

Attunement to Saints Past and Present: Clarifications and Convergences¹

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the responses to *Singing the Ethos of God* in the present volume by Gordon Wenham, Don Wood, Bernd Wannenwetsch and Hans Ulrich. The conversation with Wenham begins with the question of whether, in Christian theological exegesis, ecclesial interpretation or exegetical fidelity should be more fundamental. It argues that neither the location of biblical interpretation in the Church nor an interest in exegetical fidelity is primary in defining the role of Scripture in the moral formation of the Church. Discussion then turns to the related question of what happens when Christian ethics becomes wedded to the idea of 'ethical principles'. The paper suggests that the extreme difficulty of deriving such principles alerts us to fatal theological flaws in the concept of 'Christian moral principles'.

The response to Wood takes up his worry that the moral realism of *Singing* is in jeopardy without a more careful account of the transitions between descriptive and prescriptive moral language. The paper suggests that this criticism is a more sophisticated repetition of the assumption that Christian ethics cannot do without principles and rests on the bifurcation of theoretical and practical reason that has plagued modern theology. Here judgments about developments in western theology are crucial. The paper contends that the most pressing question for contemporary Christian ethics is how best to respond to contemporary tendencies to marry creedal orthodoxy with either ethical heterodoxy or the focusing

of Christian morality on a very narrow band of litmus test issues.

The final section moves from clarification to constructive theology, drawing together convergences between *Singing the Ethos of God* and the articles by Wannenwetsch and Ulrich. It develops the position that Christian ethics is most appropriately understood as a discipline serving the orientation of Christians in reality, reality being defined in terms that are thoroughly Trinitarian, ecclesial and scriptural. Doxology is seen as the ongoing human acknowledgement of reliance on and gratitude for God's presence and care. Theology and ethics within the orbit of doxology affirm the situation of human thought 'in the middle' of God's creation and salvation of the world. God must break in on humans to make them aware of his presence and care amidst the countervailing tendencies that characterize fallen psyches and the social formations within which they are wholly embedded. Christian theology can therefore never transcend the patient 'chewing' meditation demands (Psalm 1:1) and in doing so must avoid as a temptation the desire to come to rest in a reading that is so complete that reading can cease. Reading Scripture with the saints resists this closure in affirming that human sanctification is found in joining in unity with them in our age rather than in innovation or progress beyond them. Such Christian ethical exegesis is depicted as being best supported by the biblical language of 'transformation of the schemas of this age', 'meditation' and 'torah'.

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Dieser Artikel diskutiert die Reaktionen auf *Singing the Ethos of God* von Gordon Wenham, Don Wood, Bernd Wannenwetsch und Hans Ulrich in der vorliegenden Ausgabe. Das Gespräch mit Wenham beginnt mit der Frage, ob in der christlichen theologischen Exegese die kirchliche Interpretation oder die exegetische Redlichkeit grundlegender sein sollte. Es wird argumentiert, dass weder der Ort der Bibelinterpretation in der Kirche noch ein Interesse an exegetischer Redlichkeit bei der Definierung der Rolle der Schrift in der moralischen For-

mung der Kirche vorrangig ist. Die Diskussion wendet sich dann der verwandten Frage zu, was passiert, wenn christliche Ethik mit der Vorstellung von „ethischen Prinzipien“ verbunden wird. Der Artikel schlägt vor, dass uns die extreme Schwierigkeit der Ableitung solcher Prinzipien auf verhängnisvolle theologische Schwächen des Konzeptes von „christlichen moralischen Prinzipien“ aufmerksam macht.

Die Reaktion auf Wood greift seine Angst auf, dass der moralische Realismus von *Singing* ohne eine sorgfältigere Darstellung der Übergänge zwischen deskriptiver und präskriptiver moralischer Sprache gefährdet ist. Der

Artikel schlägt vor, dass diese Kritik eine anspruchsvollere Wiederholung der Annahme ist, dass die christliche Ethik nicht ohne Prinzipien auskommt, und dass diese Kritik auf der Unterscheidung zwischen theoretischer und praktischer Vernunft beruht, die die moderne Theologie geplagt hat. An dieser Stelle sind Urteile über die Entwicklung in der westlichen Theologie entscheidend. Der Artikel vertritt die Auffassung, dass die dringlichste Frage für die heutige christliche Ethik lautet, wie man am besten auf gegenwärtige Tendenzen antwortet, bekenntnismäßige Orthodoxie entweder mit ethischer Heterodoxie oder mit der Fokussierung von christlicher Moral auf eine sehr schmale Bandbreite von Lackmustestfragen zu verheiraten.

Der letzte Abschnitt wechselt von Klärungen zu konstruktiver Theologie und zieht Konvergenzen zwischen *Singing the Ethos of God* und den Artikeln von Wannenwetsch und Ulrich zusammen. Hier wird die Position entwickelt, dass christliche Ethik ganz angemessen als eine Disziplin verstanden wird, die der Orientierung von Christen in der Wirklichkeit dient, wobei Wirklichkeit durch und durch trinitarisch, kirchlich und biblisch definiert wird. Doxologie wird als die fortlaufende menschliche Anerkennung der Abhängigkeit von und Dankbarkeit

für Gottes Gegenwart und Fürsorge verstanden. Theologie und Ethik bestätigen innerhalb der Umlaufbahn der Doxologie die Situation des menschlichen Denkens „in der Mitte“ von Gottes Schöpfung und Erlösung der Welt. Gott muss in das Leben der Menschen eindringen, um ihnen seine Gegenwart und Fürsorge inmitten der entgegen gesetzten Tendenzen bewusst zu machen, die die gefallenen Psychen und die sozialen Gebilde charakterisieren, in die die Menschen vollständig eingebettet sind. Christliche Theologie kann daher niemals das geduldige „Kauen“ transzendieren, das die Meditation verlangt (Psalm 1,1). Indem sie das tut, muss sie als eine Versuchung das Verlangen vermeiden, sich in einer Leseweise auszuruhen, die so vollständig ist, dass das Lesen aufhören kann. Das Lesen der Schrift mit den Heiligen widersteht diesem Aufhören in der Behauptung, dass menschliche Heiligung im Anschließen an die Einheit mit den Heiligen in unserer Zeit gefunden wird, nicht in Innovation oder Fortschritt über jene hinaus. Eine solche christliche ethische Exegese wird als eine dargestellt, die von der biblischen Sprache von der „Transformation der Muster dieses Zeitalters“, von „Meditation“ und „Tora“ bestens unterstützt wird.

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RÉSUMÉ

Cet article vient en réponse à ceux de Gordon Wenham, Don Wood, Bernd Wannenwetsch et Hans Ulrich. En réponse à Wenham, Brock demande si, dans l'exégèse théologique chrétienne, c'est l'interprétation ecclésiale ou la fidélité exégétique qui est la plus fondamentale. Il considère que ni la localisation de l'interprétation biblique dans l'Église, ni l'intérêt pour la fidélité exégétique ne sont primordiales pour déterminer le rôle de l'Écriture dans la formation morale de l'Église. Il considère ensuite ce qui advient lorsqu'on lie l'éthique à l'idée de principes éthiques et suggère que la difficulté extrême à élaborer de tels principes devrait nous alerter quant à la présence de failles théologiques fatales dans l'idée de principes moraux chrétiens.

Il répond ensuite à la préoccupation exprimée par Wood selon qui le réalisme moral est en péril si l'on n'accorde pas plus d'attention à la question de savoir comment on passe du langage moral descriptif au langage prescriptif. Cette critique est à ses yeux une reprise plus sophistiquée du présupposé selon lequel l'éthique chrétienne ne peut pas se passer de principes et repose sur la distinction entre raison pratique et théorique qui a vicié la théologie moderne. Les jugements portés sur les développements de la théologie occidentale sont ici cruciaux. Brock considère que le point névralgique pour l'éthique chrétienne contemporaine concerne la

manière de répondre aux tendances modernes de mêler l'orthodoxie doctrinale et une éthique hétérodoxe ou une éthique qui réduit la moralité chrétienne à l'attitude à adopter quant à quelques problèmes tests.

Enfin, Brock signale les convergences entre son livre et les articles de Wannenwetsch et Ulrich. Il développe l'idée que l'éthique chrétienne doit se concevoir comme une discipline au service de l'orientation des chrétiens dans la réalité, une réalité qui se définit en termes trinitaires, ecclésiaux et scripturaires. Dans l'orbite de la doxologie, la théologie et l'éthique assurent la situation de la pensée humaine au milieu de l'œuvre divine de création et de rédemption du monde. Dieu doit se manifester aux hommes pour les rendre conscients de sa présence et de son intérêt pour eux au milieu des tendances contraires de leur psyché déchu et des groupes sociaux dans lesquels ils sont pleinement immergés. La théologie chrétienne ne peut donc jamais se dispenser de la patiente mastication que demande la méditation (Ps 1.2). Elle doit éviter la tentation de désirer s'arrêter à une lecture tellement définitive que la lecture peut cesser. Lire l'Écriture avec les saints permet d'éviter cela si l'on considère que la sanctification humaine s'atteint lorsqu'on se joint à eux dans l'unité en notre temps, plutôt que de chercher à innover et à les dépasser. Une telle exégèse éthique chrétienne trouve sa confirmation dans le langage biblique de « la transformation de l'ordre de ce monde », de la « méditation » et de la « Torah ».

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I.

I am deeply appreciative of such penetrating and constructive engagements by my five interlocutors, each of whom in his own way models sympathy without sycophancy. Many thanks to Hans Ulrich (how often does he get to be first in an alphabetical list?), Bernd Wannenwetsch, Gordon Wenham, Don Wood and Simon Woodman for drawing such rich reflections from *Singing the Ethos of God*. I am also especially grateful to Jonathan Chaplin, director of the Kirby Laing Institute of Christian Ethics, for proposing this dialogue, hosting the Cambridge symposium where these papers were first presented, and for editing them for publication.

I will respond to the papers in this volume in two movements. In the first I will attempt to clarify the argument of *Singing* and its positioning in the contemporary landscape by responding to some of the concerns of Wenham and Wood. I will then echo the approaches of Wannenwetsch and Ulrich by extending a conversation with them that both predates *Singing* and points beyond it.

Had I more space, I would have liked to have discussed the theological implications of the many illuminating historical points Wenham discusses in the latter part of his paper regarding the role of the Psalms in the transmission of the law in Israel. Here I will confine myself to two clarifications that I hope might alleviate Wenham's worries that I do not consider the Bible the 'Church's book', linking it with another about my unease with the derivation of moral principles or rules from Scripture.

Wenham detects in my account a suggestion that any claim that Scripture is properly interpreted only in the Church risks illegitimate anthropocentrism. My concern in chapter two of *Singing*, rather, is *how* the communarians² understand this interpretation to take place. I press the question of whether there are any substantive differences between the Church singing, praying and preaching Scripture, and, for instance, a nation debating the interpretation of the constitution in parliament. As I put it in chapter two, it is theologically crucial to distinguish the concept of 'Church' from a more general concept of 'community', not least because doing so ensures that we accord God's work a special role in defining the Church. I suggest that the communarians don't do this clearly enough, even though they rightly insist that the proper place for biblical interpretation is in the ecclesia.

My proposal assumes that the Church is that

community called into existence by God's speaking; it is a creature of God's Word, a *creatura verbi*, as Wannenwetsch notes. As a result, it understands the witness to that speaking, the Bible, not just as another book but as Scripture, that is a divinely designated medium through which God has chosen to shape human hearing and action. This leads to a second claim. The question of *how* the Church understands God to shape it through Scripture must *itself* be submitted to Scripture. My criticism of the communarians on this point is that their insistence that the Church is the proper context for biblical interpretation is not matched with a thoroughly theological account of the *role* Scripture plays in the moral formation of the Church. Though Wenham suggests I deny the first claim, that the Church is the rightful location of biblical interpretation, it is in fact the communarians' definitions of 'community' and 'moral deliberation' that I find theologically insufficient.

To put things this way allows me to agree with Wenham that the communarian insistence on the properly ecclesial location of biblical interpretation is conceptually more fundamental than the insistence of the biblical ethics school on close attention to the differences between the biblical books (discussed in *Singing* chapter three). Biblical ethics helpfully insists on the differences in *content* between different biblical books, attempting to define the ethic of each unit (however delineated) before any synthesis of the Bible's ethical teaching as a whole. What I am not able to follow is Wenham's suggestion that such fine-grained attention to Scripture should be understood as *supplementing* the communarian insistence on ecclesial interpretation. Doing so repeats the mistake of the communarians who are too assured that the simple self-designation 'Church' is one that can be made whether Scripture is taken seriously or not.

In *Singing* I assume that there are close readers of Scripture both inside and out of the Church, a fact readily apparent in any biblical studies department. Close reading, from whichever quarter it arises, is always a welcome challenge to the Church to better attend to its own Scriptures. There is an appropriate humility in allowing oneself to be forced back to Scripture rather than relying on the contention that the Bible is the Church's book to defend a lack of attention to the actual text of Scripture. The Bible is God's book, through which he forms a Church, and through which he disciplines and may even finally reject some who call themselves Church. It is God's chosen implement for

drawing humanity to himself, which means into the Church. No warrant is thereby implied for the Church to claim that it 'possesses' the book in an ontological sense. Of course the reasons why different communities and individuals read the Bible do differ, but the Church is that community that reads the whole Christian Bible as *Scripture*, that is, as a divine provision for the rule of its collective life. To restate my reservation about the communitarians, they are so sure that they are the Church that close reading of Scripture seems to fade in importance. It is this sense of *possessing* Scripture that is anthropocentric in that it insulates our certainties from challenge, whether by humans or God. This insulation, and the conceptual moves on which it rests, suggest a trajectory of domestication of Scripture and the God to whom it witnesses.

Wenham is also not persuaded by my insistence that we ought not to think of biblical ethics as the project of deriving principles, rules, models and virtues from Scripture. I make this claim for two reasons. The first expresses agreement with one implication of Lessing's observation of the 'ugly ditch' between the facts of history and the eternal truths of reason, an insight deeply etched into the structure of both modern theology and biblical studies. Though this dictum rests on problematic polarisations of time and eternity, and history and reason, it nevertheless has brought the attention of our age to the deeply historical nature of the biblical documents. Neither the Ten Commandments, nor the Sermon on the Mount, nor the epistles of Paul were written to us. They were, respectively, delivered to Israel, the disciples and crowds, and to various first-century churches. Whether or how they are *binding* on us is a theological, not a textual or archaeological question.

Fortified by these observations, biblical scholars have tirelessly reminded us that every single line of Scripture, not just the passages that hit our modern ears like the 'women be silent' passages, is bound by the strictures of local culture and thought. One of the major tasks of Part I of *Singing* is simply to show how difficult it is to begin with this historical awareness and end with a definitive culture-transcendent list of moral principles, virtues, rules or models derived from this large and complex book. The task becomes doubly difficult because our modern ethical sensibilities have been deeply shaped by a counter-productive ethical presupposition: that there is a single set of moral rules, like a Kantian categorical imperative, that is operative in every sphere of every kind of life. Such an undif-

ferentiated picture of moral rules, which assumes there must be *one* methodologically homogeneous way to be moral and a Christian, is very hard to mesh with the diversity of the Bible's stories and injunctions. To make such an ethic work demands reducing Scripture's complexity with what turn out to be woodenly reductionist ethical summaries or highly abstract principles. The interest of the third part of the book in the question of the diversity of the Church and in the concept of a grammar unifying activities that look, on the surface, very different, are both attempts to think more theologically about this question.

All this allows me to agree with Wenham that in many cases it is canonical interpreters of Scripture who are most sensitive to the conscious development of theological meanings by the writers of Scripture (cf. *Singing*, 277), as marked by their awareness, for instance, that the Psalter's animal imagery is metaphorically and theologically loaded (308). Not only have I learned much from them, but I deploy canonical interpretative moves in my own biblical interpretation (309-310). Nevertheless, canonical interpretation has singularly failed to generate what it seeks, a distillation of the moral principles that sum up the moral teaching of the Bible as a whole. My treatment of Childs in chapter four of *Singing* is rather brief not because his treatment is facile, but because it is very good and therefore displays the futility of this particular method of generating a comprehensive account of biblical ethics. I suggest along the way that one methodological barrier that still hampers the canonical interpreters becomes more clear when we read Augustine and Luther, who locate their readings of Scripture *within* the orbit of the one God's action to which the Scriptures attest. In contrast, even the theologically sophisticated canonical interpreter is constrained to speak of canonical development in more coolly descriptive terms of the ideas that 'those people' once held (cf. 189 n. 52).

This distancing gaze is constitutive of the modern discipline of biblical studies. Here I can hardly put my alternative proposal better than Wannenwetsch has done in his discussion of my rejection of epoch thinking. Whatever Christian ethics must be, it can only emerge within the conversation with the cloud of witnesses, conceived as valid, contemporary voices, that Scripture makes possible. The reason that Christians ought not seek eternal moral principles is that such a quest rests on the assumption that once we have these prin-

ciples in hand, we no longer need to listen to the saints, which simultaneously devalues the unending tutelage of the Spirit. Here I develop a position most forcefully articulated by Barth, and for this reason: if Christian ethics is a matter of applying or choosing to obey a set of principles that we have in hand, we become like Hercules at the crossroads, reinstated as judges of our own destiny, which is to sever ourselves from God's leading.³ To have the definitive set of moral principles is not yet to know which one we ought to apply, which of many 'in principle' good actions we ought to enact, or, as many biblical examples attest, which apparently morally problematic actions God might draw us into by binding us to specific neighbours (Rahab's hiding Israel's spies in her brothel, to take one of many examples that appear counter-intuitive to modern ethical principle-think).

In the final analysis, I suggest that my refusal of principles is linked to a specific doctrine of God. When we assert that we have the list of eternal terms by which humans may be moral (which necessarily stand above Scripture, being derived from it), we assert that we understand all that God wants of humans. This is tantamount to claiming to know God as he knows us. The Spirit no longer needs to be our continual guide and tutor. We have in effect become binitarian.

II.

I would like to continue with these themes as I turn to Don Wood's extremely generous and insightful response. I do so at the risk of discussing a minor point in Wood's argument in the interest of a larger point in this response, for which I must apologize. I will, however, move from a rather allusive criticism in a footnote, to try to deal with what I take to be the major question raised by Wood, whether my account undervalues accounts of the immanent works of God. Quoting O'Donovan, Wood suggests in a pithy footnote that my commitment to moral realism is in jeopardy without a more careful account of the transitions between descriptive and prescriptive moral language. On my reading, this criticism represents a more sophisticated approach to the worry that Christian ethics cannot do without principles that rests on the bifurcation of theoretical and practical reason that, in my judgement, has bedevilled modern theology.

The boundaries of the modern academic discipline of Christian ethics, and its uncomfortable relation with systematic theology, is arguably a

late flowering of the high medieval embrace of a firm distinction between theoretical and practical reason. The modern construal of the difference between theology and ethics as devoted respectively to the explication of theoretical and practical reason illustrates how difficult such a division makes moving between the two domains of knowledge. It is also linked to a tendency of western academic theological culture to fall into line with the culture of the (early) modern university in which theoretical knowledge (philosophy) was seen as more basic than the practical arts (including ethics). The result of these developments, especially in English-speaking Protestant theology, has been a sense that systematic (or fundamental) theology constitutes basic Christian knowledge, with ethics understood as the application of this knowledge to particular circumstances. The success of systematics in relation to ethics in the British academy after 1945, and the methodological disarray and fragmentation of ethics and practical theology during the same period, can be understood as a result of the splitting of practical and theoretical knowledge and the privileging of the theoretical.

In light of this reading of contemporary theological history, I am less directly concerned than Wood with the task of maintaining creedal orthodoxy, especially if this is defined purely in the register of theoretical knowledge (which Wood, I believe, would not like it to be). It is my perception (considered and reconsidered) that the only interesting question for contemporary theology is how creedal orthodoxy can be so easily wedded to either ethical heterodoxy (insofar as theologians are any longer capable of defining it) or to a Christian morality confined to a very narrow domain of litmus test issues. How should the faithful theologian respond when Christians have come to think that the certainty of their faith is a matter of holding the right eternally valid beliefs while blissfully unaware of how these very beliefs are sanctioning the most destructive of behaviours? This is George Lindbeck's famous problem of the marauding crusader's orthodox confession. Creedal orthodoxy, it seems to me, is by definition intrinsic to the Church. I do not set myself the task of refuting pseudo-churches that have lost interest in being part of the confessing Church through the ages. My interest is in supporting those churches that sense the gap I am indicating between avowed historical Christian belief and the contemporary church's moral life, and desire for it to be overcome.

From this perspective, and fully aware of the

various roles such appeals have played in earlier traditions, I read many of the recent reminders of the importance of the ascension in Christian ethics as attempts to shore up the priority of theoretical over practical knowledge. It is this bifurcation that makes possible the distinction of descriptive as opposed to prescriptive moral language. My contention, however, is that this is an unbiblical distinction. Take for instance Wood's reading of 1 Corinthians 2:10. The passage 'the Spirit searches the eternal things of God' is cited to assert the priority of God's works *ad intra* over his works *ad extra*. Wood's concern is to safeguard the logical priority of God's action in himself over his actions toward the world. Here Wood does not get me quite right in his assessment that I am nervous about this assertion and the metaphysical claims it entails. What I *am* nervous about is the foreshortening of the passage Wood's citation suggests, and which, perhaps unwittingly, appears to me to run parallel to that of the defenders of theology as fundamentally theoretical knowledge.

1 Corinthians 2 is written to believers who Paul suggests have turned Christ into an object of knowledge to be possessed as a secret (a gnosis) that can then be cashed out as political authority construed in an anti-ecclesial fashion. To refute their Christology and its anchoring in theoretical knowledge alone, Paul does not avoid talk of God *in se*. His approach, rather, is to redirect their attention to the crucial importance of spiritual judgment of the Church's contemporary affairs. The certainty Paul demands of the Corinthians is precisely *not* knowledge of the inner life and decrees of God, though he refers to it in the course of his argument. The crucial knowledge he wants them to recognise and to become certain about is "of the gifts bestowed on us by God" (1 Corinthians 2:13), the gifts that God gives to *this* community in *this* place.

For Paul, a quest for knowledge for its own sake is profoundly antisocial. When theological claims are severed from their role in the up-building in the body of Christ, they may be held as the solitary knowledge of those who think themselves as 'mature' individuals, a problem in itself that Paul thinks worthy of rebuking. More relevant for our purposes, such theological knowledge may well lend itself to moral applications, but the very fact that these come in different if not mutually exclusive proposals reveals the total inability of this approach to foster *oikodome*, the upbuilding of the community.

Christianity as solitary gnosis can have no sense

of *communal* direction, nor can it have any certainty in its concrete moral discernment. The Corinthian Christian gnosis, with its assumption that the 'real subject' of faith is spiritual matters, promotes, for instance, an indifference to the body that can be acted out in radical libertarian directions (the promiscuity of chapter 6) as easily as radical asceticism (the disparaging of sexuality as confronted in chapter 7). Paul's response is not to dispute the Corinthian claim that Christ is Lord and Saviour, but to indicate the ways in which, if their confession of Christ is to be true and accurate, it must be tied to the community and the real time working of the Spirit to reveal what God has for this particular community. I would frame my own nervousness about 'metaphysics' as that of Paul: that the language game of ontology and essence severed from this ecclesial matrix allows and even encourages the idea that there can be knowledge of Christ apart from the practical discernment of the living body of Christ as taught by the Spirit in power (1 Corinthians 4:20).

I hope that by noting these trajectories it has become clear why I agree with Wood's reminder of the importance and role of creedal affirmations as authoritative (cf. *Singing*, 276) while being actively nervous about the ways creedal orthodoxy becomes a gnosis. 1 Corinthians suggests that the indicator that faith has become a gnosis is when Christian talk about ethics does not assume it is an immediate entailment of creedal claims, and when our certainty about creedal claims is paired with confusion and uncertainty about the living power of God's Spirit.

These perspectives arise from my interest in what it means to *live* Christian faith. Thinking, including theologising, is one aspect of faithful human living. But before thinking or acting must come hearing, the condition for obedience. As Luther puts it:

True obedience is not to do what you yourself choose or what you impose upon yourself, but what the Lord has commanded you through His Word... Therefore when God is not speaking but is keeping silence, there can be no obedience. Moreover, it is not enough that God speaks; but it is necessary that he speaks *to you*... 'The Lord has said' – whoever keeps this phrase in mind in all his actions will always live happily and be full of hope.⁴

My starting presupposition is that perfectly orthodox claims and beliefs can be affirmed by those who refuse to be obedient, and my sole interest

in *Singing* is how to understand and invite the Church into obedience.

These considerations also illumine, I hope, my complaints about the expansion of hermeneutics, which at best is talk about the conditions under which God might be known. My interest is in rediscovering how God *has and is* claiming human lives as his own. To know *that* God claims lives or to know the *conditions* for any claim to emerge is not yet to have learned what it might mean to *recognise* Christ's claim in the present. Recognition is an *action*, a *response*, a *skill* and not an idea. Christian ethics is the set of ideas oriented to facilitating this sort of action, directing attention to it in its full concreteness and materiality. To begin with these starting presuppositions inevitably generates a difference of positioning from much modern theology, a repositioning with which Wood no doubt has great sympathy.

III.

While I am glad not to be labelled 'Erlangen School' by Wood, I do share much with the final two respondents, Wannenwetsch and Ulrich. This makes responding to them in the mode of clarification impossible, as they also acknowledge. Rather than reacting to *Singing* critically, they have given me the immense gift of making what is implicit in it explicit. In so doing have pushed our conversation another step forward. In many ways *Singing* represents my own similar reflections on their work, and so any response to them can only take the form of again extending the conversation, the communion in unity befitting 'fellow workers of God' (1 Corinthians 3:8-9). Not only is it more exiting to agree than to criticise, as Wannenwetsch puts it, but it is more real, more human, theologically understood. I propose to conclude this paper by drawing together what I see as our points of agreement in hope of deepening and clarifying it. Only in passing will I note the origin of any given observation in the responses of Wannenwetsch and Ulrich.

1) Christian ethics is best understood as a discipline serving the orientation of Christians in reality. This reality, however, is not perceivable without faith, but is a thoroughly Trinitarian, ecclesial and scriptural reality. It is not directly concerned with establishing or grounding its claims about reality (an apologetic task) nor primarily with ensuring internal conceptual balance (a second-order systematic task), but in facilitating the Church's

becoming aware of this reality in real time, so that humans can be oriented in their daily lives. The term 'reality' is thus indexed to the doctrine of God.

2) The economy of God's works *ad extra* is further explicated in a Christological and robustly pneumatological manner. Doing so renders doxology the primary form of human response to the reality that sustains human life. Doxology is the ongoing human acknowledgement of reliance on and gratitude for God's presence and care. Because God has revealed in the life of Jesus Christ that he desires to live with us, humans can affirm that he has prepared a way so that they can live with him. Humanity is not left to invent praises on its own, which would be tantamount to reinventing faith. What we trust we praise; the form of our faith is detectable in our praises. Some praises are authoritative because they genuinely 'author' us, genuinely open up communication with the one life giver, so keeping us alive. Doxology is ordered vertically as coming from and returning to God, and given shape, horizontally, by its emplacement in the praises of the saints. Such an approach reconfigures the academic discipline of ethics as doxology critique, with far reaching implications for concrete ethical discussions only alluded to in *Singing*.

3) These two opening points betray not only a comfort with, but an insistence that theology and ethics admit their location 'in the middle' of God's creation and salvation of the world. God must break in on humans to make us aware of his presence and care *amidst* the countervailing tendencies that characterise our fallen psyches and the social formations within which they are wholly embedded. Sanctification is thus, irreducibly, a process of unlearning and displacement of what we think we know by what comes to us, by that which we cannot yet perceive or comprehend.

4) The foregoing also positions theology as a discipline wholly comfortable with the admission that we Christians do not yet know Scripture. Once I learned the order of the biblical books, and I thought I knew Scripture. But then I learned the content of the books, and realized that only *then* did I know Scripture. Yet later I learned the biblical languages and realized, by learning more, how little I had previously understood. We are always tempted to think that we know once we have grasped the theologies of the biblical books or their ethical content, grasped the appropriate hermeneutic method, and so on, *ad infinitum*.

But if Christian theology can do no more than attend to the letter of Scripture rather than arbitrarily putting aside this attention on the grounds that we now know it, it is left with a never-ending movement into Scripture. Christian faith can never transcend the patient 'chewing' which meditation demands and which is constitutive of human blessedness (Psalm 1:1). The human condition is one of continual temptation to claim arrival, to seek to rest in a reading that is so complete that reading can cease. These considerations fund the suspicion of 'closed' theoretical accounts evident in *Singing* and the responses of Wannenwetsch and Ulrich. But notice: being comfortable with being perpetually 'in the middle' of both life and scriptural meditation can only continue in the ongoing and sustaining presence of the community of worship by the work of God.

5) When Christians lose this sense of being embedded in the faith of the community of praise, the Spirit-sustained body of Christ, they inevitably clutch for alternative mechanisms for generating certainty and stability. This clutching becomes visible when attending to the shifting inflections of praise. There is a symbiosis between a church enamoured with method, whether theological or ethical, and as Wood also picks up, a church that has lost its confidence in the power of the Spirit. Wannenwetsch nicely names this syndrome 'methodological deism'. Such analysis takes seriously the creedal claim that there is a 'pneumatological context for ethics' (Ulrich). The whole project of *Singing* is theologically to explicate what it might mean to court the Spirit in the realms of life and biblical exegesis. Formed activities of listening, praying, communal praise and so on are exposed as basic forums in which human life is given a form that befits it, that enlivens it.

6) Wannenwetsch, Ulrich and I assume a symmetrical relationship between the irreducibility of the *text* of Scripture and the irreducibility of the *persons* who make up the communion of saints. Every generation of Christians must read Scripture with the saints because our sanctification is found in *joining* them, in being made one with *them*. Because the Christian ethos is fundamentally doxological, it is irreducibly political. Individual praise is only knowable as real praise as it harmonises with the body of Christ. On this point I think Wannenwetsch and Ulrich both draw out my own sensibilities more explicitly and succinctly than I was able to do in *Singing*. The sympathy towards the saints that this account engenders is fundamentally

at odds with the academic culture in which success is won through criticism. I will consider *Singing* a success if it does nothing more than show how vital it is that contemporary theologians, especially theological students, become aware of the ways they are being cut off from the body of Christ by the habits of disdain, objectification and debunking that come so easily in the academy and offer such glittering short term gains.

7) This last observation about the influence of academic culture on theological habits is an example of how such a theology places prime importance on the heightening of sensitivity to the denuding 'schemata of this age' (Romans 12:2). For Wannenwetsch, Ulrich and me, salvation is closely tied to the divine overcoming of such schemas. Scripture and the *communio sanctorum* are understood as God's chosen modalities serving this overcoming, a wholly divine act which humans can either embrace or reject. Scripture must remain outside us, truly *other* in order to preserve the space for the Spirit to liberate it from our self-justifying projections. So too must the saints' exegesis stand against us in all its glorious depth and bewildering contradictions. To allow them to do so is to conceive biblical commentary as closer to midrash, as Ulrich points out. To immerse ourselves willingly in this turbulent but unified stream is a venture of reliance on the illuminating power of the Spirit which Ulrich succinctly labels 'a dramatic and eschatological metamorphosis'. Wannenwetsch, Ulrich and I agree that the tenor of Christian ethics is therefore appropriately focused on changes, on surprising appearances, in short, on advent. It is so because humans are lost, and doubly lost if they have not learned how to detect and respond to divine invitations to repentance.

This emphasis comprehends the emphasis of virtue ethics on the gradual building up of new ways of living, new habits. But in doing so it insists that new habits are an accumulation of human responses to divine invitations calling believers in directions their current habits resist. The important question becomes not, 'What is the basic set of Christian habits or virtues?' but a prior one: 'What does it mean to be prepared to hear when God *challenges* our current habits and schemas of perception?' In following out this question, not only is the emphasis of a Christian virtue ethic decisively shifted away from a focus on human subjectivity, but we also come to the theological source of the rejection of any hard distinction between practical and theoretical knowledge. Romans 12:1-5 suggests that

our practical and theoretical knowledge are inextricably intertwined, and therefore that our attempt to keep them separated can only yield resistance to the reformulation of the schemas that simultaneously entangle our lived life and thoughts.

8) Finally, there is agreement that the concept of faith as 'exploring the Torah' is superior to bifurcated accounts of theology and ethics, or ethics and exegesis. Christian ethics is conceived as a conversation between contemporaries gathered around and anchored to God by this text, these *words*, with their tangible and concrete materiality. This surface, in its sheer givenness, opens the space in which God has chosen to gather a Church. It is the anchoring mode of God's presence as he has chosen to offer it to us. Scripture can be loved and inhabited because it can be touched and 'eaten' because it invites us into itself. In so doing it opens our eyes to our embedding in God's works, works that encompass not only us but the whole cosmos, evoking concrete worship and love. If the Torah is God's revelation of himself and all his works, we can never encompass or summarise it, but can only be *inside* it, to be *exploring* it with all our beings (cf. *Singing*, 75-77). In it the communion of saints discovers that it is a little band in a vast universe of words, each of which indicates God's ways of being with humans. In this universe biblical exegesis is the discussion about the way forward together.

That discussion is defined by waiting for God to reveal how we can advance without breaking communion even when we disagree or are confused amongst ourselves. Christian ethics is concerned with indicating how humans can learn to trust the words of Scripture as this city, this people, and so to be made one with them, Christ's body.

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Notes

- 1 This is an edited version of a paper presented at the Annual Book Colloquium of the Kirby Laing Institute for Christian Ethics (KLICE), Tyndale House, Cambridge, 3-4 September 2008.
- 2 I use the label 'communitarians' for the discourse represented by the otherwise excellent *The Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life* by Birch and Rasmussen and *Reading in Communion* by Fowl and Jones.
- 3 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*. Edited by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956-1961) volumes II/2, 517; III/1, 264-265 and IV/1, 615-616.
- 4 Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis* vol 2. Edited by Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1960) 271, 273.

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