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Thompson's "The God of the Gospel of John" - Book Review

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highlighting of the New Testament notion of Christ as the divine image. His summary of this masterful middle section of the book suggests that “the biblical narrative of the *imago Dei* moves from creation to Christ and then on to new creation.”

The two concluding chapters address the place of sexuality in Christian anthropology and, as by now anticipated, the social self in the new community. He argues that bonding is the goal of human sexuality, which itself drives us toward community—bonding, unfortunately, remains an underdeveloped idea. Via an *analogia relationis*, however, Grenz makes a connection between human relationality as sexually differentiated and the relational, i.e., Trinitarian, God. The point of connection is Christ who is the true image of God. Through union with Christ one shares in Christ’s relationship to God and, as such, is transformed into the image of God in Christ. It is a short move now to say that this relational self is the ecclesial self, the new humanity in communion with God. Thus he completes his constructive project, which has been to speak about humankind by viewing the human from the perspective of an understanding of God.

This is a wonderful, demanding and important book. It is long (too long?), but one wishes that Grenz had more to say on the ecclesial self, especially the relationship between such a self and the Eucharist. Also, he, along with most advocates of the social Trinity, leaves inadequately treated the problem of the unity of God. However, this reviewer writing as a pastoral theologian welcomes this theological anthropology as a resource in the work of reconstructing pastoral theology upon an adequate foundation, and is happy to place it alongside a book of similar importance, Ellen T. Charry’s, *By the Renewing of Your Mind*.

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In her new book on God in the Fourth Gospel, bringing the full fruit of over a decade of research to bear on the subject, Professor Marianne Meye Thompson seeks to remedy what N. A. Dahl calls “The Neglected Factor in New Testament Theology”: namely, adequate discussions of God. Scholarly focus on God in the Gospel of John is an especially needed venture because nineteen centuries of Johannine studies have focused primarily upon John’s
distinctive and provocative Christology, and Professor Thompson seeks to shift the appraisal of John's thematic focus from a Christocentric to a Theocentric one. This, of course, runs contrary to Robert Kysar's *Forschungsbericht*, evidencing correctly that "the scholarly mainstream continues to balk at anything but a Christocentric course" when it comes to John's theological framework. Her enlistment of a few other weighty scholars, in addition to Dahl, as harbingers who supposedly "have argued convincingly that Christology is indeed an aspect of theology and only in that perspective properly grasped" remains, however, untempered by the conviction of Oscar Cullmann (*The Christology of the New Testament*, a very important monograph on her subject, neither engaged nor found in her bibliography), that as far as early Christians were concerned, no distinction was made between the first and second articles of faith confessions. For them, Christology was Theology, and vice versa. Thompson nonetheless claims to set the record straight with a monograph focusing on one topic: the identity of God in the Fourth Gospel, a work which is complemented by a nearly simultaneous *Semeia* volume on the Father in the Fourth Gospel, in which Thompson has also contributed an essay.

In so doing, Thompson approaches her task within five chapters on "The Meaning of 'God',' "The Living Father," "The Knowledge of God," "The Spirit of God," and "The Worship of God." These chapters are preceded by a helpful introduction and followed by concluding reflections on "The God of the Gospel of John," which poses helpful implications of her findings for persons of faith today. The book has many strengths. Professor Thompson takes her subject seriously and applies meaningfully much of the best of recent scholarship, while at the same time engaging appropriately relevant subjects in Jewish literature. At the very least, her book shows the pervasiveness of God, "the Father," and references to the Deity in John (far more than any of the other gospels). But, as with John's Christological tensions, John is also not without its Theological perplexities.

First, while God is indeed an important subject within John, at least 70 of the 80 or so usages of the word, *Theos*, have a direct or indirect reference to Jesus, the Son. In fact, the pervasive reasons for mentioning "God," and even more so, "the Father," in John, relate directly to the emissary role of Jesus as the divine agent and the resulting disputations among those whose understandings of God are threatened by his representative claims. Thompson rightly acknowledges the "functional" character of John's treatment of God, just as John's is a "functional" Christology; but if the latter serves to reach the world with divine revelation and love, the former serves to bolster the authority of the particular agent under discussion, which is why studies of
Jesus and God cannot be separated in John. Thompson, of course, is aware of these facts, and her work confirms that Barrett is indeed justified in referring to John's as a Theocentric Christology. Whether John's framework, or thematic core gets a theological appraisal over and above a christological one, however, has yet to be demonstrated. If anything, Thompson's work shows also that John's is a pervasively Christocentric Theology. This volumelength treatment of God in John demonstrates, if nothing else, how centrally just about everything said about God in John is related to the mission and identity of Jesus as the Christ.

At times Thompson's efforts to distance Jesus from categories of deity come across as missing the point of the particular text at hand. In her discussions of John 1:1-3 and 18, for instance, she de-emphasizes the life-giving role of the Logos—the primary subject of the passage—not God alone. She also fails to engage that problematic early textual variant about "the only begotten God, who is at the Father's side, has made him known to us." One can understand why later copyists replaced Theos with Huios, but one would have appreciated a monograph on God in John grappling with this knotty matter more than just mentioning it in a note. Confusion then ensues as she opts for the later interpolation, commenting upon the Son being in the bosom of the Father, rather than God as a more primitive Johannine reference to the Son. Even Thompson's references to the God who has life in himself in John 5 must be followed by the same attribute being granted to the Son by the Father. Of course, the operative issue here is that the life-giving power of God is now being effected through the Son, and that point is well worth making. However, while Thompson's distancing of John 8:58 from Exodus 3:14 (not a theophanic association in her view, but an emphasis upon life-giving properties) might be soothing to some modern readers, it certainly was not to the audience in that virulent chapter. They clearly understood it as a blasphemous claim and began moving Jesus toward a stoning—the standard penalty for blasphemy (Lev. 24:13-16), not disputing the lineage of Abraham or Yahweh's comforting statements in Isaiah. The problem of giving Theology its fair due, unencumbered by Christology in John, is that there is almost nothing said about God in John that is not also claimed for Jesus as the Son of God, which is why John's Christology has been such a perdurant subject of interest within and beyond Christian theology. Thompson does not, however, discuss the history of those pre-Chalcedonian debates about the Father and the Son in this book, nor does she include monographs by Wiles and Pollard on the Johannine contribution to the history of christological, and therefore theological, debates. Nonetheless, this book offers several ways forward for preserving a monotheistic theology without forsaking the re-
dempptive mission and work of the Son when taking the Fourth Gospel seriously.

Coming clear from Thompson’s monograph is the cluster of important subjects about God in John related to disputes about Jesus’ legitimacy emerging from Jewish-Christian debates in the middle-to-late first-century period. This discussion reflects some of her finest work and the book’s most important contribution. Where Jesus adherents emphasized his eschatological role in the unfolding work of redemption and revelation, debates over Jesus’ legitimacy and capacity to represent God authentically brought God’s authority and workings back into the picture. At stake was (and is) the authentic worship of God, and insights into those first-century debates illumine present discussions on the subject, as well. Central to the majority of texts about God and the Father in John, however, is the agency of the Son who is to be considered equal to the Father precisely because he faithfully does nothing except what the Father instructs. Regarding Ashton’s question about sons being sent by their fathers as agents, the vineyard owner’s sending of his son in all three Synoptic traditions offers a parallel, if not a precedent. While discussing various ways of reconstructing the Jewish shaliach figure, whether the agent should be considered in juridical, mystical, angelic, or prophetic terms, Thompson misses the originative locus of these expressions, which is the prophet like Moses outlined in Deuteronomy 18:15-22 (a text not even mentioned in her book). Especially in John, the roles of God and the Father are centrally connected to the sending of a messenger who will not speak any words but God’s, about whom God will hold his hearers to account, and whose words come true because he speaks entirely on behalf of God alone. It is these sets of issues that John’s audiences debated, questioning Jesus’ legitimacy as the authentic agent sent from God (and thus having equal-to-God status), and it is around setting these issues straight that most of John’s presentations of Jesus the Son and God the Father revolve.

This causes just one more problem with Professor Thompson’s structuring of her thesis—perhaps a geometric or spatial one. God is indeed the purported source of the Son’s mission and authority in John. And, Thompson also argues correctly that the goal and teleology of John’s Christology is to lead the reader/hearer into an experience of the eternal life availed by God. But if God is the beginning and the end of John’s design, why emphasize a Theocentric appraisal of John structure? If God is the origin, the end goal, and the center of the Gospel of John, then what do we do with Jesus, and why has John’s Christology been the central Johannine interest until now? John’s narrative structure is still Christocentric, and its Theological ballast functions as the predominant coin used by Jesus adherents—and their adversaries—in
calling the hearer/reader to a response of faith to the divine initiative manifested in Jesus as God's Son. This may explain why most features attributed to God are also claimed for the Son, and this is why even the best monograph on God in the Fourth Gospel in recent years—an accolade this book likely deserves—still fails to supplant John's Christological interest and emphasis. After all, Nils Alstrup Dahl also said about John's outrageous story and its contextual setting (in "The Johannine Church and History," John Ashton, ed., *The Interpretation of John*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997; an article Thompson does not cite): "The whole outlook of the Fourth Gospel is characterized by its *consistent Christocentricity*" (emphasis mine). While Barrett and Thompson are right to emphasize the Theocentricity of John's Christology, it must also be said that the primary function of John's Theology is the bolstering of its pervasive Christocentricity. And, Marianne Meye Thompson, by focusing on God in the Fourth Gospel helps us consider anew how this is so.

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This is a useful book. Stephen R. Holmes does a good job in presenting an introduction to Jonathan Edwards' theology. Indeed Edwards' theology is Holmes's primary concern, not so much Edwards as philosopher or as psychologist of religious experience, or even as preacher. Rather it is Edwards as a theologian, within a particular theological tradition, that is the focus of attention and the book's main contribution. Holmes states that "Edwards' life and writings make sense only when it is realized that the controlling vision was theological." Holmes presents Edwards' thought within the context of Reformed theology. Theological influences on Edwards such as Francois Turretin and Petrus van Mastricht, who have been overlooked in most studies, are given due consideration by Holmes. The idea of God's glory is the organizing principle of Holmes's presentation of Edwards' theology. Thus, Holmes presents Edwards' theological system as radically theocentric. For Holmes, Edwards' view of "God in Himself," not human relationships to God, approaches the center of Edwards' system.

Holmes interacts with the relevant scholarly literature on Edwards, from