

A RESPONSE TO THE SPRING 2002 EDITORIAL

In his spring 2002 editorial, senior editor Kent Ross writes of his exasperation about the fact that “orthodox theologians” tend not to engage in serious dialogue with advocates of biblical unitarianism. As a former member of the journal’s editorial staff and as one who has moved away from biblical unitarianism, I would like to submit, for discussion, a suggestion as to why this is so. Perhaps what I could not offer as a critic from within I can offer as a critic from without.

In his editorial, Kent cites a former professor’s statement that whereas biblical scholarship may support unitarianism, nevertheless the church councils “clarified what the Bible was trying to say.” Within that sentiment, he locates the problem: In orthodoxy, tradition is exalted over Scripture. The argument is familiar to me. As recently as the summer 1994 issue, I was arguing the same point in my article, “Trinitarian Dogma from a Unitarian Perspective.”

However, with the passage of time I became more circumspect about our theological task. In my editorial in the winter 1996 issue, I reflected on Anthony Buzzard’s challenge to Karl Barth’s Christology, a criticism focused on Barth’s use of the Chalcedonian *anhypostasia*. In that editorial, I confessed that I was troubled about our apparent inability to constructively propose a coherent theology. I closed with the statement that our theologizing work was far from finished; in fact, I wrote, it had just begun. Unfortunately, no one seemed to pick up the challenge. The journal continued to apologetically present its case for the doctrines of “the oneness of God,” conditional immortality, and an apocalyptic eschatology, as if little more needed to be done.

The difference between my 1996 confession and Kent’s 2002 exasperation can be gauged in the distance between exegesis and theology. Most of what I studied at Oregon Bible College was not so much theology proper as it was biblical exegesis, the assumption being that a straightforward interpretation of the scriptural text leads directly to an understanding of objective truth, with very little happening in between those two points. (Never mind the inconvenient fact that the canon of Scripture itself is as much a fourth-century ecclesiastical tradition as historic Trinitarianism. With little reflection, we embraced the one tradition while rejecting the other.)

Furthermore, a “correct” articulation of confessional truth was assumed to be an end in itself. The ecumenical and pastoral implications of those truths seemed secondary at best, if they mattered at all.

Finally, I felt that there was a lack of consistency in the way we articulated our doctrines. Even the work of the conference’s only systematic theologian of note, Alva Huffer, seemed like an odd hybrid, shifting gears as it did (for instance) between the doctrine of Christology and the doctrine of soteriology.

The penal substitutionary atonement posited in Huffer's theology stemmed historically from the basic outline of Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo*, but in Huffer a rhetorical shift from the deity of Jesus to the "divine Sonship" of a Jesus who otherwise is not God enabled Anselm's essential soteriology to remain relatively intact. In other words, our conference's rejection of historic Trinitarianism was not (at least in the twentieth century) accompanied by any noticeable corresponding change in any other doctrine, which at the very least raises the question of its significance in the first place. Other examples could be cited.

If God is one and not three-in-one, what does that mean for church polity, for social justice, for women's rights? These are the types of questions that must be asked, and that is why the dialogue the journal's editors desire does not materialize. "Doing theology" demands more than listing Bible verses. It demands that we ask the hard questions of today, that we cultivate multiple disciplines, that we explore the inner meaning of our confessions, and that all the while we wrestle with the problem of how we "know." A working knowledge of philosophy is indispensable at this point. (This is also a point at which I feel inadequately equipped.)

Finally, and significantly, it also means that the task of any self-professed biblical unitarian should be to move beyond polemical mirror-reflections of Trinitarian statements of faith to a more constructive theological enterprise. Ultimately, that is what led me to abandon "biblical unitarianism" the following year — not that my exegesis of key Christological texts had changed very much, but that I was tired of articulating my doctrinal beliefs in contradistinction to somebody else's, and for no particular reason at that.

Six years later, I still question the doctrine of Jesus' metaphysical pre-existence, as well as the existence of a hypostatized Holy Spirit as distinct from the "person" of the Father. However, while still rejecting the ontological presuppositions of Niceno-Constantinopolitan orthodoxy, I cannot help but recognize the significance of the church's historic experience of God in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (a fully biblical articulation, one may note, as in Matthew 28:19). Of course, there are many different ways that this tradition may be brought to bear on contemporary theological concerns. Trinitarian thought today is hardly a monolithic phenomenon.

It is my hope that in the future, both the journal's editors and contributors will strive to demonstrate the relevance of their enterprise. Hopefully this task will be undertaken not in order to satisfy one well-meaning critic, but in order to enrich and give meaning to the type of radical reformation which this journal ostensibly represents. I will not be satisfied with the reply that "this is simply what the Bible says," in part because that depends upon which passage of the Bible one is looking at, and in part because the task of interpreting a passage of Scripture is not necessarily as straightforward and objective as it may seem. In order to invite open dialogue with "orthodox theologians," the journal must demonstrate its theological relevance. Perhaps the publication of this brief

response can signal an acceptance of the challenge to engage in that type of dialogue.

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