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Theologia Evangelii: Peter Jensen's Theological Method

Benjamin Myers

*The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel
of the glory and grace of God.* Martin Luther

Peter F. Jensen's *The Revelation of God*, the most recent contribution to the *Contours of Christian Theology* series, offers a distinctively evangelical approach to the doctrine of revelation.¹ In this work Jensen is concerned with what has traditionally been called 'theological prolegomena', that is, with the explication of the method and principles of Christian theology as a whole and, more particularly, with the problem of how human beings come to know God. In the discussion that follows I will first outline the main features of Jensen's method within its broad theological context, and secondly I will provide a positive evaluation of this method. Finally I will offer some criticisms of the doctrine of revelation that Jensen develops in connection with his method.

I. A Theology of the Gospel

Peter Jensen's central thesis is 'that God has revealed himself definitively in the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ',² and that this evangelical revelation should be determinative of both the content and the method of theology. Theology must start with, and then proceed to build on, the gospel.³ Thus the doctrine of revelation cannot begin with any *a priori* concept of revelation which is then applied to the particular instance of Christian revelation.⁴ Rather, we are faced at the very outset with the concrete givenness of the gospel. The gospel is the message that Jesus Christ is Lord; through this message we have come to know God. Since this is God's way of revealing himself, we must proceed *a posteriori* from the gospel to a general understanding of revelation. For Jensen, the gospel 'acts as a paradigm or pattern of revelation, and exercises a controlling influence' over our approach to revelation.⁵ Thus without restricting revelation to the gospel,⁶ Jensen posits the gospel as the starting-point and the normative principle of theology. While others have spoken of a theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*), a theology of the Word (*theologia Verbi*), or a theology of hope (*theologia spei*), Jensen's method may be described as *theologia evangelii*—a theology of the gospel.

This is not the first time Jensen has attempted to rethink the proper starting-point and method of theology. About a decade ago in *At the Heart of the Universe*, Jensen argued for the normative role of eschatology in the theological system.⁷ In this lively outline of Christian doctrine, Jensen begins with ‘Jesus Christ, the essence of the future consummation’,⁸ and his ensuing treatments of creation, theology proper, revelation, christology, salvation and the Christian life are significantly shaped by eschatological considerations. Summarising this book’s eschatological focus, Jensen explains: ‘My method has been to follow Jesus Christ in his future, his past and his present in the context of God’s purposes for the world.’⁹

Although *The Revelation of God* continues to exhibit a significant interest in the eschatological dimension of theology, especially in its emphasis on the promissory nature of revelation,¹⁰ Jensen’s theological thinking has clearly shifted. Nevertheless, a common interest in the primacy of the gospel underlies both Jensen’s earlier and his more recent approach to theology. In his earlier work, Jensen argues that ‘[t]he gospel by which we first come to know God involves knowing about the last things’,¹¹ and that the method of beginning with the last things puts the whole of theology into its proper perspective, since the eschatological method ‘is close to the heart of the gospel message which began, after all, with the announcement: “The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand”’.¹² In short, Jensen emphasised eschatology precisely because he believed this to be the best way to accentuate the *evangelical* content of theology. He is therefore only following his own deepest principle when in his more recent work he brings the gospel itself to the foreground and allows it to exert an immediate influence on the whole shape of theology.¹³

The thesis that Christian theology, and especially the doctrine of Scripture, should begin with and centre on the gospel is not in itself new—indeed, Otto Weber is probably right to suggest that, in spite of all distortions and accretions, theology ‘has always been theology of the Gospel, at least thetically’.¹⁴ Martin Luther, who organised all of his theological thinking around the evangelical doctrine of justification by faith,¹⁵ offers one of the most striking examples of a theology of the gospel. Following Luther, Lutheran orthodoxy continued to regard the gospel as the revelational norm within Scripture.¹⁶ In a similar way, Reformed orthodoxy spoke of the covenant between believers and God through Christ as the soteriological and

christological centre (*scopus*) and foundation (*fundamentum*) of Scripture, in which all doctrine is essentially contained and by which it must be judged.¹⁷ In the twentieth century, Karl Barth's conviction that God is known in the act of his self-revelation in Jesus Christ produced a theology that is profoundly related to the gospel.¹⁸ Barth defines the object of theology not merely as God, but, more concretely, as 'the God of the Gospel';¹⁹ and implicit in all of his theological reflection is the question: 'how can we really speak about God without speaking directly, if only summarily, about the Gospel?'²⁰ Those theologians who have been sensitive to Barth's deepest concerns have likewise tended to stress the evangelical character of theology—one thinks for instance of Otto Weber, G. C. Berkouwer, Hendrikus Berkhof, Helmut Thielicke, and T. F. Torrance.

The priority of the gospel has also been asserted by writers as diverse as P. T. Forsyth, who describes the 'gospel of God's historic grace' as 'the infallible power and authority over both church and Bible';²¹ C. H. Dodd, who speaks of the primitive kerygma as the historical 'fountain-head' and 'preservative' of the New Testament tradition;²² and Ernst Käsemann, who argues that Scripture is authoritative 'because and in so far as in the Scripture we encounter the Gospel', since '[t]he authority of the Bible is the derived authority of the Gospel'.²³ More recently, Ronald Thiemann has sought to ground revelation in prevenient grace, and to organise the doctrine of revelation around the concept of promise;²⁴ and J. Christiaan Beker has argued that the authority of Scripture can be normative only if we recognise 'the gospel of God's saving purpose' as the 'coherent framework' or pattern of Scripture.²⁵ Donald Bloesch has endeavoured to develop his whole systematic theology in close relation to the gospel, claiming that the gospel is the 'absolute norm' of theology,²⁶ and calling for a 'renewed theology' which is 'evangelical, that is, centred in the gospel'.²⁷

In spite of the fact, then, that the theological and biblical priority of the gospel is familiar enough, Peter Jensen has offered a fresh approach to theology both by seeking to apply the priority of the gospel in a more thoroughgoing way than has generally been the case, and by seeking to submit not only the content but also the method of theology to the gospel. Taking the gospel as a starting-point and norm, Jensen explores the implications of the gospel for epistemology, natural theology, religious experience, and the work of the Holy

Spirit. But the value of his evangelical methodology is seen especially in his discussion of Scripture and revelation.

The relationship between Scripture and revelation is one of the distinctive problems of modern theology. Exhibiting the kind of commitment to propositional revelation that is common among stricter evangelicals,²⁸ Jensen emphasises the cognitive and verbal nature of revelation. But in contrast to the usual evangelical approach, Jensen grounds this view of revelation in the gospel. By proclaiming the Lordship of Jesus Christ, the gospel reveals to us the loving authority of God. The fact that we come to know the authoritative Lord through the gospel implies that God exercises his loving authority through words, which in turn implies the verbal inspiration of Scripture.²⁹ The divine-human relationship thus verbally established is covenantal in nature, implying that the content of Scripture is essentially covenantal or promissory.³⁰ Thus while Jensen stresses the verbal form of revelation, his concern is not simply with propositions as such, but with a particular kind of proposition—namely, the promise. In the gospel we see that God discloses himself not merely by speaking, but by making promises. God reveals his character to us by making and keeping promises;³¹ and we know also of the Bible's trustworthiness because it is 'a book of promise and fulfilment'.³² We can expect Scripture to exhibit both the unity and the truthfulness of God's own character, since Scripture is the promissory word of the faithful God.³³ The authority of Scripture is thus grounded in the fact that God creates personal, covenantal relationships with his people through verbal promises. That God's authority is exercised through a verbally expressed covenant also implies the unique authority of Scripture over God's covenant people,³⁴ and the subordination of reason and church tradition to this written authority.³⁵ The fact, moreover, that the covenantal word of Scripture is not only divine but also fully human has implications for hermeneutics: the methods of literary criticism should be employed in the reading of Scripture, but always in subordination to the presupposition that Scripture is the trustworthy speech of God.³⁶ Thus biblical criticism, like reason and tradition, is helpful insofar as it remains a servant to the authority of the Lord of the covenant.

Starting with the gospel, then, Jensen has developed a full doctrine of the nature, authority and interpretation of Scripture that centres on the God who establishes covenant through verbal promises. In short, 'God's central

revelation of himself...is evangelical at heart, covenantal by nature and scriptural in form'.³⁷ While this doctrine of Scripture is significant in its own right, its value lies also in the fact that here Jensen models his methodology of *theologia evangelii*. He shows in practical terms how a theological locus can be developed using the gospel as a starting-point and norm. It would no doubt be of value to see how Jensen would apply the same method to the other major theological *loci*.

II. Positive Evaluation

Although several of the strengths of Jensen's theological method are already apparent from the preceding summary, I will explicitly note here some of the particularly valuable aspects and implications of a theology that starts with and builds on the gospel.

1. Liberal dogmatics commonly began by treating the psychological, religious or philosophical 'presuppositions' of faith.³⁸ This procedure necessarily subjects the entire theological task to external, and therefore alien, presuppositions instead of to the intrinsic principles that arise from the body of theology itself. In contrast, Jensen's *theologia evangelii* follows classical Protestant dogmatics (and also Karl Barth's dogmatics) in treating the prolegomenon to theology as a vital part, or even as a summary, of the proper body of theology. From the outset Jensen seeks to submit his theology to its own object and intrinsic principles.

2. A theology that starts with the gospel can only be a project of faith seeking understanding (*fides quaerens intellectum*). There is no external, objective standpoint from which we can undertake such a theology; the necessary starting-point is hearing and responding to the proclaimed word of grace. A theology that starts with the gospel is thus a theology that allows no room for any human possibility of knowing God—if any such possibility existed, then theology could begin with the theistic proofs, or the feeling of absolute dependence, or a philosophy of religion, or an analysis of human existence, or some variety of philosophical epistemology. In short, a consistent theology of the gospel is, and must be, a theology of supernatural revelation. Jensen rightly sees that this is an implication of his method when he denies the validity of natural theology. He prefers to speak of a theology of nature,³⁹ that is, of a theological interpretation of the created order based on faith, rather than of a

rational interpretation of nature that somehow points or leads to faith.⁴⁰

3. We have noted already Jensen's emphasis on the verbal and propositional nature of revelation. When the gospel is taken to be the pattern and paradigm of revelation, it is immediately apparent that God's self-disclosure takes place through a verbal and intelligible form. Evangelicals have often sought to defend a propositional view of revelation on the basis of *a priori* principles external to revelation; Gordon Clark and Carl Henry, for example, argue on the basis of a prior philosophical theory of truth that revelation must be propositional in order to be true.⁴¹ But by grounding a propositional view of revelation in the gospel and in the notion of promise, Jensen has given this view a properly theological, not merely a philosophical basis.

4. A significant feature of Jensen's method is its emphasis on the gracious character of revelation. If the gospel is the paradigmatic revelation, then, whatever else revelation might be, it is especially the gracious work of God through Jesus Christ. As Jensen remarks: 'the way to knowing God is a way of grace. It depends for its initiation and closure not upon human merit or effort, but upon God's kindness.'⁴² The close relationship between revelation and reconciliation is thus preserved when the doctrine of revelation, no less than soteriology, is centred on the gospel of grace.

5. On the basis of the gospel, Jensen is able to develop a theology of the Holy Spirit in which the Spirit's revealing and illumining work 'is focused on the provision and reception of the evangelical message of the Scriptures'.⁴³ This leads him into a helpful critique of the charismatic notion of continuing revelation: since we know God through the gospel, all 'authentic Christian experience must be founded on the gospel';⁴⁴ and the manifestations of the Spirit are essentially evangelical, for the Spirit 'manifests his presence pre-eminently in the effects of the gospel'.⁴⁵ The gospel thus serves, theologically, as the basis of unity between Word and Spirit; and practically, as the basis of an authentically Christian spirituality.

6. Jensen raises the possibility of constructing a general theory of language on the basis of the gospel.⁴⁶ Both for its contemporary relevance and for its originality, this is a particularly notable implication of the *theologia evangelii*. According to Jensen the gospel, understood as a trustworthy promise, can offer

a basis for 'the rehabilitation of language'.⁴⁷ The fact that God can 'use words that we may trust' points to 'the possibility that there is such a thing as truthful speech, which may be trusted'.⁴⁸ In his earlier work Jensen has similarly hinted at the possibility of an evangelical theory of language.⁴⁹ An attempt to explore and develop such a theory in detail may well offer a valuable contribution to the present discussion of language in general and of religious language in particular.

7. Finally, Jensen's method has significant practical implications. A theology grounded and centred on the gospel is a theology that stands in intimate connection to the church's task of proclamation.⁵⁰ Just as the gospel is a word of grace both to the church and to the world, so a theology of the gospel seeks to present the evangelical message critically and reflectively to both the Christian community and the contemporary culture: it speaks at once both a dogmatic and a missionary word. This, surely, is the task of any Christian theology. Jensen's fundamental concern is nowhere more strikingly apparent than in his lament that 'in some theologies...the reader may not know in the end what the heart of the Christian message is'.⁵¹ In sharp contrast to all such theologies, the *theologia evangelii* seeks at its starting-point and at every significant point to allow the clear word of the gospel to be heard.

III. Criticisms of Jensen's Doctrine of Revelation

Notwithstanding the methodological value of the *theologia evangelii*, Jensen's doctrine of revelation does not, I think, always engage with this method deeply and consistently enough. In the remainder of this paper I will argue that Jensen's doctrine of revelation is flawed in three important respects, and that in each case the flaw arises not from any methodological deficiency, but rather from a deficiency in Jensen's elucidation of the gospel itself.

a. The Gospel Event

That dynamic revelation and propositional revelation are mutually exclusive categories is a commonplace of modern theology. Proponents of a dynamic revelatory event on the one hand claim that God 'does not give us information by communication', but rather 'He gives us Himself in communion';⁵² while on the other hand stricter evangelicals affirm propositional revelation to the exclusion of any revelatory event: 'The only significant view of revelation is rational-verbal revelation.'⁵³ Peter Jensen seems implicitly to accept this either-or dichotomy between proposition and personal event. Although he notes

some of the advantages of the conception of revelation-as-event,⁵⁴ he argues on the basis of a prior commitment to the revelatory nature of Scripture that this approach is unsatisfactory. Jensen observes that the mighty acts of God in history include acts of speech, and that historical events are revelatory only insofar as they are interpreted by speech.⁵⁵ Further, he notes that we need not limit an event to the moment in which it initially occurs; a revelatory event 'may well continue to have an ongoing life through the words that describe it'.⁵⁶ Clearly Jensen's intention is to maintain the verbal nature of revelation, and he is uneasy about an emphasis on event that might 'compromise [God's] faithfulness in speech'.⁵⁷ The gospel through which God reveals himself to us is static precisely because it is a trustworthy verbal promise: 'it is a fixed word, a truth that stands.'⁵⁸ But while Jensen's concern to safeguard the truth and constancy of revelation is laudable, his objections to revelation-as-event are hardly decisive. What he is, in fact, disputing is only a narrow understanding of event that would limit revelation to an initial historical incident;⁵⁹ and certainly the idea of a revelatory event can be understood in a much broader sense. (As in Karl Barth's doctrine of the threefold form of the Word of God, the initial historical happening, the written record, and the present announcement all may be described as revelatory events.) Ultimately, though, behind Jensen's objections lies the assumption that one must choose between revelation-as-proposition and revelation-as-event.

The gospel itself, however, overcomes this either-or dichotomy by providing the model of a revelation that includes both a personal event and a specific propositional content. In the New Testament, the gospel consists essentially of both content and form: in content, it is the message that Jesus Christ is Lord; in form, it is the proclamation of that message.⁶⁰ Jensen himself acknowledges that the gospel is not only content, but also form: 'Whatever else the gospel is, it is verbal, an announcement by way of speech. Hence the gospel is preached, heralded or proclaimed; that is what one does with a gospel.'⁶¹ He does not, however, perceive the importance of this form of proclamation for our whole understanding of the gospel. Any adequate conception of the gospel must seek to hold both form and content together. Insofar as the gospel is a message, it always consists of a specific intelligible content; insofar it is a proclamation, it is always a concrete event that takes place in a specific existential situation. Thus we need not, as has so often been alleged, choose between objective propositional content and a subjective revelatory event—for in the gospel both

are found together in the closest possible connection. Donald Bloesch aptly expresses this connection when he speaks of revelation as ‘*an event* in which God personally confronts his people with a *message* that both enlightens and redeems’;⁶² and, in spite of his tendency to downplay the objective content of revelation, Emil Brunner rightly affirms that ‘in His Word God gives us Himself in no other way than that He says “something” to us’.⁶³ The gospel is both content and form, and therefore it is both cognitive-propositional and dynamic-existential.⁶⁴ To consider the gospel content in abstraction from the concrete event of proclamation is, I suggest, to fail to do full justice both to the New Testament portrayal of the gospel, and to our own experience of the gospel.

We should also recall the Reformers’ emphasis that in the preaching of the gospel the word (*verbum*) and voice (*vox*) of God are heard. The Reformers were not here referring simply to the cognitive content of the preaching, but also to an existential event which takes place in and through the preaching: namely, the event in which God himself personally addresses his people. The gospel, then, is proclamation in two respects: first, an evangelical word is proclaimed by human lips; and second, a divine announcement breaks through the human proclamation, so that, as Rudolf Bultmann has said, Jesus Christ himself ‘becomes present in the address’.⁶⁵ In short, the gospel may formally be described as the human and divine proclamation of a specific intelligible content. It is only because this intelligible content is proclaimed to us—first of all by human lips, and more importantly by God—that we can speak of the gospel as *revelation*, as an event in which *God* discloses himself *to us*.

In order to maintain the revelatory connection between the gospel and the God of the gospel, we must therefore give full weight to both the propositional and the existential dimensions of the gospel, that is, to both content and form. Only this dynamic gospel, this gospel which is at once a proclaimed *message* and a message *proclaimed*, and which is therefore the self-disclosure of God to us, can serve as a satisfactory starting-point for theological reflection.

b. The Church and the Gospel

Jensen’s account of the doctrine of revelation includes only a cursory treatment of the relationship between church and Scripture.⁶⁶ Against the Roman Catholic positing of tradition and magisterium alongside Scripture, Jensen

affirms the freedom and authority of Scripture over the church. Although he concedes that tradition can serve a positive role in safeguarding the right interpretation of Scripture, his view is essentially negative: 'The sharpness of the gospel must not be compromised' by allowing tradition too prominent an interpretive role.⁶⁷

I have argued that the gospel should be viewed as both content and form; and if our starting-point is the gospel thus understood, then it is difficult to avoid granting the church a more significant place in the doctrine of revelation.⁶⁸ The gospel of Jesus Christ is, as we have seen, a message that is concretely heard and proclaimed—and this means, it is a message that is heard and proclaimed in the church. Further, the gospel is visibly and tangibly proclaimed in the sacraments of the church.⁶⁹ Just as revelation encounters us in, with and under the human word of church proclamation, so also God declares and discloses himself in, with and under the creaturely signs of bread, wine and water. It is in the ecclesial community that the gospel is thus proclaimed and received through both preaching (*verbum audibile*) and sacrament (*verbum visibile*).

The church is therefore the locus and context of the gospel, and so must be the locus and context of any theology that seeks to take the gospel seriously. The proclamation of the gospel is shaped profoundly by the language and thought-forms of confessional and liturgical tradition, and of the Christian community in its present situation; and it is the Christian community which hears, believes and interprets the proclaimed gospel. We do not simply receive the evangelical revelation in an immediate encounter, but rather, as Colin Gunton points out, revelation is mediated to the individual through the life of the ecclesial community.⁷⁰ T. F. Torrance is right to confess that 'we may know God and interpret his self-revelation only in the attitude and context of worship and within the fellowship of the church'.⁷¹ The fact that the gospel is neither proclaimed nor heard apart from the Christian community means therefore that a theology of the gospel must also be an ecclesial theology. The doctrine of revelation must take seriously both the role played by confessional and liturgical tradition in mediating the evangelical revelation, and the language and thought-forms of the Christian community in its contemporary situation.

To assert that the gospel is the paradigm of revelation is, in short, to deny that revelation takes place in a vacuum. The absence of any significant ecclesial

dimension from Jensen's doctrine of revelation suggests that Jensen is thinking not of the gospel that is concretely heard and proclaimed in the church, but rather of an abstract, ideal gospel, which is *eo ipso* ultimately inaccessible and unknowable to the real, living community of faith. In contrast, only a gospel that confronts and encounters us within the concrete life of the church can be described truly as God's revelation to us.

c. The God of the Gospel

Jensen acknowledges that one of the strengths of a dynamic view of revelation is that it makes clear that 'in revelation we are necessarily involved with the triune God'.⁷² But partly due to his neglect of dynamic revelation, Jensen fails to spell out the triune nature of the God of the gospel. This is, I suggest, the most serious flaw in his doctrine of revelation. A doctrine of revelation based consistently on the gospel simply cannot fail to give an account of the God who reveals himself in the gospel, and of the trinitarian structure of his self-revelation.

The New Testament gospel is the proclamation that Jesus Christ is Lord;⁷³ it is, in other words, concerned with christology. The content of formal trinitarian dogma is in turn implied by the christological content of the gospel. Historically speaking, the doctrine of the Trinity did not develop as a metaphysical abstraction from the gospel, but rather as an elucidation of the deepest christological and soteriological content of the gospel.⁷⁴ While the gospel proclaims that Jesus is Lord, the doctrine of the Trinity 'is simply a development of the knowledge that Jesus is the Christ or the Lord'.⁷⁵ Thus Thomas Smail rightly remarks that the doctrine of the Trinity 'simply makes explicit what is implicit in the biblical gospel'.⁷⁶

The extensive emphasis on Jesus Christ in Jensen's explication of the gospel is commendable. But in spite of this emphasis, it is unfortunate that Jensen has so little to say about the basic christological content of the gospel. Jensen's brief outline of christology⁷⁷ focuses on the Old Testament significance of the statement, 'Jesus Christ is Lord', but fails to speak clearly and explicitly of the deity of Jesus Christ, that is, of the fact that the promised Messiah reveals God to us precisely because he is himself the God who is revealed. The deity of Jesus Christ is of the very essence of the New Testament gospel, for in Jesus Christ it is God himself and not some other who has come among us and disclosed himself

to us.⁷⁸ And we can barely mention his deity before being compelled to speak of the unity (i.e., one *ousia*) and differentiation (i.e., distinct *hypostaseis*) in Christ's relationship to his Father. In a single christological breath we are thus led from the Christ of the gospel to the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. The entire framework of this christological–trinitarian movement is soteriological—in Jesus Christ, God has become man for us and for our salvation. In this soteriological and trinitarian statement, we are not dealing with something peripheral to the gospel, but with the heart and substance of the gospel itself.

In the gospel of Jesus Christ, therefore, we have to do with the self-revelation of God: God is the subject who discloses himself to us, and God is the object of this self-disclosure. Further, since God is known only by God,⁷⁹ the communication of the divine self-disclosure to us must also be effected by God. Starting with the simple proclamation of the Lordship of Jesus Christ, we thus arrive at Karl Barth's statement of the trinitarian structure of revelation: '*God reveals Himself. He reveals Himself through Himself. He reveals Himself*'; that is to say, in both unity and differentiation God is 'the Revealer, the revelation and the revealedness'.⁸¹ Brunner has similarly noted that the 'deepest content of the doctrine of the Trinity' is the identity of the subject, object and predicate of revelation.⁸² Far from being a speculative theological abstraction, this trinitarian structure of revelation emphasises a certainty which is 'absolutely essential for the Christian faith',⁸³ and which lies at the very heart of the gospel—namely, the certainty that God really is in himself who he is toward us in Jesus Christ our Lord. Only on the grounds of this certainty can we confess with confidence that in the gospel we have to do with the revelation of God. For this reason, T. F. Torrance can justly say that belief in God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit belongs 'to the very heart of the Gospel of salvation'.⁸⁴

In short, the gospel of Jesus Christ leads us to recognise the trinitarian nature of the God of the gospel, and the trinitarian structure of his self-revelation. This does not, of course, mean that structurally the entire doctrine of God should be subsumed under the doctrine of revelation. It does mean, however, that revelation unavoidably ceases to be the revelation *of God* the moment it is abstracted from the christological–trinitarian content of the gospel. In attempting to ground a doctrine of revelation on the gospel without speaking of the triune God who is the deepest reality of which the gospel speaks, Jensen is seeking to describe the revelation of God without speaking explicitly enough of

the God of revelation. In failing to make clear the essential unity between God and his revelation, Jensen leaves us uncertain whether the revelation of God in the gospel is indeed a revelation of who God really is in his own inner being, and therefore whether it really is God himself whom we meet in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Thus at this decisive point, it seems, Jensen's theology of the gospel fails both to explicate the deepest content of the gospel itself, and to establish the fact that the gospel truly is the gracious self-disclosure of God to us.

Conclusion

By starting and continuing with the gospel, Peter Jensen has offered a fresh and promising approach to the contemporary theological task. Jensen places great emphasis on the evangelical content of theology, and seeks to develop a method that is faithful to that content. In so doing, Jensen has called Christian theology back to a commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It seems to me, however, that Jensen's doctrine of revelation unfortunately suffers at certain crucial points, not from any methodological deficiency as such, but rather from a failure to engage with this evangelical method fully and consistently, and from an insufficient elucidation of the gospel itself. And as Jensen himself insists '[w]e cannot begin with the gospel and then proceed in some other direction, or build inconsistently on it'.⁸⁵ I have thus attempted to show that his doctrine of revelation leaves room for considerable improvement and development. In particular, by taking up Jensen's own method and by seeking above all to remain faithful to the gospel, we are led to view revelation as a concrete kerygmatic event, to give due regard to the ecclesial dimension of revelation, and to emphasise the trinitarian structure of revelation and the trinitarian nature of the God who reveals himself and is revealed in the gospel.

Notwithstanding these criticisms, it is impossible to overstate the importance of Jensen's central conviction—that God has revealed himself definitively in the gracious gospel of Jesus Christ our Lord. In this gospel, the promise of God is addressed to us and to all the world. Through this gospel, we have heard the very Word of God. This gospel is the lifeblood of the Christian faith, the article by which the church stands or falls. It must therefore also be the fundamental and compelling concern of Christian theology.

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ENDNOTES

1. P. F. Jensen, *The Revelation of God* (Leicester: IVP, 2002). Dr. Jensen is Archbishop of the Diocese of Sydney, Australia, and former principal of Moore Theological College, Sydney.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 93.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 85.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 85-87.
7. P. F. Jensen, *At the Heart of the Universe* (Homebush West, NSW: Lancer, 1991). Although the focus on eschatology has been with modern theology since the studies of Weiss and Schweitzer, Jensen's eschatological theology seems especially influenced by Jürgen Moltmann. Cf. J. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, trans. J. W. Leitch (London: SCM, 1967), p. 16: 'From first to last, and not merely in the epilogue, Christianity is eschatology, is hope.... The eschatological is not one element of Christianity, but it is the medium of Christian faith as such, the key in which everything in it is set, the glow that suffuses everything here in the dawn of an expected new day.' In *The Revelation of God*, the continuing influence of Moltmann is perhaps evident in Jensen's emphasis on revelation as promise.
8. Jensen, *Heart of the Universe*, p. 26.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 115.
10. Cf. Jensen, *Revelation of God*, pp. 49-53, 60, 75.
11. Jensen, *Heart of the Universe*, p. xi.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
13. The same fundamental principle forms the basis of Jensen's other theological concerns. E.g., see P. F. Jensen, 'Preaching the Whole Bible: Preaching and Biblical Theology,' in *When God's Voice is Heard: Essays on Preaching Presented to Dick Lucas*, ed. C. Green and D. Jackman (Leicester: IVP, 1995), p. 74, where he calls for a gospel-centred biblical theology that allows us 'so [to] preach Christ that every part of the Bible contributes its unique riches to his gospel'; and *idem*, 'Prayer in Reformed Perspective,' *Reformed Theological Review* 44:3 (1985):70, where he argues that a theology of prayer should 'be shaped by the concerns of the Gospel'.
14. O. Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics*, trans. D. L. Guder, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981-83), 2:315.
15. Cf. the famous remark of E. Billing, *Our Calling*, trans. C. Bergendoff (Rock Island, IL: Augustana, 1950), p. 7: 'never believe that you have a correct understanding of

a thought of Luther until you have succeeded in reducing it to a simple corollary of the forgiveness of sins.'

16. Cf. E. Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, trans. P. F. Koehnke and H.J. A. Bouman (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1961), pp. 5-11; and the modern Lutheran account in C. E. Braaten and R. W. Jenson, eds., *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), pp. 61-78.
17. Cf. R. A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), pp. 211-30.
18. In his brilliant study, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. H. R. Boer (London: Paternoster, 1956), G. C. Berkouwer argues that the gospel of the sovereign grace of God in Jesus Christ is central to Barth's theology: 'Throughout the whole of Barth's dogmatics we hear at every significant point and in every polemic the words of the gospel....These emphases determine the centre of his theology with pronounced and ever increasing clarity. We hear the melody of grace, of fearlessness and of victory, even in the outermost reaches of his dogmatic effort' (p. 196).
19. K. Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, trans. G. Foley (London: Collins, 1963), pp. 9-18.
20. K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956-77), 2/2, p. 510.
21. P. T. Forsyth, *The Gospel and Authority* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1971), p. 17.
22. C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1936), p. 127.
23. E. Käsemann, 'Is the Gospel Objective?' in *Essays on New Testament Themes*, trans. W. J. Montague (London: SCM, 1964), p. 57.
24. R. Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), pp. 92-111.
25. J. C. Beker, 'The Authority of Scripture: Normative or Incidental?' *Theology Today* 49:3 (1992): 382.
26. D. G. Bloesch, *A Theology of Word and Spirit: Authority and Method in Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1992), pp. 195-99.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 124.
28. I have in mind here the view of revelation and Scripture that stands in the tradition of L. Gaussen, *Theopneustia: The Plenary Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures* (London, 1841); and B. B. Warfield, *Revelation and Inspiration* (London: Oxford University Press, 1927). The *magnum opus* of this tradition is C. F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 6 vols. (Wheaton: Word, 1976-83).

29. Jensen, *Revelation of God*, pp. 87-90, 148-53; cf. *idem*, *Heart of the Universe*, p. 79.
30. *Ibid.*, pp. 74-83, 153-56. Protestant theology has traditionally regarded Scripture as comprising both gospel (promise) and law (command). Although Jensen might have dealt more explicitly with this problem, it seems that for him the legal dimension of Scripture is ultimately reducible to the promissory dimension, so that law is an aspect of—and is therefore not fundamentally distinct from—gospel.
31. *Ibid.*, pp. 69-72.
32. *Ibid.*, pp. 189, 81-83.
33. *Ibid.*, pp. 179-204.
34. *Ibid.*, pp. 161-66.
35. *Ibid.*, pp. 166-78.
36. *Ibid.*, pp. 205-29.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 94.
38. See for example F. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1928), §1, where Schleiermacher argues that his introduction to dogmatics cannot itself be regarded as dogmatic.
39. Jensen, *Revelation of God*, pp. 116-17. This kind of approach to natural theology is developed in T. F. Torrance, *The Ground and Grammar of Theology* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1980); and A. E. McGrath, *A Scientific Theology*, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001).
40. In spite of his main argument against natural theology in ch. 5, Jensen seems to equivocate at important points. He speaks, for instance, of an innate knowledge of God that provides a point of contact between fallen humanity and the gospel (p. 42), and he even suggests that the gospel makes its appeal '[o]n the basis of' this innate knowledge (p. 42). Elsewhere, he suggests that this innate knowledge 'may mean only [!] that we have a disposition to believe in God' (p. 113). But if any natural precondition enables or disposes us to be recipients of revelation, then, as liberal theology so clearly perceived, this precondition, and not revelation itself, is logically the proper starting-point for theology.
41. Cf. G. H. Clark, *God's Hammer: The Bible and Its Critics* (Jefferson: Trinity Foundation, 1987), p. 178; and Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 3:429-30.
42. Jensen, *Revelation of God*, p. 37.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 257.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 261.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 270.
46. In this movement from the actuality of verbal revelation to a general theory of language, Jensen wisely avoids the temptation to impose on revelation any

- preconceived philosophical theory of language.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 229.
 48. *Ibid.*; cf. p. 218: 'the language of promises at least gives us some hope (and experience) that words may attain a very strong "purchase" on reality.'
 49. Jensen, *Heart of the Universe*, pp. 74, 83-84; cf. *idem*, 'Prayer in Reformed Perspective,' p. 70.
 50. On this connection, cf. G. Ebeling, *Theology and Proclamation: A Discussion with Rudolf Bultmann*, trans. J. Riches (London: Collins, 1966), p. 20: 'Theology without proclamation is empty, proclamation without theology is blind.'
 51. Jensen, *Revelation of God*, p. 33; cf. *idem*, 'An Agenda for Australian Evangelical Theology,' *Reformed Theological Review* 42:1 (1983): 4.
 52. J. Baillie, *The Idea of Revelation in Recent Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956), p. 29.
 53. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 3:430.
 54. Jensen, *Revelation of God*, pp. 20-21.
 55. *Ibid.*, p. 25. Here Jensen implicitly disavows Wolfhart Pannenberg's view of the inherent meaning of historical events.
 56. *Ibid.*
 57. *Ibid.*
 58. *Ibid.*, pp. 88-9. At this point the eschatological nature of promise might have led Jensen toward a more dynamic view of revelation. Cf. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, p. 118: 'the promises are not descriptive words for existing reality, but dynamic words about acts of faithfulness to be awaited from God.'
 59. It should be noted that Jensen's objections focus only on a historicist, rather than an existential, view of dynamic revelation. But for several theologians (notably Martin Kähler and Rudolf Bultmann) the emphasis falls not on a past moment in objective, observable history (*Historie*), but on the existential, history-making moment (*Geschichte*) in which revelation takes place in the present. Any comprehensive criticism of revelation-as-event should therefore take into account both *historisch* and *geschichtlich* events.
 60. Cf. the articles on *euaggelion* and *kerygma* in G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. G. W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-76), 2:707-37, 3:683-718.
 61. Jensen, *Revelation of God*, p. 35.
 62. D. G. Bloesch, *God the Almighty: Power, Wisdom, Holiness, Love* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1995), p. 78; emphases added.
 63. E. Brunner, *The Divine-Human Encounter*, trans. A. W. Loos (London: SCM,

- 1944), p. 64. Cf. also the balanced discussion of H. Berkhof, *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of the Faith*, trans. S. Woudstra (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), pp. 71-74.
64. It is helpful in this connection to recall that the 'Word of God' in John's Gospel denotes both the act of divine disclosure and the intelligible content of what is disclosed. Only by holding together both aspects can we appreciate the fact that, as the Word of God, Jesus Christ is the one who both discloses God to us and is himself the content of the disclosure. Cf. C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), pp. 265-68.
65. R. Bultmann, *Faith and Understanding*, vol. 1, trans. L. P. Smith (London: SCM, 1969), p. 241. Cf. Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics*, 2:500: proclamation 'never can be characterised as the mere communication of information. It is essentially dependent on the presence of the "present Christ" which is testified to although not tangible....In the proclaimed Word, Jesus Christ always and unavoidably steps into our way.'
66. Jensen, *Revelation of God*, pp. 166-71.
67. *Ibid.*, p. 171.
68. For an elaborate constructive discussion of the role of ecclesial tradition in Protestant theology, see Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 1/2, pp. 585-660; and cf. the summary in *idem*, *Credo: A Presentation of the Chief Problems of Dogmatics with Reference to the Apostles' Creed*, trans. J. S. McNab (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1936), pp. 179-83.
69. Cf. Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 66: 'The sacraments are...appointed of God for this end, that by our use of them he might more fully declare and seal to us the promise of the gospel.'
70. C. E. Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), pp. 83-104.
71. T. F. Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology: The Realism of Christian Revelation* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1982), pp. 119-20. Cf. Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit*, p. 189: 'We receive revelation in the context of the community of faith. We perceive the truth of the gospel through the eyes of the church....The ecclesial tradition constitutes the matrix in which revelation comes to us and is interpreted by us.'
72. Jensen, *Revelation of God*, p. 24.
73. Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.
74. Cf. T. F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), pp. 32-72.

75. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 1/1, p. 334.
76. T. A. Smail, *The Forgotten Father* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1980), p. 105.
77. Jensen, *Revelation of God*, pp. 54-8.
78. It must of course be added that the real humanity of Jesus is also of the essence of the gospel, for in him God has really come *among us* and disclosed himself *to us*. Although both sides of this vital christological emphasis are lacking in *The Revelation of God*, Jensen rightly remarks in his earlier work that Jesus Christ 'is God's great Word to us' only because he is both God and man (*Heart of the Universe*, p. 73).
79. Jensen acknowledges that God is known only by God. See Jensen, *Revelation of God*, pp. 37-8; and *idem*, 'Using Scripture,' *The Bible and Women's Ministry*, ed. A. Nichols (Canberra: Acorn Press, 1990), p. 1.
80. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 1/1, p. 296.
81. *Ibid.*, p. 299.
82. E. Brunner, *Revelation and Reason: The Christian Doctrine of Faith and Knowledge*, trans. O. Wyon (London: SCM, 1947), p. 47.
83. Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics*, 1:361.
84. T. F. Torrance, *Trinitarian Perspectives: Toward Doctrinal Agreement* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), p. 128.
85. Jensen, *Revelation of God*, p. 32.