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## EDITORIAL

Late in May, when I learned the sad news of John Webster's unexpected death, I had just embarked on reading his Holy Scripture.<sup>1</sup> 'News', as N.T. Wright—John's colleague in St Andrews—puts it, 'is something that happens, as a result of which the world is a different place'. Just so. At that point last May, I already had a short-list of items I hoped to chat with John about, when the next opportunity came—but there is no longer opportunity in this life.

My slow read through that book recently concluded, enriched by exploration of further products of John's pen. He finishes his 'dogmatic sketch' in Holy Scripture with reflections on 'Scripture, theology, and the theological school', not a destination I would have anticipated at the start of the journey. The unexpected destination has an unlikely inspiration: the inaugural address of the young Zacharius Ursinus, delivered in 1558 as he took up a post at the Elisabeth-Schule, Breslau. In Webster's hands, it leads to a rich and challenging reflection on the nature of theological education, especially in relation to Scripture, a theme that runs through a number of John's writings, from his own Oxford inaugural lecture, via his autobiographical reflections in a contribution to a collection on *Shaping a Theological Mind*, to his 2011 article on 'Curiosity'.<sup>2</sup> A consistent picture emerges of a unified enterprise carried out in community, deepening knowledge of and response to the true and triune God, by hearing and explicating Scripture. Webster sums it up this way (pp. 115–6): 'There is simply the task of reading Holy Scripture, learning and teaching Scripture in such a way that godliness is promoted and the church more truthfully established as the kingdom of Jesus. . . . Theology is thus more a process of moral and spiritual training and an exercise in the promotion of the common life than it is a scholarly discipline.'

This is not, however, the mode in which theological education is typically framed. Webster describes the common pattern which 'arranges theology by a four-fold division into biblical, historical, systematic-doctrinal and practical theology sub-disciplines' (p. 120). The fragmentation thus incurred is exacerbated by the inclination of these 'sub-disciplines' to take

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<sup>1</sup> John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Current Issues in Theology, 1; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); page numbers cited in what follows refer to this work, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup> *Theological Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); 'Discovering Dogmatics', in *Shaping a Theological Mind: Theological Context and Methodology*, ed. by D. C. Marks (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), pp. 129–36; 'Curiosity', in *Theology and Human Flourishing: Essays in Honour of Timothy J. Gorringer*, ed. by M. Highton, J. Law, and C. Rowland (Eugene: Cascade, 2011), pp. 212–23.

their lead from 'cognate non-theological disciplines in the academy'. His parade example is one I recognize well: 'Thus, for example, theological study of the Old Testament comes to enjoy a much closer relation to Near Eastern studies than it does to dogmatics' (p. 122). The 'non-theological discipline' provides the tools, rationale, and acceptable forms of question and argument, so that the objects of study lie under the authority of the analyses, diagnoses, and attempts at improvement (or repair) of the specialist.

For Webster, such a situation in theological education is simply incommensurate with the nature of theology. Rather than standing over its object, theology defers to it (p. 114), since it knows both that it is subject to God's judgement, and that it bears the signs of God's gift of life.

Webster does not make an explicit link to this discussion in his later article on 'Curiosity'; it would be fascinating to know something more about the gestation of the latter. The two are mutually informing. For me—having furnished any number of eager university applicants enquiring about how to frame their 'personal statements' with the advice to demonstrate a healthy and informed 'curiosity' about their intended subject of study—it came as something of a shock to see 'curiosity' treated as a vice, in contrast to the virtue of 'studiousness'. Webster's exposition draws largely on Augustine and Aquinas to display curiosity as a creaturely appetite which has much to do with pride, and too much resemblance to greed. Studiousness, on the other hand, is 'the activity of the well-ordered intellect in coming-to-know', the creaturely devotion to understanding 'fitting objects', and directed to right ends. A turn to the Long Psalm captures something of theological studiousness:

In theology, the affections, will and intellect are 'fixed' on the 'ways' of God (Ps 119:15), 'delighting in' and 'cleaving to' the divine testimonies (Ps 119:24), turned from 'vanities' (Ps 119:37) in order to 'meditate' on the divine law (Ps 119:48), eager to be taught knowledge (Ps 119:66). Such is the studious theological intellect sanctified and schooled by divine grace.<sup>3</sup>

So, then, 'theological coming-to-know does not terminate in the acquisition and storing of knowledge but in its exercise, in adoration of God and edification of others' ('Curiosity', p. 222). Or, as Ursinus put it,

we serve too far from our scope or marke, unlesse we be settled in this purpose, that we ought to be busily employed in these Ant-hills and Bee-hives of Christ, not only to be more skilled in learning, but also more adorned with

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<sup>3</sup> 'Curiosity', p. 221.

a good and holy conversation, that we may be more acceptable to God and men.<sup>4</sup>

It should be readily apparent that such attitudes and activities are simply alien, or at best liminal, to the culture of the modern institutional home for much of what passes for theological education today—in Scotland, at least, but further afield also. Theological education as I know it typically serves to prepare students for participation in the discourse of the scholarly disciplines which provide the structural homes for our courses, conferences, and research grants and ‘outputs’. What it is not interested in is discipleship or godliness (cf. Titus 1:1), or any sort of unified framework fitted to understanding the gospel or for carrying out ministry in the church—although still for quite a few in schools of ‘divinity’, that destination is what has called them into study. And I don’t think this is true only of ‘non-confessional’ institutions.

The two modes of preparation are not necessarily incompatible. It is a sign of grace that sometimes, even in our fragmented and professionalized modes of learning, one can believe the psalmist’s prayer is answered: ‘Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth; unite my heart to fear your name’ (Ps. 86:11). It is, sadly, equally true that the opposite can be the case: that a critical handling of holy things sullies them, and beguiles a faith that is deluded, derided, and abandoned (cf. Col. 2:1–10). I would not like to guess what the relative frequency of those two experiences might be. But even if these modes somehow co-exist, it remains the case that Webster’s frankly ‘utopian’ vision for theological education has no place in the modern university, and finds few counterparts even among theological colleges where the disciplinary model in secular settings finds a consistent echo. Perhaps with the upsurge in church-based ‘internships’ there will be new opportunities of realizing an integration of church and Word, such as Webster discerned in Ursinus’s oration.

For what must the theologian be? Holy, teachable, repentant, attentive to the confession of the Church, resistant to the temptation to dissipate mind and spirit by attending to sources of fascination other than those held out by the Gospel. In short: the operation of theological reason is an exercise in mortification. But mortification is only possible and fruitful if it is generated by the the vivifying power of the Spirit of Christ in which the Gospel is announced and its converting power made actual. And it is for this reason that theology must not only begin with but also be accompanied at every moment by prayer for the coming of the Spirit, in whose hands alone lie our minds and speeches.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> As cited by Webster, *Holy Scripture*, p. 116.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Discovering Dogmatics’, p. 136.

## SCOTTISH BULLETIN OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

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