

S O U T H E A S T E R N

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In Defense of Theology as Gospelizing: Michael Bird's Responses

Michael F. Bird

Ridley College, Australia

Introduction

I want to begin by thanking the steering committee of the Reformed Theology group for hosting a review session on my *Evangelical Theology* (henceforth EvTh) and for the organization that has gone into it. Let me say that I am also deeply appreciative of the efforts of the four speakers for taking the time to read and constructively interact with EvTh, particularly because I know that they have expertise in many of these areas that far exceeds my own. I can honestly say that I've learned a lot by listening to them and my mind is churning over with ideas and corrections for a second edition should it ever happen. Before I make my response to the various evaluation of EvTh, let me first explain why I wrote it. People might wonder what would possess a New Testament scholar to make a foray into Systematic Theology. I mean, you don't wake up one day and decide to write a book about neurobiology. I want to say that this project was not dreamed up off the cuff, done ad hoc, on the QT, or pursued on the basis a passing thought bubble.

First, I have been consumed with the question of how to believe, think, and live as an evangelical since my seminary days. It was my theology professor, Jim Gibson, who imparted to me the idea of theology as gospelizing, the consistent application of the gospel to all areas of doctrine and discipleship. Over ten years ago Jim and I co-authored an essay on constructing an evangelical prolegomena to theology and since then my mind has been abuzz with the question of how to construct such a consistent evangelical theology.¹ EvTh is my preliminary effort at completing this task. Yes,

¹ Michael Bird and James Gibson, "Quest for an Authentically Evangelical Prolegomena to Theology," in *Proclaiming Truth, Pastoring Hearts: Essays in Honour of Deane J. Woods*, eds. R. Todd Stanton and Leslie Crawford (Adelaide: ACM Press, 2004), pp. 95–106.

there are some good theology books out there by evangelical theologians whose evangelical convictions infuse their work. But in many cases, the gospel is nowhere defined and nowhere does it become programmatic for the organization and texture of their volume. Such a lacuna is something that has always baffled me because I had been under the impression that at the core of evangelicalism was the evangel, so the evangel should be at the forefront of any theological project. Therefore, in constructing a theology where the evangel would be the beginning, center, and boundary for theology, my goal was to make programmatic what others had erstwhile assumed. Lest I sound like a lone and deranged prophet crying out in the wilderness, “Make evangelical theology more evangelical,” I’d like to point out that a similar perspective has been argued in recent article by Jeremy Treat where—quite independently of EvTh—he exposit the interface between gospel, doctrine, and the church along the same lines that I have been suggesting.² Treat concludes that, “[T]he task of theology is not to go beyond the gospel, but deeper into its riches. Doctrine, theology’s product, promotes the gospel by defending and defining it, in order that the church may understand and respond to what God has done in Christ. Sound doctrine is rooted in the gospel, bears fruit in the church, and serves the ultimate purpose of bringing glory to God.”³ I could not put it better myself! To sum up, at the end of the day, I’m simply trying to do the kind of theology that John Owen spoke about when he said: “[A]ll true theology is, in a sense, gospel theology, for, in whatever stage it existed, its object and prime mover was God the Son.”⁴ Let the record show that I’m simply trying to flesh out this type of project.

Second, I was driven to this project by my own philosophy of research and teaching which requires me to be a generalist rather than a specialist. Yes, I know that in light of the behemoth size of secondary literature and at the urging of tenure committees that one should stick to a single area of study in order to develop a reputation for excellence in that sphere, whether that is Pentateuch, Paul, or Pope Pius X. However, the compartmentalization of bibli-

² Jeremy R. Treat, “Gospel and Doctrine in the Life of the Church,” *SBET* 32/2 (2014): pp. 180–94.

³ Treat, “Gospel and Doctrine,” p. 94.

⁴ John Owen, *Biblical Theology: The History of Theology from Adam to Christ* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 2002), p. 593.

cal and theological studies is a relatively new phenomenon. Some of the greatest theological work has been done by scholars who traversed such a divide. Besides the Church Fathers and Reformers, I only have to mention names like B.B. Warfield, Adolf Schlatter, and Leon Morris to tell you about persons trained primarily as NT specialists but who went on to work in Systematic Theology. That is why in my own research I've cast the net wide and worked in areas as diverse as Septuagint, historical Jesus, Paul's letters, Apostolic Fathers, and early patristics. I've worked as a generalist specifically so as to form a general knowledge base that will equip me in the particular task of developing a consistently evangelical theology.⁵

Anyway, that explains where I'm coming from and what I was trying to achieve by writing EvTh. The real business of course is how I've fared in that enterprise and now I must turn to the affirmations and criticisms of my learned colleagues.

Marc Cortez

Marc opens with a question as to my sanity. In response, all I can do is quote Sheldon Cooper from *The Big Bang Theory*: "I'm not crazy, my mother had me tested."

I think Marc raises some good questions and pushes me on areas that I deservedly need to be pushed on. Marc wonders if I have really developed a structure that is more determined by the gospel than other theologians and if I have perhaps failed to appreciate the gospel-centeredness of other theological volumes. Accordingly he asks what I think it means to have theological content and framework determined by the gospel. Well, on the one hand, I do think that some loci are more clearly connected to the gospel than others—quite obviously the person and work of Christ—but that does not therefore mean that other loci (like the doctrine of creation or anthropology) are disconnected from the gospel. The task of theology is to lay out Christian doctrine while at the same time expounding the interrelatedness between the doctrines. It is on the matter of the interrelatedness of the doctrines that I think the gospel should be or even must be part of the material unity mapped out between the various doctrinal loci. For that reason, I much pre-

⁵ Michael Bird and Craig Keener, "Jack of All Trades and Master of None: The Case for "Generalist" Scholars in Biblical Scholarship," *SBL Forum* (May 2009).

fer a stratification of loci that makes that material unity explicit and also maximize one's understanding of the gospel.

Marc then wonders if I "fully appreciated the logic of the traditional order of theological topics, which seems to be thoroughly shaped by the gospel narrative. Beginning with the God who is Lord and Creator of all, they then talk about God's purposes for creation in general and humanity in particular. That sets the stage for appreciating the tragedy of the Fall and the amazing goodness of God's grace in Christ, the transformation of his people through the Spirit, and the final culmination of God's creative purposes in the eschaton."

A few problems I see here:

First, this "traditional order" is certainly not unanimous in the history of dogmatics. The sequence which Marc espouses resonates with Aquinas, the Scots Confession, and the Augsburg Confession among others. But if we take the Apostles' Creed as an example, the oldest syllabus there is for teaching doctrine, ecclesiology appears before soteriology! Neither is such a sequence reflected in Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine* or *The City of God*. Origen's *Principles* zigzags anthropology all over the place. Irenaeus' *Regula Fidei* and Barth's *Church Dogmatics* could move from the doctrine of God to the doctrine of reconciliation without feeling the need to place the doctrine of humanity and the fall in between. Books 1 and 2 of Calvin's *Institutes* is really a blend of epistemology, theology, bibliology, anthropology, and christology, then in Book 3 you get a broad *ordo salutis*, and then in Book 4 a manual on how to run a Protestant city. My point is that the tradition is far from unanimous of how one should structure a theology. More often than not it is apologetic reasons and intellectual currents that determine the structure.

Second, Marc then footnotes Grudem, Erickson, Horton and Frame as examples of theologians who follow this basic gospel narrative consisting of God, humanity, grace, Spirit, consummation. The problem is that that is simply not how they structure their theology for the most part. Grudem, Erickson, Horton, and Frame all begin with Bibliology, the doctrine of Scripture. This is not a function of the gospel narrative, but is indicative of the Protestant fixation with epistemology and authority and that is what is shaping the construction of their theological project at least in its opening movements. By beginning in such terms they appear more bibliocentric than theocentric. I can grant that whether one should

commence theology with divine ontology or else commence with the economy of revelation is something that has been debated since the Reformation. However, in my mind, we do better if we front load theology proper into our system in order to make theology rather than epistemology the first major movement of the theological project. A proposal which receives support from D.A. Carson and Tim Keller who state:

We also thought it was important to begin our confession with God rather than with Scripture. This is significant. The Enlightenment was overconfident about human rationality. Some strands of it assumed it was possible to build systems of thought on unassailable foundations that could be absolutely certain to unaided human reason. Despite their frequent vilification of the Enlightenment, many conservative evangelicals have nevertheless been shaped by it. This can be seen in how many evangelical statements of faith start with the Scripture, not with God. They proceed from Scripture to doctrine through rigorous exegesis in order to build (what they consider) an absolutely sure, guaranteed-true-to-Scripture theology. The problem is that this is essentially a foundationalist approach to knowledge. It ignores the degree to which our cultural location affects our interpretation of the Bible, and it assumes a very rigid subject-object distinction. It ignores historical theology, philosophy, and cultural reflection. Starting with the Scripture leads readers to the overconfidence that their exegesis of biblical texts has produced a system of perfect doctrinal truth. This can create pride and rigidity because it may not sufficiently acknowledge the fallenness of human reason. We believe it is best to start with God, to declare (with John Calvin, *Institutes* 1.1) that without knowledge of God we cannot know ourselves, our world, or anything else. If there is no God, we would have no reason to trust our reason.⁶

Third, there is biblical precedent for my approach. Paul's letter to the Romans, though not a systematic theology, is considered by many to be a theological treatise and even a template for theology.⁷

⁶ D.A. Carson and Tim Keller, *Gospel-Centered Ministry* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), p. 6.

⁷ Cf. J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), p. 77; James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), pp. 25–26.

In this epistle-essay, Paul offers a preface on the gospel in Rom 1:3–4 before delving into the plight of Gentile and Jew and expounding salvation in Christ in Romans 1–4. The same pattern is rehearsed in Romans 5–8 with Rom 5:1–11 expounding the gospel and then Rom 5:12–21 narrating the consequences of Adam’s fall and the triumph of God’s grace, followed up with ethics and union with Christ in Romans 6, a defense of the Torah in redemptive-history in Romans 7, and finishing off with ethics, election, and eschatology in Romans 8. Paul is a model for using the gospel as a theological preface prior to any rigorous theological exposition.

Fourth, while I can appreciate the theologic of volumes that follow a loose sequence of God, creation, humanity, and salvation—such a structure is not bad or misleading—as Marc rightly suspects of me, I think that they still could imbibe more gospel-logic in their construction, especially in their prologomena. Furthermore, as I argued in *EvTh*, I think there are some discernible advantages in beginning with an evangelical preface and moving eschatology up in the theological order, that is because all Christian theology is an eschatology in the process of realization. On the place of the doctrine of humanity in a Systematic Theology, rather than put it later as I did after the doctrine of salvation, I could be persuaded to budge on this and move it forward. My hesitation is because I believe that it is in light of Christ and the gospel that the plight and solution of humanity is best understood and one can more properly deal with the big issue of theodicy only after one is equipped with a fully orbed doctrine of God, creation, kingdom, and atonement. In fact, this has been largely the position taken in the Greek fathers who, as George Kalantzis has described, think, “[I]t is not possible to tell the Christian story of salvation without touching upon the doctrine of the human being, and it is not possible to explore the doctrine of the human being without engaging the person of Christ.”⁸ In which case, for the Antiochenes at least, christology drives anthropology rather than vice-versa. In my view, it is hermeneutically and heuristically helpful to go solution to plight to solution rather than just plight to solution.

⁸ George Kalantzis, “‘The Voice So dear to Me’ Themes from Romans in Theodore, Chrysostom, and Theodoret,” in *Greek Patristic and Eastern Orthodox Interpretations of Romans*, ed. Daniel Patte and Vasile Mihoc (RTHCS; London: T & T Clark, 2013), p. 85.

Marc raises the issue of application, noting my few attempts to connect the two, but opining I could have done more. I know I didn't get around to saying a lot about this, however, I hope I have been like Paul and encouraged readers to "live worthy of the gospel of Christ" (Phil 1:27) and like John Wesley who would encourage people with the words: "I hope our preachers preach and live the gospel."⁹

On anthropology, at this one point, I think the wise thing to do is for me to fold like a card table and say, "revoco," I recant. I say with the benefit of hindsight that anthropology is one of the weaker sections of *EvTh* in terms of length and depth. In a future edition I hope to expand it and make it far thicker as well. I'm grateful to Marc for several suggestions on matters that I need to engage and wrestle with. That said, I remain convinced of the "royal view" of the *imago dei* where it denotes the royal status of humanity in God's eyes and I still have reservations about a monist anthropology, though I can hopefully tackle those subjects in a more concerted way next time up.

Kelly Kapic

Kelly Kapic, author the charming volume *A Little Book For New Theologians*, engages me on the topics of the *how* and *when* of theology.

In regards to *how*, Kelly offers adulations for the aesthetics of my humorous approach finding it witty and clever. He worries, though, if such humor can lead to a trivializing of the task and be a distraction to students. In response, as a theologian I know I'm supposed to be "sensible, logical, responsible, practical" to quote the 70s rock band Supertramp. Now I can do the scholarly business, I think I've made my bones on that one. However, last year was my 40th birthday, and I have to say that I've reached the point in my life that rather than appear scholarly and stoic as I'm supposed to be, I've decided I'm going to be myself. Life is too short to do otherwise. So who am I? Well, if you watch any of my YouTube videos, it'd be fair to say that I'm something of a cross between Leon Morris and Conan O'Brian. Some theologians ask what has Athens to do with Jerusalem, I'm interested in what Jerusalem has

⁹ John Wesley, "To George Merryweather," 20 Dec 1766, accessible at the Wesley Center Online: <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-letters-of-john-wesley/wesleys-letters-1766b/>.

to do with Saturday Night Live. I want to stand for the truth and do some stand-up comedy at the same time. Some will find that refreshing and engaging, others will find it juvenile and inappropriate. You can please some people some of the time and the rest are probably cranky Presbyterians. Kelly wonders if maybe the humor should be left in the classroom. I say, no, because I write the exact same way that I teach. Mike Bird the author and Mike Bird the teacher are not *homoiousios* they are *homoousios*. I think this personal touch adds authenticity if we embed our own didactic style into our didactic texts. So I am proud that my magnum opus *EvTh* is part of my self-expression. That said, it would not hurt if I had perhaps more self-restraint. But, as Charles Spurgeon said when he was criticized for his use of humor, “If only you knew how much I hold back you would commend me.”

In relation to *when* one discusses the various doctrines, Kelly wonders if I’ve been truly consistent with my own aims and goals in structuring theology around the gospel. For case in point, he thinks I’m right to allow some of the eschatological discussion to arise much earlier than is often the norm, but wrong to then try and shove every eschatological debate into that early material. He suggests that I split up the eschatological discussion, so that material on the Kingdom appears early and naturally anticipates and helps frame Christology, while the discussions about the millennium, the intermediate state, and the future state are postponed until later as part of the work of Christ. I think there are merits to this proposal. On the one hand, pedagogically, it is better to group the eschatology materials together. But methodologically, Kelly’s suggestion certainly makes sense for what I’m trying to do to infuse eschatology throughout the work. I simply need to reflect on how to achieve both more properly. Let me finish with the observation that I am no longer the only theologian urging that eschatology be moved up the theological structure since Amos Yong similarly places eschatology immediately after his introduction to theology.¹⁰

Amy Peeler

I feel like I’m getting a mixed reception from Wheaton. After being figuratively kicked in my anthropods by Marc Cortez, I was

¹⁰ Amos Yong, *Renewing Christian Theology: Systematics for a Global Christianity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014).

very grateful to get an Anglican greeting of peace from Amy Peeler. I share with Amy a similar ecclesiological trajectory of shifting from Baptist to Presbyterian to Anglican. I was pleased to see Amy warming to the trajectory and goal that I was articulating for EvTh. She offers an appreciative reflection on several aspects of the book. So I'm very encouraged. Obviously she was not without places to prod.

Amy notes several deficiencies. Yes, I could have had more from the Wesleyan tradition. In fact, I've been reading through John Wesley's letters in recent months with a view to mining what he said about gospel. I'd like to spend more time with Methodist theologians like Thomas Oden as well. More than I did before. More from women, yes, I tried a bit on this, but I certainly could pursue more. More from the global church, yes, I've tried in several places to highlight global voices. There are some great works about the global church and global theology at the moment by Simon Chan and Amos Young and I'm devouring those books with a view to engaging with them.

Amy is in disagreement with my stance on a reformed view of election. She rightfully notes the tension in passages like Rom 8:29–30 and 11:20–23. She proffers a reading of Romans 10 that tries to balance divine initiative and human response. I can agree with her that when Paul says that faith comes by hearing, it certainly means “the resources for righteousness lie inside because they've been planted there by the proclamation of the gospel.” But I would differ because I think that resource is called regeneration. I don't think the Spirit working through the gospel brings us to a point where we can be nurtured into faith. Rather, the Spirit brings us into new life. Paul's emphasis is on the gospel's power unto salvation, not merely the possibility of salvation. That said, I think Amy and I can agree that our job is to preach the word and to entrust our evangelistic efforts to God's providence and mercy.

Finally, I remain very thankful for Amy's conclusion, because among all of the reviewers I think she captures best of all EvTh's *raison de'tre*, which is that readers would be “inspired to go out and be gospelizers” which is precisely what I'm aiming for.

Michael Horton

I'm indebted in many ways to Michael Horton. I've benefitted immensely from his various works, especially his series on covenant theology that had a deep impact on me and were formative

for own move from Baptist to Reformed, and I continue to get my graduate students to read his excellent volume *The Christian Faith*.

So I was naturally elated to receive Michael's affirmation on several areas on trying to integrate an *ordo salutis* with a *historia salutis* as well an appreciation on my exposition of the Trinity among other things. But as always it is the differences that tend to stand out.

Horton is expectedly critical of my critique of traditional covenant theology. Let me say that I find myself drawn to covenant theology because its federal nature bears the weight of biblical testimony and covenant is the primary means by which God relates to his creatures. That said, I'm often just baffled by some of the things that covenant theologians say and I engaged in a broad critique of their position. I do make some generalizations as I'm painting with a thick brush on a big canvass and in many places this may appear to be unfairly dismissive. So it might not come off well if you're a covenant theologian.

Michael takes issue with my claim that some covenant theologians postulate a works-righteousness scheme in the Old Testament and they are even Pelagian by insisting that salvation is achieved by merit. Horton claims that this is not a recognizably Reformed view. To which I say: have ye not heard what R.C. Sproul said?

Man's relationship to God in creation was based on works. What Adam failed to achieve, Christ, the second Adam, succeeded in achieving. Ultimately the only way one can be justified is by works.¹¹

Sproul is a popular author and this view of a covenant of works has been endemic in many of the branches of the reformed church that I've come across. This is what I'm intensely dissatisfied with in popular notions of covenant theology.

I also find alarming the rather aggravated insistence that is often made by some Reformed theologians that unless one holds to a covenant of works then we are bound to end up in heterodoxy. A claim that is palpably and demonstrably false. Further to that, what I find incredibly odd is in Reformed circles is that one of the worst accusations you can make against someone is to call them a monocovenantalist. I did a search on Google Books and the following people are accused of holding to monocovenantalism: John Murray,

¹¹ R. C. Sproul, *Getting the Gospel Right* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999), p. 160.

N.T. Wright, Sinclair Ferguson, and ever Peter Lillback.¹² As far as I can tell, monocovenantalism is a pejorative label used to describe people who do not subscribe to the covenant theology of Meredith Kline. And herein I think we find the problem. I was nurtured on Australian biblical theology tradition of William Dumbrell and Graham Goldsworthy. Dumbrell held to an Edenic covenant, but he did not identify it with the Mosaic covenant nor set it over and against the covenant of grace. Graham Goldsworthy is more like John Murray is identifying a probationary period in Eden, rather than a covenant per se, yet for Goldsworthy covenant is tied to redemption and begins with Noah. But in all cases, the narration of redemptive-history does not follow the bi-covenantal pattern of Kline, instead there is a more convincing description of God's one plan to bring salvation to one people through one underlying divine purposes that is played out in the various covenantal economies. The Australian biblical theology tradition has been popularized in the UK and USA especially through the series *New Studies in Biblical Theology* and *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* published by InterVarsity Press.¹³ In moments of curiosity I wonder what it would be like to get representatives from the schools of thought associated with Meredith Kline, John Murray, N.T. Wright, and Graham Goldsworthy to discuss a Reformed view of covenants and covenant theology. I think some good conversations could come out of an exchange like that. Anyone want to read a book on *Four Views of Biblical Covenants*?

¹² Cf. Michael Horton, *Covenant and Salvation: Union with Christ* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007), pp. 83–84; Jeong Koo Jeon, *Covenant Theology and Justification by Faith* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), p. 21.

¹³ Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Nottingham: InterVarsity, 1991), pp. 112–19; idem, *Gospel and Kingdom: A Christian Interpretation of the Old Testament* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1981); William J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1984), pp. 44–46; idem, *The Faith of Israel: A Theological Survey of the Old Testament* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002), pp. 25–26; see esp. Paul R. Williamson, “Covenant,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, T. D. Alexander, Brian Rosner, D. A. Carson, and Graeme Goldsworthy, eds. (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000), pp. 419–29 for a critique of covenant theology.

Conclusion

Let me end by saying that I'm immensely grateful to all the reviewers for their observations and interaction. I feel encouraged, stimulated, challenged, and even corrected where I need to be. These are certainly things I'll take on board with me for the future and will no doubt shape a future edition of *EvTh*. It is my hope that *EvTh* has at least encouraged readers and reviewers to consider how any theology that calls itself evangelical can be more explicit and deliberate about the place of the evangel in their respective theologies.