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The Power of the Gospel

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Wheaton College

Michael Bird had me at hello (almost). On page 23 (and that is pretty early in a 900 page book), he states, "I would describe myself as an ex-Baptist post-Presbyterian Anglican." My heart felt strangely warmed for I have traveled the same journey: brought to faith in the Baptist church, trained in a Presbyterian seminary, and recently confirmed in the Anglican Communion. How inspiring will it be to think about the breadth of the Christian faith with a kindred soul, not only denominationally, but vocationally as well: a New Testament scholar deeply interested in the project of theology. And it was. At many turns I found myself informed, inspired, and in full support of Bird's key claims. "The God we are confronted with in the Gospel is the Triune God" (p. 92). He demonstrates how creed crystalizes the truth of God's being as revealed in Scripture. "Jesus' life is in organic unity with Israel's story" (p. 507). He captures the continuity of God's new action in Christ. "Penal substitution and *Christus Victor* do not compete with one another but are part of a bigger picture" (p. 418) is an honest assessment of the richness of the Scriptural account. "Jesus' resurrection points to a cosmic transformation" (p. 441). Salvation is not solely about the individual: "An approach to biblical interpretation that places Scripture and tradition in a continuous spiral of listening to the text and listening to our forefathers in the faith" (p. 70). Absolutely! And then he so frequently and thoroughly listens to the theologians of the patristic and reformation eras. "Ecclesiology needs to come to the forefront of our thinking" (p. 811), "Baptism is more than a symbol" (p. 774), "The Eucharist is the gospel in sight, smell, and taste" (p. 802). With the zeal of a convert, I delighted to see advocacy for the church and sacraments.

Alas, one detail in my own story prevents me from being Dr. Bird's doppelganger. In my first teaching position, I worked at a Wesleyan school. For two years, I lived with them, thought with them, grew with them. And so because they fit the definition of

evangelical as Bird himself defines it,[1] I found myself wondering if their voice was adequately represented in this Evangelical theology. Does the sanctifying work of the Spirit warrant more than a paragraph (p. 631)? Would not Wesley have some insight on the question of who can and should come to the Eucharist (p. 798)?[2]

I guess, of course, there is one other little factor that differentiates Dr. Bird and I. Which made me wonder: are the voices of women adequately represented here? For instance, his discussion of the arguments about divine child abuse includes no feminist theologians (pp. 411–12).[3] This critique would have been more robust had he done so. More substantively, I kept waiting for a scripturally informed, fair, and gracious discussion of gender in the church as he had presented so many other pertinent topics. Then not my own, but the situation of others prompts another question. While Bird ends with a call for attention to the global church (p. 811), I found myself wondering if he consistently listens to their voices throughout his text?[4]

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[1] "Faith communities who hold to the catholic and orthodox faith and who possess a singular religious affection for the Triune God, combined with a zealous fervor to proclaim the gospel to the ends of the earth," Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), p. 11.

[2] "Am I to wait for the grace of God which bringeth salvation, by using these means, or by laying them aside? … According to this, according to the decision of holy writ all who desire the grace of God are to wait for it in the means which he hath ordained; in using, not in laying them aside… . It should be particularly observed here, that the persons directed to ask had not then received the Holy Spirit: Nevertheless our Lord directs them to use this means, and promises that it should be effectual" *The Means of Grace* II.7; III.1, 2 (*John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology*, ed. Albert C. Outler, [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991], pp. 161, 162).

[3] Evangelicals very well may not embrace the arguments of those like Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys By Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2008), or Joanne Brown and Carol Bohn, *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989), but an evangelical theology should acknowledge the voices and arguments of those with whom we disagree.

[4] To catch the vision of the importance and power of global voices, see Jeffrey P. Greenman and Gene L. Green, eds., *Global Theology in Evangelical Perspective: Exploring the Contextual Nature of Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012).

Chiding an author for what he did not do is the easiest and least helpful form of critique, but I raise this issue because it leads to a more substantive one: Who is an Evangelical? Bird claims that his book has its "content, structure, and substance singularly determined by the evangel," and that it is for "gospel people, the evangelical churches" (p. 11). Yet I found myself wondering if, at the end of the day, his presentation of evangelical theology was broad enough to include all evangelicals. Although claiming to offer a theology of the gospel for evangelicals, does Bird really only provide a theology for first-thirds world male Reformed evangelicals?

I voice that hard and unlovely question because ultimately I think the answer is no. His work, I believe, is for all. In order to tease this conclusion out, however, I'll need to employ a test case. What better way to attend to this issue of inclusion than to explore the concept of hell, or maybe less salaciously worded, the scope of eternal salvation? Bird offers thorough, lucid, and compelling accounts of these exceedingly complex issues. He deals with the question of who is saved and who is not; and even more difficult, he offers an explanation for why some are saved and others are not. Not only do such issues wrestle with the reality of who is in and out forever, but before the final assize these questions have been and continue to be some of the most pressing and divisive in the evangelical sections of the body of Christ. Bird's text with its clarity and comprehensiveness has allowed me to better understand these issues and the bold yet gracious articulation of his arguments has given me the encouragement to proffer a soteriological model of my own and, inspired by this text, deeply dependent upon the power of the gospel.

I begin with the recent interest in and sometimes affinity for universalism in some evangelical circles. Bird himself recognizes the appeal. There is, he states, something magnetic about it (p. 590). Those who have lost loved ones who are not believers, "Biblical images of God tormenting people," questions about the fairness of God make compelling arguments for the case that ultimately all things will be reconciled to Christ (Col. 1:18–20). Of course, Bird notes texts that say just that. He acknowledges those Scriptures that say God desires the salvation of all (1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9), and the universal statements found in Paul's Adamic Christology and his struggle over Jew/Gentile issues in Romans and Corinthians (Rom. 5:18; 11:32; 1 Cor. 15:22, 28). He concludes, however, that "hell is the necessary implication of God's love, holiness, and

goodness. Hell emerges because of God's purpose to unite himself to creation. The earth must be purified of evil by his justice before it can be renewed with glory by his love" (p. 591). Some evangelicals question (as does a book published earlier this year entitled *Rethinking Hell*[5]) why this purification needs to be forever. Bird responds that the many texts that speak of eternal judgment are not metaphor but instead "fabric." This is the result "for those who reject the worship of the true God and the way of humanness that follows from it" (p. 336). If texts exist that imply the reconciliation of all things to Christ, and texts are present that talk about eternal punishment,[6] how can they be brought together?

The sticking point, as Bird articulates, is the necessity of faith in Christ: "Universalists unfortunately define grace in such a way as to obviate the necessity for faith" (p. 588). "The Gospel needs a subjective appropriation" (589). "Unless humans are nothing more than puppets, there is always going to be the objective work of God countenanced with the subjective response of humanity to the divine work" (588).

I stand in agreement with these statements and their sober implications. Bird's clear and thorough examination of these matters shows in my opinion, decisively, that Scripture simply does not support the option of universalism, despite its magnetic appeal. It is assumed in Scripture and evident in daily life that some reject God's salvation. As much as we might wish it not so, there are clear texts that assume this rejection of God, and its consequences, will last forever.

God desires to save all, but not all have faith in Jesus Christ. But *Why*? As evangelicals, this is a question we cannot ignore. Students ask this of professors, laypeople of the pastor, and those pastors and professors often ask it themselves. It is a question that

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[5] Christopher M. Date, Gregory G. Stump, and Joshua W. Anderson, eds.,*Rethinking Hell: Readings in Evangelical Conditionalism* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014).

[6] About texts that speak of eternal damnation, Matthew Levering states, "If these teachings concealed a deeper truth that all rational creatures are to be saved, then these teachings would be misleading indeed—so misleading as to be not merely esoteric, but profoundly distortive of the truth about God and humans, the very truth that Christ comes to reveal," Matthew Levering, *Predestination: Biblical and Theological Paths* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 194.

comes up again and again in the lived theology of evangelicals of all types and traditions. Simply put: why do some people have faith while others don't?

This is where I stand in disagreement with Dr. Bird. His answer to the question of why "salvation becomes actual for some and not for others" is this: "it is because of God's election of persons for salvation" (p. 529). Although it may be unadvisable to question the doctrine of election in a section called "Reformed Theology," two large questions remain for me in this model, namely, does Scripture *unequivocally* support a general and special election, and is it *necessarily* the case that this special election is irresistibly and irrevocably efficacious?

To deal with these questions, I turn to Bird's specific development of these issues in his book. Utilizing the work of Moyse Amyraut and D. B. Knox, Bird affirms a "universal dimension to the atonement," but he also wants to maintain a commitment to "the sovereignty of God's predestination of the elect" (p. 432). To hold both claims together, he suggests that "God's decree to designate a Savior logically precedes God's decision to save the elect" (432). He then argues that "Jesus' death is purposed for the salvation of the elect yet it creates the possibility of the salvation of everyone" (434). So, according to Bird, God's purpose in Jesus' death is that Christ would become the *possible* savior of all but the *actual* savior of only some. Logically, I find this model quite troubling. Does it really make sense to say that God loves and is willing to receive all—and that God acts to create the *possibility* of salvation for everyone—if God actually acts only to save *some*? I imagine God saying to a person bound in chains: "I want you to be released, and I'm willing to receive you, if you can get free."

That does not seem right. But, of course, my own logic and my perception of what sounds right are not ultimately authoritative for me. I will submit my logic to God's wisdom as revealed in Scripture. In this case, that means my becoming convinced that Scripture teaches a model of general and special election along the lines of the proposal that Bird offers. However, after reading and consider his case, it was not self-evident that Bird's proposal is the only or the best way to reconcile universal and particularist texts.

Maybe then my qualms lie with more basic issues. While recognizing that the Reformed tradition is not a monolithic thing (as

Oliver Crisp so thoroughly displays in his recent work[7]), it seems fair to say that the Reformed tradition that Bird represents generally assumes that God only elects only a certain number of people.[8] The logic here is that, since God is sovereign and only a certain number accept Christ, then he must have elected only those specific individuals, and his election of them must be effective. In the words of Bird, "God sets forth Christ to save, not simply to offer salvation" (p. 432). I am not convinced that "the sovereignty of God's predestination of the elect" (p. 432)—as framed by Bird and much of the Reformed tradition—is a Charybdis we must navigate around. Is it really the case that God's predestination of the elect is absolutely sovereign in this *precise* sense? In other words, to raise an old question, might it be possible for God's sovereign grace to be rejected by his rebellious human creatures?

As I considered this question, I examined some of the key biblical arguments made within the Reformed tradition on these issues. At Bird's recommendation, I turned to Robert Peterson and Michael Williams "Why I am Not an Arminian" for the analysis of the scriptural terrain and found this winsome articulation about the elect: "When God touches their lives with his sovereign grace he free them from bondage. As a result they willingly trust Christ. God doesn't force sinners to believe against their will; he liberates their will by his Spirit. He doesn't violate their personalities; he sets them free to be the people whom he intended."[9] With this it seems to me the Scriptural narrative fully agrees. No one can come unless drawn by the Father (John 6:44, 65). For many of the Scriptures they note, however, that truth seems to be expressed with the clarity of hindsight. If someone presently has faith, keeps God's word, then it is clear that they were drawn by the Father (John 17:6). If they become believers, then it is correct to say that God destined them for eternal life (Acts 13:48). And what of the "golden chain" of Romans 8:29–30? It remains powerful and imminently preachable, but I would argue that ultimately it must be put into conversa-

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[7] Oliver D. Crisp, *God Incarnate: Explorations in Christology* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), p. 35. See also his *Deviant Calvinism: Broadening Reformed Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014).

[8] Crisp, *God Incarnate*, p. 47; Robert A. Peterson and Michael D. Williams, *Why I Am Not an Arminian* (Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2004), pp. 42–66.

[9] Peterson and Williams, *Why I Am Not an Arminian*, p. 185.

tion with Rom 11:20–23, where branches are broken off and reattached. Is not Paul warning the very same readers that they can break the chain through unbelief?

It is John 6:37 that presents the most difficult text for my hesitance to accept irresistible grace as unequivocally taught in scripture. For here every thing (it is a neuter not a masculine which does raise some question about if this is applicable to individual people) given by the Father to the Son will come to him. But immediately, especially as a student of Hebrews, I wonder if they come, does that mean that they stay forever (Heb 2:1; 3:6, 14; 6:4–8; 10:26–31; 12:15–17)? Or can they, as tragically unbelievable as it may be, turn away?

At this juncture I have walked into a rut, the well worn debates among undergrads and demons, as John Milton would say,[10] which is why I tell my students, this debate has not been settled because there are texts that can be utilized to support both sides. To say as much is not a statement of laziness, a casual and cozy shrug to mystery,[11] but I hope a statement in the spirit of Paul who praises the incomprehensibility of God's ways after he has wrested seriously with all the exegetical and experiential realities.[12]

One of my teachers always said, if you are stuck in a debate, don't answer the same question, ask a different one.[13] It would be silly to think I could make any headway on centuries-old soteriological debates in a short paper like this, so instead I want to honor the work of Dr. Bird by demonstrating how his book elicited new thoughts on this issue, thoughts endeavoring to take into account the power of the gospel in the way he does but also avoiding the problems that I see within his view.

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[10] The demons talk of "providence, foreknowledge, will and fate, Fixed fate, free will, foreknowledge absolute, And found no end, in wondering mazes lost" *Paradise Lost* (ed. Alistair Fowler; 2nd ed.; New York: Longman, 1998), Book II, lines 557–61, p. 137.

[11] About a similar proposal by Catherine of Siena, Levering states, "This theological modesty is salutary with respect to predestination" (Levering, *Predestination*, p. 9).

[12] Levering concludes, "God's all encompassing love for each and every rational creature must be affirmed together with God's transcendent providence and permission of permanent rebellion. Until the eschaton, the two affirmations cannot be resolved into one" (Levering, *Predestination*, p. 178).

[13] Credit here is due to Dr. Beverly Gaventa.

I begin with Romans 10, which demonstrates his main theme, namely, the gospel's great power. Having wrestled with his kin's far-from-complete response to the gospel, Paul turns his focus from God's choices to the human response of either faith or works (I will not engage the debate of how to define works here). The point he seems to be making is that believing in Christ is not difficult. One need not scale the heights and depths of reality. Instead, the resources lie close at hand. They are even located within oneself: trust and call, heart and mouth are all that is needed. But how can it be so easy, so accessible, so internal? Paul is not, I'm confident, preaching some kind of Gospel of Thomas, the-truth-lies-inside-of-you Gnosticism.[14] Instead, I'd like to suggest, the resources for righteousness lie inside because they have been planted there by the proclamation of the gospel.

To help us make sense of this, may I suggest that we consider Romans 10:14–15 as another "golden chain," one which Paul assembles with his series of rhetorical questions? The difference is that, in this passage, he starts at the end of the line. Those who are saved (10:13) call on the Lord because they have believed. They believe because they have heard. They heard because someone has preached to them. Those preachers proclaim because they were sent. Again in v. 17 he lays out a similar series: faith arises out of hearing; and hearing comes through the word of Christ. What Paul seems to be saying is this: that when word of Christ—the word of faith which Paul preaches (Rom. 10:8) is preached—God sovereignly plants within the people who hear it the seed of faith. What if the proclamation of the gospel makes it audience not neutral, capable of deciding for or against it, the Arminian position as Bird describes,[15] but instead plants a seed that can either be nurtured (believed and confessed) or rejected?

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[14] Jesus said, "If those who lead you say to you, 'See, the kingdom is in the sky,' then the birds of the sky will precede you. If they say to you, 'It is in the sea,' then the fish will precede you. Rather, the kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you. When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known, and you will realize that it is you who are the sons of the living father. But if you will not know yourselves, you dwell in poverty and it is you who are that poverty." *The Gospel of Thomas: The Hidden Sayings of Jesus* (trans. Marvin Meyer; New York: HarperCollins, 1992), Saying 3.

[15] Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, p. 522.

This seems to make sense of Paul's assertion that faith is not a work. It is something you do; nonetheless it is not a work. The ones who believe do so by grace and not by works (Rom. 11:5–6). What if the gospel is so powerful that it claims those who hear it? To be privy to its proclamation is to be introduced into the process of faith. What if, when one hears the gospel, he does not have to opt in, but he can opt out. Indeed, he could, as some of Israel had done in Paul's day, not heed the gospel (Rom. 10:16); but if that option is not taken—that is, if the hearer does not actively reject the gospel—then the proclamation of the gospel effects faith. The hearer of the gospel either acquiesces to what the proclamation has begun or has to choose to reject it and establish his righteousness in some other ultimately ineffective way.[16]

I find a similar description of gospel power at work in 2 Corinthians where Paul proclaims that the God who reconciles sinners has given to his followers the ministry of that same reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18–20). The vehicle for that reconciliation is the *word*, the proclamation. Several scribes made the same association I am arguing for when the specified that the word of reconciliation is the

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[16] Other theologians—ancient and modern—have reached a similar conclusion. Aquinas states, "This is in the power of the free will: to impede the reception of grace or not to impede it… God is prepared to give grace to everyone … But the only people deprived of grace are the ones who provide in themselves an obstacle to grace." Eleanor Stump in analyzing Aquinas puts his words this way: "although the will of faith is brought about entirely by God with operating grace, nonetheless a human person is herself still ultimately in control of the state of her own will. That is because it is up to her either to refuse grace or to fail to refuse grace. Although her options are just to refuse grace or to be quiescent with regard to grace, it is still only her own intellect and will that determine which of these positions her will is in, and God's giving of grace depends on the position of her will… . A post-Fall human being who cannot form a good act of will apart from grace can nonetheless control whether or not his will refuses grace. In ceasing to refuse grace, he brings himself into a quiescent condition to which God responds by giving him the grace that produces in him the good will of justifying faith." Eleanor Stump, *Aquinas* (Arguments of the Philosophers; New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 402. I would argue, based on the exegesis above, that the proclamation of the gospel removes the rejective state and allows someone to embrace the state of quiescence.

euaggelion itself.[17] This word of reconciliation, this means of encouragement comes through the evangelists. How beautiful indeed are the feet of those who bring good news; for they bring God's reconciliation and salvation to sinners. That being said, while God uses humanity, he does not depend upon them. God himself is a gospel proclaimer, as he said to Israel: "All day long I have stretched out my hands" (Rom. 10:21/Isa. 65:2 LXX). As we know from current stories in the Islamic world,[18] Jesus can go and preach himself, but typically God asks his people to serve as Christ's ambassadors.

In short, my alternative suggestion is this: in soteriological economy the gospel indeed is the power of God for salvation (Rom. 1:16). It works for all who hear. At times it saves, at times it reconciles, at times it plants a seed.

Of course not all who hear become believers. Has the word of God—has the gospel—failed? μὴ γένοιτο! God's word does not return void (Isa. 55:11). If the hearer does not become a follower of Christ, then, in my opinion, she has rejected the seed. Or maybe as some of you would say, this is evidence of the fact that God did not choose her. The Scriptural terrain, in my opinion, prevents a firm answer. What we can know, and agree upon however, this: the Gospel comes in power, and God has bequeathed that powerful word to his followers. Maybe I'm not quite an ex-Baptist after all, for I end as any good Baptist would: We have been entrusted with the good news. We must go and tell.

This way of accounting for the relevant biblical texts offers a very practical theory of soteriology that may sidestep or even transcend questions of the universality or particularity of God's electing grace. The question we need to consider may not be, "Who has been chosen?" or "Who chooses?" but "Who has heard?" By raising this question in conversation with Bird's own argument, I hope I have demonstrated what Dr. Bird's text will achieve in classrooms and churches where it is used. By revisiting concepts they have forgotten or discovering the story and details of new ideas, his readers will learn to think theologically. His students will be challenged by the voices of the text and its interpretations. His readers will be inspired to articulate where they believe Scripture urges them to

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[17] Following the manuscript tradition of $\mathfrak{P}^{46}$, D*, F, G, (a).

[18] Nabeel Qureshi, "Called Off the Minaret: Would Jesus Really Ask Me to Forsake My Muslim Family," *Christianity Today* 58/1(2014), p. 96.

locate themselves among the thinkers of the church. Perhaps most importantly, I can't help but conclude that they will be inspired to go out and be gospelizers themselves, just as I have been. His text, I believe, is for us all, certainly for those who might agree with his conclusions, but even for those evangelicals who might not. Because not only does he recognize other valid interpretations, more importantly, he invites his fellow proclaimers standing across the various aisle to meet his boldly articulated and well-supported interpretations with their own, and after they have done so to get about the business of spreading the gospel.

So, as a good Anglican, I close with the words of a prayer with which I think Dr. Bird would approve and agree:

> Lord Jesus Christ, who didst stretch out thine arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of thy saving embrace: So clothe us in thy Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know thee to the knowledge and love of you; for the honor of thy Name.[19]

Thank you, Dr. Bird, for giving us an inviting and inclusive evangelical theology—gospel powered and gospel empowering.

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[19] "Prayer for Mission, Morning Prayer Rite 1," *Book of Common Prayer 1979* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 58.