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A table of contents for *Irish Biblical Studies* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ibs-01.php

John Thompson

R. Finlay Holmes

John Thompson has had a distinguished career. He served the Presbyterian Church in Ireland both in pastoral ministry and as Professor in the Chair of Systematic Theology in Union Theological College. He is an acknowledged expert on Karl Barth and his personal status in the Church was recognised in his election to the position of Moderator. He is eighty years old this year.

John Thompson is a big man who has made a big contribution to the Irish Presbyterian Church and to the Christian cause in Ireland and beyond. Like many Irish Presbyterian ministers of earlier generations his roots are in the soil of Ulster. His father, James Thompson, was a North Antrim farmer and the family were members of Toberkeigh Presbyterian church. James Thompson was a member of the congregational committee and John's mother, Margaret, was an enthusiastic church member and a woman of deep personal faith. She was a major spiritual influence in John's life and he was aware from an early age that she hoped that he would be a minister some day. No other career ever attracted him and his success at his local primary school suggested that he had the academic ability to achieve his ambition.

John won a scholarship to the grammar school in Ballycastle - Ballycastle High School - and he pays tribute to the excellent teaching he enjoyed there, as in his primary school. Among his teachers was the well-known Church of Ireland and Ballycastle historian, Hugh Alexander Boyd, whose classes he particularly enjoyed. History, English language literature, French and Latin were his favourite subjects, rather than mathematics and science. Hockey was the school's winter game and John learned to love a game he was to play with considerable success for many years.

Ballycastle High School was attended by both Protestants and Roman Catholics, giving the pupil from Toberkeigh an early

experience of ecumenism which was uncommon in the divided society of Northern Ireland.

A scholarship to Magee University College in Londonderry, founded by Presbyterians in the nineteenth century to provide higher education in Arts and Divinity, indicated John's growing academic competence and his decision to go to Magee signalled his more mature sense of call to the ministry. He had been influenced to some extent by the dynamic young minister of the Toberkeigh congregation, the Rev. J.A McFarland. During his ministry in Toberkeigh five young men - women were not yet accepted as ordinands in the Irish Presbyterian Church - became ministers, including John Thompson.

John enjoyed a successful academic career at Magee, winning a scholarship in each of his four years. His favourite subject was Hebrew and the future theologian confesses that he had little interest in Philosophy in spite of the excellent teaching of "Tommy Logic", T. H. Robinson, the professor of Philosophy. R. L. Marshall, professor of History and English at Magee, was then a powerful influence in the college and John, like most Magee students, enjoyed his stimulating English lectures, while not always approving of his caustic tongue and polemics against people and things he disapproved of, John's outlook was naturally irenic and he had little enthusiasm for the *odium theologicum*.

Magee students completed their Arts studies in Trinity College, Dublin, where they took their degree examinations. John gained a Respondency in his B.A. degree, which represented a First class in the Trinity Arts degree.

Irish Presbyterian theological students have always been attracted by the Divinity Faculties of the Scottish universities with their great traditions of Presbyterian theological scholarship. After graduation in Arts, John went to New College, Edinburgh, where he sat at the feet of such luminaries as John Baillie and G. T. Thomson in theology, William Manson in New Testament, Hugh Watt and J. H.S. Burleigh in church history. John continued his interest in Hebrew by specialising in Old Testament in his B.D. degree, which he completed after his return to Belfast, under the supervision of

Professor Ernest Davey. While in Edinburgh he played hockey for the university and also played for the Scottish Universities against the Irish Universities in Dublin!

His obligatory year in the Presbyterian College, Belfast, popularly known as Assembly's College, introduced him to J. L. M. Haire, the young professor of theology, who encouraged his growing interest in theology, leading to post-graduate studies in Basle and Zurich under such theological giants as Karl Barth, Oscar Cullmann, Walter Eichrodt and Emil Brunner. Thus began his lifelong interest in the theology of Karl Barth, reflected in the contributions to this number of *Irish Biblical Studies*.

One of the most respected and influential Irish Presbyterian ministers of those days was the scholarly Austin Fulton, former missionary in China and minister of the large St Enoch's congregation in Belfast. John became his assistant for three years and Austin rejoiced to have an assistant with whom he could have serious theological discussions. In those days assistant ministers could not afford to run motor-cars and Dr Fulton would give John a lift to his digs and then talk theology in the car for two or three hours!

A member of St Enoch's at that time, now living in Helen's Bay, remembers clearly the impact the tall scholarly assistant minister made in the congregation and in particular his contribution to a series of addresses on Protestantism and Roman Catholicism which drew large congregations, including many Roman Catholics, and was so successful that it was repeated in another congregation.

The time had come for John to seek a congregation of his own. There were several congregations interested in the St Enoch's assistant but the first to offer a call was the Sandymount congregation in Dublin, opening up a new world of experience for the young minister from North Antrim. One thing he could continue to do, was to play hockey. In Belfast he had played for the Cliftonville club; in Dublin he played for the Y.M.C.A.

The World Council of Churches was inaugurated at Amsterdam in 1948 and John became involved in ecumenical activity in Dublin.

As honorary secretary of the United Council of Churches in Dublin, he was joint organiser with Kathleen Huggins of the Church of Ireland of the 'Irish Evanston', a conference of Irish Protestant Churches in 1956, to study the Evanston Report of the World Council of Churches and to promote Christian unity. There was, of course, no question of the participation of the Roman Catholic Church in such discussions before Vatican 2 and with John Charles McQuade as Archbishop of Dublin. John Thompson recalls that he had little or no contact with Roman Catholic clergy during his nine years in Dublin, 1952 –1961. He became a member of the General Assembly's Inter-Church Relations Board and of the British Council of Churches and in 1956 he was appointed Convenor of the Irish Presbyterian Jewish Mission which involved visits to the Mission's Jerusalem Church in Hamburg, rebuilt after destruction in World War 2 and to Israel and the Middle East. On a visit to Beirut in 1964 he lectured to the staff and students in the Near East School of Theology where Principal Cecil McCullough taught for several years.

John had been developing steadily as a theologian. While an assistant minister in Belfast, he had been involved with Austin Fulton and others in starting an Irish Presbyterian theological journal entitled *Biblical Theology*, published three times a year. His contributions marked him as a clear and logical thinker who had something to offer on contemporary theological questions. His first article, 'Theological Existence Today', appeared in the second issue of the journal, in September 1950, and he contributed regularly over the twenty -eight years of the journal's life, becoming joint-editor in 1963.

Theological reading, reflection and writing, ministry in his Sandymount congregation, ecumenical activity and hockey-playing left little time for socialising but before he left Dublin in 1961 to become minister of the Fortwilliam Park congregation he had met a bonny Yorkshire lass, Ann Norminton, who had relatives in Dublin. A large gap in John's life had now been filled as he undertook the heavy responsibilities of the Fortwilliam Park congregation in north Belfast, where he earned a deserved reputation as a preacher and pastor.

In spite of the work of a large city congregation and the impact, after 1969, of the 'Troubles', and growing family responsibilities, with the births of Catherine, Michael and Jonathan, John continued his theological studies. In 1966 he was the joint author, with Professor Haire, of a commentary and handbook on the Shorter Catechism. In 1970 -71 he deputised in the Presbyterian College for Professor Haire who was Moderator of the General Assembly and again in 1971-72 and 1972-73 when the Professor was away.

In 1972 he returned to the university of Tübingen to bring himself up to date with developments in German theology and attended lectures by Hans Kung, Jurgen Moltmann and Eberhard Jungel. He was awarded a Ph.D in 1974 by Queen's University, Belfast, for a thesis entitled 'Christological Perspectives in the Theology of Karl Barth'. The external examiner, Professor J.K.S. Reid of Aberdeen University, commented that he wished that he himself had read it before lecturing on Christology.

John was now recognised as an interpreter and expositor of the theology of Karl Barth and it was no surprise when he was chosen by the General Assembly to succeed J.L.M. Haire on his retirement from the chair of Systematic Theology in The Presbyterian College, Belfast, in 1976. He joined the College Faculty at an interesting time in its history. In 1971, when Magee University College was incorporated in the New University of Ulster, the General Assembly moved Magee Theological College to Belfast to work in partnership with the Presbyterian College and in 1978 this was given legal and institutional recognition when the two colleges were officially united as Union Theological College. John wrote the Union Theological College hymn for the Service of Thanksgiving and Dedication to celebrate the union in October 1978, one verse of which included the mottoes of both colleges, *Fac et Spera*, 'Work and Hope' (Magee), and *Veritatem Eme et Noli Vendere*, 'Buy the truth and sell it not' (Presbyterian College):

We 'work and hope' for union of all who enter here
In teaching and in learning, in awe and holy fear.
We pray for grace and blessing to be our constant lot
As all with one endeavour 'buy truth and sell it not'.

Also in 1978 John's first book, *Christ in Perspective in the Theology of Karl Barth*, was published, the first of a continual stream of publications, books and major articles, from his pen, establishing him as a leading Barthian theologian.

John quickly proved himself a valuable member of Faculty, serving in a number of Faculty offices as Librarian and Warden of the students' residence and later, during Professor Reid's illness, he undertook some of the work of the Practical Theology Department. His wise and careful judgements were much valued by his colleagues and his clear, positive theological teaching much appreciated by his students who responded to the interest he showed in them. He supervised a growing number of post-graduate students for MTh and Ph.D degrees and served as an external examiner for higher degrees in other universities. He was to serve for twenty-five as a member of the Standing Committee of Convocation and of the Senate of Queen's University. His publications were multiplying and he was invited to lecture at the Summer School of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and also in Maynooth. These lectures were later published as *The Holy Spirit in the Theology of Karl Barth*. His success was overshadowed, however, by the fact that Ann had fallen victim to cancer from which, after a long and brave struggle, during which she was an example and inspiration to us all, she died.

In 1986, a little over a year after Ann's death, John was called to the Moderatorship of the General Assembly and had to face the heavy responsibilities of leadership in the Church, at a time of great political tension in Northern Ireland over the controversial Anglo-Irish Agreement and without Ann's companionship and support although Catherine, now a nurse, was able to be with him occasionally. His theme for his Moderatorial year was 'A Church with a Vision', which had three aspects: the Church as a faithful worshipping community, the Church as a missionary agency, sent into the world with the gospel, and the Church as a prophetic voice, calling for all to let the gospel change social and political attitudes.

The Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 between the British Irish governments had been angrily rejected by the majority of Northern Ireland's Protestants and Unionists who were refusing to negotiate with the British government unless the Agreement and its

institutions were suspended. While making clear his own reservations about the Agreement - one major objection of the Unionists was that they had not been consulted while Nationalists had - John took a firm stand against their totally negative attitude, urging dialogue and negotiation rather than confrontation and conflict; in Churchill's famous words, 'to jaw-jaw is better than to war-war'. This brought him bitter criticism from the Unionist leaders but he continued to urge the necessity of dialogue. In both political and ecclesiastical conflict, it was necessary to say 'yes' more than 'no' to each other as God does to us. An article he wrote entitled 'Changing times and a time to change' evoked strong reactions, positive and negative, and a considerable correspondence, public and private.

John also made clear his sympathy with ecumenism. This had become a very divisive issue in the Irish Presbyterian Church which had withdrawn from the World Council of Churches in 1980. As we have seen, John had been involved in ecumenical dialogue for many years, participating in the Ballymascanlon talks with Roman Catholics, now called the Irish Inter-Church Meeting, since their inception in 1973. Some Presbyterians opposed any dialogue with Roman Catholics, believing that the Roman Catholic Church was not a Christian Church, but John took the traditional Reformed position that, although urgently in need of reform, like all churches, it was a Christian Church. In 1987 he travelled to Duisburg in Germany with Cardinal O'Fiaich to attend an inter-church meeting. Later in the same year he was a member of a group of Anglicans, Methodists, Presbyterians and Roman Catholics who visited the Soviet Union as guests of the Orthodox Church.

John retired from the chair of theology in Union Theological College in 1994. Until and after his retirement, he continued to make significant contributions to theology and the Church's life and witness. In a lecture delivered at the Annual General Meeting of the Irish Theological Association in 1991 and subsequently published, he examined the role of the churches in the Northern Ireland situation. Were they part of the problem or part of the solution? The consequences of the divisions of the churches had made them part of the problem but they could become part of the solution if they fulfilled their calling as the conscience of society,

condemning evil and our worship of false gods, pointing to the better way of reconciliation, social justice and political righteousness, the way of the Lord for us to-day.

In his Robert Allen Memorial lecture of May, 2000, 'If Winter's here, Can Spring be far Behind? Has the Ecumenical Movement a future?' published by the Presbyterian Historical Society, he traced the history of the Ecumenical Movement and Irish Presbyterian attitudes to it, setting out his convictions about the importance of realising the unity of the Church in our one Lord and Saviour and how this might be achieved. As a practical contribution to ecumenical understanding, he has lectured annually since his retirement on Presbyterian doctrine and practice in the Irish School of Ecumenics in Dublin.

Catherine, Michael and Jonathan have all married and John is a proud grandfather. In retirement he has found companionship and new horizons in his marriage to Ingrid Allen, daughter of Robert Allen, the Presbyterian historian in whose memory the Allen Memorial lecture, which John delivered in 2000, was founded. Ingrid is a distinguished neurologist who has recently been made a Dame of the British Empire in recognition of her services to medicine and medical research, I think we can safely say that John is in good hands!

At a conference in Cambridge some years ago addressed by the Regius Professor of Divinity, I was amused to overhear a lady remark that it was refreshing to hear an academic theologian who believed in God. John's personal faith and discipleship have always been at the heart of his theology. Like the great Anselm and Karl Barth himself, his theologizing has always been Faith seeking Understanding, *Fides quaerens Intellectum*. It has been his achievement to bring greater understanding of the Christian faith to generations of students and others who have heard him preach or lecture or who have read his writings. He still leads a Bible study group in the McCracken Memorial congregation of which he is a member.

May he long continue to advance our understanding and practice of the Christian faith.

R Finlay Holmes