



St Mark's **Review**

A journal of Christian thought & opinion

No. 226, November 2013 (4)

Sydney Anglicanism

Responses to Michael Jensen's 'Apology'

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The significance of Biblical Theology

Geoff Broughton

The theological core of *Sydney Anglicanism's* 'apologia' is a robust defence, explication and promotion of Sydney Anglicans' high regard for Scripture. This essay explores the methodological interpretation of Scripture called 'Biblical Theology'. *Sydney Anglicanism's* understanding and assessment of the significance of 'Biblical Theology' in chapter 3 is concise and compelling. In this chapter, former Archbishop of Sydney Donald Robinson is rehabilitated as a significant theologian for Sydney Anglicans and properly credited with 'pioneering' the Biblical Theology approach (p. 34). Biblical Theology continues to be developed, taught and promulgated from Moore Theological College where Jensen teaches. It is hardly surprising that Jensen's own reflective, theological method demonstrated throughout Part One of *Sydney Anglicanism* reinforces the significance and exposes the shortcomings of Biblical Theology.

Sydney Anglicanism describes Biblical Theology as 'an approach to the Bible that would enable each text of the Bible to speak in its own way without a theological or ideological grid being imposed on it' (p. 30). The previous chapter of Jensen's book established how this is distinguished from fundamentalism. The authority of Scripture within theology, however, remains paramount. Biblical Theology is not meant to displace the traditional sub-disciplines of theology such as biblical, systematic, historical,

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pastoral/practical studies. Its focus is to 'see the whole Bible as the divine and authoritative word. Christians sit under the whole of Scripture' (p. 30). The Biblical Theology approach has anticipated some recent developments in theology, but has also insulated it from other trends. Yale theologian Miroslav Volf recently observed that,

In my judgment, the return of biblical scholars to the theological reading of the Scriptures, and the return of systematic theologians to sustained engagement with the scriptural texts – in a phrase, the return of both to theological readings of the Bible – is the most significant theological development in the last two decades.¹

The pioneering theology of Donald Robinson put Sydney Anglicans at the leading edge of the theological developments described by Volf. *Sydney Anglicanism* is so bold as to claim the 'appearance of the "theological interpretation" movement ... is a vindication of Robinson and Goldsworthy' (p. 40). Other significant developments in theology however, defined broadly as 'contextual' interpretation of Scripture, have not been so readily embraced. To the contrary, the dependence on Biblical Theology has mostly insulated Sydney Anglicans from directly engaging the rise of global theologies (African, Asian, Black, Latin American for example) and liberation movements within theology (civil rights, anti-apartheid, feminist, ecological for example). In this essay I argue that Biblical Theology became more isolated under the particular influence of Graeme Goldsworthy's hermeneutics.

The best and standard description of Biblical Theology is provided by the current Principal of Ridley College in Melbourne, Brian Rosner, who defines it 'as theological interpretation of Scripture in and for the church ... maintaining sight of the Bible's overarching narrative and Christocentric focus.'² Three significant elements are identified which are crucial for an evaluation of the Biblical Theology described in *Sydney Anglicanism*: Biblical Theology is properly theological interpretation; Biblical Theology interprets Scripture's overarching narrative; and Biblical Theology has a Christocentric focus. Before accounting for the rise of Biblical Theology under two key figures, *Sydney Anglicanism* argues that it is more than just another theological method. Biblical Theology is distinguished from other kinds of biblical interpretation such as allegorical (p. 31), historical-critical methods such as form/redaction criticism (pp. 34–5) yet maintains some

parallels with neo-orthodox theology (p. 34). *Sydney Anglicanism* then narrates the genesis of Biblical Theology with Donald Robinson.

A fascinating sub-plot to *Sydney Anglicanism* is the contemporary rehabilitation of Donald WB Robinson as a scholarly rather than an ecclesial figure. The current generation of Sydney clergy, myself included, have encountered Robinson primarily as a 'churchman' and not as a scholar. For example, I was baptised and confirmed by Robinson in 1981 when he was Bishop of Parramatta, then licensed by him as Archbishop of Sydney to my first parish in 1989. Whatever advantages Robinson's episcopal roles in the 1970s and 1980s provided the Sydney diocese, it is now my view that his absence from a teaching role at *Moore College* and the diminution of his distinct theological scholarship was a net loss. It is only recently that Robinson's important theological contributions have been retrieved by the emerging generation of Sydney Anglican leaders.³ *Sydney Anglicanism* cites Robinson's *Faith's Framework* (1981) as 'the distillation of his approach to Scripture as a whole' (p. 32) in which he affirmed 'Scripture as a witness to the revelation of God in Christ' and that 'Scripture was a unity' (p. 35). Such affirmations were still the minority view in theological circles at that time but not unheard of outside of conservative evangelicalism. *Sydney Anglicanism* highlights the way in which Robinson's Biblical Theology was 'shaped by interaction with non-evangelicals' (p. 33). At the heart of Robinson's 'typology' is the overarching narrative of Scripture in three stages (p. 33). How did he develop this unique approach? Robinson is quite explicit: 'the answer lies in the content of the gospel which the basic documents point to as their precipitating word, and as the role of the apostle who was sent out to preach and teach that gospel to the world.'⁴ In *Faith's Framework* Robinson's careful exegesis is always measured against the church fathers (for example, Justin Martyr) and the best New Testament scholarship (including his *doctorvator* CFD Moule). *Sydney Anglicanism* rightly identifies concurrent developments in theology between Robinson and themes of 'promise and fulfillment' and 'Christian hope' (p. 33–4).

Does *Sydney Anglicanism* claim too much on behalf of Robinson? A brief consideration of Robinson's mentor (Charlie Moule) offers a broader perspective from which to assess Robinson's achievements. Like Robinson, Moule was a New Testament scholar and Anglican cleric whose contributions to scholarship were the product of sustained study of the New Testament; concerned primarily with Christology; and attentive to the practical and

public implications of theology.⁵ Moule consistently sought a wider audience than the academy. He often wrote for practitioners such as prison chaplains about theological issues. Robinson excelled in New Testament scholarship within an explicitly Christological focus, what he called 'the content of the gospel'. Robinson *exceeded* his mentor by discerning the overarching narrative ('the gospel and kingdom of God') that provided unity and structure to the Scriptures.⁶ The content of the gospel was always clear and compelling for Robinson. *Sydney Anglicanism* attempts to highlight this unique contribution of Robinson but does so with an unfortunate misreading of another of Moule's students, James DG Dunn (p. 36). Neither Moule nor Dunn was as clear or confident about Scripture's theological *unity*, a conviction Robinson held with utter clarity. But Dunn does not interpret the 'sheer disunity of the Bible' as 'the point of it' (p. 36). To the contrary, Dunn describes 'the fundamental issue for a New Testament theology is whether the message of Jesus or the gospel about Jesus introduced a radical disjuncture with ... what we may fairly call Israel's biblical theology'.⁷ Robinson would confirm this is exactly the *right* question (see *Faith's Framework* chapter 4: 'Jew and Gentile in the New Testament') and the similarity in their answers might surprise a few people!

Robinson's second, *apostolic* task ('to preach and teach that gospel to the world') seems to have been eclipsed by his all-consuming *episcopal* tasks throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Robinson never was as attentive to the practical and public implications of his Biblical Theology as his mentor Moule.⁸ If, as I contend in the next section, Biblical Theology became more isolated when the baton was passed to Goldsworthy, then *Sydney Anglicanism's* high praise for Robinson's pioneering work requires some qualification at this point. One wonders what Robinson's legacy might have been if his vocational role as 'apostle' had been as compelling as his theological exposition of the content of the 'gospel'? The single-minded pursuit of 'gospel-centeredness' subsequently became the catch-cry of his student, Graeme Goldsworthy.

Sydney Anglicanism whimsically recalls its author's first encounter with Goldsworthy's *Gospel and Kingdom* as a teenager on a camp in 1986 (p. 37). This parallels my own encounter at about the same time as a student youth worker at Moore College when I was introduced to *Gospel and Kingdom* in the first-year subject called 'Biblical Theology'. I recall surprising myself (and everyone else) by 'topping the year' in that subject, which only proves *Sydney Anglicanism's* claim that 'its genius is that it moves people from a

Sunday school understanding of Scripture to a mature adult understanding of Scripture' (p. 37). Graeme was also a member of the congregation at St Matthew's West Pennant Hills where I was subsequently the youth worker (1989–1996) and he was a regular presenter at youth leadership training days. A decade after Moore College while studying at Fuller Seminary in the United States I was reintroduced to Sydney's Biblical Theology in a subject called 'Bible, History and Theology', co-taught by a New Testament scholar (Marianne Meyers Thompson), a theologian (Miroslav Volf) and an historian (John Thompson). From my firsthand knowledge of Biblical Theology and Goldsworthy's work, I was able to demonstrate how its framework was essential for hermeneutics: Biblical Theology provided an hermeneutical model that reflected the gospel not law; Biblical Theology included covenant, kingdom and the new creation as the unifying elements in the biblical witness; and Biblical Theology understood Christ as Scripture's underlying pattern.⁹ It was another '15 minutes of [theological] fame' for me: a youth worker from Sydney impressing some of the better evangelical minds in the United States with his Biblical Theology! Surely this proves *Sydney Anglicanism's* claim that Biblical Theology was becoming more prominent in international scholarship? (p. 39). How can I now argue that Biblical Theology became more isolated with Goldsworthy as its guardian?

Goldsworthy's recent works such as *Christ-Centered Biblical Theology: Hermeneutical and Foundational Principles* demonstrate the immense contribution of Biblical Theology and its growing isolation side-by-side. Consistent with the evaluation of *Sydney Anglicanism*, Goldsworthy identified Robinson's threefold 'typology' as the 'heart' of his method.¹⁰ Goldsworthy maintains 'what the Bible is about involves [Robinson's] determination to engage in "the study of the Bible on its own terms" ... [this] approach is the heart of biblical theology.'¹¹ This desire – to study the Bible on its own terms – is the great strength and potential weakness of Biblical Theology as it continued to evolve under Goldsworthy, particularly as it developed into a hermeneutic all of its own.¹²

Goldsworthy's growing isolation from broader currents in hermeneutics and theological interpretation comes into sharp relief when compared with the work of British theologian Anthony Thiselton who sought a more 'open and creative' hermeneutics. Interpretation of biblical texts, Thiselton recognised, must respect their 'inexhaustible, multilayered, multifunctional

polyphony' without succumbing to the 'disastrous hospitality' of 'radical pluralism that brings anarchy'.¹³

Another notable difference in Thiselton's hermeneutics is the 'stance' or 'action' of the reader which is always more than mere 'engagement' with the text but involves the 'transformation' demanded by the gospel. In light of this very brief comparison, can Goldsworthy's claim to be doing 'gospel-centered hermeneutics' be sustained? I suggest that *Sydney Anglicanism* offers a too-generous assessment of Goldsworthy's contribution at this point. My critique is partially substantiated in the previous chapter (chapter 2) in a quote from Robinson on which Jensen comments (p. 17):

For Robinson, the practice of the authority of Scripture ought to result in a rigorous Biblical scholarship and attentiveness [though not concession] to contemporary questions and concerns. And it ought to take place in conversation with and with respect to the venerable tradition of Christian – and not necessarily just evangelical – interpretation of the Bible.

Goldsworthy's latest (and probably final) work on Biblical Theology contains some engagement with wider scholarship and appears less isolated as a result.¹⁴ What has been the impact of this insistence to study the Bible on its own terms? *Sydney Anglicanism* concludes confidently it has been the 'great strength' and 'secret to the theological robustness of the Moore College education' (p. 40). *Sydney Anglicanism* also notes a 'potential weakness here is that the specifically theological foundations and commitments upon which a biblical theological method is built go unexpressed and unchecked' (p. 41). Two other minor cautions are offered in *Sydney Anglicanism*: first, Biblical Theology 'risk(s) becoming a very limited glimpse rather than a panoramic view' (p. 40) and second, Biblical Theology is limited in the curriculum at Moore College – it does not impact every subject but tends to remain within biblical studies (pp. 40–41).

In the final part of this essay I offer four suggestions to strengthen, deepen and extend Biblical Theology by becoming more thoroughly historical, political, practical and theological. As Biblical Theology develops along these lines – while remaining resolutely *Biblical* Theology – it will be more able to fulfill Robinson's twin aims of articulating the gospel content and promoting the apostolic task of the Scriptures. Robinson knew there was both an *interpretive* and a *performative* dimension to Biblical Theology.

Faithfulness to the Bible demands both. My evaluation of Biblical Theology in *Sydney Anglicanism* centres on the three elements previously identified by Rosner: Biblical Theology must be properly theological interpretation; Biblical Theology must interpret Scripture's overarching narrative; and Biblical Theology must have a Christocentric focus. I have argued that the second of these, discerning Scripture's overarching narrative, is the single greatest achievement of Robinson and Goldsworthy. Theologians, biblical scholars, preachers, youth workers, leaders and Sunday school teachers around Australia and across the globe have been able to teach the Bible well due to the Robinson-Goldsworthy articulation of the content of the gospel throughout the biblical narrative. What of Biblical Theology's theological interpretation and Christocentric focus?

What kind of Christological vision does Biblical Theology provides? Two aspects of Biblical Theology's Christology need enhancing. First, it must deepen its historical vision of Jesus as the Christ. Moule and then Dunn seem to integrate the historical and theological dimensions of Christology better than Robinson. As Dunn notes, 'for the New Testament theologian in particular, there is, however, a middle way between a neutral and committed approach, between a historical and a theological reading, between a modern and a non-modern reading.'¹⁵ Sydney Anglicans have excelled in both kinds of reading, but somewhat independently. The world-class 'theological reading' of Jesus Christ by people like Donald Robinson from Moore College has been matched by an equally impressive 'historical reading' of Jesus Christ by people like Edwin Judge from Macquarie University. Too few within the diocese have successfully brought these together: Paul Barnett, Robert Banks and John Dickson are just a few people that come to mind. As a teenager I attended an Anglican Church in Sydney and developed some interest in theology. I was always surprised that when a critique of the latest 'interpretation' of Jesus by Barbara Thiering from Sydney University was called for, the person interviewed on ABC TV was Chris Forbes from Macquarie University and not someone from Moore College. The isolating tendencies of Biblical Theology already noted may have contributed to this. As many Sydney Anglicans have recently found in responding to aggressive atheism, a robust vision of Jesus Christ that is both historically *and* theologically credible is vital. Biblical Theology can be enhanced, historically.

A second and related agenda for the future of Biblical Theology is to extend its political vision of Jesus as the Christ. I find the Christological

focus provided by Robinson-Goldsworthy deficient at this point. While *Sydney Anglicanism* draws parallels between its Biblical Theology and Karl Barth, it is hard to imagine its vision of the 'kingdom of God' ever producing a 'Barmen Declaration'. There is a striking similarity between Biblical Theology and the Christocentric focus of Karl Barth who did not allow a notion of God to exist beyond that which was revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Yet Barth's Christocentrism was never apolitical in the way that the 'kingdom of God' mostly functions for both Robinson and Goldsworthy. John Howard Yoder, a student of Barth's and someone who shared his Christocentric focus, wrote extensively on the earthly, political life of Jesus because of his deeply evangelical conviction that 'to do justice to the biblical material we must not simply choose on the basis of taste, feel or history. We must find a way of weaving them all together.'¹⁶ Biblical Theology must not remain shy, politically.

The two suggestions above address the Christological vision provided by Biblical Theology but what about its theological interpretation? Biblical Theology can continue to strengthen its theological contribution in two key areas: by remaining more engaged with similar trends in the 'theological interpretation of Scripture' movement and by becoming fully practical and pastoral.

The theological interpretation of Scripture movement can be identified through a range of contributions such as Daniel Treier's *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (2008), Kevin Vanhoozer's *Dictionary of Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (2006) and Stephen Fowl's *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation* (1998), *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life* (1991) and *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Reading* (1997). The most recent of these, Daniel Treier, claims that there 'has been in the past two decades a movement towards the recovery of a hermeneutics that is properly theological.'¹⁷ Furthermore he notes that the movement 'respects the unity of the Scriptures and the wisdom of the great interpreters of the past' and because it 'is basically a movement within the academy ... it addresses concerns that are most at home or at issue among "mainline" Protestants rather than evangelicals.'¹⁸ Treier's hopes for theological interpretation of Scripture bear remarkable similarities to Biblical Theology: to 'learn to read the Bible as Christ-centered ... reading for application with theological, not

just narrowly exegetical, guidance and restraint'.¹⁹ Yet some important differences remain. Treier asserts that

theology is the practice of all Christian people growing in their knowledge of God amidst their various life activities and church practices. The academic discipline of theology is not entirely separate from, or more important than, ordinary Christian growth in biblical discernment.²⁰

In *Reading in Communion*, Fowl and Jones remind us that Scripture itself is addressed to communities of readers and the recovery of values of relationship and responsibility can certainly help in treating the modern illnesses of individualism and isolation that infect some interpretations of Scripture. Stephen Fowl, a student of Anthony Thiselton, recognises the interdependency of reading the Bible and living a gospel-shaped life. They suggest that the community that shapes our social and political values can and should be different from the community in which we read the Bible. Only this way will reading and interpreting the Scriptures be revelatory and transformational:

Christian communities provide the contexts whereby we learn – as the body of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit – to interpret, and to have our lives interrogated by, the scriptural texts such that we are formed and transformed in the moral judgment necessary for us to live faithfully before God.²¹

This kind of 'polycontextual' hermeneutic requires that the Bible be read in diverse communities which allow the perspectives of members of different social, political and other groups to be heard. Recognising differences, listening to the perspectives of others and engaging in critical dialogue with each other and the biblical text ensures that readers are truly transformed. Biblical Theology must not remain isolated from such currents within theological interpretation nor be content with individualistic readings. It is this one, final area – practical implications and pastoral transformation – that Biblical Theology would reap the most benefit from remaining part of the 'theological interpretation' movement.

As I am a practical theologian, it is not surprising that the last aspect of Biblical Theology I believe must be extended is its practical and pastoral dimension. I have already noted that Robinson's excellence in articulating

the gospel content exceeded his promotion of the apostolic task. But this is only one dimension of the practical and pastoral role for Biblical Theology. The need for Biblical Theology to be extended can be illustrated from a later chapter within *Sydney Anglicanism* on male and female relationships. *Sydney Anglicanism* employs a range of theological, ecclesial and missional warrants for its 'complementarian' position. *Sydney Anglicanism* then concludes that 'what remains, therefore, is for Sydney Anglicans to work out the full implications of their position for their common life and shared mission' (p. 141). This is the practical and pastoral task of Biblical Theology that is regularly missing from the Sydney Anglican approach, as it appears to be here. *Sydney Anglicanism* appears caught between opposing desires: on the one hand 'Sydney looks less like changing its mind on this than previously' (p. 141), on the other hand 'Sydney Anglicans have to work hard to ... demonstrate that they really do believe in the fundamental equality of worth of the genders' (p. 142). A practically and pastorally focused Biblical Theology would certainly assist Sydney Anglicans in resolving this tension! Unfortunately, to defend its views, Sydney Anglicans use detailed exegesis of select texts to displace practical, biblical interpretation of the entire Scripture! Elevating the practical and pastoral dimension of Biblical Theology can be traced back to its origins with Robinson and Goldsworthy. Commenting on Robinson's warm and enthusiastic response to a septuagintal offering called 'The Pastoral Application of Biblical Theology', Goldsworthy notes that 'for him [Robinson], then, the ultimate significance of having a biblical theology was its pastoral application.'²² I wholeheartedly concur!

Sydney Anglicanism demonstrates that Biblical Theology will remain the bedrock theological method of Sydney Anglicans for the future. Many outside the diocese share the convictions and commitments of Robinson-Goldsworthy's Biblical Theology. Biblical Theology has an indispensable role in the future of Anglicanism in this country and across the Anglican Communion. For this to be fully realised, it must strengthen, deepen and extend itself as an historical, political, theological and practical *Biblical Theology*.

Endnotes

1. Miroslav Volf, *Captive to the Word of God: Engaging the Scriptures for Contemporary Theological Reflection*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2010, p. 14.
2. Brian S Rosner, 'Biblical Theology', *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*.
3. For example, DWB Robinson and others, *Donald Robinson – selected works* (3 vols, Australian Church Record, Camperdown, 2008).
4. DWB Robinson, *Faith's framework: the structure of New Testament theology*, Albatross, Sydney, 1985, p. 39.
5. CFD Moule, *The origin of Christology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge/New York, 1977. CFD Moule, *Essays in New Testament interpretation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1982. CFD Moule, *Forgiveness and reconciliation: and other New Testament themes*, SPCK, London, 1998.
6. Robinson, *Faith's framework*, pp. 71–96.
7. James DG Dunn, *New Testament theology: an introduction*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2009, p. 38.
8. See his edited volume Ernst Bammel and CFD Moule eds, *Jesus and the Politics of His Day*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1984.
9. Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to plan: the unfolding revelation of God in the Bible*, Inter-Varsity Press, Downers Grove, 2002, p. 29. He maintains 'the sound interpretation of the Bible presupposes some kind of biblical-theological understanding'. See also Gordon D Fee, *Gospel and Spirit: Issues in New Testament Hermeneutics*, Hendricksons, Peabody, 1991, p. 65.
10. Graeme Goldsworthy, *Christ-centered biblical theology: hermeneutical foundations and principles*, IVP Academic, Downers Grove, 2012, pp. 170–1.
11. Goldsworthy, *Christ-centered biblical theology*, p. 171.
12. See further Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel-centered hermeneutics: foundations and principles of evangelical biblical interpretation*, IVP Academic, Downers Grove, 2006.
13. Anthony C Thiselton, Roger Lundin and Clarence Walhout, *The promise of hermeneutics*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1999, p. 138.
14. Goldsworthy, *Christ-centered biblical theology*. See chapter 4 and chapter 9 as good examples of wider engagement.
15. Dunn, *New Testament theology*, p. 13.

16. John Howard Yoder, *Preface to theology: Christology and theological method*, Brazos Press, Grand Rapids, 2002, p. 288.
17. Daniel J Treier, *Introducing theological interpretation of Scripture: recovering a Christian practice*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, 2008, p. 22.
18. Treier, *Introducing theological interpretation of Scripture*, p. 22.
19. Treier, *Introducing theological interpretation of Scripture*, p. 54.
20. Treier, *Introducing theological interpretation of Scripture*, p. 188.
21. Stephen E Fowl and L Gregory Jones, *Reading in communion: scripture and ethics in Christian life*, SPCK, London, 1991, p. 34.
22. Goldsworthy, *Christ-centered biblical theology*, p. 200.