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My Theological Journey: A Retrospective

Allan J. McNicol

All theology is, to some degree, reflective of a personal journey. I am grateful to family, dear friends, and fellow teachers (some of whom are contributors to this issue) who have nourished me over the years. To all of them, collectively, I owe a huge debt. I am not much without them. They taught me what I know.

Above all, my life has centered on being a teacher. My earliest recollection of teaching was directing an "intermediate" Bible class at my home church in Australia when I was fifteen. Since then hardly a week has gone by when I have not been teaching in some way or another. But this short essay is not a memoir. Rather, I wish simply to underscore several concerns that have engaged my attention in teaching and writing in past years. These fall into two general areas.

Theology in the Stone-Campbell (Restorationist) Tradition

For over a hundred years my family has pursued the journey of faith in this tradition. Most of my teaching took place in schools under similar auspices. One knows generally what concerns a Catholic, Lutheran, or Reformed theologian is expected to address. But in Churches of Christ this is not all that clear. Do we have an identifiable way of doing theology? Are we a definable theological tradition?

I have spent a fair amount of time attempting to answer most of these issues in the affirmative. To provide coherence for these claims I have attempted to build on the work of earlier Restorationists such as the English

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theologian William Robinson and, to some extent, certain Americans who maintain a commitment to the biblical view of the centrality of the oneness of the church as a given for the faith of the earliest Christians. Robinson argued that the core of Christianity is marked by the proclamation of the gospel which announces that the benefits of Christ's death and resurrection are bestowed to all who receive them in believer's baptism and faithful observance of the Lord's Supper. I believe that a viable theological tradition can be built on this foundation. My two small books on *Preparing for Baptism* and *Preparing for the Lord's Supper* develop this theme.[1] On the wider issue, I realize that even after two hundred years the jury is still out on whether we have developed a definable theological tradition. It will be up to others in generations to come to make the final judgments. In the meanwhile, I would like to be counted among those who see our emphases on the centrality of gospel and ordinances as the foundation for at least, a definable ecclesiology.

The Problem of Patternism

During my journey several issues have evoked considerable conflict. Two, in which I have been actively involved, may be noted briefly. First there was the discussion concerning the viability of "the blueprint model" of reading scripture.[2] This has had a long history in both Reformed and Restoration circles. Essentially the New Testament is studied along the same lines as one would read a blueprint for building a house. In the case of the study of the New Testament one presumes that the architectural model for the entire Christian faith is encoded in the text. But a glance at the kind of writings that make up the New Testament show that they are far different from plans for a house. They are occasional writings addressing various concerns of the earli-

[1] Allan J. McNicol, *Preparing for Baptism: Becoming Part of the Story of the People of God* (Austin: Christian Studies Press, 2001) and *Preparing for the Lord's Supper: Nourishing Spiritual Life Through the Lord's Meal* (Austin: Christian Studies Press, 2007).

[2] The most accessible statement of my position on this issue is my unpublished paper "Theological Method on the Bible Among Churches of Christ: A Proposal" at http://www.austingrad.edu/academics_mcnicol_resource.html.

est Christians who had been taught the faith. I believe that the Bible is normative for the Christian community. But I believe it should be read as the story of the people of God. A narrative reading of scripture involves us in God's on-going story with his creation. This understanding of the Bible as God's story also lies at the heart of my interest in Biblical Theology. In a number of circles this approach has generally been well received.

Encounter with Evangelicals

This is not the case with another issue that has come to my attention. By and large most people recognize today that American Protestantism can be viewed as two basic constituencies: Mainliners (Liberals) and Evangelicals (Conservatives). Churches of Christ, ecclesiologically, at least, represent a third way. They call for the unity of all believers based on the preaching of the gospel and, in keeping with the common faith of the church, its reception in believer's baptism and the Lord's Supper. My concern is that leaders of Churches of Christ, some deliberately, others unwittingly, are encouraging our people to view themselves primarily as Evangelicals. I think this is a mistake. This only leads to a loss of identity. Clear biblical teaching is compromised in favor of openness to such things ranging from Calvinism, evangelical models of worship (still a hot topic), to offbeat millennial views. Much of this embrace is grounded in the belief that it will attract greater numbers to our services.

However, the point I have attempted to make in the last decade or so goes even deeper. By and large we in Churches of Christ have viewed ourselves as an "alternative community" to the denominations while standing over against the mainstream culture that does not acknowledge the Lordship of Christ. This is the point that Richard Hughes sought to highlight in his historical study of the Churches of Christ in America.[3] But by incorporating ourselves into the Evangelical empire all of this is abandoned. And there will

[3] Richard T. Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of Churches of Christ in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

be a price to pay.[4] The Disciples of Christ embraced Liberal Protestantism only to follow it into terminal decline. In much the same way we are following a similar course by imitating the current Evangelical embrace of popular culture. I believe it is inevitable that those who move in this direction will suffer the same fate as the Disciples as the surrounding popular culture increasingly becomes more degraded and dismissive of faith. I realize that many do not agree with this analysis. They say that the young people will look elsewhere if we do not appear contemporary. I can only say that after visiting churches on several continents I believe what attracted thoughtful people to our movement in the first place was not "generic evangelicalism" but a strong fidelity to the restoration of the teaching and practices of New Testament Christianity. In the end this is what we have to offer. If we hold to these basic convictions I do not believe we have reason to fear. The gospel will never be popular but it always gains a hearing. By this we live or die.

Academic Theology in an Ecumenical Setting

In 1967, after finishing a Master's degree at ACU in Biblical and Patristic Greek, I enrolled in Yale Divinity School. For the next five years I studied within the circles of mainline Protestantism. While finishing my graduate work at Vanderbilt I taught a regular course on New Testament Greek and exegesis. Since that time I have actively continued my involvement with academic theology through scholarly writing and engagement in SBL (Society of Biblical Literature) and SNTS (International Society for New Testament Studies). I wish to highlight two particular areas of research that attract most ongoing interest and attention.

Eschatology

I have always believed that if Christianity is to be viable it must say something useful about the life beyond; otherwise, it is not worth much. Of course reflective analysis on such matters needs to be pursued in a wider

[4] My clearest statement on this issue is "Churches of Christ Meet the Evangelicals: A Review Essay," *Christian Studies* 19 (2003), 71–78.

context. This would include such areas as Jewish beliefs about the future, the resurrection of Jesus, and biblical and philosophical anthropology. One cannot be an expert in all of these areas. I choose to focus on the biblical witness. The fruit of this research is found in several published works, which I trust go beyond academic discussion.[5] In my teaching in churches I find there is considerable confusion about historic Christian teaching on these matters. The church is in desperate need for teachers to think through and restate in a fresh way the biblical teaching on the last things. When one reads the Bible in its total canonical context it is amazing how much of the text is concerned with the new world God is bringing.

Gospel Studies

The first year I spent at Yale I enrolled in a yearlong graduate seminar on the Synoptic Problem taught by John Schütz. Most of the first semester involved intense analysis of William Farmer's then recently published book *The Synoptic Problem*.[6] Later, after moving back to Texas, I became personally acquainted with Farmer and eventually was invited to join his research team. Most of the recognition I have received in international biblical scholarship comes through these associations.[7] As noted earlier, this is not a memoir, but books could be written about the frantic round of international conferences and publications that took place mainly under Farmer's auspices in the latter decades of the twentieth century.

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[5] Allan J. McNicol, *Jesus' Direction for the Future* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1996); "All Things New," *Christian Studies* 21 (2005/2006) 29–55; "Revelation," in *The Transforming Word: A One-Volume Commentary on the Bible,* Mark Hamilton, et al., eds. (Abilene: ACU Press, 2009) 1063–1086, and my forthcoming work (2011) *The Conversion of the Nations in Revelation* to be published by T & T Clark.

[6] William R. Farmer, *The Synoptic Problem: A Critical Analysis* (New York: Macmillan, 1964).

[7] The works *Beyond the Q Impasse: Luke's Use of Matthew*, Allan J. McNicol with David L. Dungan and David B. Peabody, eds. (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1996) and *One Gospel from Two: Mark's Use of Matthew and Luke*, David B. Peabody with Lamar Cope and Allan J. McNicol, eds. (Harrisburg: TPI/Continuum, 2002) represent the most accessible contributions in this area.

What have I learned from this work since the Synoptic Problem is still a problem? Not only am I convinced that there is no such thing as Q and that Mark is later than Matthew or Luke, I have come to a much deeper conviction that the study of the Gospels is foundational for the life of the church.

My interests in eschatology and the study of the gospels are not unrelated. The Gospels take us back to Jesus of Nazareth, the source of our faith. Eschatology moves us forward forcing us to frame what we believe will be ultimately accomplished through God's coming in Jesus Christ. Between the two (past and future) we continue to live in the church: the body of Christ. To me it is only through life lived in the church that these concerns about past and future make sense. The Stone-Campbell movement with its strong doctrine of the church has underscored this important reality.

Conclusion

This has been a brief retrospective summary of major concerns that have grounded my work. But it would be out of place if I did not express on this occasion my deep gratitude for the support of the many friends of Austin Graduate School of Theology, my academic home for almost four decades. Successive administrations, always helpful staff, and faculty colleagues, who are not only friends, but always challenge me to do my best work, are deeply appreciated. The Board of Trustees remains a constant source of encouragement. One cannot mention them all. But several friends of the School such as A. B. Cox, Claude Hocott, William Shive, O. J. Weber, and Ike Summerlin, all who have passed to their reward, are especially worthy of mention. It was persons like these who made Austin Grad what it is today. All of these men loved both the church and the academy. They believed that Christianity, at its best, had nothing to fear from allowing Christian scholars to pursue their work and publish their results in an atmosphere of full freedom. In this way the academy was truly the servant of the church. In a time when this was under challenge in some quarters these men stepped forward courageously and unreservedly supported this enterprise. We owe them and their friends a debt of gratitude.

After Karl Barth made his visit to America he was asked what he thought about this country. According to one account, he responded, "Fantastic!"[8] Allowing for Barth's healthy appreciation for the world and all that is within it, this response, even if apocryphal, is understandable. As an Australian who has spent his working life "abroad" in America, Barth's comment rings particularly true. America, for all of the criticism (not the least coming from many of its own citizens), remains the model for the rest of the world of how Christianity can thrive in a free-church setting.[9] I remain grateful to be privileged to observe and participate in many of the liveliest theological conversations in both Stone-Campbell circles and the wider ecumenical community over the past several decades. Whatever small contributions I have made pale in significance to the "fantastic experience" of it all.

[8] Hans W. Frei, "Karl Barth—Theologian" in *Karl Barth and the Future of Theology*, ed. David L. Dickerman (New Haven: Yale Divinity School Association, 1969), 5.

[9] This is a major thrust of the recent book of Mark A. Noll, *The New Shape of World Christianity: How American Experience Reflects Global Faith* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2009).

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