively new one’ (p 643). Thus, it may be that evangelicals outside North America have not made the term ‘a mandatory marker for orthodoxy’ (p 644), but that point is trivial. The question is whether it is important, given our context, to affirm the substance of the doctrine in terms such as the Chicago Statement. Bird seems to think it is, and I certainly agree with that. His discussion about the value of the term, then, seems to be a distraction

¹⁰ K. Barth, *CDI*/1, 127–135.

from the significant theological point.¹¹

Doctrine of God and Christology

As noted, Bird's doctrine of God and Christology are biblical and orthodox. I suspect, though, that there is more to be done in his doctrine of God. He is right to say that the gospel leads us to the Trinity, and that we think about the attributes of God in the light of the acts of the Triune God in redemption. However, the discussion of God's attributes is conventional and, dare I say, tame.¹² There is more to be gained from the gospel programme. Furthermore, it would be worth bringing into that discussion some of the scholars who have worked recently to relate the biblical portrait of God with traditional formulations. Amongst biblical scholars, I think of Brueggemann, Bauckham and Terrien, and from systematicians, there are Jenson, Pannenberg and Cole. The discussion of Open Theism could be included in this (although I find that something of a dead end). If these ingredients were mixed more thoroughly in the Bird kitchen, I suspect we could enjoy a richer feast.

I wonder what is gained by leaving the consideration of two-nature Christology until the end of the Christological discussion (pp 460–485). I appreciate the problem of trying to show students the need for two-nature Christology without a full exposition of the work of Christ. It is in the work of Christ that we fully grasp his identity. Still, the same must be said for the doctrine of the Trinity, that it is only in light of the work of God that we know him as one God, Father, Son and Spirit. Bird deals with the Trinity at the start of his doctrine of God. His judgement there is correct. A satisfactory Christian exposition of the doctrine of God requires the doctrine of the Trinity. In the same way, a Christian exposition of the person and work of Christ must be Chalcedonian (as Bird's is), and it is better to show the basis for this at the beginning of the

¹¹ Bird's own view and the whole issue are discussed in J. Merrick and Stephen Garrett, eds, *Five Views on Biblical Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013).

¹² Barrett, in his online review of *ET*, observes that the discussion of the attributes of God looks as if it has been produced by the 'Theological Sausage Maker 3000'. http://thegospelcoalition.org/article/evangelical_theology. Accessed 30 June, 2014.

discussion, and allow it to explicitly structure the exposition. As T. C. Oden insists, we need the 'theandric premise' to read the NT account of Christ coherently.¹³ I would suggest placing §4.7 near the start of the chapter.¹⁴

One of the strengths of the Christological discussion of *ET* is the inclusion of a substantial section on the life and ministry of Jesus (pp 375–382). This is an advance on many reformed, systematic Christologies, and no doubt springs from Bird's work as a Gospels scholar. However, as with the discussion of the attributes of God, I would like to see these insights more fully developed. Bird states that 'the mediation of Jesus only makes sense as the end result of his ministry to inaugurate the kingdom' (p 377). Does Jesus' inauguration of the kingdom simply 'make sense' of the rest of his work, as an explanation and demonstration of his role as mediator? Surely, it is more than this. The inauguration of the kingdom in the life and ministry of Jesus could be developed as programmatic, perhaps by working the narrative of the life of Jesus around the three-fold office, expanded at least by the New Adam. I am not aware of any work that does this in a systematic way, and it is an area in which evangelical theology should be ready to make a major contribution. I hope what Bird has done will push us further.

Eschatology

As noted above, Bird places his discussion of eschatology in a strategic position in the book, allowing eschatology to substantially shape his exposition of theology: 'an evangelical theology should be one that is colored, flavored, saturated, and pervaded by eschatology: God is king and becoming king in the reign of the Lord Jesus Christ' (p 236). He gives an excellent explanation and defence of the 'now-not yet' of gospel eschatology, and explains the implications for both theology and ethics. Similarly, the very satisfying exposition of the coming of Christ is built on a very careful study of the relevant texts, in interaction with recent scholarship. Bird argues that 'no Old Testament text refers to a second visitation of the Lord's anointed to establish a messianic kingdom'

¹³ T. C. Oden, *Word of Life* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 168ff.

¹⁴ See Bird's comments on Christology from below and above (p 355f), which I consider support this proposed rearrangement.

(p 260), and that Jesus' own references to his *parousia* are references to the destruction of the temple in AD 70 (pp 262–267). This view of Jesus *parousia* is the current, standard, scholarly conclusion, and can be contested. Bird lays out the case carefully.¹⁵ Nevertheless, he affirms the importance of a second advent in Jesus' own teaching (although I am not convinced that John 14:3 is the 'clearest reference') and in the rest of the New Testament.

Bird announces that while his natural, theological sympathies incline him to amillennialism, the key millennial passage convinces him of a historical premillennialist position: 'if it were not for Revelation 20, I would be amillennial (and I nearly changed my mind when writing this)' (p 280). However, he argues for his millennial position from OT prophecy as well—'biblical prophecies look forward to a time of blessing and fecundity on the earth' (p 282)—and from a range of NT themes. Bird presents the pre-millennial exegesis of Revelation 20 very clearly, yet, as far as I am concerned, the amillennial view is at least as convincing.¹⁶ The interpretation of Revelation 20 is a case in which the clear teaching of Scripture must be relied upon to guide our interpretation of a difficult passage. Thus, we turn to Bird's wider biblical-theological argument. His key suggestion is that the cultural mandate (Gen 1:26–28) must be fulfilled with Christ by those in him as the completion of Israel's vocation in the 'penultimate stage of the kingdom' (pp 283–287). He then adduces several NT texts in which Christians reign with Christ, in fulfilment of

¹⁵ My colleague, Murray Smith, argues persuasively, against this consensus, that Jesus taught his 'second coming'. He has argued the position in two conference papers—'Coming or going? The theophany-like final advent of the Son of Man in Matthew', *SBL Annual Meeting*, Baltimore, November 2013, and 'Jesus and the future advent of God: Mark's Perspective', *ETS Annual Meeting*, Atlanta, November 2010—and summarizes his conclusions in a forthcoming article—M. J. Smith, 'The Lord Jesus and his Coming in the *Didache*', *The Didache: A Missing Piece of the Puzzle in Early Christianity*, J.A. Draper and C. N. Jefford, eds, *Seminar Papers from the Society of Biblical Literature* (Atlanta: SBL, 2014)—as well as in *Better than Heaven: A Biblical Theology of Hope* (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, forthcoming). The full case will be made in his soon-to-be-completed doctoral thesis.

¹⁶ V. S. Poythress, 'Genre and Hermeneutics in Rev 20:1–6', *JETS*, 36.1 (1993): 41–54.

Adam and Israel (1 Pet 2:9; Rev 1:6; 5:10; Matt 19:28; Luke 22:30; 2 Tim 2:12; Rev 5:10). He suggests that the Lord's Prayer is a 'millennium prayer', when it asks for the kingdom to come on earth as in heaven (Matt 6:10; Luke 11:2). He appeals to 1 Cor 15:22–24 and Rom 16:20 for evidence that Paul expected a 'messianic interregnum' before the general resurrection, although he admits that this is 'subject to dispute' (p 288).

Bird's case for Christians completing the mission of Israel, and with it, the human calling to rule the world, is compelling; but it is not clear why this must be located in a 'penultimate' stage of the kingdom. None of the texts beyond Revelation 20 demand a particular eschatological timing for this. Most of them, like Rom 16:20, simply assert the final triumph of the saints ('The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet'). Bird is right to see the importance of the *location* of this triumph—that the kingdom must come 'on earth'. However, this is far more simply accounted for with a robust, new creation eschatology.

ET presents the new creation and affirms 'the renewed creation' as a 'resurrection of the present order of things', so that there is 'continuity between this world and the next one' (p 326). I wonder, however, if this could be affirmed more strongly. Bird quotes N. T. Wright's, *Surprised by Hope*, extensively in the discussion, but does not seem to have quite the same emphasis on the renewal of the creation by the presence of God, and speaks rather of 'a heaven that descends to earth and an earth that receives the heavens, so that both heaven and earth are *transformed into something other than what they were before*' (italics added). The directional language is correct. Heaven comes to earth, and there is most certainly a transformation—a glorification of the most wonderful kind. However, is the transformation so extensive that the earth is no longer the earth? If it is, then the expectation of the kingdom *on earth* must be fulfilled in a penultimate stage. However, if Bird was to allow the full import of the new creation as a renewal of this creation, then he could see the fulfilment of the Adam-Israel vocation in the new creation, rather than requiring a penultimate terrestrial stage of the kingdom.

Bird holds to a doctrine of 'sheol': 'prior to Christ's ascension, all who died descended to Sheol/Hades, which was divided into two parts, one for the wicked and one for the righteous' (p 323). This is a fairly standard view among modern evangelicals, in the light of the report of biblical

scholarship on the Old Testament view. Hence, it is no surprise that although Bird holds to the view that there is continuity between OT and NT in the *ordo salutis*, he cannot find the same continuity in individual eschatology.

There is, however, another way to view the material. In a sadly neglected article, Desmond Alexander argues that OT saints ‘lived in the hope that God would deliver them from the power of death and take them to himself.’¹⁷ He notes that *sheol* is almost always viewed as negative, and is the place of evil doers after death.¹⁸ He points to the fate of Enoch (Gen 5:24) and Elijah (2 Kgs 2:1–18), and the confidence of Ps 49 that injustice will be put right in the afterlife. This accords with other passages in which there is hope of ‘life after death’ for the godly (Pss 16:10; 17:15; 73:24). He deals with the passages that may seem to count against his thesis.¹⁹ With this evidence, Bird could take more seriously the idea that the godly in the OT expect communion with God, not Sheol. Like the hope of resurrection, the difference between the OT and the NT on the intermediate state is not, then, a development in the *ordo salutis*, but a matter of greater clarity in the process of progressive revelation.

Covenant Theology

Bird’s interaction with covenant theology (pp 223–224) is frustrating. His critique of covenant theology trades in caricatures (Leithart’s criticism is not on target). He follows McGowan (and before him, Murray) in claiming to present a significantly modified covenant theology, when in fact the major modifications are at the level of terminology rather than substance (referring to an ‘administration,’ rather than a ‘covenant’). The discussion of Adam and the entrance of sin comes, in substance, to something much like covenant theology (pp 677–683). *ET* claims

¹⁷ T. D. Alexander, ‘The Old Testament View of Life after Death,’ *Themelios*, 11.2 (1986): 41–46.

¹⁸ Alexander, 44. See further T.J. Lewis, ‘Dead, Abode of the,’ *ABD* (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 2:104.

¹⁹ He argues that when Jacob speaks of going down to *sheol* like Joseph and Benjamin (Gen 37:35; 42:38; 44:29, 31), he is referring to the prospect of a ‘bad’ death for himself in light of the presumed ‘bad’ deaths of his sons. Similarly, in Isa 38:10, 17–18, Hezekiah is saying that he will be treated as wicked.

to take Blocher's view of the place of Adam, but also affirms that all are condemned because of Adam's sins. We are guilty, as sinners in Adam (repeating Horton). Blocher, in fact, suggests that Adam's role 'is to make possible the imputation, the judicial treatment, of human sins'; that in Adam all are placed in a 'covenant of creation' and so are culpable.²⁰ The discussion includes interesting and important observations about biblical themes, which, if they do not substantially modify covenant theology, do fill it out and suggest new directions in which it could be developed. Some more detailed attention to the best presentations of covenant theology would allow Bird to develop his proposal more carefully.²¹

The Atonement

ET give a vigorous and thoughtful defence of a penal substitutionary view of Jesus' death, concluding that 'penal substitution must be central to any account of the atonement for it demonstrates how the penalty due sinners is borne away by Jesus Christ'. He stresses that this must be carefully integrated with a doctrine of God that shows that 'God propitiates his own wrath by becoming the object of his own wrath for the benefit of his chosen people' (pp 409–410). Bird does not explicitly note that this can only be achieved with a properly Trinitarian theology, but the substance of his exposition is Trinitarian. In this discussion, he, correctly in my view, notes the importance of viewing Jesus' death as representative as well as substitutionary (pp 407–408).

The discussion of the atonement concludes with an interesting proposal for *Christus Victor* as the integrating motif for atonement theology, though it focusses most on the relationship of victory and lordship with sacrifice and substitution. I wondered if, in the end, Bird is not actually proposing a unification of *Christus Victor* and sacrificial substitution as the heart of atonement theology. He writes, 'because Jesus is *Anges Dei* he is also *Christus Victor* ... the divine victory is the goal

²⁰ H. Blocher, *Original Sin* (Nottingham: Apollos, 1997), 77.

²¹ G. Vos, 'The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology,' *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, R. B. Gaffin, ed. (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 234–267; H. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol. 2, *God and Creation*, J. Bolt ed, J. Vriend trans. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004) 563ff.

of the atonement and Jesus' sacrificial death is the means to it' (p 418).

Justification

Bird's approach to justification is consistent with his comments on covenant theology and the atonement. With a penal substitutionary view of the atonement, he affirms the forensic character of justification: 'justification is essentially and principally a forensic declaration of being in a right relationship with God' (p 561). He clearly distinguishes it from transformation, while linking them closely, and warns against collapsing the two. He affirms that this right relationship with God is based on an 'alien' righteousness for believers, since Christ 'takes the penalty for them' (pp 562–563).

He is, though, critical of the doctrine of the imputation of Christ's active obedience. In part, this is because he rejects the idea of the covenant of works, which he recognises is a key element of the doctrine under consideration. He also seems to question more generally the concept of imputation, worrying that it leaves us with the 'medieval mind-set of a treasury of merits', rather than thinking in terms of a relationship which must be reconciled. He points out that the New Testament texts emphasise Christ's passive obedience (his sin bearing death on the cross), and that the texts usually appealed to as teaching imputation 'fail to say exactly what some Reformed theologians think they say' (p 563).

The critique is too sweeping. It assumes that the validity of the notion of imputation is tied with the active obedience of Christ, hence he critiques both elements of the doctrine in the same move. However, if the atonement and justification are forensic, then they require concepts such as imputation (and even merit, properly understood). Given that Bird views the atonement (in an important aspect) and justification as forensic, it is difficult to see why he feels that imputation, a forensic notion, cannot be part of a genuinely relational view of salvation. The notion of incorporation does not, by itself, successfully replace that of imputation in a forensic doctrine of justification, unless it is defined in such way that it comes to convey the same idea as imputation traditionally has: that we share in what Christ has done for us in dealing with the penalty due to us for sin, not by our direct action or possession, but by what is Christ's, being counted to us.

In a rather shot-gun summary of his criticisms of the doctrine, Bird explains:

Jesus' obedience becomes ours—but not through artificially dividing Jesus' obedience into active and passive varieties, not through a medieval concept of 'merit' that is imputed rather than imparted, not because Jesus is the exemplary Pelagian who earns salvation when we cannot, not by fulfilling a covenant of works that required meritorious fulfillment, not by way of righteousness molecules floating through the air to us; rather we become 'righteous' in Christ when by faith we participate in the vicarious death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are incorporated into the righteousness of Jesus Christ. (p 564)

Let me take these criticism *ad seriatim*.

1. Bird himself accepts the distinction between Christ's passive and active obedience, since he states that 'Jesus faithfulness in his vocation as Son enabled him to execute his role as the second Adam', and that the NT emphasises Christ's death on the cross dealing with the penalty of sin. It is not clear why the traditional doctrine is guilty of an 'artificial' distinction.
2. A forensic (legal) understanding of the atonement and justification, which Bird affirms, must involve an idea like 'merit'—Jesus taking what his people deserve. Bird invokes Robert Gundry's criticism of imputation, which is not aimed at the imputation of active obedience, but the notion of imputation *per se*. Several scholars have argued, in response, that imputation is a valid and important theological concept, even if it is not explicitly used in the New Testament texts.²²
3. If assuming that Christ's active obedience merits salvation treats Christ as 'pelagian', why is that criticism not also relevant to Bird's view that Jesus' obedience enabled him to be the new Adam and new

²² D. A. Carson, 'The vindication of imputation', 46–78, M. Husbands and D. J. Treier, eds, *Justification: What's at Stake in the Current Debates* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004); S. Gathercole, 'The Doctrine of Justification in Paul and Beyond: Some Proposals', *Justification in Perspective: Historical Developments and Contemporary Challenges*, B. L. McCormack, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006) 219–241; P. Helm, 'John Calvin and N. T. Wright on Imputed Righteousness', *SBJT*, 13.4 (2009): 53–62.

Israel for us? In any case, a traditional, reformed Christology affirms that the work of Christ is effective because it is the work of Incarnate Word in union with humanity, and that his human obedience flows from the hypostatic union and the presence and work of the Spirit. The pelagian claim is irrelevant.

4. No one has ever imagined ‘righteousness molecules’ floating around. It is not clear what this criticism is directed at.

The comment with respect to the covenant of works is the only one which is on target. Bird’s discussion would be far more productive if it focussed on this. While I am not persuaded by his critique of the covenant of works, I do accept that he raises important questions about how we should relate Christ’s faithful obedience to the Father to our redemption. His comments about Christ as the new Adam and the new Israel suggest lines along which the whole doctrine could be reworked.²³

Conclusion

ET is a remarkable achievement, a very useful textbook, and a valuable contribution to theological discussion. It comes from an evangelical context, but is catholic; it affirms the classical orthodoxy which should be at the heart of evangelical thought; it is deeply, richly engaged with Scripture; and by focussing on the gospel, it shows us Christ, the crucified and risen Lord and Saviour, and in and through him, it leads us to know God. The issues that I have raised are part of the to and fro of theological discussion. There is always more to talk over and wonder about. I offer them because this is a good theology book, and good theology books start discussions, they do not end them.

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²³ Barrett comments along similar lines, although I think he overstate the case when he wonders if ‘for all of Bird’s focus on the gospel, has an essential component and corollary to the gospel been abandoned?’ See also William’s brief comment in his review, *Themelios*, 39.1 (2014): 139.