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Direct correspondence to: **Attn: Editor, *Southeastern Theological Review***
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary
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BOOK REVIEWS

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Review of Michael Bird, Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction

Michael S. Horton
Westminster Seminary, California

Introduction

It is a credit to systematic theology that a biblical scholar of Michael Bird's rank would take dogmatics as seriously as he has with this volume. It may be sufficient cause to have his credentials at SBL checked at the door. Nevertheless, it represents a healthy and hopefully growing conversation between these fields. In what follows, I will present brief bullet points of engagement, which will be followed by two larger areas for further discussion.

- I'm not a fan of "central dogmas" and I don't see the gospel as "the canon within the canon," but rather as the central announcement from Genesis to Revelation. One danger of this sort of method is that it often leads to distortion more than integration. The search for chief divine attributes threatens divine simplicity. On the atonement, he goes so far as to say that Christus Victor "is the crucial integrative hub of the atonement because it provides the canopy under which the other modes of the atonement gain their currency" (p. 414). Yet don't the seminal Christus Victor passages (e.g., Col. 2:13–15 and 1 Cor. 15:56–57) treat Christ's victory over Satan, death, and hell as the result of his "having cancelled out the certificate of debt" and removing the sting of death by taking away the curse of the law? And why must we choose between a participatory view of salvation (union with Christ) and the Christ's work of meriting our salvation, imputing his righteousness to us?
- A further concern I have with Bird's method has to do with his assumptions and assertions regarding Protestant scholasticism. On one hand, he can be quite generous to Karl Barth, whom he describes "decidedly orthodox and Reformed in his basic stance…" (p. 191). On the other hand, he reduces traditional Reformed theology to caricature in a number of places throughout this volume, as early

as the line he draws from the Reformation (especially the Protestant scholastics) to Enlightenment rationalism—and, of course, to Charles Hodge (p. 34, p. 37, p. 61) .

- I appreciated the author's warning against a "naïve biblicicism" in many evangelical theologies: "Theological Sausage Maker 3000" (p. 77), "a theology derived from a concordance" (p. 78). In that vein, I appreciated his integration of the *historia salutis* and the *ordo salutis*, although I did wonder if, like Scott McKnight, he tends to exclude the "pro nos" (for us) aspects from Christ's death and resurrection. Hence, "salvation and the gifts of the Holy Spirit," including redemption, forgiveness, justification, and adoption are not treated under the gospel itself, but under "effects of the gospel"—"images of salvation" (p. 52).
- Bird provides a terrific exegetical defense for the Trinity and the importance of our worship being shaped by it. I loved his line, "Only a triune God can do what is done in the gospel" (p. 89).
- Many of his reflections on the attributes of God through a gospel lens were helpful, although it seemed at one point as if he was collapsing the eternal processions of the Son and the Spirit into the acts of creation and redemption (p. 152).
- Bird's expertise is especially evident in his discussion of Christ's person and work. His exegetical handling of the preexistence of the Son I found very helpful (pp. 468–75), although I had some questions about his account of the Reformed *non capax* (p. 485) and his defense of an Amyraldian view of the atonement's extent was clouded, I thought, by a misunderstanding of the Reformed view.
- His reflection on the Holy Spirit as both divine and a distinct person was illuminating, although there were still some formulations that made me wonder if he is conceived as a person as much as a thing ("the artistic side of God," p. 662 and "the effect of revelation," pp. 631–32).
- While affirming "dichotomy" (p. 664), he navigates deftly between the Cartesian Scylla and monist Charybdis, affirming the soul's separate existence in the intermediate state while pointing to the resurrection of the body as the ultimate hope (pp. 309–25).

- Some earlier statements on the sacraments struck me as "Zwinglian" (viz., pp. 444, 740).[1] However, in his focused discussion on the subject he offered a rich exegetical defense of a more robust view of baptism (including the baptism of covenant children) and the Supper (esp. pp. 775 ff.). This is why I was surprised at his conclusion that baptism is "a second order doctrine" (p. 770) and his recommendation of "dual baptism" (768–76). "If we base our doctrine of baptism not only the doctrine of the church (credobaptism) or on the doctrine of the covenant (paedobaptism), but on the doctrine of the gospel, then perhaps we can reach a point of 'equivalent alternatives' regarding baptism" (p. 776). Here again, I think that the author pioneers a "middle way" merely by trivializing the reasons that credobaptists and paedobaptists offer for their convictions.
- On the millennium, I wish that Professor Bird had, "in the end," fallen out on the amillennial side of things (p. 280), but appreciated the respectful way in which he described the other views on their own terms. I thought he was at his best in drawing attention to the ultimate hope of a renewed rather than replaced cosmos.

Larger Areas for Further Discussion

There were a few controversial sections that I'd like to point up for further conversation. On *Scripture*, I was confused as to what Bird was affirming and rejecting concerning verbal inspiration. It seemed that he was driving a dangerous wedge between the Spirit and Scripture. He is wary of identifying Scripture with "revelation itself" (pp. 199, 646). "Scripture is not authoritative in and of itself,

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[1] "Baptism is a sign of grace and the pledge of fidelity to God" (p. 444). "The grace of baptism and Eucharist is sanctifying and edifying, not salvific." These sacraments "symbolize the gospel" (p. 740). I also have a quibble with this statement: "The problem with providing the 'Reformed view' of the Lord's Supper is that there was a wide diversity of opinion among the Reformers. Zwingli, Bucer, Bullinger, and Calvin all held different views, not always unrelated, but different all the same" (p. 784). However, the Reformed view is set forth in our confessions and catechisms, not the writings of the Reformers—however illustrious. And those standards clearly affirm the consensus that Calvin summarized well.

as if its pages have some kind of magical theological quality" (p. 646). "Our authority is not the propositions of Scripture. Our authority is the Holy Spirit speaking in Scripture as a testimony to the living Lord" (p. 201). Nevertheless, he says, "Rightly understood, there is no reason to engage in a Barthian retreat from identifying God with his inscripturated Word" (p. 203). Other points on the topic left me confused, but perhaps he can clear them up for me in our discussion.[2]

The presentation of the traditional Reformed view of *covenant theology* is clouded by some caricatures—or at least misunderstandings. I know of no Reformed theologian who has ever said that "the Mosaic covenant contains a similar scheme of obedience for

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[2] (1) What is meant by the church "canonizing" Scripture, rather than speaking of the canon as recognized and received by the church? For example, "the church did create the biblical canon in the sense of being charged with the task of putting the inscripturated Word of God into its canonical form…Furthermore, the Apostles' Creed precedes the existence of a biblical canon" (p. 66). Aside from the fact that the Apostles' Creed dates from the seventh century, the gist of the point is unclear to me. Is it that tradition grounds Scripture or vice versa? I had similar questions about experience as a source of theology. There is no distinction drawn between the experience of the prophets and apostles and that of us today. The footnote to Bultmann hardly cleared this one up for me. (2) What are the implications of holding that not only the texts, but the persons of the prophets and apostles were inspired? According to the traditional view of verbal inspiration, the texts are inspired. However, Bird argues that the persons were inspired. He says that 2 Pet. 1:20–21 suggests that "God inspires persons, not pages" (p. 640). I don't see his point about 2 Pet. 1:20–21. On the contrary, what is inspired is "the prophetic word" (v. 19) rather than the prophet. Twice he says that "no prophecy of Scripture" originated with the prophet. The prophets "spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (v. 21), but it is the prophecy itself that is inspired. In fact, Bird says and that inspiration encompasses even the preservation of the texts and the final recognition of the canon (p. 638 note 49). (3) And what are the implications of saying that they were inspired even at the level of their worldview (p. 642)? Does this not undermine the humanity of Scripture more than verbal inspiration would? And does this mean that their cosmological assumptions were inspired? Furthermore, Bird extended inspiration to include the church's "canonizing" of Scripture. Wouldn't the traditional distinction between inspiration and illumination be more appropriate and helpful? Ironically, as inspiration broadens, it weakens.

salvation" (p. 222). Adam did not need to be saved, but to fulfill the probation and win for himself and his posterity the right to eat from the Tree of Life. Further, the Mosaic covenant doesn't contain a scheme for *salvation* at all, but for remaining in God's holy land as his holy nation—typological of the messianic kingdom. Everlasting life came, for Israelites as well as for us, through faith in the promise. A second caricature follows upon the first. Traditional covenant theology "is essentially Pelagian," he says. "Jesus becomes our vicarious Pelagian, who keeps the law for us and imputes his obedience to us" (p. 224).

Third, Bird caricatures the Reformed view of the relation between the church and Israel. By teaching that "the church had effectively replaced Israel as God's people," he asserts, Reformed theology helped contribute to the Holocaust (p. 719). On the contrary, covenant theology affirms the expansion of Israel, in fulfillment of the pledge to Abraham of a worldwide family in Christ. In fact, there is nothing in Bird's description of his own view that is not affirmed in traditional Reformed accounts (p. 726).

Now to substance. Bird sees "several major drawbacks" to the traditional Reformed scheme of covenant theology. First, he faults the traditional scheme for a "*multiplication* of covenants" that obscures God's "*one* purpose in salvation" and yet immediately adds, "What is more, the penchant for *unity* between the covenants is often *overplayed*…" (p. 223, emphasis added). Is the problem too many covenants or not enough? Too much diversity between them or too much? Second, he jokes (I think it's a joke) that he has tried in vain to "find a 'covenant of works' in my ESV concordance!)." "While there is some 'deal' between God and Adam, it is not described in terms of a covenant, nor is there any law etched out beyond the commands that Adam is given." Nobody argues that there is any law etched out beyond the commands that Adam is given. As for the concordance, I fear that Professor Bird has used the Theological Sausage Grinder at this point: "theology by concordance." The elements of a covenant are clearly present in Genesis 1 and 2 and even more clearly when the covenant curse is executed in chapter 3. As with the Davidic covenant, more than the absence of the word *berith* is required to dismiss the notion of an Adamic covenant. (Besides, if I were petty, I might say, "no matter how much I try, I cannot find an "Adamic Administration" in my ESV concordance!")

Bird grants "that Israel in a sense recapitulates the role of Adam," but he holds that "the Mosaic law cannot be a republication of a covenant of works, since there is grace under the Mosaic covenant (see Deut. 9:1–19; 26:1–10; Ezek. 16:1–63; John 1:16)" (p. 223). However, this misunderstands the classic federal view, for many reasons.[3] For example, after the fall, *all* of God's covenantal relations are in some sense gracious. Furthermore, the promise of descendants and land was part of the Abrahamic covenant and God fulfilled this gracious pledge when he delivered Abraham's descendants from Egypt, drove out the idolatrous nations, and allotted the inheritance to the twelve tribes. The Mosaic covenant established the legal basis for *remaining* in the land as God's elect nation, not for the inheritance of the whole earth through the faithfulness of his one elect seed, namely, Christ (Gal. 3:16). That Paul calls them "two covenants"—one of law and the other of promise—underscores the point (chapters 3 and 4, esp. 4:24). Yet Bird characterizes his position as a middle way: "a modified covenant theology" (p. 224), but this simply means that "'covenant' is a biblical way of describing the formal and material unity of redemptive history" (p. 225).

It becomes clear that the driving force behind Bird's concerns is what I regard as a false choice between a participatory paradigm and a legal one; between a relationship that needs to be restored and the fulfillment of the law (pp. 224, 226). He affirms many points that he shares in common with Reformed theology: the "'Two Adams" scheme of Romans 5, for example. He allows that God made a "deal" with Adam, based on Adam's "obedience to the law" during his "probation," upon the fulfillment of which he would "attain immortality." But then what he says later seems to contradict all of this: "Adam's failure was not the failure to keep an eternal law; it was the breaking of his relationship with God through his desire for autonomy from God. Salvation will henceforth mean restoring the relationship between Creator and humanity as opposed to accruing the meritorious law-keeping that Adam failed to achieve" (pp. 226–27; cf. p. 497, note 7). The main concern is the false choice between relationship and the word "merit," even though he seems to affirm what "merit" implies, but without a covenantal basis for it.

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[3] The group discussed this point at the original meeting ETS where these papers were given.

Although Bird criticizes Reformed theology for over-emphasizing the unity of the covenant of grace, his own view is that "each new covenant presupposes and renews what preceded it" (p. 228; cf. p. 508) and "the Abrahamic and Sinai covenants are essentially renewed and transformed into the new covenant, where God's people are united with Jesus the Messiah" (p. 509). Of course, no one doubts that the old covenant foreshadowed the new, but how does Bird's construal make sense of the contrast between the covenant of law (Sinai) and the covenant of promise (Abrahamic/New), especially in Romans 4 and Galatians 3–4? Or the way in which the writer to the Hebrews refers to the new covenant not as a renewal of Sinai but as the Reality whose advent makes "the first one obsolete" (Heb. 8:13)? In any case, I cannot see from the relevant Old Testament texts, much less their New Testament interpretation, any suggestion that "the Sinai covenant is a restatement and expansion of the Abrahamic promises" (pp. 502–503). On the contrary, in fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise of a worldwide family in Christ, the new covenant is "not like" the Sinai covenant (Jer. 31:32) and it is far more expansive than a geopolitical plot of land.[4]

Bird's "modified covenantal theology" underlies a modified view of *justification*.[5] Much of the traditional Reformed doctrine is present here, but crucial revisions are proposed. Once again engagement begins with a caricature of the traditional doctrine. He repeats N.T. Wright's notorious blooper, comparing the notion of Christ's imputed righteousness to a gas passed from the judge to the defendant in the courtroom. Bird adds his own comparison: Jesus logging "frequent flyer miles." He packs a lot of these carica-

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[4] On further point could be added. The classic covenantal scheme of Reformed theology affirms that Christ as the new Adam not only restores us to "the original image of its Creator." It is not merely that "[w]hen we are seated with Christ, we are returned to our proper human state" (p. 661). It is much more than a return to Eden. Rather, it is the consummation and confirmation in righteousness and immorality that Adam fell short of entering.

[5] Professor Bird will not be surprised to hear me repeat my "retrograde-dead-orthodox-Reformed-view" that I presented in a volume of essays with his "Progressive Reformed View." Actually, my title in that volume is titled "Traditional Reformed View" in James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy, eds, *Justification: Five Views* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011).

tures into one sentence, in fact: "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" (pp. 563–64).

Again, I think that an unwarranted dichotomy between imputation and participation, law and relationship, drives what Bird thinks is wrong with the Reformation doctrine of justification. "In the Reformed tradition it is common to define justification as the forgiveness of sins supplemented by the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer (e.g., Calvin, *Institutes* 3.11–2)…That is certainly logical, but it is not biblical" (p. 552).[6] Instead, Bird argues, "We are justified because we participate in the justification of the Messiah" (p. 443; cf. p. 561).[7] "Upon closer inspection," he adds, "one notices that the emphasis falls squarely on *union with Christ*….Rather than *imputation,* a better description of the biblical material is *incorporation* into the righteousness of Christ" (p. 563). "The problem is a broken relationship. What is needed is not merit, but reconciliation" (p. 562).

Yet after these rather sweeping critiques, Bird allows for imputation "under this aegis of union [with Christ]" (p. 564).[8] Since he

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[6] "What is more, the 1999 Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by Lutherans and Catholics moved the ecumenical conversation forward in a positive way and broke down some of the misconceptions and caricatures that Catholics and Protestants have had of each other's positions" (p. 561). He allows that it tends to collapse justification into sanctification and *simil iustus et peccator* "appears to be irreconcilable with the Catholic scheme" (p. 561). However, I disagree more sharply with the Joint Declaration's alleged success.

[7] He adds, "On the Reformed side, it is important to remember that there was a lot of diversity among the Reformers about justification itself" (p. 562). However, even the substantiating footnote to James R. Payton does not support that claim: "But these differences were variant modulations within the Reformers' concerto. The Protestant Reformers agreed in emphasizing justification *sola fide*" (p. 562, note 149).

[8] Now imputation is a legitimate concept under this aegis of union and is inferred from the gift of righteousness (Rom. 5:17; Phil. 3:9), emphasis on Jesus' obedience and faithfulness (Rom. 5:17–19; Phil. 2:5–11; Heb. 3:1–6; Rev. 1:5), the representative role of Adam and Jesus (Rom 5:12–21), the language of reckoning and forgiveness (Rom 4:4-5; 2 Cor. 5:21),

has argued that the Reformed view of imputation is unbiblical and is rendered superfluous by union with Christ, I'm not quite sure what this means. The section ends with another search for "the unifying image" of salvation. "To begin with, we can disqualify justification and theosis as the primary structures for a salvation framework… If God's plan is to unite himself to creation through the Logos with the Spirit, perhaps we could proffer the suggestion that the center of salvation consists of *communion with God*, *union with Christ*, and *life in the Spirit*" (pp. 578–79).

The section on regeneration and the perseverance of the saints also provoked some big questions. His questioning of monergism—even in regeneration—I found somewhat surprising and, once again, his description of the Calvinist view was a bit off-putting (pp. 588–89). On the perseverance of the saints, he says that he opts for "the Reformed position" (and cites me approvingly on the point). Nevertheless, the view that he actually defends is rather different: Those who fall away (Hebrews 6) are "phenomenally speaking, saved"' and have faith and therefore "do in a sense 'lose' their salvation," but they are not regenerated or fully converted (pp. 602–604).

Conclusion

Focusing as it has on areas of difference and further need for clarification, this review hardly does justice to the many helpful insights, suggestive interpretations, and careful exegesis that I discovered at many points in this work. Like all human attempts to summarize the greatest story ever told, Bird's tome does not pretend to be the last word. However, if generating conversations about the gospel is any indication, then it will doubtless prove to be an important word along our pilgrim way.

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and the forensic nature of righteousness (Rom. 5:16; 8:1; 2 Cor. 3:9). It is true, then, as N. T. Wright says, that one of the 'great truths of the gospel' is that 'the accomplishments of Jesus Christ are *reckoned* to all those who are 'in him.' Yet the accomplishment is the fulfillment of a role, not the acquisition of merit (p. 564).