

My Pilgrimage in Theology

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Most theological students associate John Wenham with Greek grammar. Not me. I was in an undergraduate audience which he addressed in 1970. He urged Bible-loving Christians to consider theological study and a ministry of teaching and writing. His model was that of the stream from which Christians drink. The stream is polluted by bad theology. Our task is to feed in good theology. 'Trickle-down' theories are risky, but I think this one works. I had been heading for parish ministry; from that day on I knew God was calling me to an academic, though still very much church-related, vocation.

As so often, I attacked this vocation the wrong way. When I began theology, I assumed that all writers not published by the . . . Press, or perhaps the . . . of . . . Trust, were suspect. If I read the right books I would find the 'answers'. Fortunately, after two years of soaking myself in the Bible itself, I was so gripped with the excitement of exegesis, and the new horizons it opened up that I didn't worry so much about 'sound' answers. I continue to respect the Reformers, and men like Charles Simeon, of 200 years ago, John Stott, Jim Packer and Michael Green, at whose feet I was privileged to sit, and whose work in a variety of ways created space for me to do things differently. Where I disagree with them it is because I have done what they told me to: to read Scripture and emerge with a *more* biblical theology. The evangelical tradition at its best encourages critique from within. It sends us back to the Scripture which stands over against all traditions, our own included.

Graduate work followed. I focused on Romans 9-11, hoping to sort out the predestinarian controversies that occupied many of us in student days. I quickly found that Paul's agenda was quite different. I grasped his question: What about Israel? and came up with a basically post-millennial answer to it, expounding it at Tyndale House in 1974. Alas, that night a wise friend gently but devastatingly questioned me. I struggled, but within two years I had changed my view: 'All Israel' in Romans 11:26 actually refers to the whole Jew-plus-Gentile people of God in Christ. So, too, with Romans 7. Having met 'sinless perfectionist' teaching as an undergraduate, I had believed (and taught vehemently) the Cranfield/Dunn line (Rom. 7:14ff. describes the Christian's struggle with sin). Once again I was forced to rethink. I worked on Romans 1-4, then on 9-11. Together they formed a pincer movement on my view of 5-8. I walked round Cambridge in the snow thinking it through. Yes, Christians still struggle with sin. Yes, the sinless perfectionists are wrong. But no, that's not what Paul is talking about. He is talking about Israel (*not* 'humans in general', as the mainline German view suggests) under the Torah.

Around the same time I became convinced that I should explore Davidic 'representative' Messiahship as a fundamental clue to Paul. This was, and is, unfashionable. I was often tempted to abandon it. I remember a sense of call, coupled with (I hope) a hard-headed academic conviction that I should proceed. I learned to live with unanswered questions: one of the keys to staying sane and Christian in a lifetime of studying theology is to say 'I don't know the answer to

this just now, but I'm prepared to wait'. Often the answer comes by an unexpected route, in a form that one wouldn't have recognized at the original time of asking. Patience is a fruit of the Spirit much needed by theologians.

During this time I was ordained, and worked as a college chaplain. I organized (among other things) a Jewish-Christian discussion group, which sharpened up my awareness of a lot of contemporary issues that related directly to Paul and Romans.

I went to Canada in 1981 to teach NT studies at McGill, and to be involved with the Anglican College in Montreal. The Combination was superb: out of the lecture room, into chapel. My view of the Eucharist, which had started at a rock-bottom low as an undergraduate, had received an upward jolt through reading Calvin (yes, try it and see), and had been nurtured through my early years as a chaplain. It finally came together and started to approach that of Paul. . . . Passages I'd not understood before came alive. So did the joy of participating in the richest of all Christian symbols. Alone, I continued to read the NT in Greek and the OT Hebrew day by day, constantly finding a combination of personal address and intellectual stimulation which I have never been able to separate. (I was once advised to keep separate Bibles one devotional and one 'academic'. Fortunately I took no notice.)

During my second year at McGill, I plunged into the deepest depression I've ever known. I wrestled in prayer, searched the scriptures, examined my conscience, and fell apart. I told my wife about it one night; the next morning, a letter arrived from a Christian psychotherapist who had felt an inexplicable but irresistible urge to write. I still have that letter. Over the next year I learned more about myself and my emotions than I had thought possible. If today I manage to function as a pastor, it is not least because I know something about pain. I know, too, that healing of memory and imagination is not just wishful thinking.

Six years later, as I prepared to teach a course on Jesus in his historical context, I realized what else had been happening. I combed through my notebooks for all my old jottings. All the most significant insights about Jesus I had ever had, particularly my deepest reflections on the crucifixion, were dated in that period of depression.

In 1983 I started work on my Colossians commentary. By the time I finished it in 1985 I had undergone probably the most significant change of my theological life. Until then I had been basically, a dualist. The gospel belonged in one sphere, the world of creation and politics in another. Wrestling with Colossians 1:15-20 put paid to that. I am still working through the implications (and the resultant hostility in some quarters): my book *New Tasks for a Renewed Church* is a recent marker on this route.

Back in Oxford in 1986, the two halves of my professional life came together in a different way. I teach and write about the NT and early Judaism, and especially about Jesus and Paul. I work as a pastor in a college full of students from all backgrounds and in all disciplines. And I have the joy, during term, of a regular celebration of the Eucharist at which, again and again, everything else I do comes into focus. I find myself held within the love of the triune God able to receive fresh grace for fresh tasks. Privately I have found to my surprise that at least sometimes prayer is becoming more of a delight than a discipline—perhaps because I have drawn on

traditions other than my own (charismatic on one side, orthodox on the other). Passages from Scripture still jump off the page and make me want to laugh and/or cry with the love and the pain, of God.

Unanswered questions remain. So does the frailty of my human self, as I struggle to be obedient to my multiple callings, both professionally and, more important (though not all Christians see this point), domestically. Who is sufficient for these things? Certainly not this muddled and sinful Christian. The great thing about that is what it does for your theology. The more I appreciate my own laughable inadequacy, the more I celebrate the fact of the Trinity. Without the possibility of invoking the Spirit of Jesus, of the living God, for every single task, what would keep me going? Pride and fear, I guess. I know enough about both to recognize the better way.

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