

**The Insanity of Systematic Theology:
A Review of Michael Bird's *Evangelical Theology***

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A student once asked if I would ever write my own one-volume systematic theology. Unfortunately I was eating, so I nearly killed myself when the shock of such an absurd proposal caused me to inhale a barely chewed chunk of burrito. There is just too much to say, too many complex issues to grasp, too many debates to resolve. Even if you manage to address everything you want, your book must still face an array of theological experts, each frustrated that you didn't say more or present with more nuance the issues on which they are most concerned. Give me the thirteen volumes of Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, the entirety of Augustine's theological corpus, or even the paltry 2-3 volumes allocated to many modern theologians. But one? What sane person would accept such a challenge?

I can't comment on Michael Bird's sanity, though I'd be willing to offer a few speculations after the session. But I can say that, unlike me, he was willing to take up the challenge, and has created a unique resource: a systematic theology that demonstrates an exemplary commitment to clear and engaging communication, while also striving to ground itself in the gospel, biblical theology, and the real needs of everyday Christians. For that we should all be grateful.

I could comment at length on the many things that Bird's *Evangelical Theology* does well.¹ Following the long-standing tradition of focusing a review on more constructive and critical observations, however, I will guide my reflections in that direction. To that end, we will consider two major issues. First, we will look at Bird's claim to have offered a systematic theology that is more thoroughly determined by the gospel than earlier evangelical efforts. Second, we will assess the content of *ET* by looking specifically at his doctrine of humanity as a case study for assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the volume as a whole.

¹ Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), hereafter referred to as *ET*.

Part 1: Thoroughly Determined by the Gospel

Bird clearly states at the beginning that one of the primary motivations for producing this book is the lack of “a genuinely evangelical theology textbook...that has its content, structure, and substance singularly determined by the evangel,”² thus identifying several *desiderata* for a truly gospel-centered theology. Since I am unclear on this distinction between “content” and “substance,” I will treat those two as synonymous. We thus have two criteria to use as our starting point:

- (A) The gospel must singularly determine the *structure* of the theology.
- (B) The gospel must singularly determine the *content* of the theology.

Later in the chapter, Bird offers as a third criterion that a systematic theology determined by the gospel will not focus solely on the various loci of theology, but will also “be applied to the sphere of daily Christian life and the offices of Christian leaders.”³ Thus a third criterion:

- (C) The gospel must connect the content of theology to daily Christian life and ministry.

Bird may have more in mind than this. But these three criteria should be enough for us to assess Bird’s claim regarding the adequacy of earlier evangelical theologies and the success of his own endeavor.

A. The Structure of Evangelical Theology

Applying these criteria, however, proves rather difficult. What precisely does it mean for the gospel to “singularly determine” the structure or content of a systematic theology? Although Bird does not address this question explicitly, we might be able to tease out an answer by considering his decision to deal with eschatology relatively early in the volume. Based on the centrality of the Kingdom in biblical theology as a whole and the teachings of Jesus in particular,

² *ET*, 11.

³ *ET*, 21.

Bird concludes that eschatology “provides the framework for Christian theology” and that it is “the essential nucleus of the Christian gospel.”⁴ Eschatology is thus presented as sufficiently important for understanding the gospel that it must be addressed far earlier than traditional theological structures allow.

For Bird, then, allowing the gospel to determine the structure of theology seems to mean something like arranging the theological loci in the way most conducive for understanding the gospel. But this can be taken in two different ways. First, it could mean that certain theological topics actually are more or less central to the gospel. Thus, we must deal with eschatology early in the process because it is essential for understanding the gospel in a way that other theological loci are not. This, however, would be a difficult claim to sustain given that Bird places eschatology before such vital topics as Jesus, salvation, and the Spirit. The second option, then, is that a gospel-determined theological structure does not mean that certain topics actually are more central to the gospel, but only that we should order the theological loci in the way most conducive to understanding the gospel. But this raises its own questions. For example, in another surprising move, Bird chooses to deal with the doctrines of humanity and sin toward the end of the volume. If used as a textbook in class, then, we would find ourselves in the interesting position of having to discuss the gospel and salvation before having talked about *who* is being saved and *what* they are being saved from. That seems problematic for any number of reasons, not least of which is why exactly such a structure is more singularly determined by the gospel than another approach.

One final point before leaving the question of structure. I wonder if Bird has fully appreciated the logic of the traditional order of theological topics, which seems to be thoroughly shaped by the gospel narrative. Beginning with the God who is Lord and Creator of all, they then talk about God’s purposes for creation in general and humanity in particular. That sets the stage for appreciating the tragedy of the Fall and the amazing goodness of God’s grace in Christ, the transformation of his people through the Spirit, and the final culmination of God’s creative purposes in the eschaton.⁵ Say what you will about this structure, it is hard to see why this would not qualify as a theological framework singularly determined by the gospel.

⁴ *ET*, 236.

⁵ For a representative sample of evangelical theologies that follow this basic gospel narrative, see Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994); Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998); Michael Scott Horton, *The Christian Faith: A*

Now it is entirely possible that all of this is beside the point. Maybe Bird does not mean to suggest that earlier theologies failed to have gospel-determined structures *in fact*, only that they generally fail to make explicit the gospel-logic driving the structure of their theologies. And here he would largely be correct. Indeed, one of my favorite aspects of Bird's book was his clear desire to help his readers see how the various loci relate to the gospel. But claiming that earlier theologies failed to be sufficiently *explicit* about their gospel-centeredness is a far cry from implying that they were not so *in fact*.

B. The Content of Evangelical Theology

Moving on to the second criterion, is it the case that earlier theologies failed to have their content determined by the gospel in a way that Bird substantially improves upon? Here we can be somewhat briefer since I would largely be repeating the previous argument. If earlier theologians implicitly structured their systematic theologies around the logic of the gospel in the way suggested above, then it should come as no surprise that the content of that structure does the same. Indeed, the reader is left wondering here what it would mean for an evangelical theology *not* to have its content determined by the gospel. Presumably Bird does not think that earlier attempts actually undermined the gospel since he refers to the many "good" evangelical theologies already available.⁶ Does he then think that the content of earlier theologies focused on issues irrelevant to the gospel? If so, it would be interesting to hear what those might be. Or again is the concern a failure to make explicit how the content of each theological issue relates to the gospel? If so, Bird identifies a legitimate concern, but one that is far different from suggesting that the content of those earlier theologies is not actually determined by the gospel.

C. The Practice of Evangelical Theology

Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011); John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2013).

⁶ *ET*, 11.

Bird's third criterion involves the integration of theological reflection with Christian life and ministry. So this provides a third way in which earlier theologies might have a significant lack that Bird will seek to address.

Here I find myself agreeing with Bird's frustration regarding earlier theologies. Although some excel at developing this connection, most demonstrate a consistent weakness in relating systematic theology to life and ministry, preferring instead to relegate such reflection to works on Christian ethics and/or practical theology.⁷

Despite this agreement, however, I wonder if Bird has in fact improved upon earlier attempts in this area. Though he does evidence a desire to connect theology to life and ministry in places, for example when discussing the doctrine of the Trinity,⁸ nonetheless that section stands out as relatively unique since few other chapters offer any sustained practical reflection. This lack becomes particularly problematic in those sections where pressing issues demand further reflection. The section on creation offers no discussion of ecological or environmental issues. In Pneumatology, Bird addresses spiritual gifts but not the continuation of "miraculous" gifts or the practical issues that surround the use of gifts in ministry.⁹ Further he discusses the Spirit's revelatory work, but not the questions concerning whether the Spirit provides new revelation today, whether the Spirit is at work in other religions, or what it might mean for the Spirit to lead believers today. Most surprisingly, Bird's chapter on humanity remains completely silent on pressing issues like sexuality, gender roles in ministry, race, vocation, end of life issues, and more. Once again we must acknowledge that there is only so much you can accomplish in a single volume. Given Bird's own claim that a gospel-centered theology should connect theology to everyday life and ministry, though, such critiques seem legitimate while raising questions about Bird's claim to have offered a more adequately gospel-centered theology

In sum, then, *ET* offers an excellent example of a work that seeks to make explicit the relationship between the gospel and systematic theology. For that it should be commended. Whether it has succeeded in being *more* determined by the gospel than earlier evangelical

⁷ I do think we should exercise some caution here, however. By emphasizing the need for theology to be practical, we may inadvertently contribute to popular notions of what constitutes the "practical," which end up limiting the scope and significance of theology to those issues with purely pragmatic value.

⁸ *ET*, 122-124.

⁹ E.g., whether we should try to identify our spiritual gifts, the relationship between "spiritual" and "natural" gifts, whether spiritual gifts can be developed over time.

theologies, however, is an entirely different question. And here I think we have good grounds for questioning whether that is in fact the case.

Part 2: The Devil Is in the Details

Next we turn our attention to Bird's discussion of theological anthropology.¹⁰ And we can begin rather superficially by noticing its length and structure: 16 pages on the doctrine of humanity and 30 pages on the doctrine of sin. It is thus comparable in length to Bird's treatment of pneumatology, both of which are substantially smaller than the other sections. Indeed, Bird's treatment of the *imago Dei* is roughly comparable to his excursus on the various *lapsarian* positions, and the 16 pages he devotes to the doctrine of humanity is the same as that dedicated to both the millennium and the intermediate state.¹¹

You should not, of course, assess a theological treatment's adequacy based on page count alone. I only raise the issue at this point because some of my comments below directly relate to the limited space allocated to this topic. Some might be inclined to dismiss my concerns as criticizing the book for not being even longer than it already is. So my point here is not simply that the section in humanity is short, but that it is notably short *relative to the other sections*. Thus, Bird has clearly made decisions about where to invest his pages. And I think his treatment of humanity raises questions about whether it would have been wise to invest further in this section, especially given that Bird framed this project around the gospel, which, as he himself recognizes, includes "a significant amount of anthropocentrism."¹²

A. Made in the Image of God

Moving into the specific content of this section, we should consider what Bird has to say about the image of God. Here Bird's background in biblical studies shines as he introduces

¹⁰ I need to be careful here since it is inherently dangerous to assess a one-volume systematic theology based on the adequacy with which it addresses an area of particular interest to you. Nonetheless, it is also advantageous to draw upon an area of particular strength to assess the overall adequacy of a theologian's approach to the systematic task. So I will focus here on identifying some areas that can and, in my opinion, should have been addressed with greater rigor, even in a volume with this length and focus.

¹¹ *ET*, 274-300, 309-325. Indeed, if you combine those two issues with Bird's discussion of the various positions on the tribulation, you would have a mere subsection of eschatology that is almost three times the length of *ET*'s entire doctrine of humanity.

¹² *ET*, 653.

readers to the “royal view” of the image of God as the one with the greatest support among biblical scholars.¹³ He quickly walks readers through the Ancient Near Eastern context of the phrase, how it relates to divine sovereignty and presence, and how it finds its ultimate expression in Jesus Christ. So there is much to appreciate about Bird’s discussion of the *imago Dei*.

Nonetheless, this relatively brief section prompts questions of its own. First, some confusions arise in Bird’s description of alternate interpretations. For example, in summarizing the substantive view, Bird states that “the Cappadocian Fathers identified the image with Adam’s freedom from death and decay,” and therefore concluded that the image was entirely lost at the Fall.¹⁴ This, however, is not the case. Gregory of Nyssa, for example, identifies the *imago Dei* with human freedom in general (i.e. not just freedom from decay) and primarily with the virtues.¹⁵ Thus he viewed the image as tarnished rather than completely lost at the Fall.¹⁶ A similar mistake occurs when Bird associates Luther with the substantive view of the *imago*. Luther instead emphasized the person’s right relationship to God as central to the *imago*, rejecting any attempt to ground the image in human capacities.¹⁷ Finally, Bird’s explanation of the relational view itself seems confused. There he describes the relational view as addressing “a human capacity for relationship,”¹⁸ apparently unaware that this is a better definition of a substantive view of the image. Properly understood, the relational view of the *imago* has nothing to do with particular capacities or faculties of the human person.¹⁹ The human person is not an image bearer in virtue of any particular *capacities* but solely because of the *relationships* in which the human persons stands.

In addition to this occasional lack of interpretive clarity, Bird’s defense of a functional view of the *imago* raises its own questions.²⁰ Most importantly, many argue that human

¹³ *ET*, 659-661.

¹⁴ *ET*, 658.

¹⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, 5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁷ Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis*, Luther’s Works 1 (St. Louis: Concordia House, 1958), 55-65.

¹⁸ *ET*, 659.

¹⁹ To be fair, this is a relatively common confusion in discussions about the relational view of the *imago*.

²⁰ One problem that is relatively minor but points to the extent to which Bird has clearly explained the differences between the various positions involves an apparent category mistake. When explaining his preference for a functional interpretation, Bird asserts, “Part of the meaning of salvation is that our *eikōnic* faculties are gradually restored to their Edenic state” (*ET*, 661). Bird thus relies on substantival language (i.e. restoration of “faculties”) to describe his position despite the fact that he has already affirmed the functional *over against* the substantival view of the *imago*.

dominion should be seen as the *purpose* of the image rather than its *definition*.²¹ Although Bird recognizes in a footnote that such an objection exists, he provides no response, leaving the reader to wonder if he has simply dismissed contrary data.²²

At multiple points, then, Bird's summary of contrary perspectives manifests significant difficulties. Some might object that these are relatively small errors in the overall presentation and that they do not necessarily detract from the broader argument Bird wants to make. But statements like these raise questions about the extent to which Bird has adequately interpreted and explained the theological landscape, raising similar questions about the cogency of his proposed solution. In the end, he may be correct that the royal view of the *imago* is the most satisfying. But it is not clear that the reader has received all of the data necessary for adequately assessing that claim.

B. How Many Pieces Am I?

Some of these same difficulties arise in the rest of Bird's discussion of human constitution, mostly relating to Bird's description of "Christian monism" as a perspective on what comprises the human person.²³ First, although Bird offers this in the context of various Christian views on the human person, he refers to this position as the "materialistic/atheistic" position.²⁴ It is not entirely clear what Bird intends by associating Christian monists with an "atheistic" position like this, but the unfortunate association biases the discussion.

Second, Bird describes the monist position as believing that all talk about the soul is "metaphorical."²⁵ If he simply means to say that monists do not think of the soul as a substantial reality separable from the body, he is clearly correct. But Christian monists retain a high view of

²¹ In other words, when God states that he will make humans in his image and immediately follows that with a declaration that they will have dominion over other living creatures, does he intend the latter statement to explicate the content of the image (i.e. image *means* dominion), or does he intend to say that dominion is the purpose for having been made in his image? For any functional interpretation of the *imago*, this seems an important question to answer.

²² I am not saying that this is what Bird has in fact done, only the way the information is presented could lead the reader to this conclusion.

²³ *ET*, 663.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

the very real capacities of the human person that we typically associate with the soul.²⁶ To call all of this language “metaphorical” misleads the reader into thinking that the Christian monist views these as somehow less than fully real.

Third, and most surprisingly, Bird’s engagement with the biblical data in this section leaves much to be desired.²⁷ He declares early in his presentation that “Dichotomism...is the most biblical position,”²⁸ supporting this by claiming that the biblical data affirms that “both the spirit and soul can survive death.”²⁹ However, Bird fails to engage or even reference the substantial body of literature contending that “spirit” and “soul” in the kinds of texts that he cites refer either to the principle of “life” (i.e. that which animates living beings) or to those aspects of the human person that cannot be viewed by other human persons (i.e. the “inner” life of the person).³⁰ Many biblical scholars argue that the Bible’s anthropological terminology emphasizes the unity of the human person far more than any substantial dualism.³¹ Bird is certainly free to disagree and offer his own perspective, but it is unfortunate that he remains entirely silent here on contrary interpretations of the biblical data.³²

Finally, alongside the weaknesses in his portrayal of contrary perspectives, we also see some limitations in the presentation of his preferred position. Bird offers no extended discussion of any of the significant biblical, theological, and scientific objections raised against substance

²⁶ See, for example, Warren S. Brown, Nancey C. Murphy, and H. Newton Malony, eds., *Whatever Happened to the Soul?: Scientific and Theological Portraits of Human Nature*, Theology and the Sciences (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998).

²⁷ Interestingly, the only biblical scholar Bird cites in this discussion is Joel Green who argues that the biblical data is at least consistent with anthropological monism (e.g., Joel Green, “Three Exegetical Forays into the Body-Soul Discussion,” *Criswell Theological Review* 7.2 (2010): 3-18).

²⁸ *ET*, 662. Such a statement raises its own questions about whether such a claim truncates meaningful engagement with contrary perspectives. It is perfectly legitimate, of course, for Bird to declare his understanding of an issue. It is, after all, his book. When summarizing various perspectives, though, I wonder how helpful it is simply to declare that one position is the “biblical” one.

²⁹ *ET*, 663.

³⁰ For classic studies on this, see esp. Werner Georg Kümmel, *Man in the New Testament* (London: Epworth, 1963); Robert Jewett, *Paul’s Anthropological Terms* (Leiden: Brill, 1971); and Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (London: SCM, 1974).

³¹ This does not necessarily mean that the biblical data require some kind of Christian materialism since it is entirely possible to read the biblical terminology as emphasizing unity within a broader duality. Here I am simply pointing out that Bird’s presentation oversimplifies the relevant biblical data.

³² The argument is similarly skewed when Bird concludes his presentation by saying that “monism flounders...if we believe that Scripture clearly teaches a postmortem, disembodied intermediate state” (*ET*, 664). The intermediate state is indeed a key issue in the debate, but Bird’s presentation makes no reference to the fact that Christian materialists are fully aware of the issue and have offered substantive responses. We may not be convinced by those responses, but Bird’s presentation makes it sound as though they have simply ignored this decisive refutation of their position.

dualism. That does not mean that Bird's conclusion is incorrect, only that he has not given his readers the data necessary for them to understand and wrestle through this difficult.

C. Shades of Sin

Finally, we can follow similar trajectories into Bird's discussion of sin. For example, Bird summarizes Augustine's debate with Pelagius, and then claims, "Pelagianism did not win the day, though Semi-Pelagianism did,"³³ going on to define Semipelagianism as "the view that the human will *cooperates* with divine grace and thus produces salvation in tandem."³⁴ Such a definition is problematic for two reasons. First, it is historically incorrect. Although the label was invented during the Reformation to refer to any synergistic approach to salvation, its historical referent was a controversy in the fifth and sixth centuries that focused on whether the human person could *initiate* the process of salvation and was ultimately condemned as a heresy at the Synod of Orange (529). Thus, regardless of what we might think about the continued influence of Semipelagianism in the Middle Ages, it simply is not correct to state that it won in the theological debate with Augustinianism. The impression that it did so comes from the second mistake: conflating Semipelagianism with synergism. But these two positions are importantly different.³⁵ By failing to distinguish them, Bird not only makes his discussion of sin unclear, but he also associates all synergistic soteriologies with a condemned heresy, which raises important, though unaddressed, questions about how Bird views Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Wesleyan soteriologies, among others.

This raises another concern. Unlike our earlier critiques where we raised questions about the adequacy of how *ET* summarizes contrary perspectives, here *ET* routinely fails to identify contrary perspectives entirely. Bird may be able to explain the lack of engagement with Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy based on his decision to focus on evangelical perspectives, but we also receive no extended treatment of Wesleyan/Arminian perspectives either. There is no discussion of the Wesleyan understanding of sin, original sin, or prevenient grace. Given the

³³ *ET*, 676.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ If we take semi-Pelagianism as any system in which the human person initiates the process of salvation apart from any grace other than common grace, and if we take synergism to mean any system that affirms some kind of cooperative interaction between the divine and the human in salvation, then we must conclude that these are importantly different concepts in that one can be a synergist (cooperative interaction) without being semi-Pelagian (salvation begins with human effort).

importance of Wesleyan theology for shaping evangelicalism as a whole, this is a notable lack, and one that reduces the value of *ET* for those coming from this side of evangelicalism.

And finally, here as well we can ask whether Bird has adequately engaged relevant criticisms of his preferred interpretations. For example, Bird defines sin as “a despising of God and an attempt to dethrone God.”³⁶ And that may be a fine definition but Bird makes no reference to the important critiques that many have offered to definitions of sin that seem to privilege the kinds of sins that those in positions of power and preference struggle with. They rightly ask whether such definitions adequately capture the full reality of sin as experienced by oppressed people who are less likely to be tempted by self-enthronement than by self-denigration.³⁷

Conclusion

In the end, we have seen several ways in which *ET* could be strengthened. I would have liked to see a clearer explanation of what it means to claim that *ET* is more determined by the gospel, one that more generously recognizes the ways in which earlier evangelical theologies were determined by a similar vision of the theological task. And if our case study on the doctrine of humanity is any indication, three additional issues warrant further consideration: (1) greater clarity and accuracy when summarizing contrary theological perspectives, (2) more nuanced engagement with a broader range of evangelical perspectives, and (3) increased engagement with possible criticisms Bird’s preferred conclusions.

I would like to conclude, however, by reaffirming my introductory comment about the value of *ET*. Michael Bird has given us a helpful resource with a number of unique features, most significant of which is the attempt to make explicit the relationship between the various theological loci and God’s redemptive work in Christ. That alone makes *ET* worth reading.

³⁶ *ET*, 669.

³⁷ E.g. Susan L. Nelson, “The Sin of Hiding: A Feminist Critique of Reinhold Niebuhr’s Account of the Sin of Pride,” *Soundings* 65.3 (1982): 316-327.