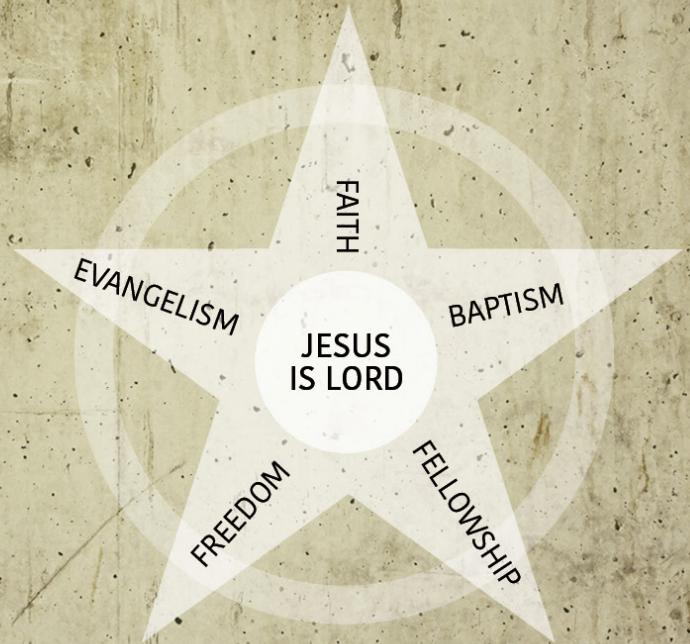


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To What Extent do Theological Research Methods Run the Danger of ‘Eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil’? (Gen 2 v 17)

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Introduction

As an epigraph for *On The Origin of Species*, Charles Darwin quoted from Francis Bacon;

let no man out of a weak conceit of sobriety, or an ill-applied moderation, think or maintain, that a man can search too far or be too well studied in the book of God's word or in the book of God's work [...] but rather let men endeavour an endless progress or proficience in both.¹

Since its publication, many have accused Darwin's *magnum opus* of committing the sin described in this essay's title. Certainly, both Bacon and Darwin seem to advocate a modernist viewpoint that there is no such thing as too much knowledge, and that scientific method should be enthusiastically embraced as the way of leading us from error into truth. Schleiermacher had earlier argued that theology itself should be regarded as a legitimate science within the academy, which resulted in theology subdividing into separate academic disciplines, resulting in the 'fourfold' of Bible, church history, dogmatics and practical theology.² But was all this optimism entirely healthy? Could theological enquiry actually be dangerous? To address this, we will begin by exegeting

¹ Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species: By Means of Natural Selection*, 150th anniversary landmark ed. (London: Penguin, 2009), 6.

² Mary McClintock Fulkerson, 'Systematic Theology' in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology* edited by Bonnie J. McLemore (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 360-61.

Genesis 2:17 and then consider how different approaches to theological research might risk transgression, and how this can be guarded against.

Genesis 2:17

Although Genesis 2-3 is commonly read as a foundational text for doctrines of ‘the fall’, the explanation of evil and the origin of death, Walter Brueggemann suggests it is in fact none of these things, which instead come as Christian doctrines from Paul’s exegesis in Romans 5:12-21, which in turn draws on later writings such as IV Ezra.³ For Brueggemann, the Genesis text is less about offering explanations, and more about setting out the call ‘to live in God’s world, with God’s other creatures, *on God’s terms*’ (his italics).⁴ Furthermore, Paul’s writing should not be read as systematic theology or theodicy, rather he is proclaiming good news.⁵ Paul Goodliff does read Genesis 2-3 as describing a fall from innocence, but he sees this as analogous to child development, whereby at around six months old, cutting teeth and gaining mobility, she requires parents to impose boundaries and prohibitions.⁶ Read in both of these ways, the prohibition of v17 is not to be seen as an arbitrary or wilful threat imposed by a despotic God who somehow delights in limiting human freedom, but as a further expression of grace towards his creatures, concerned for their well-being and flourishing.⁷ To focus on the *prohibition* of the tree of knowledge is also to underplay the greater *permission* granted to Adam and Eve—only one tree in the garden is prohibited. Bonhoeffer agrees that pre-fall Adam sees only grace, not prohibition, in the relationship between limited creature and limitless creator.⁸

Nevertheless, the passage clearly serves as a warning of various kinds of harm which may arise from eating ‘of the tree of the knowledge of

³ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 42.

⁴ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 40.

⁵ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 43.

⁶ Paul Goodliff, *With Unveiled Face: A Pastoral and Theological Exploration of Shame* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2005), 12.

⁷ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 48.

⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3* translated by Douglas S. Bax (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 87.

good and evil?. The exact meaning of the two trees in the garden is not spelled out in the text, but it is clear that they represent the potential for life and death. Bonnie Miller-McLemore points out that ‘tree’ has been a powerful image across cultures, usually symbolising life and unity, but sometimes having a dark side, as with the lynch tree of Billie Holiday’s *Strange Fruit*.⁹

Brueggemann suggests that the tree of life may refer to a royal wisdom tradition which saw a king’s appointed role as guarding the mysteries of life and knowledge, as suggested in Proverbs 25:2-3.¹⁰ The meaning of the tree of knowledge is even less clear; it is not mentioned elsewhere in scripture and ‘nothing is explained’ regarding its nature.¹¹ This gap invites speculation, but such speculation may actually be the very danger that the text is warning against! Webster distinguishes between ‘studiousness’ and ‘curiosity’, the latter of which ‘gives itself promiscuously to whatever sources of fascination present themselves, particularly if they are novel’.¹² Idly imagining what God might have meant when he hasn’t told us may lead to error in many forms. Ultimately, the serpent persuades Eve to eat the forbidden fruit by arousing sceptical curiosity in her; ‘Did God say...?’¹³ Scepticism leads to speculation which leads to hasty action without sufficient reflection; this is a pertinent warning for those of us eager to embark on theological research.

What is clear, for Brueggemann at least, is that the text ‘is not a counsel to obscurantism, as though knowing nothing is an act of fidelity’.¹⁴ If the text is challenging the royal wisdom tradition, then it does so by challenging the equation of knowledge and power; perhaps some ‘modes of knowledge [come] at too high a cost’ but it is not suggesting that knowledge itself is bad.¹⁵ Indeed in v19 Adam is

⁹ Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Christian Theology in Practice: Discovering a Discipline* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 19.

¹⁰ This would imply a late, possibly post-exilic date for the compiled Genesis text.

¹¹ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 45-6 and 51.

¹² John Webster, ‘What Makes Theology Theological?’, *Journal of Analytic Theology* 3 (2015): 26.

¹³ Genesis 3:1.

¹⁴ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 51.

¹⁵ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 51.

invited to undertake an exercise in taxonomy not unlike the later work of Darwin himself. For Brueggemann, the sin of the gardeners was in wanting knowledge *instead of* trust, and the tragedy was that ‘they now know more that they could have wanted’.¹⁶ This desire to go beyond trust as God’s creatures is fundamentally a sin of pride. Adam and Eve were not created to be kings, nor did God’s purposes for humanity include kingship (1 Samuel 8, Matthew 20:25-6 and 1 Peter 5:3), but humans craved more. Pride led to a desire for power instead of trust.

It is important at this stage to emphasise that just as the passage seeks to describe rather than explain, so too we must acknowledge that human sinfulness, like evil itself, is not ultimately ‘explicable’.¹⁷ Bonhoeffer says evil must remain ‘completely incomprehensible [because] every attempt to make it understandable merely takes the form of an accusation that the creature hurls against the Creator’.¹⁸ Neither does God resolve evil through explanation, but instead comes to ‘suffer the worst that evil could do to him’.¹⁹ Nor should we exaggerate the satanic component of evil which might reduce human culpability or elevate it to something it is not. Charles Mathewes explores Hannah Arendt’s description of Adolf Eichmann’s trial in Jerusalem to describe an evil which, although profound and extreme, was carried out in a banal, bureaucratic manner.²⁰ The simple careless absence of good can cause immense harm; failing to believe in God’s ultimate good can result in highly toxic relativism.

But the question remains as to whether there are areas of knowledge which we would do well to avoid? Can theological research probe forbidden knowledge? For Barth all knowledge of God comes from ‘the revelation of His Word by the Holy Spirit’.²¹ Thus, unless God

¹⁶ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 49.

¹⁷ T. A. Noble, ‘Original Sin and the Fall: definitions and a proposal’ in *Darwin, Creation and the Fall: Theological Challenges* edited by R. J. Berry and T.A. Noble (Nottingham: Apollos, 2010), 113.

¹⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 119.

¹⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 114.

²⁰ Charles T. Mathewes, ‘A Tale of Two Judgments: Bonhoeffer and Arendt on Evil, Understanding, and Limits’, *Journal of Religion* 80.3 (2000): 375–404.

²¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, ed. G. Bromiley and T. Torrance (London: T & T Clark, 2009), 1.

reveals himself, such knowledge is impossible, and if he has revealed himself, we can conclude that in those respects he desires to be known. However, such knowledge is not 'objective' it is 'indirectly objective' as it comes to us in forms suitable to us as his creatures: Jesus Christ, the scriptures, the church, preaching, sacraments and 'in the whole world of His work and sign'.²² Without these mediators it is impossible to know God *in abstractio*, despite repeated human attempts to do so which Barth describes as 'like a rank weed, clinging even to what is apparently the soundest stalk, weakening it and finally killing it'.²³ This should warn us that misplaced attempts to know the unknowable may arise from high motives, which is a salutary lesson even for confessing theological researchers. There are aspects of God's objectivity which 'remain a mystery to us' even as he reveals himself with 'clarity and certainty'.²⁴ Similarly, Bonhoeffer saw Eve's conversation with the serpent as a theological discussion 'about God' but in a way that 'reaches beyond' God (and thus misses the target).²⁵ Bonhoeffer views the resulting desire to be like God as a misplaced form of excessive 'piety' rather than rebelliousness though ultimately that is what it turns out to be.²⁶ In our world such 'piety' more often takes the form of a secular political correctness which critically rejects the normative teachings of the church, preferring to define 'good and evil' in individualistic terms, once more leading to an unrooted relativism.

We have therefore identified four possible dangers suggested by Genesis 2:17; scepticism or idle speculation, pride desiring power instead of trust, banal relativistic carelessness, and an excessive piety which attempts to reach beyond God's revelation. However, if we exercise a healthy restraint towards the 'hidden and inscrutable' and carefully honour secrets about the human heart which should not be

²² Barth, *CD II/1*, 14 and 21.

²³ Barth, *CD II/1*, 20.

²⁴ Barth, *CD II/1*, 39.

²⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 111.

²⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 116.

exposed, then none of this should represent a call to ignorance, but rather to trust.²⁷

Theological research categorisation and risk analysis.

Theological research may take many forms each of which may be prone to one or more of these dangers. It can be categorised according to the field of study in which it is situated (biblical studies, church history, doctrine or practical theology) or the methodologies used (literature review, biblical exegesis, qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods research) but there is nearly always some degree of overlap across disciplines, and the best theological research often aims for 'thick descriptions' drawing on a number of methodologies. Creswell and Creswell suggest that the more important fundamental categorisation is the underlying worldview adopted by the researcher which may take one of four forms.²⁸ Postpositivism affirms the presence of an objective reality which is being investigated (though it is 'post' in the sense that it acknowledges the limits to our knowledge capabilities).²⁹ Constructivism contends that individuals develop subjective interpretations of the world, and the researcher aims to collate these meanings via open-ended questions probing the interaction between individuals to arrive at a socially constructed meaning.³⁰ Transformative worldviews are politically shaped, intending to move beyond description towards bringing change especially for the marginalized.³¹ Finally the pragmatic worldview is concerned with what works to solve a problem, rather than being committed to developing an underlying theory.³² We will consider each worldview, how it shapes theological research, and what dangers it may be prone to, in turn.

²⁷ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 52.

²⁸ John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2018), 5.

²⁹ Creswell and Creswell, *Research Design*, 6-7.

³⁰ Creswell and Creswell, *Research Design*, 7-8.

³¹ Creswell and Creswell, *Research Design*, 9-10.

³² Creswell and Creswell, *Research Design*, 10-11.

Postpositivism fits with the classical scientific method approach whereby objective truth is available to be investigated. By using rigorous methodology and a quantitative approach it seeks to avoid errors of bias and subjectivity. Positivist approaches that provide a sense of certainty may be prone to the sin of pride and the misappropriation of power that can come from those in control of systems of knowledge which tend towards reductionism. For example ‘scientism’, the belief that ‘the last word on what we are is to be spoken by natural science’ is popular with the ‘new atheists’ of Dawkins etc.³³ Medawar recognised the fallacy of this belief in 1984; even while acknowledging the enormous explanatory power of science he was nevertheless content to allow for the possible validity of ‘transcendent’ answers arising from myth, metaphysics or religion.³⁴ Webster agrees that theological enquiry should result not just in objective ‘science’ but also in contemplative and practical outcomes—it should shape and change us.³⁵ Theological researchers who are resistant to this change may be guilty of the pride that Genesis warns against. Bonhoeffer graphically describes the consequences of this, as unregenerate humankind becomes ‘the lord of its own world [...] the solitary lord and despot of its own mute, violated, silenced, dead, ego-world’.³⁶

Constructivism is a useful approach when the research encompasses a wide range of viewpoints concerning the area being studied. It may be employed when exploring both doctrinal or practical matters, employing the methods of interview, questionnaire, and literature reviews to collate ideas. The greatest risk may be of misrepresenting the views of others, either due to an unrecognised prior commitment on behalf of the researcher, or through carelessness. Arendt reminded us that great harm can result from banal carelessness towards others, and this highlights the importance of a robust ethical approach to research. Research ethics should never be merely a bureaucratic tick-box exercise in ‘moral fastidiousness’ but should arise from genuine

³³ Raymond Tallis, *Aping Mankind: Neuromania, Darwinitis and the Misrepresentation of Humanity* (Durham: Acumen, 2012), 343.

³⁴ Peter Medawar, *The Limits of Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 88.

³⁵ Webster, ‘What Makes Theology Theological?’, 17-28.

³⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 142.

concern to protect the subjects of research from any possible harm, including unintended consequences.³⁷ Beauchamp and Childress set out four widely accepted principles of ethics in 1977 which are applicable across many disciplines; respecting the autonomy of the subject, beneficence (desiring their good), non-maleficence (avoiding their harm) and justice (ensuring that benefits and risks are shared fairly within society).³⁸ To maximise autonomy when conducting a wide range of qualitative research (especially narrative, phenomenological, ethnographic and case studies) it is a pre-requisite to obtain informed consent, being clear about confidentiality and having due regard for the ‘secrets of the human heart’.³⁹

Transformative worldview. Helen Cameron calls this ‘critical realism’, in that it seeks to critique underlying metanarratives of meaning.⁴⁰ But this presents a problem for the confessing theological researcher who does believe in a metanarrative of God’s overarching plan for his creation which is not open to question. Of course, criticising our *human understanding* of God’s plan is fair game, but should this include critiquing received church tradition? Bennett *et al* recognise ‘an uneasy balance’ between commitment and challenge when researchers confront church tradition.⁴¹ The ‘knowledge of good and evil’ in Genesis implies a form of moral autonomy; in this sense Adam and Eve become ‘like God’, but as they are finite their determination of right and wrong is flawed.⁴² The risk of an overly critical worldview for theological research may lie either in extending criticism beyond its proper scope through a misplaced belief in what constitutes ‘perfection’ as defined by secular political correctness, or conversely in refraining from critiquing church tradition through a misplaced sense

³⁷ Mathewes, ‘A Tale of Two Judgments’, 388.

³⁸ Tom Beauchamp and James Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 7th ed (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 13.

³⁹ Creswell and Creswell, *Research Design*, 13.

⁴⁰ Helen Cameron and Catherine Duce, *Researching Practice in Ministry and Mission: A Companion* (London: SCM, 2013), 30.

⁴¹ Zoë Bennett, Elaine Graham, Stephen Pattison and Heather Walton, *Imitation to Research in Practical Theology* (London: Routledge, 2018), 106.

⁴² A.N.S. Lane, ‘Irenaeus on the Fall and Original Sin’ in *Darwin, Creation and the Fall* edited by R J Berry and T A Noble, 145.

of religious piety. A. N. S. Lane picks up the child-development analogy found in Genesis to suggest that Adam was not created ‘perfect’ or ‘sinful’ but ‘immature’.⁴³ Similarly in Hebrews 5:8-9 Christ learns obedience and becomes perfected. Transformation is certainly part of God’s design, but this is not merely ‘restoration’, it is towards a telos of ‘vastly more’ which is God’s plan, not our own.⁴⁴ Theological researchers should be cautious lest their pious desire for ‘perfection’ blind them to their own imperfect capacity for critical judgment.

Pragmatic approaches seek to link theory and practice and are exemplified by theological action research (TAR) and mixed methods research (MMR). MMR combines qualitative and quantitative research to capture the full complexity of the matter being studied and to propose answers.⁴⁵ TAR similarly attends to all ‘four voices’ of theology (normative, formal, espoused and operant), but its focus on ‘what works’ can lead to accusations of value-free relativism.⁴⁶ Taken to an extreme this may result in excessive scepticism towards any prior truth claims—such scepticism may be inappropriate in theology. Christian theology already knows the answer to life’s problems, they have been revealed in the story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.⁴⁷ Properly understood therefore, theological research is not about reductively simplifying situations, but rather ‘complexifying’ them; exploring the complexities of the questions to which the answers of Christianity are given, rather than questioning the answers themselves.⁴⁸

A further ethical consideration for theological research, especially but not solely that of a pragmatic or action research nature, is that theology should aim to result in greater faithfulness towards God. Thus it

⁴³ Lane, ‘Irenaeus on the Fall and Original Sin’, 131.

⁴⁴ Lane, ‘Irenaeus on the Fall and Original Sin’, 133.

⁴⁵ Creswell and Creswell, *Research Design*, 4.

⁴⁶ Helen Cameron, Deborah Bhatti, Catherine Duce, James Sweeney and Clare Watkins, *Talking about God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (London: SCM, 2010), 54 and 43.

⁴⁷ Miller-McLemore, *Christian Theology in Practice*, 30.

⁴⁸ John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM, 2006), 13.

‘requires more than simply problem-solving. It involves consciousness-raising’.⁴⁹

Conclusion

Throughout the Bible, wisdom and knowledge are regarded as positive goods to be pursued, for example Proverbs 15:14. In Colossians 2:2-8 Paul also encourages wisdom and knowledge where this is compatible with Jesus Christ, but warns against human argument (pride), deceptive philosophy (scepticism) blind tradition (excessive piety) and spiritual syncretism (relativism). By rooting our theological research in Jesus Christ, including an openness to be transformed by his Spirit as we learn more about the bible, doctrine, the church and practical matters, we can guard against these errors. Berry and Noble conclude their study of Darwin and Creation saying 'It is our contention that there is no conflict between Holy Scripture and modern science.'⁵⁰ This essay similarly contends that knowledge derived from theological research, when conducted with appropriate reverence towards God and ethical regard towards its subjects, and with an appropriate awareness of its own limitations, is also not in conflict with God's purposes and may enrich his church and help to build his kingdom.

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⁴⁹ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 256.

⁵⁰ R. J. Berry and T. A. Noble, 'Epilogue: the sea of faith – Darwin didn't drain it' in *Darwin, Creation and Fall* edited by R. J. Berry and T. A. Noble, 204.