The Future of Christian Theology, by David F. Ford

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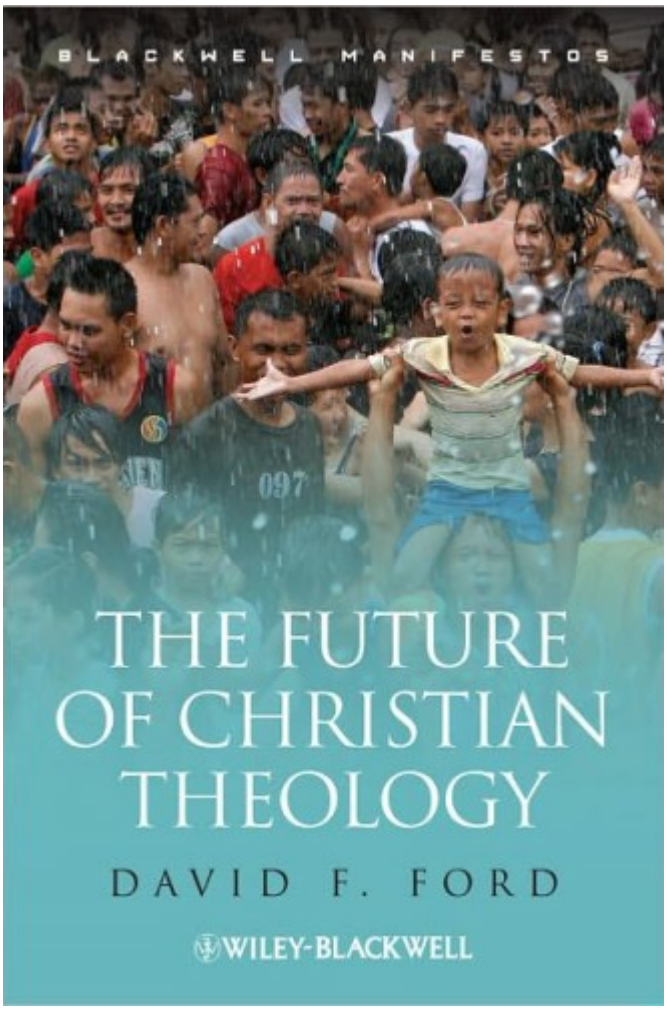
In Review



The Future of Christian Theology

By David F. Ford
Wiley-Blackwell

A manifesto hardly seems like the right genre for David F. Ford. The Irish Anglican theologian has made a career partly with the splendid encyclopedia *The Modern Theologians,* a book regularly blessed by graduate students facing their exams. Other British theologians of the last couple of generations, such as Ford's onetime classmates and friends Rowan Williams and Sarah Coakley, and the younger Radical Orthodox thinkers, would have seemed more likely candidates to write in the Blackwell Manifestos series. Though Ford's work is voluminous, he does not shout from the rooftops. He far more often synthesizes, observes and inveighs with a magisterial tone. His most important work may be what he does behind the scenes: helping build the Cambridge divinity faculty, launching the Scriptural Reasoning project and churning out graduate students who are actually employable.

Yet here Ford does offer a manifesto, and it's a happy thing that he does. It's really, really good. It thunders that we should . . . well, actually, it doesn't thunder. It ponders how theology can be wise and creative in the 21st century. If it were to thump its chest a bit more, as the genre seems to suggest it should, it would claim that everyone should do theology as Ford's colleagues in Scriptural Reasoning do. But he's leery of assigning such a stance to all theologians, and I agree with him. So the genre feels not quite right for Ford, and the book limps in places where it should gallop.

Ford opens with a brief survey of 20th-century theology, which he presents in the same tone as his encyclopedia. The consciousness of theology, he explains, has changed indelibly with the advent of feminist and ecumenical theology. He mentions a host of other trends, but these are the two through which all theologians must pass. He wants to add a third category: Scriptural Reasoning's sort of interreligious theology, in which Muslims, Christians and Jews remain faithful to their own community while joining in binding relationship to one another.

However theology is done, it will have to involve wise retrieval, delving deeply into scripture and tradition. This immersion is double: it also includes baptism in engagement with God, neighbor and the world. To be philosophically "sure-footed," as Nicholas Wolterstorff puts it, theology requires wise and creative thinking—and then it will be written better as well. (Ford uses "wise and creative" as a sort of trope; I found myself wishing he'd have added *loving,* to make it fully trinitarian.)

The next chapters strike me as the best, though they offer little that is genuinely new and much that is retrieved. One tells of Hans Urs von Balthasar's threefold dramatic schema for doing theology: Theology can be conducted as epic, in which it knows all the answers and is "impatient with ambiguity." It can be conducted as lyric, in which all truth is subjective and romantic and is conducted at the level of feelings. Or it can be conducted as drama, in which characters are genuinely open to one another, the outcome is undetermined, and all are alert to the divine Author. This handy schema is not unknown (Ford credits it to his student Ben Quash's interpretation of Balthasar), yet I found it illuminating in the hands of this master teacher.

Throughout the book Ford stops to offer exegesis of Job and John that is always interesting and occasionally breathtaking. Like his beloved Karl Barth, Ford writes exegesis that does more than illustrate; it leads (of course, Barth had the luxury of 10,000 pages compared to Ford's trim 200).

Several chapters in particular show this biblical profundity. One details a series of "cries" in scripture, first from God, then from us. The divine "The Lord is God!" should be met with a human "Alleluia!" "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again" is echoed by "Come, Lord Jesus." Moreover, the world's cries of pain should be met with the church's cry of "Thy kingdom come." The cry has been a central focus of Ford's work in recent years. It communicates that the church must attend to human need generally. This biblical grounding shows that he's not left behind his Barthianism. Far from it.

Another chapter shows the myriad of moods in which theology is conducted in the Bible: the indicative, to be sure, but also the interrogative ("How long, oh Lord?"). In another, Ford suggests that a key question for a theologian to ask is "To whom do I belong?" He then combines John's vision of unqualified belonging to Jesus with a plea to belong without excluding others, and he offers a sprinkling of insights about the importance of durable, protracted friendships (such as his with Williams and Coakley) as irreplaceable sources of creativity. Brilliant.

The book is less successful elsewhere, especially in its middle and later chapters. Not that it's not brilliant. A lesser theologian could have gotten by with less than is on display here. Rather, what Ford offers is so good I wanted to hear more.

For example, he speaks of the category of drama as that which best describes life in a democratic civil society. By the end of the chapter he's offering a list, in bullet-point form, of things the church must address (education, disability, family, money, etc.). All good and worthy things, but why were *these* chosen, and what should be said about each? Several other otherwise lovely chapters end with bulleted lists, some worthy of books in their own right, but together accumulating into . . . what? Did Ford often run out of space and have to hurry to a conclusion?

In another chapter Ford seeks a new version of theology and religious studies in which the two are not antagonists but willing partners, with religious studies being marked as "mutual" rather than "neutral." Why indeed should religious studies shy away from the normative claims made by and within religious communities? Here I wanted to cheer Ford and sic him on all the secularist U.S. religion departments (the very people, of course, who would never listen to him). Yet the chapter concludes with observations about why the British theological academy is superior in this regard to the American or the German. I'm inclined to think he's right, but why? The evidence shown here is insufficient and lacking in historical context.

Having found fault with Ford, now I must praise him again. For I've never seen a better account of what theological education is. Job's friends are those who offer packaged theology that is inattentive to new circumstances. By contrast Jesus, in the Gospels, is "receptive—a listener, a questioner, a learner of wisdom, and above all, a receiver of the Holy Spirit." What a glorious inner-trinitarian and incarnate portrait of the Son of God, and what an inviting posture for his disciples. John the evangelist is a theologian "whose feet have been washed by Jesus." His Gospel is a "pedagogy" on the "fathomless meaning of the incarnation" that draws us ever more deeply into God's incarnate wisdom and love. After all this, Ford gives a page or so on the reason we write dissertations and orally defend them. I wish my pre-Ph.D. self could have had this.

Few theologians writing today are better positioned to see where theology needs to stay the same and where it needs to change for a new century. I can see why Blackwell asked Ford to produce a manifesto and, in view of his deep passions, why he accepted. Yet I fear that the assignment is a misfire. Ford is too interesting too often, and then he lacks the time or space to develop many of his one-off insights. Those that reach full flower here are signs of just how good a much longer book, or a more focused one, might have been.