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CHAPTER TWO

SIN IN HIGH PLACES

An Interview with Carl R. Trueman



Carl R. Trueman is Professor of Historical Theology and Church History at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He is the author of *The Wages of Sin*, *Minority Report*, and *John Owen: Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man*.



MARTIN DOWNES: As you reflect back on your student years and involvement in conservative evangelical organizations in the UK, were there men who started out with evangelical convictions who later moved away from the gospel? How did you cope with that?

CARL R. TRUEMAN: I always find it hard to speak or to write about such things. It is sad to see friends fall. Of course, I have known a few such figures; and, Martin, we have both worked together enough in the past to share a number of friends who are now nowhere in terms of orthodoxy and their Christian walk. In my experience, such friends and acquaintances have fallen into two broad categories. There are those who fell into serious immorality, homosexuality, adultery, bitterness of





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spirit, etc., and whose views seemed to shift almost as a result of the practical moral move, a way of getting out from under the demands of truth. Then there are a few who really do seem to be driven by intellectual crises and problems.

How have I coped? The fall of a friend or a respected mentor is hard to stomach; but there are a number of things which help us to understand these tragedies. I have a high view of human sin. I know that, left to themselves and placed in the perfect storm of circumstances, anyone is capable of anything. Remembering this basic fact means that, though we can be disappointed and surprised by individual falls, we should not see them as failures of the gospel but failures of sinful human nature. It is what I jokingly call Zen-Calvinism: once you are enlightened about and understand the universal power of sin, you can never be wrong-footed by the fall of another. Further, it should also prevent us from standing in pharisaic judgment on such friends. Sin needs rebuking and, if necessary, church discipline; but we do this in a spirit of love to God and out of a desire to see the fallen one restored.

I must say, I do feel great personal sadness and some responsibility when I think of particular friends who have fallen and not, so far, returned to the church. It is always sobering to ask ourselves if we have failed as Christian friends in such circumstances: could we have been more available? Should we have intervened at an earlier stage when we saw the start of a self-destructive path? Why were we not the kind of people to whom our friends were able to turn with their struggles and doubts? Did we preach the gospel to our friends as we should have done? There are names I won't mention of friends who have fallen and who will always lie somewhat heavy on my conscience. Of course, everyone must take responsibility for their own actions and thoughts, but such questions are helpful in preventing self-righteous smugness relative to the failings of others.



DOWNES: Have you ever been drawn toward any views or movements that time has shown to have been unhelpful or even dangerous theologically?

TRUEMAN: I dallied briefly with Barthianism and then with Berkouwer's theology in the late 1980s. Studying at the University of Aberdeen, I found the dominant theology to be Barthianism refracted through the writings of the Torrance brothers. Berkouwer's *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth* was helpful in giving me a critical handle on Barth and helping to free me from that particular dead-end; and his *Studies in Dogmatics* also gave me an appreciation for doing theology in a self-consciously historical manner. However, as my knowledge of confessional Reformed Orthodoxy developed in the early 1990s, through reading widely in the primary texts and the relevant secondary literature, and as I came to grips with the wider sweep of Western theology as I had to teach courses on medieval thought and on Thomas Aquinas at the University of Nottingham, I began to see how Berkouwer too had absorbed a lot of Barth and how this distorted his reception of theological tradition. At that point, I started to develop a much more carefully worked out confessional theology.

In practice, the theologies of Barth and Berkouwer have really proved sterile as ecclesiastical programs. The best one can say is that they failed to stop the collapse of vital church life in Scotland, Germany, Switzerland, and the Netherlands. For all of their criticisms of the 'static' God of orthodoxy, Barthian preaching is, in my experience, sterile and dull, and fails miserably to confront listeners with the God of the Bible. I personally know of no church which has really grown through Barthian preaching.

So I would summarize by saying that I am very grateful to Barth and Berkouwer for directing me to serious dogmatics, for fuelling my interest in theology and doctrinal history, and for raising big and important questions in my mind; and



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I still enjoy reading them on occasion for the tremendous intellectual stimulation and challenge they provide; but I have ultimately found little of any real use, theological or practical, in the actual content of their theologies.

DOWNES: How should a minister keep his heart, mind and will from theological error?

TRUEMAN: No magic bullet here. The minister needs a good theological education, and then needs to maintain the basic disciplines of the Christian life – prayer and Bible reading, love to God and to neighbor. Of course, the minister does not sit under the preaching of the Word week by week, so accountability is even more of a problem for him than for others in the congregation. Presbyterianism has a structure of ministerial accountability in its church courts, but these are often impersonal and rather procedural gatherings. Even the Presbyterian minister still needs to make himself self-consciously accountable to others, a small group of one or more intimates.

One of the secrets of great leadership in any walk of life is to place those close to you who are not simply yes-men but who are prepared to be honest with you when they see you making a mistake. This is absolutely critical in the church: having true friends who speak the truth in love is vital.

I think of church leaders who simply became such objects of adulation by their people and by the wider evangelical world that, when they fell, it was clear that they had simply come to be regarded as too big to be held accountable. Nobody dared call them to account; nobody ever even suspected they needed to be held to account. I can think of others who simply started to believe their own propaganda and saw any and every criticism as a personal attack. Such people were disasters waiting to happen; and their problem was that they lost sight of the basics of the Christian life and made themselves accountable to no one. And I am always amazed at the cronies such people manage to gather around themselves: there is always someone





willing to stroke the ego of such types, to tell them how wonderful they are whatever shenanigans they get up to; yet a true friend knows the necessity of speaking the truth out of love in all circumstances.

DOWNES: What signs of potential doctrinal drift and danger do you need to keep an eye out for in ministerial students?

TRUEMAN: I am increasingly convinced that pride is the root of problems among students. I was convicted recently by a minister friend quoting to me 1 Timothy 1:5-7 (ESV):

The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions.

My friend made two observations about this passage. First, the drift into dubious theological discussion is here described as moral in origin: these characters have swerved from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith; that is why their theology is so dreadful. Second, their desire is not to teach but *to be teachers*. There is an important difference here: their focus is on their own status, not on the words they proclaim. At most, the latter are merely instrumental to getting them status and boosting their careers.

Thus, what concerns me most is that students may simply *desire to be teachers*. If that is their motivation, then they have already abandoned a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith, and their theology, no matter how orthodox, is just a means to an end and no sound thing. It is why I am very sceptical of the internal call to the ministry as a decisive or motivating factor in seeking ordination. Nine times out of ten, I believe that the church should first discern who should





be considering the Christian ministry, not simply a rubber-stamp act as a putative internal call which an individual may think he has.

Further, such students whose first desire is to be teachers are more likely to try to catch whatever is the latest trendy wave. Orthodoxy is always doomed to seem uncreative and pedestrian in the wider arena; if the aim is to be a teacher, to be the big shot, then it is more likely that orthodoxy will be less appealing in the long run – though there are those for whom orthodoxy too is simply a means to being a celebrity.

If a prideful desire to be a teacher, to be a somebody, is the fundamental problem, then one other aspect which is increasingly problematic is the whole phenomenon of the internet. Now anyone can put their views out for public consumption, without the usual processes of accountability, peer review, careful editing, timely reflection, etc., which is the norm in the scholarly world and has also been the tradition in the more theologically responsible parts of the Christian publishing industry. The internet has few quality controls and feeds narcissism. Again, I have a friend, a minister in a North American Presbyterian denomination who says that, as he reads many blogs, his overwhelming feeling is one of sadness as he sees men seriously undermining their future ministry through the venom they pour out on others. I think he is right.

Of course, all young theologians and aspiring church leaders say stupid and unpleasant things. I still blush about comments I made fifteen or twenty years ago which now seem arrogant and offensive, and certainly unworthy of a Christian. But for those of us who are older, the sins of our youth are thankfully now long vanished from the public sphere; yet such sins committed today can live on indefinitely in cyberspace. I shudder for those who have not yet grasped this basic fact and who say some frightful things on the internet which will come back to haunt them the very first time a church googles their name as part of doing routine background checks on a potential ministerial candidate. But more





than that: I shudder at the kind of self-appointed arrogance among ministerial candidates and recently-minted graduates which the internet can foster and intensify.

Paul's words to Timothy seem prophetic in times such as ours. Students should cultivate pure hearts, good consciences, and a sincere faith. That way they will safeguard their theology from becoming idle speculation.

DOWNES: If theological poison flows from the professor, to the pastor, to the pew, how can this insidious effect be kept in check?

TRUEMAN: As for professors, no system is ideal because a system is only as good as the people who make it possible; but I do believe seminaries should be accountable to a church. Now, I am a professor at an independent seminary, and I regard neither my position nor the Seminary's constitution as sinful or wrong, simply as potentially more problematic.

As we serve the church, so I think it makes more sense for us to be directly linked to the church. That has not been without its historical problems: arguably the church link is what pulled Princeton down – one reason why J. Gresham Machen determined that Westminster should be independent; but on the whole it strikes me as better. Failing that link, I am increasingly persuaded that those who train men for the ministry should be officers of the church. That at least preserves ecclesiastical accountability through the status of individual professors.

As for pastors, I was once a Baptist but am now a convinced confessional Presbyterian, and the single most significant matter which made me make this shift was the issue of ministerial accountability to a clear and coherent confessional position, with an appropriate ecclesiastical structure to regulate this. The existence of presbyteries should, in theory at least, allow for the careful monitoring and evaluation of what is being taught from denominational pulpits. Of course, as noted above, the effectiveness of the system is only as good as the men who are part of it, but I do believe the





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presbyterian form of government comes closest to what is described in the New Testament and thus is the best system there is.

As for the people, I am impressed by the seventeenth-century practice of catechizing during house-to-house visitation as a means of reinforcing what is preached from the pulpit and monitoring the penetration of the preaching into the hearts and minds of individual believers. Now, I am not sure that going from door to door, hammering on about the Shorter Catechism is necessarily the right way to go (though there are many worse things that could be done); but it seems to me that, if this particular practice is now not appropriate, the need of the hour is to find the modern-day equivalent in order to make sure that the great gospel truths and duties contained in the Word of God are clearly grasped by every believer.

DOWNES: You once described the contribution of liberalism to the church as ‘emptying pews and lives.’ How did such a destructive movement succeed in capturing the churches?

TRUEMAN: At a theoretical level, easy: the truth will always be opposed; falsehood will always prove more attractive in the long run to the unregenerate human heart. Of course, the path of liberalism was different in different nations and denominations since particular cultural, economic, social and political factors determined how the battle between truth and falsehood played out; but the basic moral dynamic is universal.

I do think that the culture of evangelicalism itself has often not helped. Belief in the truth is always difficult – doctrinally and morally. We believe not because we find it easy or straightforward but because we are commanded so to do. Yet evangelical culture often fails to acknowledge the level of struggle involved in being orthodox and thus creates unrealistic expectations for the Christian life.

Berkouwer says of Herman Bavinck (perhaps the outstanding Reformed theologian of the last two hundred years) that





the people who most angered him were those who believed exactly what he did himself, but who failed to see the problems and difficulties, the sheer struggle, involved in so doing. I carried a copy of that anecdote in my wallet for many years as I worked in university departments where my faith was constantly under challenge from friends and colleagues as a reminder that the intellectual struggles I felt were precisely to be expected in the normal Christian life; but that I had to continue to believe not because it was easy or pain-free but because of God's revealed command so to do.

The pastoral significance of this is that too often we fail to present orthodoxy as such a struggle, giving people unrealistic expectations and the false alternatives of believing easily or believing nothing at all. That is a cruel dilemma to place before people, and one that must in practice ultimately favor the 'believe nothing' option for as soon as a struggle arises, the believer has nowhere to go.

DOWNES: In your estimation are there contemporary moods and movements that could have the same effect on the church as liberalism did?

TRUEMAN: Of course. For example, the pop-appropriation of some of the sillier excesses of postmodernism by numerous writers seems to be little more than the old liberalism *redivivus*: God is silenced, His demands on human beings are rendered equivocal, theology becomes the solipsistic musings of human beings, albeit refracted through communitarian views of language as opposed to the Kantian categories of the individual self-consciousness of the old-style liberalism.

I am also concerned at the loss of the sense of God's holiness in much that passes for theological reflection. Ideas of eternal significance are batted around like ping-pong balls. The awesome holiness of God should act as a control on speculation; yet there is little evidence of that in the contemporary scene. Again, the difficulty of belief is perhaps relevant here: if you find it easy to talk of God's holiness or





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His wrath, then maybe you have never really wrestled with these doctrines. Barth's comment that all theology should be doxology is surely pertinent here.

DOWNES: The accusation has been made that evangelicals in the second half of the twentieth century went after recognition and prestige in the academy like Gadarene swine. As someone who previously taught at two British universities were you tempted to follow this trend? How did you resist?

TRUEMAN: No. Being sinlessly perfect I can honestly say I never felt that temptation but have always worked solely for the glory of God and the benefit of others. Come on, Martin, of course I did. All fallen human beings are narcissists at heart; we all want recognition, whether on the sporting field or in the workplace. I guess I am in the fortunate position, as a historian, of being able to have my cake and eat it: the scholarly guild within which I work has little interest in my theological commitments, and I can believe mad stuff like the Westminster Standards without my scholarly peers regarding that as anything other than an eccentric aberration.

Were I in systematic theology or ethics or one of the biblical fields, it would be much harder to be both a respected member of the academy and a confessional Christian. Of course, evangelicals working in those areas knew what they were getting into, so this should not surprise them; but I do think we need to pray for and support such colleagues who face unique and brutal challenges to their faith almost every day of their lives and who may well have to make a key choice between acceptance by the guild and fidelity to God's Word.

Having said that, I do think there is a distinction to be made between academic integrity and academic respectability. The failure to distinguish these two – and to fall into line with the scholarly guilds who determine the former on the basis of the latter – is problematic; and I do not think that evangelicals have thought critically enough about the



very structure of scholarly guilds and discourse in a way that allows them to make this distinction in as useful and practical a way as they should. As soon as I hear the phrase ‘but no biblical scholar believes that anymore’ my antennae go up; that’s not an argument, that’s a rhetorical ‘consent of the nations’ ploy, whatever the merits of the particular case in point. The desire to be thought well of by all is seductive; and evangelical success in the academy needs to be assessed not in terms of who is invited to speak on which scholarly platform, but who has remained faithful to God’s Word, despite all the pressure to do otherwise.

DOWNES: Why have evangelicals reduced the great Protestant confessions down to minimal statements?

TRUEMAN: Because evangelicalism, as a transdenominational, parachurch movement, needs to sideline great swathes of the faith in order to hold the alliance together. That is not a bad thing in itself. I identify myself as an evangelical and am very happy to be in common cause with brothers and sisters from other denominations who share basic commitments to the gospel. Such parachurch alliances are important in presenting a popular front for the gospel in the current climate.

Popular front evangelicalism only becomes a problem when, with its minimal doctrinal basis, it comes to be normative for how we actually understand Christianity and thus to impact how we understand the church. Then we find ourselves in a situation where tail wags dog, so to speak, where the identity of the church is shaped not by her own confession but by the exigencies of the evangelical world, where key theological issues such as divine sovereignty, baptism, and the Lord’s Supper are marginalized. Wherever we come down on these issues, Scripture does teach about them; and we have no right to make them merely negotiable matters of indifference in the church. At the ecclesiastical level, I would rather do business with a convinced Arminian or Baptist who knows that the Bible’s teaching



on the pertinent issues are important, than with someone who thinks it is all a bit unclear and not that vital anyway.

The long-term impact of abandoning the historic confessions and catechisms is wide-ranging. You stand to lose much historical identity and sense of continuity with the past. With no catechisms and confessions of any depth, you have few resources left in the face of a rising tide of theological illiteracy which leaves the way open for all manner of weird and wonderful stuff to fill the resulting vacuum. You can end up simply replacing them with doctrinal statements which, through their very minimal nature are inherently unstable. And you might find you have a theology which is unsatisfying and ultimately of little use in providing a base from which to address many of the great issues of life.

None of this is to invest historic confessions and catechisms with the authority proper to Scripture alone; but it is to point to them as serious ecclesiastical and historical attempts to wrestle with the great themes of Scripture. If you wish to abandon them, you are free to do so; but unless you can find something which does the job equally well, in just as comprehensive and catholic a fashion, you might want to think twice before you throw them away.

DOWNES: One increasingly gets the impression that evangelicals are at a crossroads. There are plenty of voices urging them to go back to an 'ancient-future' faith, some are turning to Rome or Constantinople. Why should they go to Geneva instead?

TRUEMAN: Because Geneva, or Reformed Orthodoxy, as the project was originally conceived, offers precisely an ancient-future faith. The great works of Reformed Orthodoxy and the impressive catechisms and confessions of the sixteenth century are all built upon positive reception of the ancient creeds and even the best of medieval theology.

If I have made any contribution to the understanding of Reformed Orthodoxy, it is this: the Reformed faith at its best is a brilliant and catholic articulation of the Christian





faith, as developed in the ancient church and Middle Ages, and then refracted though the necessary corrections made by Protestant exegetes and theologians in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Only as the notion of ‘Scripture alone’ has been wrested from context and come to be understood as ‘we only need to read the Bible’ has this catholic and historic dimension been lost. This has then been compounded by the abandonment of the great creeds, confessions and catechisms in our church practice. Reformed Orthodoxy gives you the best of the Christian creedal tradition, combined with vital Protestant insights such as justification by grace through faith, and the centrality of assurance to Christian experience.

The loss of historical rootedness and identity which evangelicalism seems to have experienced has left us vulnerable to the attractions of Rome and Constantinople; but it does not have to be that way. Evangelicalism has sold its birthright; we should reclaim it before it is too late.

DOWNES: Tertullian regarded Pagan philosophy as the parent and instigator of heresy. A good case could be made that many heresies are in substance based on human philosophy but are dressed up in Christian language. Is this true? Do we see contemporary examples of this?

TRUEMAN: To an extent, though I am always a little concerned that such sound-bites as those of Tertullian can take on a life of their own. All theology is to some extent parasitic upon the philosophical vocabulary of the traditionary context within which it is articulated; and the mere presence of, say, Greek philosophical terms and logic in a theological statement do not indicate that the statement is necessarily an unholy synthesis of Jerusalem and Athens.

I am more attracted to Cardinal Newman’s statement that every heresy was actually a Christian truth pushed too far and to the exclusion of other truths. Thus, Arianism was in origin an attempt to defend the transcendence of God the Father in a way that ultimately prevented a biblical understanding of





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the Son. Modalism emphasized divine unity at the expense of divine threeness. Ebionitism emphasized Christ's humanity in a way that precluded a biblical account of His divinity. Etc. etc. The key is always biblical balance, allowing God's revelation to check our speculations.

As to contemporary examples: open theism is an attempt to underscore human moral responsibility and to distance God from sin; but this is done at the expense of God's sovereignty; prosperity teaching is an attempt to emphasize the importance of praying to a God who wants the best for His people, but in a way that conflates human aspirations with God's purposes. These are just two examples; there are plenty of others.

DOWNES: When a denomination or Christian organization falls into serious theological error does history give us any encouragement that the situation can be retrieved?



TRUAMAN: Not much. There is the remarkable turnaround in the Southern Baptist Convention over recent decades, symbolized more than anything else by the conservative takeover of the Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville under the presidency of Dr Albert Mohler. That is impressive but I would guess there are structures in place within the organization that helped facilitate the move.



Beyond that, however, the picture is not so good. The Anglican evangelical approach of operating at a local level has certainly had an impact in individual parishes, and has led to some great church-planting developments, but has failed to shift the larger denomination in a more faithful direction, at least in Britain. When it is big news that a bishop defends the resurrection, we should rightly rejoice; but we should also realize that the overall doctrinal bar must be set pretty low when adherence to such a basic doctrine by a church leader is newsworthy. The Church of Scotland is no better. Encouragements at local level, but no real headway in the presbyteries or in ministerial training, where gains are only





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ever made in one area by selling out in others. You cannot reform the church without taking heat; that is what men like Dr Mohler had to do; and that is what the evangelicals in mixed denominations need to do at an institutional level.

But God is sovereign. He will build His kingdom through the power of His gospel, despite the weaknesses and failings of His church.

