

A
Manifesto
for Theological
Interpretation

EDITED BY

Craig G. Bartholomew
and Heath A. Thomas



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More and more “young fogeys” like Oden are discovering the truth that is “ever ancient, ever new” (Augustine of Hippo). It is called the catholic feast, and it is a feast to which he invites us. It is a moveable feast, still developing under the guidance of the Spirit. Oden is like cinema’s “Auntie Mame,” who observed that life is a banquet and most poor slobs are starving to death. Origen, Irenaeus, Cyril of Alexandria, Thomas Aquinas, Teresa of Avila, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley—the names fall trippingly from Oden’s tongue like a gourmet surveying a most spectacular table. Here are arguments you can sink your teeth into, conceptual flights of intoxicating complexity, and truths to die for. Far from the table, over there, *way* over there, is American theological education, where prodigal academics feed starving students on the dry husks of their clever unbelief.

Richard John Neuhaus, “An Invitation to the Feast”

The waning of Christianity as practiced in the West is easy to explain. The Christian churches have comprehensively failed in their one central task—to retell their foundational story in a way that might speak to the times.

John Carroll, *The Existential Jesus*

The biblical texts *must* be preached—under all circumstances and at any cost. The people for whom we each have a responsibility need them for living (and for dying).

Gerhard von Rad, *Biblical Interpretations in Preaching*

Schweitzer said that Jesus comes to us as one unknown. Epistemologically, if I am right, this is the wrong way round. We come to him as ones unknown, crawling back from the far country, where we had wasted our substance on riotous but ruinous historicism. But the swinehusks—the “assured results of modern criticism”—reminded us of that knowledge which arrogance had all but obliterated, and we began the journey home. But when we approached, as we have tried to do in this book, we found him running to us as one well known, whom we had spurned in the name of scholarship or even of faith, but who was still patiently waiting to be sought and found once more. And the ring on our finger and the shoes on our feet assure us that, in celebrating his kingdom and feasting at his table, we shall discover again and again not only who he is but [also] who we ourselves are: as unknown and yet well known, as dying and behold we live.

N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*

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Preface

Theological interpretation, which we define broadly as *interpretation of the Bible for the church*, is that most ancient of hermeneutics. Surprisingly and wonderfully, it is also that most recent approach to the Bible witnessed in the renaissance of theological interpretation today. In fact, it is not only that most ancient hermeneutic but also the dominant one during the last twenty centuries. It was only in the past 250 years, with the rise of historical criticism, that theological interpretation became increasingly marginalized. In reaction, we have witnessed a resurgence of theological readings of the Bible in the late twentieth century and on into today.

We welcome this renaissance as a gift, a springtime of biblical interpretation. But how are we to receive this gift, and how are we to contribute toward its maturing? The emergent theological interpretation is a “broad church,” which often raises as many questions as it does answers. Our Manifesto is an attempt to identify the key issues in theological interpretation and to propose fruitful ways forward. It is not the first word, nor is it the last word, but we hope it is a good and helpful word. It is written by a diverse group of biblical scholars, theologians, missiologists, and pastors from a range of denominations and universities and seminaries. We celebrate this diversity and welcome the interaction between church, seminary, and academy. We also hope that this work spurs other women and men toward deeper and richer interpretation of God’s Word for the church.

Scripture invites us to a feast, to the great feast of the Lamb. For all its insights and rigor, too much modern interpretation has prevented us from hearing God’s address in Scripture and feasting at his table through his Word. At its best, theological interpretation offers us a way to recover the feast of Scripture without for a moment sacrificing the insights of modern scholarship.

How should the reader approach the present volume? The first portion of the volume (before the numbered chapters) is the Manifesto itself. The Manifesto is modeled, in part, after the Lausanne Covenant, which was developed to help define theology and practice as the church went into the world for global evangelization. For the cause of Christ, that covenant enabled partnerships and alliances that cut across denominational lines. While the Manifesto does not rise to the level of a “covenant” that swears before God and fellow believers foundational theology and practice, it nonetheless is a document that gathers and presents essential tenets to help orient the church toward theological interpretation today. Because of this, we would like to see others endorse the vision set by the Manifesto as they find it to be a helpful and faithful way forward.

A word should be said about the term “Manifesto.” In meetings of the Scripture and Hermeneutics Seminar from 2012–14 (out of which the present volume emerged), some voiced concern about the term, particularly the dangers of hubris or overreach that it may connote. The contributors to this volume (and especially the editors) recognize these dangers and affirm that the term “Manifesto” does not mean the only, first, or final word on theological interpretation.

In a concentrated and concise manner, the Manifesto tries to make public the central tenets that help to orient theological reading of Scripture so as to hear God’s address. The Manifesto provides these tenets in order to spur interpreters toward fruitful *practice* of theological reading in various contexts. It is a timely word for the present day as the church charts the way forward.¹ The Manifesto, then, highlights areas informing theological interpretation that may otherwise be ignored or neglected in the reading of Scripture.

Although theoretical conversation may emerge from the Manifesto, it nonetheless is aimed toward faithful practice of reading Scripture so that God might be exalted, the church might be built up, and the saints might be equipped for missional engagement in the world. We recognize that theological interpretation of Scripture in *practice* was the capstone of the Manifesto project in the 2014 Scripture and Hermeneutics Seminar meeting in San Diego, California. “The Son of Man in the Gospels and Daniel” was the focus of the meeting, and the twelve tenets of the Manifesto drove us more deeply into Scripture to hear God’s voice and envisage the Son of Man, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Chapter-length expositions on each section follow the Manifesto. Those who produced the concentrated and concise Manifesto sections also provide

1. An analogue to our Manifesto is, for instance, the Wiley-Blackwell Manifesto series. Of particular note for the present volume is David F. Ford, *The Future of Christian Theology* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

these expositional chapters, which elaborate, with nuance and depth, the affirmations of the Manifesto. Any reader who has a question about particularities of the Manifesto is encouraged to consult the expositional chapter for explication.

This volume is an invitation for women and men to join that company of interpreters who long to hear God's address through Scripture for all of life in the present day. More, no doubt, needs to be said, and more needs to be brought to the banquet to enjoy the feast of Scripture. Yet we hope that, in some small measure, the loaves and fishes that we provide here will be multiplied so that all might feast on Scripture and thereby feast on Christ.

We are grateful for the work of many who have made this project possible. Over a three-year period, the Scripture and Hermeneutics Seminar provided the hospitable space to reflect on what theological interpretation might look like in our day. Various institutional partners helped to fund the work of the seminar, to which we are grateful. We especially acknowledge the generous contributions of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary (USA) and Trinity Theological College, Bristol (UK). We are grateful for the wonderful and lively discussions in the seminar during this time, in which we were stimulated, challenged, and encouraged in the Manifesto project. Thanks to all contributors and participants.

Heath would like to thank the administration and faculty of Southeastern for a sabbatical leave that allowed him to work on this project. Heath would also like to thank Craig for his leadership in the Scripture and Hermeneutics Seminar from its inception. His vision remains instrumental for a generation of scholars who strive to work deliberately and faithfully *coram deo*. His life and work models the collaborative, ecumenical, irenic, and hospitable spirit of theological interpretation. May his tribe increase.

A Manifesto for Theological Interpretation

1. The History and Reemergence of Theological Interpretation

Karl Barth's *Romans* commentary of 1919 can be seen as the opening salvo in the twentieth-century's renewed theological engagement with Scripture. Such theological interpretation has reacted against the forces that led to the waning of ecclesial modes of reading the Bible: the professionalization of theology; the disciplinary divide between "theology" and "biblical studies"; a shrill disdain for the church's historical practices of reading; and a secular, disenchanting view of time and history.

Attention to Scripture's life in the context of faith reminds us that the church has always practiced theological interpretation in some form, not least in and through its preaching, sacraments, and acts of charity. An understanding of theological interpretation that restricts it to a conversation between systematic theologians and biblical scholars too easily encourages forgetfulness of the church's enduring and persistent attention to Scripture. Indeed, theological interpretation has never been fully lost in the church.

Tradition, understood as the church's history of indwelling Scripture, needs to be approached as a capacious and broad space in which to explore the biblical texts. Relating to tradition faithfully is not necessarily a task of repeating what was said in the past, but of establishing how to live in communion now with past readers of the text. Reading Scripture in conversation with the church's long history of reading calls at various times for receptivity, generosity, thankfulness, and penitence. Vitally, as we relate to the past

in our bid to hear the address of God in the present, we need to be readers characterized by wisdom.

There is much to learn from the history of the church's reading of Scripture. (1) Through the practices of *lectio divina*, we can grow in our appreciation of the shape of the text and its purpose to lead us to God. (2) The church's use of the fourfold sense of Scripture (literal, allegorical, tropological, and anagogical) alerts us to the interlocked and diverse ways in which the text operates in the economy of salvation and in our lives. (3) Typological reading points us to the divine shape of history, our history as part of God's ordering of history, in which Scripture and its texts are suspended. (4) The Rule of Faith provides an indispensable context for plumbing the depth, length, height, and unity of Scripture.

The reading of Scripture as the church's book needs to incorporate the most penetrating insights and scholarly endeavors of our time and the faith of the church as a treasury handed down to us (tradition) and as something we embody now. As such, theological interpretation of Scripture can be cast as *rejoining* an enduring conversation to which modern theology and biblical studies gradually ceased contributing: it is not possible to approach the history of the church and its faith without sensitivity to how both have been formed by and with its reading of Scripture. Scripture comes to all its readers as a text that has been borne through the life of the church.

Theological interpretation comes in many forms and is practiced by Christians across the denominational spectrum. What unites the different approaches is a desire to reconnect biblical reading to the faith and practices of the church catholic and to establish, in a variety of ways, how faithful interpretation should engage with secular ways of reading the text.

It is necessary to say that the reading of Scripture is part of the church's human, and hence fallible, history. Some readings have dehumanized those with whom the church now reads Scripture attentively and prayerfully. Recognizing the church's messy history of engagement with Scripture is part of the task of receiving tradition with humility and, sometimes, penitence. Equally, we need to be alert to the church's history in its broadest sense, with awareness that sometimes we work with a restricted view of what counts as "the church's reading of Scripture." As well as reading the great texts of theological history, we also need to attend to those voices and places that the church or academic theology has marginalized, and to the ways in which Scripture has coursed through the people of God in hymns, prayers, liturgical forms, and sermons. Theological interpretation calls for an irrepressibly ecumenical form of attention, as God's church ever extends beyond particular localization in history or geography.

A healthy crossover between the academy and the church bears within it the promise of enriching theological interpretation. Discovering meaning and purpose in the created order, in relationship with the scriptural texts, calls for an enriching, intense dialogue with the past and the present, with fellow Christians and non-Christians, and with a range of methodologies and approaches. Theological interpretation needs spaces of hospitable generosity.

2. Doctrine of Scripture and Theological Interpretation

To bear fruit within such spaces of hospitality, theological interpretation needs to be informed by a robust, creative theology of Scripture. The Bible is the Word of God and the means by which God addresses his people by leading them to salvation through faith in Christ and by equipping them to live more and more into our creation-wide salvation by leading us to Christ. However, sometimes our doctrinal formulations of Scripture hinder us from hearing God's address in Scripture to this end. Various misunderstandings have contributed to this problem: a rationalism that has caused us to miss the storied nature of the Bible and reduce it to fragments of truth; an individualism that has led to a misunderstanding of the nature of the Bible as a cosmic story of redemption; a severing of the attributes of Scripture—authority, inspiration, infallibility—from their purpose; various dualisms that have reduced the Bible's all-embracing authority; and a false dilemma between the Bible as the Word of God and the words of men. We need a doctrine of Scripture that overcomes these problems and leads us to a fruitful and faithful theological interpretation.

A doctrine of Scripture begins with the insight that the Bible is part of a fuller organism of revelation. An organism has many separate parts, which all have their own particular function but also are bound together in a unity that contributes toward one single purpose. The organism of revelation has many aspects, yet in all of them God discloses himself and his purpose to us. There are various ways to distinguish these diverse components. A twofold distinction between general and special revelation has been common. Some have opted for a threefold distinction: either distinguishing revelation in creation, redemption, and Scripture; or revelation in creation, Scripture, and Christ. We find a fourfold distinction most helpful: creational revelation, redemptive revelation, Christ, and the Scriptures.

This fourfold distinction allows us to see four things clearly: (1) revelation comes in the way of creation, fall, and redemption; (2) redemptive revelation progressively unfolds in history and finds its climactic fulfillment in Jesus

Christ; (3) Scripture is the narrative record and capstone of that revelation; (4) Scripture functions authoritatively as a controlling narrative, with its many genres to lead us to salvation through faith in Christ.

Thus Scripture is not an unrelated collection of divine oracles, theological truths, and ethical principles. Flattening out Scripture in this way reduces the unified story of Scripture into isolated fragments. The Bible is a cohesive and narrative unity that tells the story of God's saving and judging acts, which finds its all-dominating center and concentrated focus in the coming and the work of Christ.

Since this story begins with the creation of the entire world by God and culminates in the renewal of all things as the ultimate consequence of his renewing work, this means that the Bible is nothing less than the true story of the whole world. It is a metanarrative that gives unity and meaning to all creation and tells us the way the world really is. In speaking of scriptural authority, therefore, one must respect the narrative authority of Scripture to narrate the world truthfully over against all other stories that claim to tell us the way the world is.

Scripture is not only a record of God's redemptive work but is also a tool that effectually brings about that redemption in the world. To understand the nature and purpose of Scripture as an instrument, we need to inquire into its role within the very story it tells. Scripture as a whole and in every part finds its place in this narrative through its role of enabling people to take their place in this story, leading us to Christ to know salvation and to live more and more fully into that comprehensive and restorative salvation. And since God's people are always blessed to be a blessing, Scripture equips them throughout redemptive history to take up their missional vocation amid the nations. The various genres of Scripture function as a toolbox with many different tools—law, history, poetry, prophecy, wisdom, gospels, epistles—that are utilized by the Spirit to lead us to faith in Christ so we might embody God's salvation for the sake of the world.

As such, Scripture is the Word of God because in it the Spirit witnesses to Jesus and leads us to salvation. In that statement we see the trinitarian soil of a doctrine of Scripture. The Holy Spirit is the one who witnesses; Christ is the one to whom the Spirit witnesses; and the Father is the source as he sends the Spirit. But to rightly articulate a doctrine of Scripture, we must pay special attention to the work of the Spirit. We can outline a threefold work of the Spirit. Scripture finds its origin in the witness of the Spirit to Christ; the content of Scripture is the witness of the Spirit to Christ; the continuing power of the Scripture is the witness of the Spirit to Christ. As the Spirit witnesses to Christ in this threefold way through human words,

we are made wise to salvation through faith in Christ and equipped for every good work.

Speaking of Scripture as making us “wise unto salvation” (2 Tim. 3:15 KJV) does not narrow Scripture’s focus to so-called spiritual issues. This would allow Scripture to be molded by an alien sacred-secular dichotomy and would reduce religion to a small compartment of life. Such mistaken understanding is challenged by the comprehensive scope of the biblical story, by the creation-wide breadth of the salvation that is its central theme, and by the cosmic authority of the Lord Christ, who stands at its center as creator and reconciler of all things, ruler of history, and judge of humanity. Scripture’s authority is totalitarian in its scope, speaking to every part of human life in its own way and from its own particular standpoint: Jesus Christ.

If the nature and purpose of Scripture is to witness to Christ and his all-encompassing salvation, then authority, inspiration, and infallibility must be defined in terms of its very nature and purpose. Scripture’s authority is in its purpose to lead us to Christ; the God-breathed, or inspired, content of Scripture is a story of salvation centered in Christ; infallibility refers to the fact that it does not err in its purpose to lead us to Christ. What Scripture *is* cannot be separated from what Scripture *does*. Scripture is the authoritative, inspired, and infallible Word of God since it is the Spirit’s witness to lead us to Christ and his salvation. Asking the Bible to do something else exhibits misunderstanding of the very nature and authority of Scripture. Defining authority or infallibility in terms other than its purpose imposes alien categories on Scripture.

To make confession that Holy Scripture is the Word of God does not in any way diminish its human form. The Spirit’s witness to Christ comes precisely through the human witness to Christ, both prophetic and apostolic. Whoever presents a dilemma between the divine and the human introduces a problem that is entirely alien to the Scripture. Organic inspiration best accounts for the fact that the Spirit’s witness comes through authors whose full humanity was not overruled and who were fully a part of their culture and environment. This means that to hear the Spirit’s witness to Christ, one must carefully attend to the human dimensions of Scripture: historical, cultural, and literary. The church hears God’s voice through the human witness to Christ.

3. The Ecclesia as Primary Context for the Reception of the Bible

Because theological interpretation is *from faith* and *to faith*, it is inherently connected with the church. In and through Scripture, God speaks in order to

be heard. The church is the primary *context* for theological interpretation of Scripture because she is the bride listening for her Groom's voice. The regular, gathered, and ordered worship of the church is the primary ecclesial *event* when she gathers to listen for his voice. The Groom's proclamation, given through his called and gifted preachers, is vital to the liturgical *acts* whereby he addresses his bride. Christ meets his bride in the proclamation of the Word, Eucharist, and baptism, whereby God's people worship their Lord and are energized and guided for their mission in the world.

God has summoned a people for his purposes through the gospel. The Scriptures reveal God's purposes for his creation, thwarted by human rebellion, but redeemed by God's own Son. The church consists of those who receive the proclamation of this news, as *good news*, before God's purposes are consummated. This faith-full reception is thus always a response to God's summons. Listening while we wait for the Son, who promises to return, makes *our reception* of the Scriptures much like the reception Paul seeks for his letter to "the saints . . . who are in Philippi." Paul gives thanks for their reception of the good news (Phil. 1:3–8), and *then* he prays that they will be shaped by the gospel "more and more" until "the day of Christ" Jesus (Phil. 1:9–11). Like those saints at Philippi, we are the grateful community that has received the gospel. Because we live and worship in the hope of the same Day, we remain deeply open to God's voice in the Scriptures to make our listening more and more fruitful and mature.

Thus *the primary interpretation* of Scripture, taking its place between Christ's inauguration and consummation of his kingdom, is a listening ordered and oriented by faith, hope, and love. This corporate, through-the-ages engagement with Scripture has its own place in God's economy of redemption. While the church is helped by many sources and conversations, by the grace of God the church corporate must humbly submit to this calling to her role in God's economy, to be the primary location of God's address.

The church also receives Scripture when individual Christians, who are themselves members of the body of Christ, practice personal Bible reading. The integral relationship between the corporate and the private reception of God's Word is evident in the Shema (Deut. 6:4–9). The passage begins with and prioritizes the reception of God's address by the gathered community, yet for life in its entirety to be focused on God, the hearing of God's address must extend to the home, to public and private life, to one's rising and lying down. The primary liturgical reception of God's address, therefore, is complemented by the reception of God's Word in all of life.

But how do we go about reading the Bible in private so that the deepest parts of our souls are open to the transformative work of God, who is living

and present in his Word? We must approach the Bible with the comportment of a listener. This is a different posture than that of biblical studies and theology, with their analytic orientations. The nature of Scripture as God's address to us and the glory and the goodness of the One who addresses us in Scripture both determine listening as fundamental. This is not to say that analysis is unimportant. Rather, we need to distinguish receptive listening to Scripture for God's address, which can include various acts of analysis, and an analytic approach, which nevertheless should be encompassed by listening for God's address.

Good and fruitful work is being done to address the challenges of analyzing Scripture. The more fundamental approach of listening requires attention too. A basic issue here is the role of silence. The silence required for listening to God's address in Scripture is not a matter of momentarily turning our attention to God, but of bringing our whole selves before God, quieting our inner chatter. The deep-rooted and time-tested way of reading the Bible known as *lectio divina* requires and develops the capacity for just such a disciplined, slow, quiet attentiveness.

Through our ecclesial reception of Scripture—with its corporate and private moments, and its postures of analysis and listening, located between the two advents of Christ—God forms us into the image in which we are created. With Christ as our promise-fulfilling Savior, the whole Scripture story, his story, becomes our story. He now lives his life in us through the Spirit, by whom we are sealed into union with him. His invitation to us is for us to be nourished as dearly loved and so be transformed with ever-increasing glory.

4. Theological Interpretation and Historical Criticism

It is in relation to academic analysis of the Bible, and to historical criticism in particular, that the tension between theological interpretation and modern exegesis is felt most strongly. This tension cannot be avoided. Theological interpretation of Scripture involves acceptance of the theological claim of Scripture itself that the world is created by God. It also involves acceptance of the more specific christological articulation of that claim found in the Epistle to the Colossians: "In him [Christ] all things in heaven and on earth were created; . . . all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (1:16–17). This claim, in its various forms throughout Scripture, has far-reaching implications—not least for our understanding of history. As the creation of God, the world and its history are invested with a telos: the world is created for a

purpose. History, we might say, is *God's* project. In the terrain of space and time, given as a dwelling place for God's creatures, God seeks to bring about his purpose of drawing all things into reconciliation with himself (2 Cor. 5:19).

If this is true, then every nontheological account of history is bound to be seriously inadequate at best, or simply false. By failing to recognize the essential character of history, nontheological accounts improperly limit the range of categories needed to account for what takes place in history. Most seriously, nontheological accounts omit the category of divine agency. Due to this omission, the eyes of those who operate with nontheological accounts of history are kept from seeing how God is at work in the world. As with the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:25–27), this failure can be corrected only by the tutoring of Christ himself. John's Gospel offers a pneumatological elucidation of Luke's claim by explaining that this tutoring is mediated by the work of the Spirit (John 16:12–15).

The involvement of God in history entails that history is an appropriate object of theological inquiry. As distinct from theological approaches that seek an understanding of God through the universal alone rather than through the particularities of history, any theology informed by the Jewish and Christian Scriptures looks to the realm of historical events in order to learn who God is and what God does. It is through history that God identifies himself—archetypally in Hebrew Scripture as the one who “brought you out of the land of Egypt” (Exod. 16:6); then, in the fullness of time, as the one who “sent his Son . . . to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children” (Gal. 4:4–5); and as the one who, following Christ's crucifixion under Pontius Pilate, raised Jesus from the dead. Consistent with God's self-identification through exodus and redemption, death and resurrection, God acts in many and various ways throughout history as the one who delivers his people from bondage, who dwells amid his people, and who gives new life. History then, to repeat the point, is a proper object of theological inquiry.

A key question arises: How are we in history to apprehend the God who is at work in history? Clearly, it will not be possible to recognize God at work in history if one's method for studying history already excludes the category of divine agency. Yet this is how historical-critical inquiry with respect to Scripture has commonly proceeded, even in the face of the plain intent of Scripture's authors to testify to God's involvement in the world. Theological interpretation, by contrast, seeks to develop and work within an account of history that is itself determined by the reality of God's involvement in history, and seeks to utilize methods of historical inquiry that are alert to the action of God in history. There is no escaping the circularity of this commitment

of faith, just as there is no escaping the circularity of historical methods that begin by excluding the category of divine agency and then find themselves unable to recognize the work of God in history.

Because the decisive clue to what history is and how it is to be understood is found in the person of Jesus Christ, in his life, death, and resurrection, both the account of history under which theological interpretation operates and the methods utilized in its investigation of history will be christocentric. Specifically, this means that judgments made about the content and significance of the historical events testified to in Scripture will be made in the light of Christ. The resurrection, of the utmost importance here, is an eschatological event that, in the midst of time, reveals the telos toward which history is directed and also the true nature of history itself. Precisely as such, the resurrection cannot be accommodated within an account of history that begins elsewhere. On account of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, the fabric of history is altered once and for all. History is now to be understood as the terrain in which God is bringing about his kingdom; it is the place where God's new creation is breaking in! The reality of the resurrection therefore gives rise to a new historiography, a new means of discerning what is actually going on in history.

Although the Bible is comprised of a rich range of literary genres, not all of which are to be interpreted in the same fashion as historical narrative, there is much in the Bible that constitutes a theological account of history and directs us toward the concrete reality of God's work in the world. "Historical criticism" is therefore a necessity, but it will be a historical criticism that is both informed by and indeed *transformed* by Scripture's story. It will test all historical claims, both biblical and extrabiblical, by considering the degree to which the claim in question coheres with the true telos of history made known in Jesus Christ.

5. The Role of Hermeneutics and Philosophy in Theological Interpretation

Theological interpretation presupposes its own hermeneutic, an account of the reading situation that is itself informed by Scripture. Such a hermeneutic rests on an approach to philosophy that not only is self-consciously shaped by the Christian story but also understands the Christian story to be the story in which every other story finds its place. Furthermore, Christian belief gives to this philosophy a series of working assumptions that inform our approach to traditional areas of philosophical inquiry, such as epistemology and ontology.

In turn, philosophy helps us to think through many of the assumptions arising from theological interpretation: the status of the biblical texts, anthropology, language, and history. In other words, theological interpretation assumes a complex philosophical framework and *needs a philosophy practiced in the context of Christian belief*. Fortunately, we are well served by the renaissance of Christian philosophy in our day.

Notwithstanding the sometimes uneasy relationship between philosophy and theology, the resources of philosophy—and by extension of all scholarship—remain essential for maintaining a properly life-affirming and integrated intellectual habitat for theological interpretation. For the task of theological interpretation, philosophy is practiced with an awareness of both its limits and its vocation within God’s creational ordinances. The myriad ways in which philosophy has benefited theology include the early Romantic critique of rationalism, postmodernity’s healthy suspicion of “idols,” accounts of language that helped to resolve long-standing philosophical problems such as skepticism, the exposure of the myth of the lone Cartesian ego, and resistance to the worst excesses of logical positivism. The hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer has retrieved the best in humanism by demonstrating the importance of tradition, community, and prejudice (prejudgments) for human meaning and understanding. Sensitivity to linguistic genres has also extended our understanding of meaning and truth. Each of these “philosophical” insights can in turn be expressed in terms of Christian wisdom. Indeed, the extent to which these philosophical developments owe their inspiration to convictions learned in the language of faith is a moot point. It therefore becomes somewhat artificial to attempt to draw clear lines of division between theology on the one side and philosophy on the other.

As well as being faithful to Christian belief, the task of theological interpretation must also be evangelistic: it must make its case to the wider world. At its best, philosophical discourse helps us keep our arguments *reasonable* and *persuasive*. For this reason, theological interpretation must be interdisciplinary, learning to speak with multiple conversational partners. The more conversant we become in philosophy, the more adept we will become at identifying relevant fields of knowledge. Philosophy therefore promotes scholarship in a general sense, both in scope and in rigor. At particular junctures in our understanding, philosophy will either point us to a specific field of scholarship or, where no such science currently exists, continue to yield speculative but plausible trajectories of thought and reflection. Those who practice the task of theological interpretation need to know when and where to find help.

Scripture’s witness to the loving trinitarian God has far-reaching implications for hermeneutics. As hermeneutics is taken together with biblical

anthropology, it is clear that people are made for relationship, with one another and with God. Revelation foregrounds the importance of language and, in turn, the relationships that language makes possible. If “the pearl of great price” of theological interpretation is communion with Christ, then theological interpretation requires a *relational account* of hermeneutics. The impulse for such hermeneutic models proceeds from clues provided by Scripture itself. Prominent passages include the creation narratives, Deuteronomy’s insistence that the people of God learn to live on every word that comes from God’s mouth (iterated by Jesus in the temptation narrative), the wisdom hermeneutic of Proverbs 1:7, Jesus’s parable of the sower, Luke’s record of the Emmaus road encounter and his subsequent Pentecostal hermeneutic, and the cruciform hermeneutic in the early chapters of 1 Corinthians. The best research in linguistics and psychology can provide more detailed descriptions of the speech situation of the text as well as the hermeneutical situation.

From time to time the church finds itself in crisis over ethical or doctrinal disagreement. Not all approaches to hermeneutics have managed to integrate a mechanism by which to judge between different positions or interpretations. A relational hermeneutic fit for theological interpretation will transpose the hermeneutic ideals of explanation and understanding into the double hermeneutic of truth and love, in which we are invited to see hermeneutics as part of a Christian praxis, a way of doing discipleship that is at once both compassionate and critical, that is capable of judgment and discernment. By extension such a hermeneutic will also be deeply pastoral.

6. The Canon and Theological Interpretation

The concept and fact of canon is the ground and basis of all theological interpretation. It is because this collection of documents is like no other—it is the Word of the living God—that the canon provides the *raison d’être* for theological interpretation. It is true that this word is a human word, originating in history and particular ancient cultures, yet as a whole the canon is simultaneously God’s Word, which cannot be reduced to or imprisoned by its various historical contexts. Canon grounds theological interpretation. Although this Word originally addressed particular people at particular times in particular cultures, God’s ultimate intention is, through the canon, to address all peoples and all cultures throughout all generations. This is one of the reasons the church has called these documents Holy Scripture; they preserve the primary knowledge about God and his purposes for humanity, without which humanity would remain in the dark. Scripture is thus divine

revelation. This does not mean that the word of God is exclusively confined to the canon, for that would be impossible, but it does mean that the canon has become a criterion by which all other words are judged.

Thus the canon is not an accident of history. It is not the result of an external force, such as a community of faith, that arbitrarily or willfully made decisions on books to be included and excluded. Rather, in these documents the community of faith has recognized the voice of God and hence gives them its stamp of approval. This stamp of approval ratifies an existing internal force working within the documents and attesting to their divine source.

Since the canon is the ground for theological interpretation, it also provides the context for interpretation. In the canon we do not have the partial counsel of God but the “whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27 RSV) for salvation and sanctification. Thus we must work not only to understand any particular text of Scripture but also to interpret that particular text in the light of the whole Text. Every word of Scripture occurs in a specific literary context that is part of a larger context, which is part of the ultimate canonical context. The larger canonical context is able to show how the various parts of the canon connect, interrelate, reveal the major accents and emphases, and dialogue with one another. Thus the canon is not flat and one-dimensional but has depth, contour, and texture; it must be understood in its rich and multifaceted totality, what is called *tota Scriptura*.

The one canon consists of two Testaments, which have as their goal and center the Word made flesh, Jesus the Messiah. Thus Jesus Christ is the goal of the canon. “God spoke . . . in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son” (Heb. 1:1–2). The Old Testament looks forward to him, and the New Testament is a response to his life, death, and resurrection. Jesus Christ is the life-giving Word of God sent for the salvation of humanity: he is the light of the world. The first word spoken in the canon is “Let there be light” (Gen. 1:3); at the end of the canon, Christ is the reason why the sun and moon have become obsolete in the new heavens and new earth, “for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb” (Rev. 21:23). The Old Testament and the New Testament have their own discrete integrity yet must be read together. Without the Old Testament, the New Testament has no meaning. Without the New Testament, the Old Testament has lost its goal.

But there is another sense in which human beings themselves are the goal of the canon. Within the boundaries of canon is a word that is comprehensive and produces life. This word is multifaceted, encompassing a multitude of genres and life situations. There is a text for every situation imaginable, from the utter darkness of Psalm 88 to the light and glory of the New Jerusalem

in Isaiah 60. This word is intended not just for information but also to be internalized in the lives of members of faith communities so that they may experience its life-giving blessing. This word is the Word above all words for human beings; it is by this word in particular that human beings receive life (Deut. 8:3). Hence at significant junctures the canon of the Old and New Testaments gives the repeated injunction to internalize the creative word of God (Gen. 1:3) through reading and meditation and thus to experience the life-giving blessing of God (Josh. 1:8–9; Ps. 1:2–3; Rev. 1:3). Part of the goal of canon, then, is to have its words held and pondered in our hearts like they were in the heart of Mary, Jesus’s mother, and thereby let them become the pacemakers of our consciousness. This is a word that gives light for the way, medicine for the soul, freedom for the heart, relief for the weary, correction for the wayward, comfort in suffering, and is more precious than gold and sweeter than honey. Thus the canon gives wisdom “for salvation” and “is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:15–17) through becoming conformed to the divine image.

Every human effort must be used to help us understand the Word of God as it was addressed to its original audience. Because that Word was first addressed to a particular human community in a particular historical period, every tool of historical exegesis must be used, albeit recontextualized within a theology of history. Yet the basic prerequisite for understanding the canon is the attitude of the young boy Samuel in the Old Testament, who says, “Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening” (1 Sam. 3:9), and the attitude of Mary in the New Testament, as she sits at the feet of Jesus and treasures his every word (Luke 10:39).

7. Biblical Theology and Theological Interpretation

Attention to the Bible as canon leads to *tota Scriptura*. But how do we grasp Scripture—and how are we to be grasped by it—in its totality? Biblical theology provides an important answer. Theological interpretation stands on the confession that God speaks in and through Scripture and that he speaks with a unified voice. Although Johann Gabler’s inaugural address at the University of Altdorf (1787) is often regarded as the origin of the theological discipline of biblical theology, the practice of biblical theology has its roots at least as far back as the early church fathers. Some of the earliest debates in the first centuries of Christianity centered squarely on how the totality of Scripture is bound up in the person and work of Jesus—a question of biblical theology.

Biblical theology thus engages a key question: How can we discern and articulate the unity of the Bible on the basis of terms and categories derived from the Bible itself? An unfortunate by-product of the past two centuries of modern critical scholarship is that many scholars view the Bible as irrecoverably diverse and fragmented, thus problematizing the very possibility of biblical theology. The recent influence of postmodernism on biblical interpretation has only compounded this challenge, particularly with its suspicion of metanarratives. The reduction of the Bible into fragmentary pieces is not, however, evident only in the academy. Many Christians approach Scripture as a collection of moral instructions, stories, spiritual nuggets, and so forth without a coherent overarching framework. The irony is that biblical theology yields a view of the world (a metanarrative) that is at odds with some of the fundamental assumptions of modern biblical criticism, postmodernism, *and* some pietistic readings of the Bible among Christians.

Biblical theology has always been a task and tool of the church. The New Testament authors, in their intimate knowledge of the Old Testament and their understanding of Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament story, provide a vital foundation for doing biblical theology today. They also demonstrate that one of the primary tasks of biblical theology is to recover the storied shape of Scripture. Out of this narrative approach, many other approaches to biblical theology can and should emerge. In the grand narrative of Scripture, the sovereign God directs history from the beginning, through creation, to the end, the new creation; it all is centered on the good news of the person and work of “Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1). We are taken up in this story as Jesus the Victor commissions his followers to continue his liberating kingdom mission until he returns. On the one hand, therefore, biblical theology aims to refine and articulate the grand story of Scripture by means of a deep engagement with particular texts, asking, How does *this text* fit into and shape the overarching story of the Bible? On the other hand, the biblical story claims to illuminate all of reality and thus should shape, among other things, the very task of biblical interpretation. Bearing witness to the kingdom of God in biblical studies will mean that our assumptions, methods, and goals of interpretation may—inevitably will—be at odds with those of the modern secular guild of biblical studies. In the recovery of biblical theology, therefore, the stakes are high!

What is the relationship between biblical theology and theological interpretation? If theological interpretation involves listening, biblical theology allows us to hear Scripture as a single (albeit complex) symphony that is made up of many voices, parts, and movements. Biblical theology respects the integrity of each passage in the Bible but also insists that the passage is

located within the context of the whole story of Scripture, showing how it contributes uniquely to the whole. Moreover, biblical theology validates the whole project of theological interpretation, calling for a way of reading that coheres with the Bible's view of the world and the text. Yielding as it does a way of seeing and understanding the world, biblical theology summons us to work out an authentically biblical understanding of history, philosophy, literature and language, anthropology, sociology, cosmology, and so forth. This in turn will deeply influence and enhance the riches of theological interpretation on a variety of levels.

Even though biblical theology has received some renewed interest in recent times, much work remains to be done. Surprisingly few attempts at a biblical theology of the whole of Scripture exist. Biblical theology of the Old and New Testaments is a high priority on the agenda for theological interpretation in the present day.

8. Mission and Theological Interpretation

Mission is a central thread in the biblical story and must be taken into account when any part of Scripture is interpreted. By mission we mean the participation of God's people in his mission as narrated in Scripture to restore the whole of the creation, the entire life of humankind, and peoples of all nations from sin and its consequences. A proper theological interpretation of Scripture will therefore attend closely to a missional hermeneutic.

On the one hand, mission is an essential hermeneutical key to reading the whole of Scripture. Mission is not just one of the many subjects that the Bible talks about. Rather, it is a way of reading the whole of Scripture with mission as a central concern. On the other hand, it is not the only lens employed to read the entire canon of Scripture since mission does not constitute the comprehensive subject matter of the biblical narrative. There are three closely related aspects of a missional hermeneutic: the Bible is a *record*, *product*, and *tool* of God's mission to renew his world as he works both in and through his people.

The story of the Bible is first of all a *record* of God's mission in and through his people. The Bible tells a story that begins with God's creation of the world and ends with his restoration of the whole world from sin and its effects, culminating in the kingdom of God. God employs particular means to reach that universal end: the story flows through Israel, Jesus, and the church.

God's way of carrying out his redemptive plan is to choose a people—Israel—to whom he promises a blessing that comes as he rescues them from

sin's devastating curse and restores them to the fullness of creational life. However, they are chosen not only to be a recipient of God's redemptive work but also to be a channel of that blessing to others. Participation in God's salvation necessarily entails participation in his mission to the world. God's renewing work is always *in a people for the sake of* the whole world. Specifically, they are called to be a display people who exhibit an attractive and holy life that is visible before the nations, as they manifest God's original creational intention for human life, as they are a sign of the coming kingdom of God at the end of history, and as they encounter other idolatrous ways of life that diminish and distort God's creational purpose for human life.

Israel's failure to be a faithful light to the nations brought them under God's judgment. But through the prophets, God promised to gather and renew them by his Spirit so that all nations, and ultimately the whole creation, could be incorporated into God's saving work through them. That promised gathering and renewal are accomplished in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and in his ascension and outpouring of the Spirit. Renewed Israel is sent to all nations in the power of the Spirit to now fulfill God's original intention to gather all the nations into his renewing work through a faithful witness in life, word, and deed. Thus mission is at the heart of the biblical narrative as a record of God's mission in and through his people for the sake of all nations and the whole creation. Reading the Bible missionally, then, means reading it along the grain of its intended story line.

The canon of Scripture is also a *product* of God's mission. The various biblical writings have their origin in some issue, need, controversy, or threat that needed to be addressed in the context of their missional calling. The books of Genesis and Exodus arise out of Israel's need to understand their origins and their covenant vocation in the world. The book of Kings emerges from an acute crisis of faith in God's promises while in exile. The books of Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles proceed from a perplexing situation in which Israel struggles with how their postexilic experience matches God's promise of restoration. The various messages of prophetic warning and promise issue from the rebellion of Israel, in which they have lost sight of their covenant calling. Genesis 1 originates in a missionary encounter between ancient Near Eastern myths and Yahweh as Creator. Questions about how to live faithfully in Corinth inspire Paul's letter to that church, and various other threats or crises lead Paul to take up his pen to address missional congregations. In all these cases the point is that the canon of Scripture finds its origin in mission: a crisis or conflict or struggle of God's people in mission calls forth God's word to his people. The Scriptures are a product of God's mission in and through his people.

The Bible is also a *tool* of God's mission. The books of the Old Testament were written to equip Israel for their missional calling in the world. The word "equip" describes the various roles that different genres of Scripture played to enable Israel to be a faithful missional people. It is precisely in order that Israel might be a light to the nations that the law was given to order their national, liturgical, and moral life; that the Wisdom literature was given to help shape the daily conduct of Israel in conformity to God's creational order; that the prophets threatened and warned Israel in their disobedience and promised blessing in obedience; that the psalms nourished Israel's covenantal calling in corporate and personal worship; and that the historical books continued to tell the story of Israel at different points in the overarching story summoning them once again to their missional calling. Christ came and has fulfilled the purpose of the Old Testament canon—forming a faithful people for his mission in the world. Apostolic proclamation and doctrine continue to make Christ present in his saving power to shape and empower a missional people. The New Testament books have emerged precisely as a literary expression of the apostolic preaching and teaching, which continued to make Christ present to form and nourish particular missional communities in different parts of the Roman Empire. Thus the Bible is not only a record and product of God's mission in and through his people but also a tool to effectively bring it about.

A missional hermeneutic not only asks how a particular book of the Bible equipped the original readers for their mission in the world; it also asks how the Scriptures continue to do so today. Contemporary hermeneutics has rightly taught us that our particular interpretive location may open up or close off true understanding of a text. Since missional questions, issues, and problems are what the ancient authors address, then to hear the text today, contemporary readers themselves must be committed to the same mission that the biblical authors pursue. It is only within the hallowed and exhilarating context of the *missio Dei* that theological interpretation finds its place. Only then will we ask the proper questions of the text and experience it as the Spirit's tool to inspire and inform the ongoing mission of the church.

9. The Telos (Goal) of Theological Interpretation

In the context of the *missio Dei*, theological interpretation reads Scripture to hear God's address, so that the church might be transformed into the image of Christ for the sake of the world. A number of points emerge from this simple and yet profound aim. First, theological interpretation aims to hear the voice of God. Readings in the Christian tradition remain helpful and productive

insofar as they lead us into Scripture and help us to hear it better. But the aim of theological interpretation is to hear not just the text but also God's voice through the text: God remains the divine "Thou" who addresses his church. Scripture's transformative potency derives from its source: God, the Author and Creator of all things. Scripture is "breathed out by God" (2 Tim. 3:16 ESV) yet written by human hands: these human authors wrote God's words "as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet. 1:21 ESV). God has given his Sacred Word so that the Scriptures might draw people deeply into the life of God and enact their formative work on those who believe (2 Thess. 2:13).

Second, theological interpretation attends to God's voice in Scripture for the formation of the *whole* person (cognitive, affective, social, and behavioral). Through Scripture, God provides wisdom "for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15) as he reproves, corrects, teaches, and trains God's people in righteousness so they might be "equipped for every good work" in him (3:16–17). The book of Hebrews affirms that Scripture is "living and active" (4:12), able to render judgment, to expose the idolatries of the human heart, to open us to worship of the true God. Scripture builds up the church of God, providing it with an "inheritance among all who are sanctified" (Acts 20:32). This demands cognition, and hence true information remains crucial. *Right information and teaching about God, church, and world* are vital to theological interpretation. However, because of the vast potential of Scripture to address the complexity of what it means to be human, God's Word should not be reduced to knowledge alone. Scripture certainly and importantly teaches doctrine, but it also promises, names, appoints, declares, gives, condemns, binds, delivers, ministers, comforts, blesses, heals, cures, and awakens the human spirit. Right information about God, church, and world remains central in these biblical affirmations, but key to all of them is right doctrine that *transforms* the church. In engaging with God's Word, the Spirit of God does God's work to transform the church into what Christ has already made it: a new creation. Doctrine and praxis complement one another in theological interpretation, so that theological interpretation aims not just at *orthodoxy* but also at *orthopraxy*, correct conduct.

Third, theological interpretation has its roots within the *church*. The church is the true home of Scripture, centrally in its worship of the Triune God, where God communes with Christ's bride in the power of the Spirit: in the Word, the Eucharist, and the waters of baptism. The church is Scripture's home, a home that includes the private reading of Sacred Scripture by believers. Such private reading, aimed at hearing God's address for the transformation of life, is encouraged and fostered. The church's encounter with God speaking in Scripture is holy and majestic, whether the Lord's voice is heard in the

thunderous trumpet blast of a Sinai experience (Exod. 19–23); in the still, small voice to a fearful prophet (1 Kings 19); or in the caring words of Christ on a road and preparing a meal (Luke 24 and John 21). In all, the voice of God in Scripture draws the church to worship and enacts real transformation.

Fourth, theological interpretation aims at the transformation of the church into the image of Christ *for the sake of the world*. It may seem that Scripture is only for the church; yet with full seriousness, theological interpretation takes the missional arc of the story of Scripture. Scripture finds its climax and fulfillment in the work of Christ: his life, death, resurrection, and ascension. For this reason, theological interpretation listens for God’s *kerygma* (message) in the discrete portions of Scripture (law, letter, poetry, wisdom, parable, prophecy, etc.), yet nonetheless relates these discrete words within the unified testimony of God’s salvific work in Christ. Theological interpretation understands Christ as the center of Scripture, the hinge of history, and the clue to creation. Scripture introduces humanity to Jesus Christ. In this way, the transformative potential of Scripture finds its fulfillment as the church sees and hears Christ and is conformed into his image (Rom. 8:29).

But as Scripture’s readers are introduced to Christ, those who are his will give themselves for the world. As Christ gave himself for the world, he calls the church to go and do likewise. The church stands as the community that proclaims the good news of the kingdom of God in word and deed. Theological interpretation reads with the aim of the transformative potential of the gospel to be unleashed in *present contexts*, in the whole of life. With each new generation, God’s Word must be heard afresh so that God’s people might respond to him in worshipful obedience.

10. A Framework for Theological Interpretation

What would a framework for theological interpretation today look like? In the past, the Christian elucidation of doctrine lived from and worked on a theological interpretation of the biblical text. Up to the end of the Middle Ages, the links between Bible and theology were neither questioned nor loosened. In both Catholicism and Protestantism, even the classical schools of theology thought of Scripture as the main source of the theological enterprise. But in the modern era, a genuinely theological interpretation of the Bible was threatened by trends associated with either rationalism or Romanticism. Theological interpretation was imperiled inasmuch as it was viewed either as a “nonscientific” and therefore unjustifiable reading of a text, which instead was to be interpreted exclusively according to the methods of historical

exegesis, or as a “dogmatic” imposition on a text, which instead was to be understood merely as a means to an existential experience of faith. In both cases, the theological study of the biblical text was rejected as inadequate for identifying the meaning of that text.

The renewed understanding of the Bible as a work originating within the community of the church implies a claim regarding its theological interpretation: the biblical books may be usefully researched but cannot be validly understood outside of the context in which they were born. That context is *faith*: the biblical documents were written by believers and for believers, to prompt, describe, penetrate, explain, and transmit faith.

A theological study of the biblical text must approach it as God’s Word, to which the appropriate human response is *faith*. Faith demands that its meaning be explored in view of the questions that reason-illumined-by-faith raises; theological study orders the biblical meaning in view of priorities emerging for the life of human beings and communities under the guidance of faith. Here we speak of *Christian* faith as we speak of the *Christian* Bible, with a particular understanding of the two Testaments as “Law and Prophets” brought to fullness in Christ—through his words and deeds—reaching out to all humankind through apostolic preaching, consolidated and transmitted in written form to the church.

While a plurality in theological thought and work is a direct result of the human condition, the prerequisites for a theological interpretation must be set in a way analogous to what the canon does for materially defining the Bible. This results in a framework that not only outlines the boundaries but also identifies the focal point of a theological interpretation. The foundational articles of faith in this respect are:

- Belief in one single God, the Creator, from whom all human life takes its origin and meaning, calling human beings individually and collectively to himself, to share his life and happiness.
- One universal plan of salvation, which, although structured in phases, opens the salvation drama with Abraham, continues with Moses and the journey of Israel, carrying the faith in the one God, until it centers on Jesus.
- The acceptance of Jesus as Messiah and God’s incarnate Son, in whom the Father addresses humankind as his children to be shaped according to the image of his Son in order to participate in the good pleasure that God finds in the Son through a share in his life and suffering, ending in the glory of his resurrection.

- The expectation of a “new heaven and earth,” thus “rebirth” not only for the individual in a mortal life but also leading to a new beginning as of new birth and creation (*palingenesia*) for all humanity when history reaches its final goal.
- An understanding of the human being as an individual person endowed with intellect and freedom so as to be responsible for one’s acts, to respond to God individually and collectively when addressed by God, and to be capable of being lifted by God’s free grace to the freedom of God’s children.
- Working within such a framework obliges the exegete-theologian to engage in dialogue with the philosophical quest, searching for truth about human existence, the cosmos, and the capabilities and responsibilities of human beings.

Theological interpretation neither carelessly expands exegesis into theology nor naively reduces theology to exegesis. Its task is to build bridges between these disciplines without confusing or separating them into a state of isolation. A theological interpretation renders the exegete open to treating a number of concerns that a merely critical or historical interpretation may easily neglect or refuse to consider as legitimate. These concerns may be summarized as follows:

- The issues of the so-called canonical interpretation, or interpretive trajectories that connect all biblical history and all biblical books.
- The issues of inspiration, concerning not only those of human authors but also those of the divine Author. What is the relationship between the divine will that has caused the biblical books to come about by using human beings he inspired? How did historical processes impact how the incarnate Logos emerged in history, both in the flesh and blood of Christ (incarnation) and in the writings of the prophets and the apostles (inspired canon)?
- In particular, theological exegesis must be sensitive in seeing to it that the interpretation will not ultimately compromise the purity of monotheism and a Christology equally free of Nestorian and Monophysite elements. Thus the exegete must be fully dedicated to the truth of the Bible as inspired Word, which in its canonical wholeness never refrains from exposing the incarnate as God’s full humanity, but refuses to state as ultimate biblical truth anything unworthy of God.

A theological understanding of God’s biblical Word must be undertaken on the basis of believing in its inspired character, which means searching the

Scriptures in the same Spirit in which they were written. The Holy Spirit, through whom the created human spirit obtains an understanding of God's Word, is present in the world through the church, provides the believer with the continued presence of the risen Christ, and leads all human beings through their individual and common journeys through history.

11. Theological Commentary

If theological interpretation works within such a framework, what does this mean for commentary writing? Theological commentary is made possible, indeed obligatory, by the confession that our Triune God reveals himself in canonical *texts*. The character and nature of Holy Scripture flows from this confession. Our hermeneutical approach, therefore, should also be shaped and determined by it. In Holy Scripture, God speaks and witnesses to his own identity as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This trinitarian context for reading (the *regula fidei*, Rule of Faith) provides the epistemic basis, interpretive expectations, and prayerful posture for reading and interpreting Scripture. All commentary on Holy Scripture, then, should likewise be shaped and molded by this confessional reality: biblical commentary should ultimately be *theological* commentary; otherwise it interprets the Bible contrary to its nature, origin, and purpose.

A theological commentary recognizes the creaturely and divine authorship of the biblical texts. Although leery of placing a divide between these two, a theological commentary is located within the broad stream of the Christian interpretive tradition that recognizes the dogmatic priority of the divine Author. The divine authorship of Scripture governs our approach to human authorship, and not vice versa: "Men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Pet. 1:21). In this light, the creaturely character of Scripture is not something to shy away from in the task of theological commentary. It is located dogmatically in God's providential oversight of creaturely affairs. The verbal/grammatical sense, along with the historical particularity of texts, is to be examined with all the rigor we can muster, in an effort to understand what the church fathers referred to as the text's *akolouthia*: the way the words go. All the critical tools of biblical scholarship, albeit recontextualized in a theology of history, are welcome in attending to the text's *sensus literalis*. This welcoming entails within it the recognition that such tools can aid the reader's understanding of the text's theological character.

At the same time, the examination of the biblical materials in their historical and literary particularity cannot *exhaust* the text of its theological content. A

theological commentary resists the modern historicist tendency to reduce the text's witness to the historical moment of writing and its immediate reception. Christians have always understood that God speaks through Scripture to every generation of readers, so that Holy Scripture is always saying more than what we might determine solely as the intent of the historical author.

Following the interpretive instincts inherited from the Christian tradition, the Scriptures themselves should be understood as their own best interpreter. In this light, the canonical shape of our Christian canon as Old and New Testaments plays a material role in our approach to reading. A combusive interpretive dynamic is at play when the Old and New Testaments are read in dialectic relationship with each other. Ideally, theological commentary reveals the organic relationship between the literal sense of Scripture and its figural sense. Indeed, theological commentary at its best manifests a close attention to the particularity of the biblical texts as they are in broader conversation within the canon and the Christian dogmatic tradition, which is itself shaped by continual reflection on and submission to the canon.

An examination of the history of the biblical commentary in the Christian era is revealing with regard to the different instincts, sensibilities, goals, and practices. There are many good and appropriate types of biblical commentaries, with different emphases and contributions to make. There is no one-size-fits-all way to comment on the biblical texts. But while no time period or singular approach to commentary is perfect, across the history of the church there is a robust way of reading that can be called *theological commentary*. The techniques and methods may vary, but there is a family resemblance in the best kind of trinitarian theological commentary.

A theological commentary is a key location for Christian, theological reflection. In this sense, Christian theology *is* exegesis. Such a statement is initially jarring to interpretive instincts shaped by the legacy of Spinoza's more localized reading strategies or a hermeneutic where *meaning* and *significance* are sharply divided. Nevertheless, a theological commentary seeks to dialogue with and to order our theological grammar by attending closely to the words of the prophets and apostles. This theological ordering is situated in the salvific and liturgical context of Christ's church, where the interpretive community of the church plays a substantive role.

A theological commentary thus engages the biblical text because of the anterior confession that our Triune God has spoken and is speaking in and through the canonical witness. God's own self-determination to be God for humanity places his revelation in the dogmatic location of God's reconciliation of sinners to himself. While affirming the creaturely character of the biblical documents and all that this entails, a theological commentary's goal

is to hear God's Word for God's people today, to press through the verbal/grammatical sense of the text to its theological subject matter. As a result, a theological commentary seeks to aid Christ's church in hearing God's Word for the sake of shaping Christian worship, identity, and mission.

12. Theological Interpretation for All of Life

Acts describes Jesus as "the Author of life" (Acts 3:15), and theological interpretation should embody this creation-wide perspective in its work. If Christ is the Author of life in all its many dimensions, then theological interpretation should work to relate the *kerygma* of the Bible to all of life, and not just "church life." Indeed, Brevard Childs identifies failure in this regard as one of the reasons for the downfall of the biblical theology movement, but it is a critique that can be leveled against too much contemporary biblical interpretation.¹ Scripture deals with "universal history," to use Lesslie Newbigin's poignant phrase, and views Israel, Jesus, and the church in this light.² Another way to express this is that creation is the very stuff of salvation.³ Redemption involves the recovery of God's purposes for the whole of his creation and thus is comprehensive and cosmic in scope. Theological interpretation must be no less.

It is especially in the Old Testament that we witness the comprehensive range of God's *torah* (instruction), whether it is narrative, law, prophecy, or wisdom. While God pursues his redemptive purposes, he chooses a people and forms them into a nation. As an ancient Near Eastern nation in *covenant* with "the LORD," they are called to live under his reign in every aspect of their national life. So, for example, when the Old Testament addresses leadership, it is often not priestly but political or economic or familial leadership that is in view. The Old Testament law deals with all aspects of the life of Israel, and so too does wisdom. The prophets call Israel (and the nations) to account not just for failure in the cultic realm but also for social and political sins.

In the New Testament, the church is no longer a nation as was Israel, but is now scattered among the nations. The church's ethic thus alters—Old Testament *torah* remains normative but cannot simply be translated and legislated amid cultures that are nontheocratic—and that ethic's outworking becomes more complex while remaining comprehensive in scope: the church is called to

1. Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970).

2. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 81.

3. Ola Tjørhom, *Embodied Faith: Reflections on a Materialist Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 36.

live all of its life under the reign of Jesus. It is *he* and not Caesar who is *kyrios* (Lord). Amid the nations the ecclesia is called to be a sign of the kingdom. Theological interpretation, if it is true to Scripture and to Jesus, will therefore bring *all of life* within its focus. If a theme like *the kingdom of God/heaven* is as central to theological interpretation today as it was to the ministry of Jesus, then interpreters can do no less.

If we conceive of the Bible as a drama in multiple acts, then we are in the same act as the early church, but our cultural and historical context is vastly different. We need to use all the clues in all the acts of the great, unfolding drama of which we are a part as we work out what these clues mean for *life today*. Mission is lived at the *crossroads* of two stories: the biblical story and our cultural story or stories, a place of extreme tension. Theological interpretation needs to be practiced at this crossroads; in order to do so, we must be familiar with both the biblical story and our cultural story or stories; hence a cultural hermeneutic is an indispensable part of theological interpretation. Rigorous cultural analysis is vital so that, like the Old Testament prophets, we work to relate God's Word to *this* time and *this* place.

All this is not to suggest that theological interpretation will manifest expertise in the detail of all areas of life. There are some areas of life, such as family and social justice, about which Scripture goes into considerable detail, but in many areas of contemporary life, the relevance of Scripture needs to be worked out by practitioners *in those areas*. Theological interpretation, for example, cannot and should not spell out in detail what a biblical aesthetic looks like, but it should alert us to the need for one. Theological interpretation must sound the kingdom note for all of life, but that is not the same thing as being prescriptive in areas foreign to its particular, biblical expertise.

There are few major examples of such work today in biblical studies. Walter Brueggemann stands out as one who has tirelessly and creatively sought to navigate the distance between the Bible and contemporary culture. Oliver O'Donovan's work similarly and repeatedly seeks to make this journey. An older example is the work of Jacques Ellul: alongside his sociological works, he has published a series of important expositions of Scripture. John Stott helpfully spoke about and practiced "double listening": the exegete bends one ear to Scripture and one to contemporary culture in order to connect the two.

Most contemporary theological education does not prepare exegetes for this sort of creative work. To move in this direction, as we must, the comprehensive scope of Scripture will need to be recovered, the time in our culture(s) discerned, and the hard work done of moving back and forth between these two poles, so that Scripture is heard in relation to all of life. Only thus will we hear and transmit Scripture as the great feast that it is.

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