

Pursuing the *glory and goodness*: Christomorphism Where neopentecostal and anabaptist meet?

By Jim Purves

- The approach here offered is dogmatic rather than systematic: our method lies in identifying the essential ‘building blocks’ of Christian theology, not designing a complete system. The propriety of constructing a contextualised, narrative theology is allowed for; but subject to it having, as *prolegomena*, an adequate dogmatic foundation. It is the nature of that dogmatic foundation that we seek to address.
- *His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires*
(2 Peter 1.3-4)

Pt. 1 The Story

The glory

At the age of 19 the realisation of a living Jesus impacted me, during a student outreach meeting, six months prior to my conversion. The sense of God’s glory, at variously times since described by me as ‘being born again’, ‘filled’ or ‘baptised’ by the Holy Spirit, overwhelmed me at conversion. It seemed that God’s presence came down with an experience of energy, of presence and power passing in and through my body. Involuntary shaking filled the room when I met with another in prayer. Convictions formed within me that God was saying certain things. A hunger for Scripture, prayer, fellowship and an appetite for witnessing gripped me. In the context of revival in the university’s Faculty of Law, I was inducted into a spirituality that embraces *glossalalia*, prophetic utterance, healing and deliverance ministry as normative to the Christian life.

This experience of God’s imminent glory was, at the same time, contextualised within an evangelicalism which was married to a clear, confessional basis. I was a socially aspiring law student, instinctively gravitating towards the Presbyterian establishment of the Church of Scotland. I was introduced to a conservative, Calvinist, evangelical congregation where there was excellent propositional, exegetical preaching, well argued and ‘proof-texted’.

At the same time, I was mixing with a peer group who were shaped by the Charismatic renewal movement of the mid-1970’s. Introduced to a biography of Edward Irving, a famous preacher whose sermons gripped London society in the early 1800’s, and whose reflections in Christology and Pneumatology prefigured those of

both later Holiness and Pentecostal theologians, I also became involved in a sacramental and liturgical traditional of healing and deliverance ministry, connected with the Scottish Iona Community.

Two years after conversion, I was a ministerial candidate for the presbyterian Church of Scotland, already trying to deal with a tension between:

- a. A Federal Calvinism, emphasising Atonement through Christ's propitiatory, substitutionary Sacrifice. This was allied to an Augustinian anthropology, emphasising Christ *potest non peccare*, set over against the mass of sinful humanity, *non potest non peccare*. Christ's sinless humanity was presented as essentially different to ours. I was taught that, through the atoning power of the Cross, we receive the benefits of Christ, specifically through salvation imparted through my credal confession of the revelation of Christ as Saviour, grace for this life dispensed through the continuing ministry of Word and Sacraments.
- b. An understanding and ownership of the implication of the assumed humanity of Jesus Christ, as explored by Edward Irving, focussing on the Incarnation as the wellhead of atoning power, as expressed in Athanasius' *De Incarnatione*, further looking to the Irenaean model of recapitulation, which emphasised that Christ shared the whole experience of our own humanity.

There was, in these early days of my theological formation and, indeed, throughout the period of preparation for ministry, no consolidated, ontological understanding of what it means for us to share in the life of Christ. Expectation of sharing in the experience of Christ was diminished by a stress, arising out of Bezan Calvinism, of Atonement properly understood as propitiatory sacrifice. Sacramentalism, in the Reformed as well as the Catholic setting, had domesticated the *modus operandi* of the empowering, purposeful presence of God. My ministerial mentors impressed upon me, as a young pastor, that it was through the faithful, weekly exercise of the ministry of Word and Sacraments that the means of promoting Christian witness and fulfilling the Church's missional purpose was pursued. As one of my predecessors in my present charge, Bristo Baptist Church (founded 1765) was fond of saying, 'we are evangelical but not evangelistic'. This was not meant as a confession of shame: it was a positive affirmation of a philosophy of ministry that validated the weekly ministry of Word and Sacraments.

This inability to consolidate a meaningful ontological understanding of what it means for us to share in the life of Christ was the case not only for me but also, I observed, for the majority of those who participated in the Charismatic movement around me. I witnessed the Charismatic experience of the 1970's, certainly in the Scottish context, as not so much a drawing into participation in the life of Christ, but a vivifying and refreshing of our separated, sinful humanity through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, an outpouring consequential to the death and resurrection of Christ and which brought us into communion with the Redeemer who, while dying for us, always stood over against us. Life in the Spirit was viewed as the benefit of a post-Calvary enabling, released at Pentecost to enable Christians to live *life in the knowledge of*, rather than in a manner replicating the *life of* Jesus our Saviour upon earth.

The Goodness

Goodness, it sadly has to be said, was largely consigned to being the business of the theological liberals; of those who had drunk at the waters of a critical, biblical reductionism. These were the people who, once the miraculous and the mythical had been stripped away, were left only with the ethical and moral aspirations of a historicized Jesus the Nazarene. They were usually characterised as those who appeared to have no real experience of the immediate, glorious reality of Christ. They rarely, it seemed, could testify to a conversion experience. They had no need of absolute, inerrantly inspired Scriptures. They illustrated the marrying of critical, biblical scholarship to Christian humanism. Their advocacy of 'goodness' became itself polarised over against the dynamic reality of a glorious Christ, typified in the experience of one pastor who, on asking a leading, New Testament scholar 'what can we be sure Jesus actually say?' was told, " 'Abba' & 'Amen' "!

Goodness? Apart from seeking to be pleasant and caring as occasion required, it was only of real concern if it would help lead a person into wanting to know more about Jesus, a prelude to their conversion.

Pt. 2 Questions

What if 'glory' and 'goodness' are, in fact, integrally related components? What if this is something that God has ordained as necessary for us, in order to share in His missional purpose for a renewed humanity, *sharers in the divine nature*? What if the essence of Christian faith and living is not, in fact, related to an individualistic ownership of Cartesian, propositional truths; but more foundationally related to our engagement with the substance of the glory and goodness of God, alone through which we come to a proper engagement with *his very great and precious promises*?

At present, the fastest growing church in Britain is a Hispanic neopentecostal church, the *Comunidad Cristiana de Londres*. In Latin American neopentecostalism, we see an emphasis on experiential ownership of the 'glory' of God, the patent presence and power of God touching and changing lives through the experience of His presence. But where is the ethical and moral centre, the goodness? On the other hand, in post communist, eastern European theology, we see a renewed search for a post-rationalistic narrative theology, which seeks to place the ethic of the community at the centre of its life. But what of the glory? Is it possible to attempt to join together, in terms of orthopraxis, both the 'glory and the goodness', the ontological and ethical realities as authentically representative of the life of Christ?

Can we not encourage this dual axis of awareness, that is captured in **2 Peter 1.3** - the *glory* (ontological awareness) and the *goodness* (ethical awareness) - in the reading and application of Scripture? Before looking to how we might do this, let us first clarify the dogmatic basis on which we would seek to build our hermeneutic.

Pt. 3 Dogmatic foundations

1. Truth is found in the context of God's relating to people and the responding relating of people to God and, consequentially, people to people. Jesus is this truth, because He prototypical and paradigmatic of all these relationships.

2. God calls us out of a perception of life grounded simply in either abstracted propositions or from a perspective grounded in ourselves. He calls us out off both a

dispassionate ownership of propositional truth and also out of existential thinking. He calls us into relating, where there is another focus that is in God. Theology begins to be formed when we are in the grip of God's reaching out - His relating becomingness - to us; and our reaching out - our responding embrace - towards Him, both met with in and through Jesus.

We can only engage in theology out of this relationship, which is a process of our moving out of subjective, existential perceptions regarding ourselves and God, into relational dynamic anchored in Jesus Christ. Both the catalyst and paradigm for this is Jesus. In Jesus, we meet with mankind truly relating to God. In Jesus we meet with the One who is fully embraced in God's relating becomingness to us and man's responsive desire for God. In Jesus we meet with our humanity embraced and saturated in the glory and goodness that comes from God alone. This reciprocity of God's becomingness to man and man's response of surrender, in his desire for God, is founded for us in the vicarious humanity of Jesus Christ.

3. This God who, through Christ, enrolls us in His dynamic relationships defines Himself in relational terms. The key passage of **Exodus 34.6-7a**, is seminal here. As with Moses, we can only know God in and through seeking relationship with Him and His glory; and in being confronted with the self-disclosure of God in His goodness: *And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the **compassionate and gracious** God, slow to anger, abounding in **merciful love and faithfulness**, maintaining love to thousands, and **forgiving** wickedness, rebellion and sin.*

The truth of the One who declares 'I am who I am' is found only when we are arrested and constrained by these dynamic characteristics of His goodness; and it is when these dynamic characteristics of His goodness are combined with the presence of His glory, the weight of His presence met with and embraced, that we enter into and are enabled by God in a manner true to His revelation in Jesus. All we need for life and godliness are this glory and goodness (**2 Peter 1.3-4**). Indeed, the full nature of the vicarious, atoning death of Christ can only be sufficiently grasped when we view it terms predicative of our humanity's engagement with the relational intent of God's character, in terms of compassion, grace, merciful love, faithfulness and forgiveness.

4. All else that we say about God, all theology seeking to express His holiness, greatness, knowledge and power, is but parenthesis to these essential characteristics of His glory and goodness. The Holy Spirit is the agent of God's glory in our midst. The enabling, or empowering of our humanity, comes in and through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is responsible for sublimating the glory of God within us as the body of Christ. At the same time, the goodness of God - the ethical and moral rectitude and intent which God impresses upon our humanity - is expressed in and through the coming of the Word of God into human flesh in the Incarnation. The catalyst of our meeting with God is singularly the Incarnation in Jesus Christ, for it is here the Spirit conceives in human flesh and the Word becomes incarnate in human flesh. It is in the Incarnation that the Word of God, the Spirit of God and the humanity of man are all fully engaged in a point of concurrence.

5. My relationships with others will be decisively shaped by my grasp of this identity that God invites me to embrace in Christ, recipient of and participant in His glory and goodness. Where my identity and self-understanding is firmly grounded in Christ, this will decisively shape the priority I give to seeking the presence of His

glory and, at the same time, responding to His call to reflect the character of God's goodness towards others.

Pt. 4 The hermeneutical challenge

To encourage people to engage with this dual axis that is captured in **2 Peter 1.3** - the *glory* (ontological dynamic) and the *goodness* (ethical dynamic), we need to engage with the Scriptures in a way that draws people into the process of discipleship that is centred on the vicarious humanity of Jesus Christ. For this, we would want to apply a condensed, prognostic question that addresses the basic, Biblical hermeneutic:

 **Who** were the people this Scriptural passage was first delivered to? **Why** was it addressed to them? **What** could this Scripture have meant to them?

However, in order to apply the dynamic of a Christomorphic life, we must go further than that. We have to look for a contextual application that allows for the glory and the goodness of God to be outworked in and through our ministry.

One way of doing this might be in asking the following questions.

‘Through the reading of this passage, in what way does the Word of God:

 confront me with our heavenly Father's intent to bring the fullness of His glory and goodness to earth?

 challenge me to give myself more fully into the life of God's Son, “to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death”?

 encourage me to recognise or further seek, as one among God's people, the enabling presence of the Holy Spirit?

It seems no accident that so much early preaching of the Scriptures was heavily allegorical, or that early, pre-Nicene formulations of the Trinity were emphatically economic. What mattered was the pursuit of Christomorphism: becoming more like Christ. In reading the Scriptures, it was the presence and pattern of Christ that was constantly looked for, the enabling of the Holy Spirit that was sought, the glory and goodness of Father that was acknowledged.

Where neopentecostal and anabaptist meet?

Both glory and goodness are dynamic and experiential. We participate in them. We are appointed, in Christ, to reflect and express them, for they are the basis of Christian living. Theology must be their servant. The life of Jesus Christ is the baptistry wherein these realities are met with. Into this men and women need to be immersed, to be overwhelmed and filled by the Holy Spirit, equipped and enabled to live a life fulfilling our heavenly Father's pleasure.

Neopentecostals have alerted the world afresh to the glory of God come to earth in and through Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Unashamedly experiential, they look with expectancy for God's glory to come among them; and many of us have

witnessed, participated in the reality of God's present glory through the power of the Holy Spirit and been blessed by God because of it.

At the same time, our Anabaptist heritage offers us a valued context wherein the pursuit of Christlikeness in community is emphasised and God's goodness expressed, as we willingly embrace Christ's example of what it means to be His suffering body, His body given for others. Can we work to bring the two together, acknowledging that the glory of God comes to those who call out to Him in order to lead them into a deeper participation in that humanity, wherein the full expression of God's goodness is found? A theology that serves this end is theology truly worth engaging in.

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