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RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Problematic Doctrine of Scripture

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Abstract

This article explores the doctrine of Scripture in Anglican evangelicalism. It critiques the defence of the clarity and perspicuity, truth and even the inerrancy and infallibility of propositional revelation, as proposed by Dr Mark Thompson, currently the Principal of Moore Theological College in Sydney. Thompson's contention over nearly 20 years is that the 'God who speaks' cannot mislead or communicate in a way that is less than trustworthy and true. He argues that the historical tradition of apophatic theology, with its belief that finite human language falls short of the Infinite Reality of God and cannot therefore be reduced to clear and distinct literal or prosaic specification, not only undermines the Biblical doctrine of the 'God who speaks', but is responsible for contemporary agnosticism. This article defends the orthodox apophatic thesis that God transcends the metaphorical and analogical images of him of finite theological discourse and upholds an understanding of faith as a response to a God who does not compel assent but allows humans the freedom to respond or not to respond. Thompson's quest for clarity and certainty replaces the free response of faith with 'regenerate reason' – reducing the human appropriation of the divine revelation to ratiocination.

Keywords: Clarity of Scripture; faith; freedom; monothelitism; Neo-Arianism; perspicuity of scripture

For nearly a quarter of a century now, a number of Anglicans in Australia have entertained very grave doubts about the Christian orthodoxy of some of our brothers and sisters who have sought to promote what they speak of as the 'complementarian' doctrine of the Trinity.[1] According to this understanding of things, the Son is said to be 'eternally subordinate to the Father' at least in a functional sense, or 'eternally submissive to the Father'. Notwithstanding the belief amongst complementarians that this may be asserted while at the same time contending that the Son is equal to the Father in terms of his divine nature, this was judged to be a form of Neo-Arianism by the Melbourne theologian Kevin Giles in

[1]The first sections of this paper were delivered at a Conference of the Australia and New Zealand Association of Theological Studies (ANZATS) at Pilgrim College, University of Melbourne, from 30 June to 3 July 2025 to commemorate the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea.

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Subordinationism and the Trinity in 2002.[2] I myself somewhat clumsily indicated a similar concern in 2004 in *Reflections in Glass: Trends and Tensions in the contemporary Anglican Church*, which subsequently triggered a spirited discussion at the level of the Australian National Bishops' Meeting; and more recently I have tried again to unpack the issues of concern in much more detail in two companion volumes: *Arius on Carillon Avenue, More than a Memoir: a Trinitarian Saga* (2023) and *The Subordinate Substitute: Another Wrong Turn on Carillon Avenue* (2024).[3]

Briefly put, the argument of those of us who entertain this concern is that talk of a complementarity of willing in the Trinity inevitably involves talk of two different if complementary divine wills. This is so even if these wills are said to be expressed functionally, or perhaps particularly when expressed functionally, such as in references to the exercise of 'the commanding will of the Father and the obediently subordinate will of the eternal Son' in the context of expositions of the penal substitutionary theory of the Atonement. By contrast, in orthodox Trinitarian belief, there is one equally shared divine nature, and a single divine will expressed in accordance with that indivisible nature, ensuring both the unity of God and the undivided operation of the Persons of the Trinity in the world. Insofar as a diversity of function expresses a diversity of willing, we therefore seem to have a problem. The problem is that a diversity of divine wills, even if complementary, in turn appears logically to lead to a form of tri-theism; and insofar as the will of the Son is said to be eternally submissive or eternally subordinate to the will of the Father, this appears to be inimical to the *homoousion* of Nicaea and thus inevitability to lead to a kind of Neo-Arianism.

The general response to the expression of this concern has been one of implacable denial. This denial in turn appears to be grounded in the belief that complementarianism may be found in the Bible, both in references to the eternal relations of the Father and the Son and also between men and women (who are made in this divine image). Clearly, underneath and logically prior to this concerning difference of trinitarian opinion, within Australian Anglicanism there are radically opposed views of the doctrine of Scripture. This is what I wish to address in writing this article.

Perhaps the scholar who has produced the most carefully argued and sustained exposition of the understanding of Scripture that prevails amongst those of this 'complementarian' persuasion is Dr Mark Thompson, the current Principal of Moore Theological College in Sydney, to whom we are indebted for a systematic account of the doctrine of the clarity or perspicuity of Scripture. Indeed. Thompson has endeavoured to uphold and defend this thesis for the last nearly 20 years, in at

[2]See Kevin Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism*, *The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate* (Downers Grove, Il.: InterVarsity, 2002). This was a serious response to a notorious Report of the Doctrine Commission of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney, entitled 'The Doctrine of the Trinity and its bearing on the relation of men and women' that was received by the Sydney Diocesan Synod in 1999.

[3]See Peter Carnley, *Reflections in Glass: Trends and Tensions in the contemporary Anglican Church* (Sydney, NSW, HarperCollins, 2004); *Arius on Carillon Avenue, More than a Memoir: a Trinitarian Saga*, (Eugene, OR.: Cascade, 2023) and *The Subordinate Substitute: Another Wrong Turn on Carillon Avenue*, (Eugene, OR.: Cascade, 2024). For those who may not know, Carillon Avenue in Newtown, Sydney, is historically the location of Moore Theological College, the epicentre of these complementarian views, though this kind of thinking is now dispersed across the Anglican Church of Australia.

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least 3 key publications: *A Clear and Present Word: The Clarity of Scripture* (2006), *Too Big for Words? The Transcendence of God and Finite Human Speech* (2006), and *The Doctrine of Scripture: An Introduction* (2022).[4]

At the outset, Thompson admits that there has been a long history of challenge to the doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture.[5] Most notably, his chief adversary-in-debate across these three works is the whole broad tradition of apophatic theology of classical theism, which has persistently stressed the ultimate unknowability or incomprehensibility of God, the ensuing divine mystery, and the related difficulty of seeking to talk about the Infinite with words crafted originally for use in relation to matter-of-fact things and happenings of this finite world. This leads classical theism to be cautiously indeterminate in its use of language about God, his nature, his will and ways, which is acknowledged to be essentially metaphorical or analogical, with the metaphors and analogies being irreducible to clear and distinct literal or prosaic specification; whereas, Thompson himself yearns for the proclamation of the Gospel to be resoundingly clear and distinct so as to allow us to be confidently certain both of its meaning and truth, hence his defence of the clarity and perspicuity of Scripture.

Thompson helpfully also notes that this apophatic tradition of classical theism has been bolstered by the scepticism of both ancient and recent philosophical movements (e.g. notably Immanuel Kant's epistemological conclusions relating to the difference between and the way in which things appear to us and the way things are in themselves, along with his critique of the arguments for the existence of God). This is not to mention post-modern literary theory such as that stressing the importance of reader responses at the expense of authorial intent – the work of Michel Foucault,[6] Jaques Derrida,[7] Stanley Fish[8] and many others who are often corralled with them, along also with the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein on the philosophy of meaning,[9] in which the meaning of words is said to be established by their conventional use in linguistic communities. In relation to this, Thompson's judgement is that 'Such a perspective on understanding texts has very serious

[4]Mark D. Thompson, *A Clear and Present Word: The Clarity of Scripture, New* Studies in Biblical Theology, Book 21, Series editor: D. A. Carson, (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2006); *Too Big for Words? The Transcendence of God and Finite Human Speech*, (London: Latimer Trust, 2006); and *The Doctrine of Scripture: An Introduction,* Short Studies in Systematic Theology, ed. Graham A. Cole and Oren R. Martin, (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2022). Also of interest: 'Revelation, *Sola Scriptura* & Regenerate Human Reason', in Christopher C. Green and David I. Starling (eds), *Revelation and Reason in Christian Theology,* (Bellingham: Lexham, 2018), pp. 229–245.

[5]See Mark D. Thompson. *A Clear and Present Word,* Chapter One, 'Oh sweet obscurity: The absurdity of claiming clarity today', and especially *Too Big for Words? The Transcendence of God and Finite Human Speech*, which explicitly and systematically addresses this issue.

[6]Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Pantheon, 1970), and *Power Knowledge, Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon, 1980).

[7]Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (1967), trans. G. C. Spivak as *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974); *L'écriture et la différence* (1967), trans. A. Bass as *Writing and Différence* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978); *Limited Inc*., trans. S. Weber (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988).

[8]Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretative Communities* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).

[9]Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953).

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implications for the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture. If meaning is largely or even entirely determined by the reader who resides within an interpretative community, then how can we possibly decide between suggested meanings?'.[10]

Thompson is also dismissive of recent work on the indeterminate nature of the meaning of metaphors, such as that of Paul Ricoeur who has convincingly demonstrated something of the imprecision of metaphors generally, and their indeterminate openness to the arbitrary exploitation of being pulled in novel directions.[11] All of this challenges the possibility of achieving a single agreed meaning with respect to literary texts. However, we are urged by Thompson not to take all this too seriously, and his own critical analysis of these intellectual movements tends to be dismissive and slight. For example, though Thompson helpfully summarizes the work of scholars such as Derrida, Foucault and Fish, he does not really engage with the actual arguments of any of them, preferring instead simply to promote his own doctrine of Scripture as a better alternative. This is in turn based on his contention that language is not a complex but imperfect human artefact as these post-modernists in different ways suggest, but rather the gift of God to humanity, with a reliable capacity therefore to communicate God's meaning relating to the self-revelation of his nature and purposes with clarity and perspicuity.

It is somewhat curious that in none of Thompson's three books is there a serious analysis of the apophatic method in theology. Rather, Thompson is content to signal some of the legitimate concerns of those who have pursued an apophatic approach to talk about God, such as the concern to avoid the idolatry of fashioning God in a human image or, indeed, in any purely finite image, by insisting that God is always beyond all our images of him, or the avoidance of over-confident, even arrogant claims to know more about God than the divine self-revelation will warrant. However, the importance of acknowledging the implications for human linguistic communication of the ultimate mystery of God, and of owning that it is both easier and wiser to say what God is *not* (following the *via negativa*, the negative way), than to make positive affirmations about his nature and will (following the *via positiva*, or positive way) is not really explored. And this is not to mention Thompson's omission of any discussion of how statements of a negative kind and statements of a positive kind might be understood to work *together* in the delivery of meaningful talk about the Infinite God.

Indeed, there are even suggestions that Thompson has not really understood the apophatic or negative approach to theology of which he is nevertheless so critical. For example, he often seems to suggest that apophatic theology fails because it is unable to say *anything at all* about God, and even that apophaticism suggests that human language is an 'obstacle to proclaiming the truth about God'.[12] It is in

[10]Mark D. Thompson, *A Clear and Present Word,* p. 40.

[11]See Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (1976), and especially, *The Rule of Metaphor; The Creation of Meaning in Language* (1975, translated by Robert Czerny and Kathleen McLaughlin, 2003). I have discussed the importance of Ricoeur's work on metaphor for theology in Peter Carnley, *The Subordinate Substitute* (2024), pp. 188–189, and 197. See also the discussion of the difficulty of moving from one family of New Testament metaphors to another in Colin Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement: A Study in Metaphor, Rationality and the Christian Tradition* (1998), p. 83.

[12]*Too Big for Words?* p. 54. This is something that is said to have been demonstrated to be untrue by Jesus himself by becoming man and proclaiming the Gospel and calling people to repentance and faith (as reported in *Mark* 1.14–15).

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response to this alleged inability to communicate that Thompson so insistently affirms the importance of God's words as they are found in the Scriptural texts. His contention that an apophatic sensibility means that nothing may be said about God is clearly not true, however, for even by using negative statements we are saying something of importance – for example, that God *is* invisible, immaterial, eternal (not in time), impassible, (unaffected by what happens in the world), unchanging, unlimited, and so on.

Alternatively, Thompson sometimes suggests that an apophatic approach to talk about God assumes that all language about God is metaphorical. Thompson says by way of rebuttal of this contention, that Christian theology positively asserts that God is a Spirit (John 4:24). The word Spirit (obviously when it is not used as a proper name) is said not to be a metaphor: 'This is far from the contemporary suggestion that all talk about God must be metaphorical'.[13] In fact, however, what the apophatic approach to theology insists upon, apart from the fact that it is important to say what God is *not* while attempting to say more positively what God is or is like, is obviously not that *all* statements about God are metaphorical, but that when positive statements about God are made, then it is always necessary to qualify them by following them with a negative 'but not . . . ' statement. For example, if God is positively affirmed to be a Rock, a Wind, a Fire, a Judge, a King or a Shepherd, it has to be said in order to avoid misunderstanding that God is *not* to be thought to be any of these in the way that we know the finite rocks, winds, flames of fire, judges, kings or shepherds of this world, and that such images must necessarily be understood as concepts that are used in a metaphorical or analogical way. This means, for example, if God is referred to as a Rock, it has to be said that God is *not* a Rock like Uluru, *not* hard, *not* grey in colour, *not* material . . . and so on . . . even if this means that God is 'rock-like' in a way so different from any of these literal qualities that God's rock-likeness eludes clear and distinct specification. In other words, God is 'rocklike' in some other ultimately unknowable sense appropriate to God alone. It is therefore not just that all language about God is metaphorical (for negative statements appear not to be metaphorical), but rather that all positive images of God have to be negated and acknowledged to be of a metaphorical or analogical kind, and furthermore, that such metaphorical or analogical language cannot be unpacked or reduced to precise, clear and distinct, prosaic or literal specification. Indeed, even to affirm that God is Spirit is essentially to affirm that God is *not* material even when described as 'a sudden rushing wind' or 'flame of fire'. As we try to speak of God in descriptive images, God who is acknowledged to be 'beyond' all these images, in a sense recedes from view. At best, we are left with a somewhat indistinct after-image as we bow before the ultimate mystery and transcendence of an Infinite God who cannot be captured and contained in the net of finite human language.

It has to be accepted that Thompson is regularly somewhat inconsistent, which makes for difficulties in pinning down his precise intended meaning. While categorically denying the metaphorical nature of theological language, for example, he nevertheless concedes that, 'as with all language about God, we must recognize a

[13] *A Clear and Present Word*, p. 68. Also, in *The Doctrine of Scripture*, p. 68, Thompson categorically asserts that 'The Bible's descriptions of God's speaking are not mythological, and they are not metaphorical . . . '.

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principle of analogy'.[14] This principle of all theological language is illustrated by the fact that references to God's speaking are said to indicate a manner of speaking that is '*like* our speaking in some ways – involving words, able to be committed to writing, open to translation across language barriers, and so on – yet unlike ours in others. So God does not require physical vocal apparatus'.[15] Thompson is himself quite certain that the 'Bible's descriptions of God's speaking are not mythological, and they are not metaphorical'.[16] Given, however, that Thompson never explains how he knows that the Biblical images of God are definitely not to be classed as metaphorical, we are left wondering how this piece of information has been acquired.

It would also be helpful to know how it is that Thompson is able categorically to deny the metaphorical nature of theological language while at the same time conceding that 'all language about God' is characterized by a 'principle of analogy'. It might be said in response to the drawing of this apparent distinction between metaphor and analogy that they differ in the sense that while some clearly anthropomorphic images of God may be understood on the basis of a principle of analogy, as when God is described as a Father, Judge, King or Shepherd who is in some undefined way similar to or 'like', but at the same time different from, earthly fathers, judges, kings or shepherds, other Biblical images of the divine are more clearly metaphorical, as when some kind of similarity is identified or indicated through an expression of radical difference, such as when God is said to be a Rock, a Wind or Fire. Given that God cannot be literally a Rock, a Wind or a Fire, this language must surely be understood metaphorically.

In any event, Thompson's admission that all language about God must recognize a 'principle of analogy' is surely disastrous in relation to his insistent thesis that the apophatic method of classical theism undermines the Biblical presentation of God and must therefore be abandoned in favour of a doctrine of the clarity and perspicuity of Scripture. Even the use of the analogical images of God as Father, Judge, King and Shepherd, while registering a similarity with the fathers, judges, kings and shepherds of this world, cannot be unpacked in precise, clear and distinct literal specification. At the end of the day, after acknowledging that God is not exactly like the fathers, judges, kings and shepherds of this world, and that this language is not being used univocally, we are reduced to silence before the ultimate mystery and transcendence of God who passes all understanding. As St Paul says: 'Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and decisions and how unfathomable and untraceable are His ways!'.[17]

While acknowledging that some of the concerns of contemporary apophaticism are legitimate,[18] Thompson nevertheless argues that this has come at considerable cost. Indeed, he argues that the apophatic tradition has not only made it difficult to proclaim the Gospel with clarity and confidence, but even worse, that it has in fact been a counter-productive force in Christian history and even responsible for

[14]*The Doctrine of Scripture*, p. 68.
[15]*The Doctrine of Scripture*, p. 68.
[16]*The Doctrine of Scripture*, p. 68.
[17]*Romans* 11. 33–36.
[18]See 'The Legitimate Concerns of Contemporary Apophaticism', *Too Big for Words*?, pp. 33–41.

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leading to contemporary agnosticism. At the end of the day, the apophatic tradition is judged to be dangerous: 'It undermines the biblical presentation of God as one who speaks'.[19] For those of us who entertain apophatic sympathies, these are fighting words.

And then, without demonstrating the alleged inadequacies or logical mistakes of the apophatic tradition, almost like pulling a rabbit out of a hat, he seeks simply to argue for the viability of what he submits is a better alternative, by expounding and defending the doctrine of the clarity or perspicuity of the Scriptural revelation.

The basic argument of all three of his books may be set out in terms of a simple syllogism:

1. The Biblical God is a speaking God. In Scripture itself, God is said to be steadfastly committed to revealing his nature and his will to humans by speaking in propositional terms.[20]
2. God by definition cannot mislead, confuse or utter untruths.
3. Therefore, the Scriptures, as the Word of God or God's Word written, are meaningfully clear, reliable and true, not just in general terms but verbally true, and even inerrant and infallible.

It is important to note that this conclusion does not just have to do with the nature and will of God but also relates to matters that we would normally term scientific or historical. Thompson makes this clear by endorsing a quotation of Paul Feinberg: 'Inerrancy means that when all facts are known, the Scriptures in their original autographs and properly interpreted will be shown to be wholly true in everything that they affirm, whether that has to do with doctrine or morality or with the social, physical, or life sciences'.[21]

The circularity of an appeal to Scripture to prove the clarity and truth of Scripture is said not to be a vicious circularity. The Bible is merely self-authenticating, making perfectly legitimate claims for itself. As *2 Timothy* 3.16–17 says: 'all scripture is inspired by God' or 'inbreathed' by God. While this itself appears to be a metaphor bearing a meaning that is not entirely clear, it is assumed to be clear enough for Thompson to be able confidently to conclude that the Scriptural text embodies the revelation of God's words in a clear and distinct way that, because God is the primary author, must necessarily be judged to be true.[22]

Thompson hastens to say that this is not to be mistaken for dictation.[23] The contribution of the human authors of the Scriptural texts, particularly in relation to

[19]*Too Big for Words*? p. 61.

[20]Thompson says that 'Only the God who created all things, including the gift of speech and human language, is able to speak with his creatures.' (*The Doctrine of Scripture*, p. 61); 'The Bible presents God as the first to use human words'. (p. 67)

[21]*The Doctrine of Scripture,* p. 143, quoting Paul D. Feinberg, 'The Meaning of Inerrancy', in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1980), p. 294.

[22]'As always, this attribute of Scripture is properly grounded in the person and character of God. Scripture is utterly truthful and trustworthy because it is God's word, and God himself is truthful and trustworthy'. (*The Doctrine of Scripture*, p. 137).

[23]Though there are some Biblical references which suggest that God actually dictated words to human writers, as when God dictated the Ten Commandments to Moses (Exodus 34.27–28), this is not the general

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matters of literary style, is not to be eliminated as though they were automatons. The Scriptural texts did not simply drop from the sky without human input. On the other hand, it certainly sounds like dictation when Thompson defends his insistence that Biblical statements about God's speaking are definitely not metaphorical. When God is said to speak to Moses and David, for example, this is said to be something that was actually audible. Even though God has no larynx, God is imagined to have conjured up the audible sounds of a coherent language that were actually and literally heard. Thus, it is in this sense that he confidently speaks of 'words written by Moses at God's command'.[24]

In the case of other Biblical authors who may not have heard anything, God is said somehow to have prepared them to do his work in such a way that, even if unwitting, can be said to be 'concursive' so that, though they wrote in Hebrew, or Greek, with a smattering of Aramaic, every word of Scripture is as God intended it to be, whether they be words about the nature and will of God or about matters that would normally be classified as science and history.[25] This is even though the light is said to have been created prior to the Sun in the days of creation of *Genesis* 1, and in the face of the fact that there are competing accounts of the order of creation in *Genesis* 1 and 2. Because God speaks, we cannot pick and choose amongst his words.[26] At the end of the day, it is the text that is inspired rather than the writers. Thompson is therefore able to endorse 'with confidence' the view of Benjamin Warfield: 'Every part of Holy Writ is thus held alike infallibly true in all its statements, of whatever kind'.[27]

Thompson notes an obvious difficulty that is posed for his thesis of the clarity and perspicuity of Scripture by the fact that there are differences of opinion with regard to the meaning of many Biblical passages, witness the plethora of diverse commentaries, many with logically competing expositions of a text's meaning. His answer to this is, first, that Jesus himself warns us that there will be differences of opinion, and even heated disputes, for these are just signs of the Eschatological End Time, just as there will be false teachers and false prophets.[28] In this way, the fact that there will be differences of interpretative opinion tends to become part of what God reveals with clarity!

norm. See Thompson, *The Doctrine of Scripture*, pp. 72, and 94 where Thompson says: 'If we confine ourselves just to the New Testament, we find eyewitness testimony, an 'orderly account' (Luke 1:3) of history compiled from the reports of many eyewitnesses, personal and pastoral letters written by Christ's commissioned apostles, a 'word of exhortation' (Heb. 13:22), and the record of the vision given to an apostle in exile. *None of these required word-for-word dictation. The personalities and literary styles of the different authors are apparent in the word choices they made . . .* ' (my italics).

[24]*The Doctrine of Scripture*, p. 86.

[25]*The Doctrine of Scripture*, p. 73: 'God often works concursively in and through his creatures to accomplish his purpose'. See also, pp. 76–77.

[26]' . . . .the passages where natural phenomena are discussed are just as inspired as the other parts of Scripture. We must not stand over the text deciding what is inspired and what is not.' (*The Doctrine of Scripture*, p. 100). 'All Scripture is God-breathed, and so we cannot distinguish between which texts are inspired and which are not'. (*The Doctrine of Scripture*, p. 101).

[27]*The Doctrine of Scripture*, p. 145, quoting Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, 'Inspiration and Criticism', in *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, ed. Samuel G. Craig; repr., Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948, p. 420.

[28]*The Doctrine of Scripture*, p. 132, referencing *Matt.* 24:11–12; *1 Tim.* 6:2–5; *2 Pet.* 2:1–3.

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He further seeks to address the challenge to perspicuity constituted by the plethora of Biblical commentaries by arguing that this is not because of a deficit in the actual text, but because of what we readers bring to the text. 'The problem is not with the word God has given, but with the use made of it by sinful men and women'.[29] Alas, reader response theory which we were originally urged not to take too seriously as a challenge to Biblical clarity and perspicuity is now called upon to explain that it is not the text that is at fault or unclear, but that we humans make it unclear by whatever agenda we bring to the text.

Furthermore, though the chief message of Scripture is clear even to the ploughboy of Tyndale, Erasmus and Luther,[30] Thompson assures us that no defence of clarity and perspicuity argues that there are not difficult passages: ' . . . the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture is not a claim that the meaning of every passage is obvious or that the process of understanding is always simple or transparent. There are difficulties in Scripture'.[31] 'The clarity of Scripture did not mean, and had never meant, that there are no difficulties at all in Scripture'.[32] In response to this difficulty, we are assured that we are not alone in reading the Scriptures, but read in community with others. Sometimes, we have to rely on experts to unpack the Biblical text's meaning for us. But if this is the case, we might well ask how it is that God is so remiss as to allow that there are long-standing disputes about very key issues even amongst experts? – the meaning of the word 'justification', for example. Does it mean 'account righteous' as was so popular amongst early Reformers or 'make righteous' as the great Ernst Käsemann argues in his eschatological reading of Paul on justification in his commentary on *Romans*?.[33] Or, what is the exact clear or perspicuous meaning of the Pauline hapax *hilasterion* in *Romans* 3.25? – propitiation, expiation, or just whatever it is that happens at the mercy seat? This is not to mention the mystery of how sacrifices generally were actually understood to have worked in the ancient world, particularly in relation to a God who is said to be changeless and beyond human manipulation? How is it that such key issues are apparently unclear even to the scholarly world? Somehow, one has the sense that the clarity and perspicuity of Scripture begins to die the death of a thousand qualifications.

In defending this basic argument, Thompson challenges the assumption of classical theism that language is a human artefact originally developed by linguistic communities in this world in the process of referring to and handling items and happenings of the finite and created order, and having therefore to be stretched in order to refer metaphorically or analogically to the Infinite. He points out that immediately after creating Adam, God speaks to him; this is long before there is the possibility of a human community, let alone a linguistic community addressing

[29]*A Clear and Present Word*, p. 131.

[30]*A Clear and Present Word*, p. 111.

[31]'No serious defence of *claritas scripturae* has ever denied that there are difficulties in Scripture. (*A Clear and Present Word*, p. 102). 'The doctrine of the clarity of Scripture is not a claim that the meaning of every passage is obvious or that the process of understanding is always simple or transparent. There are difficulties in Scripture' (*A Clear and Prent Word*, p. 134).

[32]*A Clear and Present Word*, p. 153.

[33]See Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. and ed. Geoffrey Bromiley (London: SCM, 1980), p. 96.

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problems of human communication. Thus, he concludes that God must have furnished Adam with human language as a gift.[34]

The historicity or otherwise of this account in *Genesis* is not discussed, let alone defended. The *Genesis* text seems simply to be taken at face value, as a clearly and perspicuously revealed account of what happened. Similarly, later, after Babel, God is said to have 'confused' the languages of the world so as to make translation necessary.

This inevitably raises the question of whether God also gave the gift of human language to the snake who is said to have spoken to Eve; or was it that the snake, the most crafty of animals was able to curl itself around a nearby tree so as to over-hear God's tutoring of Adam in human language and then, having stolen it, as it were, he (the snake) put it to sinister use to beguile Eve? One might say that this is all unnecessarily speculative, but it is hardly much more speculative than the theory that human language was given to Adam by God as a gift rather than a humanly crafted artefact.

In any event, this account of the origin of language as a gift in some way explains why there is no serious discussion of the rationale of the apophatic tradition in Thompson's books. There is no need to discuss the apophatic contention that language that was originally devised for reference to things and happenings of this finite world had to be stretched to refer to the Infinite, because at the outset language is deemed not to be a humanly devised artefact. The apparently metaphorical or analogical images of God in Scripture are thus left hanging in the air without being discussed. They are simply not to be 'undermined' by the apophatic tradition.[35]

Well, what are we to say about Thompson's syllogism? The conclusion of a syllogism is usually admitted only to be as good as the premises on which it relies. The first thing to be said about the first premise of the syllogism – that the God of the Bible is a God who speaks because he wants to reveal his will and his ways to humans – is that this is not the *only* thing Scripture says about God. If God is a God who speaks the *purpose* of his speaking naturally comes into consideration and I think we will agree that the Biblical God is also a God who yearns to achieve the redemption of humanity by calling us to faith. If God calls humanity to faith, and if faith is a combination of trust (*fiducia*) and knowledge (*fides*), with *fiducia* being logically dependent upon *fides* (for you can only really trust one who you know to be trustworthy, or certainly not untrustworthy), then an understanding of the kind of knowing appropriate to faith (*fides*) is obviously important, particularly in its relation to knowing generally. For Thompson, it is a knowing based on a revelation that is clear and distinct, perspicuous. But is this necessarily so?

In relation to knowing generally, we may first note that when we seek to order experience with linguistic tools so as to make knowledge claims, we are free to use a range of equally appropriate words and concepts; indeed, I guess we are free even to choose inappropriate words and concepts. In other words, human perception always involves an element of interpretive freedom. This is the case whether our

[34]*Too Big for Words?* p. 49: 'It is worth noting that human language had its origins in God's primeval address of the man and woman at the moment of creation. The first words spoken in Genesis are spoken by God and the narrative proceeds on the basis that these words can be understood by those God has so recently created'.

[35]*Too Big for Words?* p. 61.

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interests have to do with claims to know material reality or claims to the awareness of moral considerations in our immediate environment. We are free to draw upon a range of words and concepts. But when we speak of religious faith, the element of freedom that is a feature of all perception appears to be maximal. Given the radical invisibility of God, this does not surprise us; we are free to perceive and take notice of the presence and will of God and of the importance of it for the living of our lives, or not to do so. Just as in teaching by parables, Jesus was aware that his hearers might well hear but not be disposed to understand, and looking they might not see his point (*Mark* 4.12, quoting *Isaiah* 6.9–10). Faith and this kind of epistemic freedom thus go hand in hand.

Thompson charges that apophatic theology sets God at a distance from us and insists that there should be no gap or distance between humans and God; the Incarnation, he says, makes this point loud and clear. God is immanent and reveals himself to be immanent. But this misses an important point. The point about the element of perceptual freedom that is intrinsic to faith is that the immanent God who is near at hand, who is not separated from us, in revealing himself to us gives us the freedom to see or not to see, to hear but not to understand. John Hick, in his magisterial work on the epistemology of faith (*Faith and Knowledge*[36]) thus spoke of this perceptual freedom as the consequence of the *epistemic distance* at which God is set in relation to humanity, given that God reveals his presence and activity in the world in an indirect way that does not compel assent.

Hugh of St Victor expressed essentially the same truth this way:

> God from the beginning wished neither to be entirely manifest to human consciousness nor entirely hidden. [For} if he were entirely hidden, faith indeed would not be aided unto knowledge, and lack of faith would be excused on the ground of ignorance. Wherefore, it was necessary that God should show himself, though hidden, lest he be entirely concealed and entirely unknown; and again, it was necessary that he should conceal himself, though shown and known to some degree, lest he be entirely manifest, so that there might be something which through being known would nourish the heart of man (sic), and again something which through being hidden would stimulate it.[37]

Immanuel Kant, whom Thompson accuses of leading others into philosophical scepticism[38] even if he was not a sceptic himself, famously dared to point out that the various arguments for the existence of God do not prove their case with a logical necessity that compels assent, even if he nevertheless admitted that they do *point towards* the possibility of the existence of God. Consequently, Kant once declared 'I had to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith' or 'I had to abandon reason in order to make room for faith'[39] – faith being a not unreasonable but

[36]Macmillan, 1967.

[37]Hugh of St Victor, *On the Sacraments of the Christian Faith*, Bk. 1, Part III, Sec 2., trans. Roy. D. Deferrari, (Cambridge Mass., 1951), pp. 41–42.

[38]*Too Big for Words?* p. 20: 'The conclusion he drew provided further impetus to the sceptical inclinations of others . . . '

[39]Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Preface to the Second Edition, B/xxx.

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nevertheless free response to a religious object that, in being partially or indistinctly known, does not compel assent.

Though Thompson insists that Kant bolstered the apophatic tradition that leads disastrously to agnosticism, the element of freedom allowed by the epistemic distance between humanity and God is usually regarded as a plus for humanity rather than a disaster. It can be argued, for example, that the ultimate unknowability of the God, whose presence is apprehended but not comprehended, and whose self-disclosure therefore does not compel assent, is in fact something that is necessary in God's dealings with us if we are to become morally autonomous and responsible agents in the world. If God's presence and will were constantly manifest to us in a clear and distinct way, if God were unmistakably 'in our face' all the time, as it were, we would have no alternative than to respond to his presence and will, almost as automatons. In other words, there would be no real freedom to make responsible moral decisions for ourselves.

What we perceive to have been revealed by God is thus something of the nature and will of a God who does not compel assent but invites us to *faith*, along with the freedom that is an implicit element of faith, and for good reason. Hence, Samuel Taylor Coleridge in a famous statement once said that the divine existence 'could not be intellectually more evident without becoming morally less effective; without counteracting its own end by sacrificing the life of faith to the cold mechanism of a worthless because compulsory assent'.[40]

This means that when God acts to reveal his nature and will, he acts persuasively rather than in a coercively powerful way that would compel assent. Hence, the Messiahship of Jesus, who came in the humble, self-effacing manner of a servant. Those who would be his disciples take up a Cross and follow in the same way. Clearly, they are not compelled to do so. Indeed, if an element of freedom is necessary for faith to be faith, and for hope to be hope, for we do not hope for what we already see, as St Paul once said, then it is also necessary for love to be love, for love is a free giving of oneself, not a compulsory or forced response. Indeed, to think of love in terms of a compelled or forced response would be to confuse genuine love and self-giving, with rape.

I think all this suggests at least *prima facie* that when we *in faith* perceive the Word of God in the text of Scripture a degree of interpretative freedom is necessarily involved. Talk of the clarity and perspicuity, inerrancy and infallibility of the Scriptural revelation may in fact undermine the nature of faith.

In other words, I think we are justified in entertaining the initial suspicion that Thompson's whole project of dismissing the apophatic tradition allegedly because it leads to agnosticism and undermines the Biblical view of God, in fact comes at the cost of undermining the nature of faith and the perceptual freedom that is intrinsic to faith. This freedom inevitably involves the divine risk that some will not come to faith. But faith and epistemic freedom go hand in hand.

Indeed, Scripture itself has something important to say at this very point: in *I Corinthians* 13: 12–13, St Paul famously says that what has been revealed to faith is known, not clearly and distinctly, but in a knowing that is partial and incomplete;

[40]Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (London: Everyman, 1906), p. 106.

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what we see is like an ill-defined or indistinct reflection – as in the polished metal mirrors of the ancient world; 'we see as in a mirror, dimly, not face to face'. In Paul's understanding of things, what is disclosed to us in faith is an eschatological reality that is thus promissory of more clarity to come.

It is notable that the text from Paul in *1 Corinthians 13* about 'partial seeing' is a passage that receives remarkably scant treatment at the hands of Mark Thompson, if any at all. Clearly, if Paul's words relate to a kind of apprehending but not comprehending, they are hardly congenial to the alleged clarity and perspicuity of the revealed propositions of the Scriptural texts. Thompson's strategy in dealing with Paul's sense of the partial knowing of the surpassing mystery of God is instructive. In order to deal with it, or rather to avoid dealing with it, he invites us to re-think God's transcendence.

For Thompson, the transcendence of God is not apprehended by faith when something of his presence and activity is itself experienced as an indistinct knowing, and therefore partial in this sense, as St Paul suggests; it is not the indistinct apprehension of something that surpasses or transcends our ability to know clearly. Rather, Thompson suggests that the transcendence of God has to do, *not* with the nature of what God *has* revealed, but with the part of God that has *not yet* been revealed. In other words, he argues that what has been revealed is only a small part of what could be revealed, a large part of God must necessarily remain hidden because God is inexhaustible. An appeal to the inexhaustibility of God is thus made so as to allow him to affirm God's surpassing transcendence.

This must necessarily be so because, for Thompson, what *has* been revealed of God's nature and will, and that is now found in the propositions of Scripture is said to be clear and distinct; it is other hidden parts of God's nature and will that are yet to be revealed, and are not yet known to us, that allow us to talk of God's transcendence in terms of his inexhaustibility.

This is something that Thompson says he has learned from the Melbourne theologian, Peter Adam in *Speaking God's Words*. Adam argues that the clarity and perspicuity of the Scriptural revelation does not impact negatively on the power or ability of God to communicate, who thus remains transcendent in this sense.[41] (Though it might be observed in passing that the Scriptural revelation of God in Christ might nevertheless invite some reflection on the nature of the operation of God's transcendent power as the self-effacing power of persuasion rather than a coercive power that compels assent).

It should also be noted that Thompson also draws upon Luther's treatment of the hiddenness of God to support talk of God in terms of parts: the clear perspicuous part, the *deus revelatus* as against the hidden part, the *deus absconditus*. For the present, I have to leave it to Lutheran scholars to tell us if this part-and-part understanding of things is a fair reading of Luther, or whether for Luther God is the *deus revelatus* and the *deus absconditus*, both together, as it were, at the same time.

In any event, what are we to say of this theological partition of the Infinite into parts – a quantifiable part that is said to be clear and distinctly revealed and a remaining part that is inexhaustible and entirely hidden, and that thus transcends

[41]Peter Adam, *Speaking God's Words: A Practical Theology of Preaching* (Leicester: IVP, 1996), pp. 21–22.

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our capacity to know? There are a few initial observations that I only have space to touch upon here:

1. Though Thompson sees the apophatic tradition in classical theology as his chief adversary, it should at least be noted that it is somewhat ironic that he then appeals to the inexhaustibility of God to explain the divine transcendence. After all, inexhaustibility is a negative, apophatic concept. Alas, consistency may not be one of Thompson's strong points.
2. Admittedly *Exodus*, for example, speaks of knowing or seeing parts of God. When, in the process of passing by Moses who is hidden in a cleft of rock, God is said to have covered Moses with his hand, and then God is said to have lifted his hand and to have departed the scene; Moses peeps out but only glimpses God's 'back' as God disappears from view. Some translations speak of Moses glimpsing God's 'back parts'; Wycliff had 'hinder parts'. I understand that the Hebrew means something like God's 'afters'. To recognize this as anthropomorphic imagery that has to be apophatically qualified by some negative statements (for starters, God does *not* have a hand or back) does not entirely deal with talk of 'parts' of a reality that is understood to be Infinite. The question is, given an understanding of the 'simplicity' of God, can we speak of 'parts' of God at all? Indeed, is it possible to divide an Infinite Reality into quantifiable and inexhaustible parts?
3. There is also an apparent difficulty here which relates to the Nicene *homoousion*. Speaking of Constantine at Nicaea and his influential support of its Credal formulation, Eusebius of Caesarea states: 'He confessed, moreover, that such were his own sentiments, and he advised all present to agree to it, and to subscribe its articles and assent to them, with the insertion of the single word "one in substance" (*homoousios*)'. Eusebius then proceeds to say that Constantine explained his use of this word by saying that it was not to be interpreted in terms of 'the affections of bodies' for it meant 'identical being' rather than a divisible being that can be understood 'in the way of division, or any severance; for that the immaterial and intellectual and incorporeal nature could not be the subject of any corporeal affection, but that it became us to conceive of such things in a divine and ineffable manner'.[42] I suspect Constantine's understanding of the meaning of '*homoousios*' means that we may have to add the negative apophatic term 'indivisible' to the standard list of negatives that relate to the divine – invisible, infinite, immaterial, impassible, unchangeable, unaffected, and so on.
4. Understandably, the *Anglican Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion* begin with an apophatic statement – the one living and true God is 'without body, *parts*, or passions' (italics mine). Talk of a partial knowing, as the knowing of a part of the divine nature while leaving other divine parts yet to be revealed may need some attention and care.

[42]Eusebius of Caesarea; *The Complete Works of Eusebius of Caesarea: Church History, Life of Constantine the Great*, trans. and ed. Caleb Sinclair (Delhi: Grapevine Press, p. 125).

It is very important to note that, while Thompson studiously avoids any consideration of the theological significance of Paul's talk of the knowing of faith on analogy with an indistinct reflection in a mirror, he speaks consistently of 'partial knowing' not as an indistinct knowing but as the (clear) knowing of *a part*. Indeed, he co-opts Paul's words in *I Corinthians* 13 and massages them into conformity with his own purpose by making the point that *all knowing* is only ever the knowing of *a part* of things, even the perception of material things. In relation to knowing generally he says '. . . such knowledge was not only partial (Paul makes clear that (this) is true of the Christian's knowledge of God as well, 1 Cor. 13:12) but radically prospective'.[43] Indeed, he emphasizes this point: 'In all areas, not just in theology and its application, 'now we know in part' (1 Cor. 13:12)'.[44]

However, when Paul describes the seeing or knowing of faith as being a partial seeing, and speaks of it as being like seeing a reflection in a mirror; it is a *seeing* that is *in part* and in a sense unclear or indistinct, not the clear and perspicuous seeing of *a part* (to which we now have access in the perspicuous propositions of Scripture) leaving another part hidden and therefore unavailable to human knowledge and thus transcendent (in Thompson's revised sense). In other words, Paul does not say that we see the object of faith in a clear and distinct way while the rest of God is hidden, but rather that what is revealed and perceived by faith itself remains at the same time indistinct and partly hidden, transcending our ability to know, and is *itself* promissory of clarity to come. If we perceive in faith that 'God's love has been poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us' (*Romans* 5.5), then this is promissory of more to come, a greater and clearer eschatological outpouring of God's love *on all flesh*, not the disclosure of another divine part as something entirely different.

Clearly, what Paul actually has to say about the partial or essentially indistinct seeing of faith, rather than the reconstruction of Paul's meaning that Thompson urges us to accept, has disastrous consequences for Thompson's contention that the revelation of God in Scripture is clear and distinct, inerrant and even infallible. It is understandable that he naturally seeks to sidestep Paul's reference to the *partial seeing* as the indistinct seeing of faith by speaking of a clear and perspicuous seeing of *a part*.

If Thompson sidesteps Paul's use of the image of an indistinct reflection in polished metal, his treatment of John Calvin is more abruptly dismissive. In the process of affirming that God's 'spiritual nature forbids us to indulge in carnal or earthly speculation concerning him' and that it is true, indeed, that 'he is incomprehensible',[45] Calvin dared to acknowledge the quality of indistinctness when God

[43]*A Clear and Present Word*, p. 57.

[44]*The Doctrine of Scripture,* p. 143. See also, 'Revelation, *Sola Scriptura* & Regenerate Human Reason', p. 243, where Thompson argues that the knowing of the Scriptural revelation through the exercise of the 'regenerate human reason' results in a 'partial knowing', not so much in the sense of Paul's indistinct reflection in a mirror so that more clarity is to come, but instead in the sense that there is quantifiably 'still more' of God to be known, given the alleged clarity and perspicuity of the part of God that is already known. It is in this specific sense that Thompson bids us hear the words of Paul: 'It is not yet perfected'. 'Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known' (1 Cor 13:12)'.

[45]*Institutes*, I, xiii, 1.

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speaks, by speaking of God as one who 'lisps with us'.[46] To speak of indistinct or unclear speech as 'lisping' is obviously not at all congenial to Thompson's thesis of the clarity and perspicuity of God's revelatory speech in Scripture. After all Calvin's suggestion that God's speech to us is in some way indistinct might in effect allow the freedom to hear or not to hear. Calvin is therefore abruptly put down with a reprimand: Calvin's talk of the 'lisping' God is said to be problematic: it would be quite inappropriate for Calvin to suggest that God has some kind of physical disability.[47] Alas, Calvin's reference to the God who speaks indistinctly as the 'lisping' God may not be felicitous, but he quite certainly had something a little more sophisticated in mind than a physical disability of the kind that might qualify for assistance from the National Disability Insurance Scheme.[48]

Though it is acknowledged that Immanuel Kant 'was certainly no sceptic',[49] Kant is nevertheless likewise dismissed by Thompson for so much as suggesting that the existence of God is only a subjective matter by declaring disparagingly that for Kant 'the thesis of the existence of God belongs to doctrinal *belief*'[50] (Thompsons's own emphasis) – as though it is self-evident that mere *belief* is somehow problematic or undesirable. Thompson therefore dismisses Kant for promoting subjective '*belief*', whereas he himself seeks to secure the knowledge of an objectively certain revelation. We may be inclined to conclude, however, that the thesis of the clarity and perspicuity of Scripture may in fact be so lacking in evidential warrant as itself to constitute the ultimate subjective belief!

It is certainly difficult to dismiss the suspicion that, if Immanuel Kant said he had abandoned the kind of *knowledge* secured by the logical necessity of the conclusions of reasoned argument in order to make room for *faith*, Mark Thompson, by seeking to replace the element of epistemic freedom that is intrinsic to faith with the alleged clarity and perspicuity and truth of the Scriptural revelation, appears in effect to be on a quest to replace faith with the paper logic of clear and distinct propositions – all in the illusory hope of being able to proclaim the Gospel with the confidently reasoned certainty of claims to knowledge. Indeed, in the article entitled 'Revelation, *sola scriptura*, & regenerate human reason' which Thompson published in 2018,[51] he unequivocally indicates that the human appropriation of the Scriptural revelation is via the faculty of reason. He alleges that the 'regenerate human reason is disciplined by the gospel of grace and oriented toward the word that God has spoken'.[52] Thompson observes that even though human reason is finite and contingent, this is not to be thought to be a negative. It is simply 'part of the creaturely orientation to the word which God speaks'. This orientation of reason to the revelation of God's

[46]*Institutes*, I, xiii, 1: 'For who is so devoid of intellect as not to understand that God, in so speaking, lisps with us as nurses are wont to do with little children?'

[47]*Too Big for Words?* p. 31.

[48]The Australian Federal Government's programme of assistance for people with disabilities.

[49]*Too Big for Words?* p. 20.

[50]*Too Big for Words?* p. 21, citing Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), trans. and ed. by P. Guyer and A.W. Wood (CUP, 1998), p. 688.

[51]In Christopher C. Green & David I. Starling (eds), *Revelation and Reason in Christian Theology* (Billingham: Lexham, 2018), p. 242.

[52]'Revelation, *sola scriptura* & Regenerate Human Reason', p. 242.

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word is said to take place in a 'cognitive fellowship' within which 'Christian discipleship includes a determined discipleship of the mind'.[53]

If revelation is to be appropriated not by faith but by human reason, even if aided by grace, perhaps this is what you might expect when revelation itself is viewed as a matter of clear and distinct propositions. Moreover, this does begin to sound like the reversal of Kant's dictum that he had abandoned the knowledge achieved by the exercise of reason in order to make room for faith. In other words, Thompson does seem, perhaps unwittingly, to be on a quest to abolish faith by replacing it with a clear and distinct knowledge appropriated by the exercise of reason. Certainly, in this article, a discussion of the nature of faith is side-lined as Thompson seeks instead simply to provide an outline 'of what an explicitly theological account of revelation, Scripture, and human reason might look like'.[54]

Alas, an unintended consequence of a belief in the alleged clear and perspicuous revelation of the propositions of Scripture appears to be that the response of faith is displaced by human ratiocination.

I think we have to conclude that Thompsons's writing appears to show a remarkable reluctance to enter upon a serious discussion of the nature of the specific kind of knowing that is implicit in the response of faith (*fides*). This appears to be the outcome when the cognitive freedom to see or not to see that is implicit in the concept of religious faith becomes a casualty of the refusal to acknowledge the implications of the Infinite mystery of God, and the theological importance of the epistemic distance between finite human minds and the surpassing transcendence of an Infinite Reality.

This has disastrous consequences. Indeed, if 'regenerate reason' rather than faith is the appropriate human response to God's revelation of himself in the alleged clear and perspicuous propositions of the Scriptural texts, then we have to ask whether the human appropriation of God's revelation by 'regenerate reason' inevitably entails a doctrine of 'justification by reason' rather than 'justification by faith'? No doubt Thompson's answer to this would be that he believes in 'justification by faith' because it is one of the propositions of the Scriptural revelation that may be appropriated by the exercise of the 'regenerate reason'! Even so, perhaps it would not be an unfair characterization of the implications of Thompson's thesis of the clarity and perspicuity of Scripture to say, not that we Christians are justified by faith, but rather that 'justification by faith' is one of the revealed propositions found in the Scriptural texts which is appropriated by 'regenerate reason' and which Christians claim to *know* to be true with the confident certainty of logical necessity as they pursue the 'discipleship of the mind'. This in turn is said to have been revealed by God who by definition is trustworthy. In this case Christianity becomes a rationalistic philosophy expounded by suitably attired business-suited ministers of the regenerate reason. Perhaps we might prefer, as a Christian community, more simply to give thanks for the gracious gift of our justification *by faith* as we pursue lives of *true* discipleship – the discipleship of the Cross.[55]

[53]'Revelation, *sola scriptura* & Regenerate Human Reason', p. 242.

[54]'Revelation, *sola scriptura* & Regenerate Human Reason', p. 243.

[55]See Mark's redaction of the tradition concerning Jesus and his messianic significance. His threefold presentation of Jesus' prediction of his passion (*Mark* 8.31, *Mark* 9.31 and *Mark* 10.32–34) is followed by the

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Finally, Mark Thompson's defence of the clarity and perspicuity of Scripture leads him into a disastrous theological predicament: it is not just the nature of faith that is undermined but the integrity of Christan orthodoxy. Thompson's confident view of the clarity and perspicuity, reliability and truthfulness, indeed inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture, means that he tends to stand loosely to any reliance on the interpretative support of the dogmatic traditions of early Christianity in unpacking the meaning of Scripture. If anything, the reverse is the case, the doctrinal formulations of primitive Christianity are judged simply to be the work of men; they are subject to the corrective norms of Scripture. Though Thompson is prepared to acknowledge the legitimacy of external aids to the interpretation of Scripture, by which he probably includes reason and tradition, he has no interest in exploring Hooker's interplay of Scripture, tradition and reason. Rather, he perfunctorily acknowledges that we read '. . . from within a context: personal, cultural, and even denominational', which means that 'We acknowledge other 'authorities' when it comes to knowledge – Scripture is not the only authority, though it is the *final* authority'.[56]

While allowing for at least a subsidiary role for 'other authorities' in this way, in his own exegetical practice, however, Thompson nevertheless tends to read Scripture without drawing upon outside 'authorities' including the dogmatic traditions of early Christianity. If anything, with the possible help of the Holy Spirit, the clarity and perspicuity of Scripture means that *in practice* Scripture is capable of standing on its own feet and interpreting itself. It is therefore interpreted and expounded by Thompson with little interpretative support.

For example, on page 58 of his first book *A Clear and Present Word*, the Chalcedonian Definition of the two natures of Christ and its directive not to separate them, but also (importantly) not to confuse them, is nowhere in sight. Thompson simply takes the property of obedience that the author of *Hebrews* assures us Christ *learned* 'in the days of his flesh' and assigns it as an eternal divine property also of the pre-incarnate heavenly Son. Thus, he speaks of '. . . the decision of the eternal Son to be incarnate, to take the form of a servant and to die bearing the sins of the world' as all exhibiting the Son's obedience. Indeed, he declares: 'These decisions are described in the New Testament in terms of obedience'.[57] It is as though the Chalcedonian definition of two natures, a divine and a human, that are not to be confused are pushed together to form a single composite divine/human nature that expresses a single willing obedience. This tends to suggest that we are to understand the Incarnate Son to be possessed of a single composite divine/human will (Monothelitism) rather than two wills coordinate with his two natures (orthodox Dyothelitism).

Thompson's problem is that the clarification of Chalcedon by the definition of the two wills, coordinate with the two natures of the Incarnate Christ, at the Third

threefold presentation of Jesus' call to true discipleship (*Mark* 8.34–9.1: *Mark* 9.35–10:31, *Mark* 10.38–45), and then the ensuing account of the giving of sight to Blind Bartimaeus (*Mark* 10.46–52). This is more than just a miracle story, for Bartimaeus becomes the paradigm of the true disciple, who, having received the gift of sight, then follows Jesus 'in the way' (*Mark* 10.52). The passion narrative of the way of the cross then begins.

[56]*The Doctrine of Scripture*, p. 158.

[57]*A Clear and Present Word,* p. 58.

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Council of Constantinople (and the vindication of the teaching of Maximus the Confessor by defining Monothelitism as a heresy as against orthodox Dyothelitism) is not allowed to condition his understanding of the Scriptural texts. Instead, at this point he simply quotes *Philippians* 2:5–11 and *Hebrews* 5:7–10 as Scriptural evidence that is assumed to warrant his own view that all decisions, whether pre-incarnate decisions of the divine Son, or earthly human decisions of the historical Jesus, are to be understood it terms of obedience. The orthodox Dyothelite Christian understanding is that the divine will of the pre-Incarnate Son, which is equally shared with the Father along with their equally shared divine nature, is the will for the redemption of humanity; the specific human will of the human Jesus in accordance with his human nature is to be obedient to his divine calling.

The implicit Monothelitism of Thompson's incorporation of Jesus' willing obedience, which properly belongs to Jesus' human nature, also into the divine nature as a property of the Eternal Son, in turn means that Thompson generates the implication of two eternal divine though complementary wills: the alleged obediently submissive will (wrongly) attributed to the Eternal Son being by implication complementary to the commanding will of the Father. Unfortunately, this is exactly what invites the concerning conclusion with which I began this paper – that this inevitably leads to a resulting tri-theism of multiple divine wills; at the same time talk of the subordination of the Son's will to the commanding will of the Father ignites the unfortunate spectre of Neo-Arianism.

Mark Thompson's sustained and concerted attempt to dismiss the whole apophatic tradition of respect for the ultimate mystery of God who surpasses all understanding, and his steadfast refusal to take note of the implications of this for those who venture to attempt to speak of God in finite human language, all on the ground that this undermines 'the Biblical view of God', is seriously mistaken. What the apophatic tradition may rightly be said to undermine is actually *a reading* of the Scriptural revelation that would quite mistakenly invite us to believe that God is finite, material, divisible, affected and thus changed by what goes on in the world, with 'a body, parts and passions', and who is said to be clearly and distinctly known, represented and spoken about in concrete images and words that are understood to be literally descriptive. The apophatic method seeks to achieve its purpose in the first instance simply by robustly asserting the negative of all these properties – by affirming that God is infinite, immaterial, impassible, indivisible, unchangeable, atemporal and ineffable.

Furthermore, this is a God who reveals sufficient of his nature and will to humans to allow them to come to *faith* by freely placing their trust in him, but insufficient to compel assent. Consequently, the apophatic method insists that what is perceived in faith is sufficient to help faithful people in the living of their religious and moral lives in communion with him and in accordance with the perception of his will, without necessarily providing them with an exact knowledge of inerrant and infallible information. As H. L. Mansell said in his Bampton Lectures of 1858, what is revealed of God is in this sense *regulative* rather than theoretically or speculatively *informative*.[58]

[58]H. L. Mansel, *The Limits of Religious Thought* (London: John Murray, 1858/59), Lectures iv and v.

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As it happens Mark Thompson appears at one point to come close to reflecting Mansel's position, if perhaps inadvertently, when he makes the claim that God 'gives us a knowledge of himself (that) we are able to apprehend in our present condition'[59] as 'the ultimate accommodation to our capacity'.[60] This is rightly said to be in the apparently regulative interests of a 'God who provides all the resources necessary for us to live faithfully'.[61] These modest claims are somewhat removed from Thompson's more characteristically absolute assertions about the clarity and perspicuity, inerrancy and infallible truth of every word of the Scriptural texts, whether they have 'to do with doctrine or morality or with the social, physical, or life sciences'.

Curiously, in referencing Mansel's uncompromisingly apophatic emphasis on the ultimate incomprehensibility and mystery of God, Thompson also makes the positive point that this means that 'none of us are in a position to criticise revealed religion' ... 'and so we can't criticise the Bible'.[62] Mansel certainly pointed out that the inability of the human mind to form clear and distinct conceptions of God means that the same inability also 'disqualifies us from proving or for disproving a given doctrine'.[63] However, Thompson chooses to make no mention at all of Mansel's fundamental thesis that God's revelation is *regulative* rather than simply or *speculatively informative*. Instead, he uses Mansel to further his own idiosyncratic thesis that apophaticism undermines the Biblical presentation of God and leads to contemporary agnosticism. Thus, he somewhat dismissively notes that in the course of the nineteenth-century debate generated by Mansel's lectures 'some' argued that Mansel had 'unwittingly destroyed the foundations of traditional Christian theology'.[64]

Apart from being regulative of the actual practice of a life of faith rather than abstractly speculative and clearly and distinctly informative, the Scriptural revelation itself invites us to believe that God acts in accordance with his ultimate revelation in Jesus Christ who came in self-effacing lowliness as 'one who serves' – that is to say in a way that is not powerfully coercive but gently persuasive, leaving us the freedom to respond or not to respond as responsible self-determining persons. This is by contrast with the received notion of an awaited Messiah of political and military power whose arrival was anticipated to be characterized by coercive self-assertive power.

In noting that faith is a response to a God who does not compel assent but who instead acts persuasively, we may profitably note Paul's declaration of his own ultimate faith commitment as something of which he was 'persuaded' in *Romans* 8.38. There the verbal emphasis appears to be related to the rhetoric of persuasion

[59]*Too Big for Words?* p. 53. The use of the word 'apprehend' as distinct from 'comprehend' here may admittedly be an unintended slip, though happily so.

[60]*Too Big for Words?* p. 54. Calvin says essentially the same thing in his celebrated passage about 'the God who lisps': 'Such modes of expression, therefore, do not so much express what kind of a being God is, as accommodate the knowledge of him to our feebleness. In doing so, he must, of course, stoop far below his proper height' (*Institutes*, I, xiii, 1).

[61]*Too Big for Words?* p. 47.

[62]*Too Big for Words?* p. 45.

[63]H. L. Mansel, Preface to the Fourth edition of *The Limits of Religious Thought* (1859), p. xi.

[64]*Too Big for Words*? p. 45, citing Bernard Lightman, *The Origins of Agnosticism: Victorian Unbelief and the Limits of Knowledge* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1987), pp. 28, 68.

rather than to a strictly logical set of necessary entailments based on clear and distinct evidence and the exercise of reason. In other words, the intuitive *certitude* of faith of which Paul said he was 'persuaded' is not to be confused with the absolute *certainty* of logical necessity that may or may not attach to propositions. It is possible to be absolutely certain that 'all bachelors are unmarried'. This is a matter of logical necessity. But faith is not like that. Nor is the deposit of faith in and through which we by faith discern the Word of God in the Christian Scriptures with all their rich metaphorical and analogical imagery.

By contrast, Thompson's quest to replace what he calls Kant's subjective '*belief*' with a kind of objective certainty allegedly guaranteed by a Scriptural revelation that is said to be clear and perspicuous, inerrant and infallibly true, appears to be wishful thinking. Ironically, far from furnishing believers with a confident objective certainty, the acceptance of the thesis of the clarity and perspicuity of Scripture may itself ultimately be a paradigm of ultra-subjective *belief* but unfortunately lacking even mildly persuasive evidential warrant.

This raises an important question as to whether the theological quest is a matter of 'faith seeking understanding' or the illusory pursuit of an alleged objective certainty in the apparent hope that it will close off all inquiry through the confident articulation of a set of inerrant and infallible assertions. In the absence of the Emperor Constantine to direct and cajole us, not to mention to bank-roll our travel, and accommodation for three months, as he did at Nicaea, it seems that we are condemned to have to contend with these issues for some time to come.

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