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Theological Aesthetics: Some Reflections on Michael Bird's *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction*

Kelly M. Kapic
Covenant College

Introduction

How should we go about the task of constructing a Christian Theology that is both biblical and systematic? Answering this question may be far more difficult than many realize. Often we imagine that only the content of what is said is important, but in truth that is an incomplete picture. What matters is not only *what* you say, but *how* and *when* you say it. In this way, constructing a Systematic theology involves cultivating a theological aesthetic. Having gone through Michael Bird's fresh volume, *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Theology*, I have decided to use my limited time to focus on what might roughly come under the heading of aesthetics. Accordingly, I will concentrate here on the "how" and "when" rather than the "what," since aesthetics does matter in theological discourse.

How

As is well known, Karl Barth memorably wrote, "The theologian who has no joy in his work is not a theologian at all. Sulky faces, morose thoughts and boring ways of speaking are intolerable in this science."[1] As theologians, we love this quote. But this reminds me a bit of something Steve Brown—the wonderfully funny and yet raw pastor—was once told by a listener: "lots of preachers say they are sinners, but you are the first one I really believe." Lots of us theologians say we shouldn't be boring or sulky in our theology, but Bird is one of the few that readers will think actually is joyful, free, and engaging. If we are honest, how often is our writing genuinely riveting, drawing readers in rather than speaking with uninspired tones that lull our students to sleep and subtly communicate

[1] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics 2:1* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1960), p. 656.

that these matters are merely abstractions with little practical significance? Are we so fearful of making missteps that we weaken our message by dulling our words, stifling our imaginations, and in the process lose the awe and joy of the task before us? Such a charge most certainly cannot be levied against Michael Bird, which is amazing given that we are discussing an 800-page tome. Whatever one thinks of Bird's content, let us give him credit; he writes an introductory theology that clearly communicates that he is full of joy about his task and his Lord. That is no small accomplishment.

This book, for the most part, is quick paced, readable, accessible, and clever. Most notable (and probably controversial) is Bird's humor, which I suspect would almost be impossible for him to hide—it would certainly be a different volume if his wit were to be left out. His humor is part of the aesthetic of his theology. Many, especially college students, will likely be thankful for these small cups of water offered along this long pilgrimage. A random sampling of some of his humor may help:

- "During my time at university one chap wrote his thesis on 'Gay Spirituality,' which is a fair enough and valid PhD topic. However, while he was there, he also published a book attempting to prove Jesus was gay, using astrology. Another guy wrote his thesis on the religious significance of vampire myths. Then there was the option of taking a class on religion and body art. It was a top university, but filled with more nuts than Brazil."[2]
- "historical Jesus research remains a great place to go and try to get your theological parking historically validated."[3]
- Addressing the doctrine of the tribulation: "the posttrib view is eminently preferable to the pretrib view because the latter did not appear on the scene of church history until J. N. Darby in the 1830s (perhaps inspired by a spiritual enthusiastic teenage girl from Glasgow [all the more harrowing for me since I know some Scottish teenage girls from Glasgow])."[4]
- "whereas Schleiermacher made the Trinity an appendix to his book on *Christian Faith* because it was irrelevant to reli-

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[2] Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), p. 191, footnote 194.

[3] Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, p. 349.

[4] Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, p. 300.

gious experience, Barth made the Trinity first and foremost in his *Church Dogmatics*, which was Barth's way of saying, 'suck on that one, Schleiermacher!'"[5]

- Discussing those who claim penal substitutionary theories advocate a form of "divine child abuse," Bird gives an extensive quote from one such popular source. Then he responds: "Dem dere be fightin words! The problem is that this argument is filled with so much straw that you could literally take that argument, put a costume on it, and audition it for the role of the scarecrow in a new Broadway production of the *Wizard of Oz*."[6]

We laugh, because Bird has the ability to be wonderfully clever. But let's be honest, using wit in academic writing is both difficult and risky, which is partly why so few people do it. And most of us are not as funny as Bird. Bird is far more successful at this then I ever could be, no matter how hard I tried.

However, the challenge is that it is hard to employ comedy consistently without undermining or trivializing the important matters you are discussing. When working well such quips actually make a profound point, reinforcing an argument rather than distracting from one. For a classic example of this kind of humor perfectly employed, Robert Jenson memorably wrote this devastating line: "Hegel's only real fault was that he confused himself with the last judge; but that is quite a fault."[7] We laugh here, but actually, in that brief joke, Jenson is also making a serious critique of Hegel that takes one right to the heart of the problem in Hegel's approach.

Unfortunately, it doesn't always seem that Bird's jokes add to his arguments, and sometimes potentially do distract or risk trivializing them. A qualification may prove helpful here: I do believe these kind of witticisms often work well in our classrooms, since we have a relationship and rapport with our students. However, to translate classroom wit into a widely distributed textbook can create some unexpected problems.

For example, when discussing Covenant Theology Bird spends time considering if there is a "covenant of works." He then offhandedly writes: "No matter how much I try, I cannot find a 'cov-

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[5] Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, pp. 191–92.

[6] Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, p. 411.

[7] Robert W. Jenson, *The Knowledge of Things Hoped For: The Sense of Theological Discourse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 233.

enant of works' in my ESV concordance!"[8] This could be humor working to further his real concern (i.e., he doesn't think this doctrine is taught in scripture). However, for many conservative evangelical college students using this book, it may be the kind of humor that hurts rather than helps Bird's purposes. In the student newspaper where I teach, an undergraduate recently described how in one of her classes, as the professor was just about to elaborate on reasons for affirming the belief that Jesus is God, another student frustratingly interjected: "I know why I do," and then simply explained, "because the Bible says so…" Unfortunately, the Bible doesn't exactly *say* 'so,' which is why a student like that has his world shaken later when he sees an ABC Easter special where scholars interviewed claim Jesus never explicitly affirms his divinity.[9] They turn to their concordance to answer this objection, only to find out there may be at least something in what this 'liberal' scholar has said. The cliché has failed them. Such students need to be drawn into what might be called biblical reasoning: faithful ways of making sense of the explicit and implicit, of holding together the whole narrative of scripture, including story and proposition, etc. Without that, they are vulnerable.

Bird is sensitive to the need for a nuanced theological methodology that avoids naïve Biblicism (see his prolegomena[10]), and in context he provides substantive points of concern about a covenant between God and Adam.[11] But a simple passing joke like the one noted above, I fear, unintentionally makes the thoughtful objections he goes on to outline become peripheral, rather than central. That may be maddening to us as scholars, since we think the students should focus on the arguments rather than the joke. But when the options are 1) to learn a pithy short response ('it is not in the bible') or 2) work through carefully constructed reasons for

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[8] Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, p. 223.

[9] Bird is well aware of these kinds of problems and misleading representations, which is why he and a few others have written a helpful response to Bart Ehrman's problematic but popular volume. See *How God Became Jesus: The Real Origins of Belief in Jesus' Divine Nature--a Response to Bart Ehrman* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014); Bart D. Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2014).

[10] Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, pp. 29–86.

[11] Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, pp. 233–34.

raising concerns about this doctrine, students often quickly settle for the funny aside. The quip will be repeated, but the arguments too often forgotten. We must remember that many young evangelical students start their theological studies from a posture of naïve Biblicist intuitions, which is partly why conservative evangelicals have not always been great at appreciating and contributing to the discipline of theology. I recognize that this example from Bird was just a parenthetical amusing comment, so I don't want to make too much of it. Yet it is an example of the kind of concern many will have who read this volume. Again, there appears to be a difference here between how one would present material in a classroom, and how one carries that task out in print.

One final sample of the "how" might prove helpful here, for this is not merely a matter of the humor one uses, but also the kinds of vocabulary employed. Discussing the Holy Spirit, Bird writes: "the Holy Spirit is a maverick," by which he explains: "he crosses the floor on many issues, breaks ranks in division, and won't be owned by any party."[12] In the immediate context Bird appears to have his sights here on denominational disputes and territorialism. He goes on: the Spirit "is impossible to predict or predetermine…" I believe I know what Bird is trying to get at here, as he rightly raises concerns about some denominational tendencies to neglect or subtly imagine we can control the Spirit. But this is an example of rather clumsy and even potentially misleading vocabulary.

Part of the problem for American audiences is that "maverick" language in recent history is strongly associated with the politicians John McCain and Sarah Palin, so that when Bird goes on to talk about "breaking the ranks" and "won't be owned by a party," the general narrative of these two candidates vaguely hovers in the back of our minds. They loudly and triumphantly used the language of "maverick" as a badge of honor, though it drove others who tried to work with them crazy. Such language tends to conjure up imagery of brash individualism rather than the ecclesial unity that Bird is actually arguing for (and the divisions he is warning against).

Furthermore, one might begin to wonder how the Spirit can ever be called a "maverick," since he is none other than the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ. There can be no "maverick" in the Trinity, or in the Triune God's work in this world (*Opera Trinitis ad extra*

[12] Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, p. 611.

sunt indivisa). Put differently, is it true that the Spirit is "impossible to predict" when it comes to the promises of God, such as his assurance to be present with us, to comfort his people, to work in certain ways? Now, clearly Bird is not claiming the Spirit is advocating autonomy among the divine persons (that would move us into tritheism), but this loaded language of maverick—maybe unintentionally—creates more problems than it helps, and thus should be avoided. Here is just an example of where a more slowly developed theological aesthetic may have proved advantageous.

When

Let us turn from considering *how* one presents the material to *when* one discusses particular doctrines. One of the most promising aspects of a New Testament scholar offering to write a systematic theology was the chance for a fresh perspective in terms of arrangement. In other words, he would not merely offer particular insights on individual doctrines, but maybe more importantly offer us another way to approach the systematic task in the first place. Bird purposefully seeks to do just that, aiming to provide an *evangelical* theology that is distinctly arranged around the "gospel."[13] Here is a chance for real creative arrangement. In many ways I both like what Bird proposes here, and yet I believe he falls short of his own goal, and that the volume would prove richer if he were even more consistent in carrying out the task he gave himself in the first place.

Bird's proposal is to let the good news of Jesus drive the heart of the story, which then means that from this epicenter the rest of theology unfolds. However, sometimes when it would prove most interesting to see this thoroughly applied and worked out, it is only vaguely practiced. For example, with Bird's treatment of the attributes of God: how Christologically informed is his unpacking of each attribute? Some mention is made at times, but a thorough and careful discussion of each attribute viewed particularly through the lens of the story of Jesus would prove far more interesting and innovative, since it is rarely done (for some good and some not so good reasons). Given this book's distinctive goals, this very well could have been an area where Bird might have demonstrated constructive theological insights drawn from exegetical engagement, since so often the divine attributes are supported merely by a smat-

[13] See Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, pp. 19–26, esp. pp. 47–54, pp. 80–83.

tering of proof texts. Here was a chance to consider, in a sustained way, how the Son of God's becoming man now informs and transforms our view of the divine attributes. Later, when talking about "Christological revelation," Bird does point back to this idea, recognizing that "the incarnation is a further revelation of the divine attributes, especially the faithfulness of God."[14] Could this not inform our conception of the attributes beyond merely divine faithfulness? How might this be done in a distinctly "gospel" oriented way. Given how this volume is intentionally organized, I believe a fuller treatment could have been both appropriate and enlightening.

Let's turn to Bird's discussion of biblical eschatology for another area where arrangement proves both promising and yet, in my opinion, is still wanting. Here is an example where we see a New Testament scholar bringing his wisdom and training to the table, offering us a fresh arrangement. Most notably, Bird reminds us that eschatology is not merely something that happens at the "end": consequently, we should not leave these discussions for the final chapters in a systematic theology. No, we need to let our theological presentation become shaped much earlier by an exposition of the "Now and Not Yet." This is a great instinct. However, I am not sure Bird has really advanced us as far along as he may have wished. Let me briefly explain.

Bird rightly frames eschatology in terms of the Kingdom: this is good and right. Such crucial background is helpful as he prepares his readers for reflections on the coming of the King, that is, his discussion of Christology. Here I am sympathetic with his broadly redemptive historical instincts.[15] However, what ended up happening in this volume is that Bird decided to still basically allow old paradigms to govern him here, just offering slight modifications. So, he simply takes the *entire* section on eschatology and moves it forward. Therefore, after his reflections on the kingdom, he spends an abundant amount of time discussing millennial positions, different views of the rapture, God's judgment, and a longish discussion on the intermediate state. Next comes his entire section on "The Final State: Heaven, Hell, and New Creation." Only after all of that is

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[14] Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, p. 210.

[15] Cf., Kelly M. Kapic, "Trajectories of a Trinitarian Eschatology," in *Trinitarian Soundings in Systematic Theology*, ed. Paul Louis Metzger (New York: T & T Clark International, 2005), pp. 189–202.

examined does Bird turn his attention to *starting* his section on Christology!

This is problematic. Bird is right to allow some of his 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 reverts back into an old paradigm that he himself has raised serious questions about. It creates an oddness that should be avoided (e.g., talking about the problem of death and how it is overcome before you have talked about the person of Christ or the atonement). Why not split up the eschatological discussion, so that material on the Kingdom that more naturally anticipates and helps frame Christology comes early, but then discussions about the millennial, death, intermediate state, and reflections on heaven and hell all would come later (post-Christology). How can one rightly speak of the new heavens and the new earth without first dealing with the "firstborn from the dead," an idea that is again dependent on earlier discussions of incarnation and resurrection? Bird senses this, and thus he does spend time in his eschatological chapters pointing to the Christ events; but that means trying to really unpack them before they have even been properly introduced.

Or, maybe most clearly a problem, the book has a chapter on the "Return of Christ" before it has even really discussed the doctrine of the ascension. Here it seems to me, we end up in the very position Bird was trying to avoid: classical systematic ordering (all eschatological matters must be dealt with together) rather than allowing a "gospel" telling to drive his organization and sensitivities. Again, the only way he could have kept his 'gospel' ordering, however, would be to become far more radical in his structure than he allows himself in this volume. But why not delay the "return of Jesus Christ" so that it follows his chapter on the Ascension and session of Jesus? But as it stands, the "return" is discussed almost 200 pages *before* Jesus' ascension is. It is not necessarily that he says anything 'wrong,' but rather, the debate is over how and when he says it, for that does affect one's reception of these doctrines. Could his theological aesthetic be better refined?

In sum, I suspect that part three, "The Gospel of the Kingdom: The Now and the Not Yet," really needs to be divided up and spread throughout the entire volume, rather than lumped together. This would more faithfully make the very point Bird and Molt-

mann[16] try to highlight, that eschatology is not merely something to discover at the end, but actually informs the whole.[17] Consequently, eschatology is not merely one chapter, but a framework for better understanding the various doctrines, from creation to salvation, from Christology to Pneumatology. Therefore, why lump it all together in this way? Why not have the Christology section begin with the treatment of the Gospel and the Kingdom, working through the Now and Not Yet material? Then leave the discussions on the final judgment and intermediate state to follow later soteriological material on the scope and security of the salvation achieved by Christ. One could even imagine that if Bird went in this way, he could retool his discussions of the Millennium and Tribulation to fit well under section eight on the "Community of the Gospelized," since in many ways that discussion is about how the Church should be the Church in the midst of the now and not yet. Further modifying his structure could free him up in other ways as well. He could give attention not merely to NT Kingdom discussions, but provide an even larger eschatological vision. For instance, Geerhardus Vos (not merely Moltmann) argued for a view in which the entire biblical story can be read with eschatology, rather than soteriology, holding the position of primacy.[18] This may, however, be farther than Bird wants to go.

I fully understand I have just blown up his entire section (Part 3), and maybe his most innovative contribution in terms of organi-

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[16] Cf., Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991); *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, 1st Fortress Press ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).

[17] Such a move would be similar to how theologians sometimes (at their best) approach the Trinity: the truth that God is triune is not simply one chapter among many in a systematics theology, but rather becomes the truth that informs all of the other doctrines. Yet, a section is normally devoted to the Trinity, and then pulled on throughout the chapters that follow. Bird is, in my opinion, exactly right when he puts the doctrine of the Trinity at the beginning of his theology. But in this way, eschatology seems somewhat different, in that to fully unpack this historically structured truth so early, and in full, appears to work differently than the doctrine of the Trinity does, and so some modification of approach is necessary.

[18] Geerhardus Vos, *The Eschatology of the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg: P & R, 2001).

zation. But I am actually trying to encourage Bird to be *more* rather than less bold with his "gospel" ordering. Bird is able to resist the temptation to reduce eschatology to a concluding chapter in the book, but then he keeps all the doctrines classically discussed together under this *locus*, thus potentially distorting the very message he hopes to lay out for us. Again, it is not that Bird necessarily says erroneous things at these points, but I am here encouraging him to finish the task, to follow his own instincts more fully than he actually does here.

Conclusion

There is much to commend in Michael Bird's *Evangelical Theology*. It is filled with little exegetical nuggets, fresh ways of approaching issues, and a real attempt to provide fair-minded presentations of opposing viewpoints. He is willing to spend time on areas often neglected (e.g., the ministry of Jesus[19] and the centrality of Israel to the Gospel story), and this enriches the volume. The design of the book is extremely student friendly, including everything from the various insert boxes to clear summary sections, from bullet points to bibliographical helps, from charts to healthy attention devoted to practical or pastoral matters. He is also brave in this volume, willing to take a position on everything from divine impassability[20] to Rob Bell.[21]

We can be thankful that a biblical scholar has graciously sought to offer a systematic theology, just as theologians are now trying to offer commentaries. Let us hope that if Bird has the chance to revise this volume, he will attempt to more thoroughly carry out the very task he gave himself by ordering his theology around the gospel, letting the *euangélion* shape his presentation and more thoroughly inform his unpacking of each and every doctrine.

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[19] Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, pp. 375–84.

[20] Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, pp. 130–31.

[21] Another example of his humor here: when referencing Rob Bell, he calls attention to his "humorous little book" (Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, p. 337).