

# The Significance of Theology in Interpreting the New Testament

Martin Williams

## Introduction

Lucy and Linus are staring out of the window watching rain pour down. The often crabby and cranky Lucy is anxious that the never-ending rain might flood the whole world: “Boy, look at it rain,” she remarks, “What if it floods the whole world?”

Peanut’s resident theologian Linus van Pelt confidently replies, “It will never do that. In the ninth chapter of Genesis, God promised Noah that would never happen again, and the sign of the promise is the rainbow.” Lucy looks relieved. “You’ve taken a great load off my mind.” “Sound theology has a way of doing that!” Linus responds matter-of-factly.<sup>1</sup>

However, not all Christians today feel so positive about the value of “Sound Theology.” It is not too hard to find postmodern and emergent leaders questioning the importance or value of theology or doctrine. Emerging church guru Brian McLaren in his book *A Generous Orthodoxy* complains that,

The word orthodoxy means “straight thinking” or “right opinion.” The last thing I want is to get into nauseating arguments about why this or that form of theology (dispensational, covenant, charismatic, whatever) or methodology (cell church, megachurch, liturgical church, seeker church, blah, blah, blah) is right (meaning approaching or achieving timeless technical perfection).<sup>2</sup>

He goes on to define

Christian orthodoxy...as the hard mental work of holding in one’s mind an increasing bank of complex opinions about a lot of things

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<sup>1</sup> See Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *Who Needs Theology: An Invitation to the Study of God* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1996), 134.

<sup>2</sup> Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 23.

before breakfast.<sup>3</sup>

Carl Trueman tells the following story of a church his friend once visited:

The pastor there had the habit of standing in the pulpit, seizing his Bible in his right hand, raising it above his head, and pointing to it with his left. “This,” he declared in a booming voice, “is our only creed and our only confession.”<sup>4</sup>

In a similar vein Erwin McManus writes:

The power of the Gospel is the result of a person—Jesus Christ—not a message. The Gospel is an event to be proclaimed, not a doctrine to be preserved.<sup>5</sup>

Both the pastor in Trueman’s account and the author I just quoted have committed what is famously known as an “Either-or Fallacy.” Why can’t it be both? It must be both! The Bible and our confession, Jesus and doctrine cannot be separated; they are like bread and butter, cookies and milk. You cannot have “Jesus” without saying *who* Jesus is (the *person* of Christ) and *what* he has done for us (the *work* of Christ). And how is the message about Jesus — *who* he is and *what* he did (his person and work) — different than doctrine? “It’s all about Jesus” is certainly true. But, as Kevin deYoung asks, “What is it about Jesus that we are all about? If we have no message, no theology, no confessions, no ritual, what do we have?”<sup>6</sup> Dorothy Sayers was very critical of the notion of a Christ devoid of doctrinal content in her criticism of the modernists of the 1930s and 40s:

Christ, in His Divine innocence, said to the Woman of Samaria, “Ye worship ye know not what”—being apparently under the impression that it might be desirable, on the whole, to know what one was worshipping. He thus showed Himself sadly out of touch with the twentieth-century mind, for the cry today is: “Away with the tendentious complexities of dogma—let us have the simple spirit of worship; just worship, no matter of what!” The only drawback to this demand for a

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<sup>3</sup> McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 33.

<sup>4</sup> Carl Trueman, *The Creedal Imperative* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 12.

<sup>5</sup> Erwin R. McManus, *The Church in Emerging Culture: Five Perspectives* (ed. Leonard Sweet. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 248.

<sup>6</sup> Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck, *Why We’re not Emergent (By Two Guys Who Should Be)*, 108.

generalized and undirected worship is the practical difficulty of arousing any sort of enthusiasm for the worship of nothing in particular.<sup>7</sup>

“Away with the...complexities of dogma...let us have the simple spirit of worship.” But as Sayers points out, worship without content, without doctrine, is “the worship of nothing in particular.” “We worship what we know,” says Jesus in John 4:22. This false dichotomy that pits Jesus against theology, worship against doctrine, and the Bible against the creeds is in fact nothing new, and makes no more sense today than it did centuries ago.

### **The “Iron Curtain”**

Brevard Childs was the professor of Old Testament at Yale University until 1999. In his *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testament* he spoke of the difficulty he faced as a student in relating the disciplines of biblical studies and theology (p. xvi):

- (1) Soon I became painfully aware that an iron curtain separated Bible from theology, not just at Yale but throughout most of the English-speaking world. I am sure that fault lay with both disciplines, but deep suspicion and disinterest prevented any interaction.<sup>8</sup>

The presence of this “iron curtain” can be felt at many levels:

- (2) It can be felt by the student wanting to relate one part of the university curriculum to another. As a student I often struggled with such questions as: What is the relationship between my New Testament subjects and my Theology subjects? What role should my Reformed theological tradition have in my study of the Scriptures? Should it even have a role? Should my Bible reading be shaping my theology, or should my theology be shaping my Bible reading? Which way round is it?
- (3) It can be felt by the pastor seeking to bridge the gap between “original meaning” and “contemporary significance.”

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<sup>7</sup> Dorothy Sayers, *Creed or Chaos? Why Christians Must Choose Either Dogma or Disaster (Or, Why it Really Does Matter What You Believe)* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 1999), 19.

<sup>8</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), xvi.

- (4) It can be felt by the professionally trained scholar or specialist who has been taught to guard one discipline from the other.<sup>9</sup> If you visit any theological college or university today you will notice that they all have their own separate departments: Old Testament, New Testament, Systematic Theology, Church History, etc. In this sort of situation, how should these different disciplines relate to each other?

## The Roots of the Problem

The roots of this problem can be traced back to the rationalism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when scholars sought to apply the tool of reason to the biblical text. The result was twofold:

- (1) Only those parts of Scripture which passed the test of rational inquiry should be retained. In other words human reason was the chief source and test for all knowledge. Anything that did not pass the test of human reason was rejected. Thus only those parts of the Bible that could be subjected to rational inquiry were retained. The flip side of this was the rejection of all the supernatural elements in the Bible.
- (2) The second result followed the first: The insistence that the historical analysis of the biblical text should be carried out separate from any theological concerns. With the rejection of the supernatural came the view that the Bible was merely a collection of historical human documents reflecting an historical religious (Jewish) movement. Thus the study of the Bible and the movement it reflects should be carried out no differently from that of any other book or historical movement.

For example, in the seventeenth-century, the Dutch Jewish Philosopher Baruch de Spinoza (1632-77) declared at the beginning of his *Theologico-Political Treatise*:

I determined to examine the Bible afresh in a careful, impartial, and unfettered spirit, making no assumptions concerning it, and attributing to it no doctrine which I did not find clearly therein set down. With these precautions I constructed a method of Scriptural

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<sup>9</sup> See Green, J. B. "Scripture and Theology: Uniting the Two So Long Divided." Pages 23-43 in *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology* (Edited by J. B. Green and M. Turner. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 23.

interpretation.<sup>10</sup>

For Spinoza, doctrine should have no bearing on the interpretation of a text, instead, he said:

Doctrine should be reached only after strict scrutiny and thorough comprehension of the Sacred Books...and not be set up on the threshold, as it were, of inquiry.<sup>11</sup>

What does he mean when he says: “Doctrine should...not be set up on the threshold, as it were, of inquiry”? He means that doctrine should have no influence over our interpretation of the Bible. In the following century scholars such as Johann Salomo Semler (1725-1791), Gotthilf Traugott Zachariä (1729-1777), and Johann August Ernesti (1707-1781) continued to teach that the study of the biblical texts must be carried out separately from and preliminary to the concerns of systematic or dogmatic theology.

The stage was then set for a highly significant statement by Johann Philipp Gabler (1753-1826),<sup>12</sup> in his inaugural lecture at the University of Altdorf entitled “On the Proper Distinction Between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology and the Specific Objectives of Each” (March 31, 1787).<sup>13</sup> In this lecture Gabler warned against the “inappropriate combination of the simplicity and ease of biblical theology with the subtlety and difficulty of dogmatic theology.”<sup>14</sup> By “biblical theology” he meant the inductive study of the biblical texts,<sup>15</sup> and by “dogmatic theology” he meant the changing philosophical systems of modern times.<sup>16</sup> As Carson observes, Gabler’s “primary appeal was not that the Bible must first be read historically...but that biblical theologians may properly go about their task without being

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<sup>10</sup> Benedict de Spinoza, *The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza* (Translated with an introduction by R. H. M. Elwes. 2 vols. London: Bell, 1889-91), 1:8.

<sup>11</sup> Spinoza, *Chief Works*, 1:8.

<sup>12</sup> To borrow the words of Frank Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament: A Canonical and Synthetic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 23.

<sup>13</sup> See 2:179-98 of *Kleinere theologische Schriften*, ed. T. A. Gabler and J. G. Gabler (2 vols. Ulm: Verlag des Stettinischen Buchhandlung, 1831 [The original title is: ‘De justo discrimine theologiae biblicae et dogmaticae regundisque recte utriusque finibus’]). The English translation used here can be found in J. Sandys-Wunsch and L. Eldredge. “J. P. Gabler and the Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology: Translation, Commentary and Discussion of His Originality,” *SJT* 33 (1980): 133-58.

<sup>14</sup> Gabler, “On the Proper Distinction,” 135.

<sup>15</sup> See Gabler, “On the Proper Distinction,” 138-42.

<sup>16</sup> See Gabler, “On the Proper Distinction,” 144.

directly bound by doctrinal aims.”<sup>17</sup> What Johann Gabler is saying is exactly what Spinoza was saying in the previous century: The study of the biblical texts is a purely historical task and therefore must be carried out separately from the concerns of theology. Theology was to have no bearing on the interpretation of the Bible. His proposal was soon widely adopted.

For example, in the following century the German Lutheran theologian William Wrede (1859-1906) wrote his widely influential article: “The Task and Methods of So-Called ‘New Testament Theology.’” In this work he continued Johann Gabler’s distinction between biblical and dogmatic theology. Notice the title of his work: “*So-Called* New Testament Theology.” He doesn’t believe there is such a thing! Instead he claimed that:<sup>18</sup>

The name New Testament theology is wrong. The New Testament is not concerned merely with theology, but is in fact far more concerned with religion.

What does he mean when he says: “The New Testament...is in fact far more concerned with religion”? He means it is concerned with an historical, religious movement and its beliefs, and little more. And that the task of New Testament studies is to study this movement and its beliefs just as you would any other religious movement. He states at the outset of his article:

I must state from the outset that my comments presuppose the [and note the words he uses] *strictly historical character* of New Testament theology.<sup>19</sup>

Again, as this is a strictly historical task, theology should have no bearing on it at all. Wrede writes:

Biblical theology has to investigate something from given documents... It tries to grasp it as objectively, correctly and sharply as possible. That is all. How the systematic theologian gets on with its results and deals with them—that is his own affair. Like every other real science, New Testament theology has its goal simply in

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<sup>17</sup> D. A. Carson, “New Testament Theology,” pages 796-814 in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments* (Edited by Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids. Downers Grove: IVP, 1997), 796.

<sup>18</sup> Gabler, “On the Proper Distinction,” 116.

<sup>19</sup> Wrede, “Task and Methods,” 116.

itself, and is totally indifferent to all dogma and systematic theology. What could dogmatics offer it?<sup>20</sup>

Such thinking has resulted in the present drift toward the increasingly atomistic, in which biblical studies has been cut off from any obligation to systematic theology.<sup>21</sup> Sadly, this is pretty much where we are at today. Fortunately not everyone has bought into the line of thinking, but sadly the influence of such men has been wide and pervasive and influential and we are still feeling its effects in the academies and literature of the today. So what do we do about it?

## **Theology and the Bible**

We have looked at some of the historical roots of the present divide between biblical studies and systematic theology. What reasons can we now give for wanting to bridge this divide through a consciously theological approach to the study of the Bible? A number of reasons could be put forward, but I offer what I consider to be the two most important:

### **(1) It is True to the Nature of Scripture**

The primary reason why Scripture should be interpreted theologically is because, contrary to the authors we have surveyed, the Bible cannot be simply reduced to a work of human history. It is that, but it is so much more. The Bible is ultimately the word (*logos*) of God and about God (*theos*)—which are both themselves issues of theology. As *The Westminster Confession of Faith* notes (1:4):

The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man, or Church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God.

Or more importantly as Peter puts it in 1 Peter 2:21:

For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men

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<sup>20</sup> Wrede, “Task and Methods,” 69.

<sup>21</sup> To paraphrase Carson, “New Testament Theology,” *DLNT*, 797.

spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

John Webster observes four things here:

- (2) The leading theme of any doctrine of inspiration is captured by the words “from God” (ἀπὸ θεοῦ): “[I]nspiration is not primarily a textual property but a divine movement and therefore a divine moving.”<sup>22</sup>
- (3) The operative expression “from God” carries with it a negation: “no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man” (οὐ θελήματι ἀνθρώπου). “Talk of inspiration indicates that the general impulse of the biblical text is not human spontaneity...it is not a voluntary, self-originating movement, but a ‘being moved.’”<sup>23</sup>
- (4) This “being moved” is “particularly appropriated to the Holy Spirit” who ensures that “creaturely objects and causes are indeed moved realities.”<sup>24</sup> Inspiration, therefore, does not mean the elimination of creatureliness in the production of Scripture but its right ordering so that it may “fittingly assist in that work which is proper to God.”<sup>25</sup>
- (5) The Spirit generates language. “[T]he moving of the Spirit, the direction of the ἀπὸ θεοῦ, is to human communicative acts. Those moved by the Spirit spoke [ἐλάλησαν ἀπὸ θεοῦ].”<sup>26</sup> Inspiration is thus verbal: “What is inspired is not simply the matter (res) of Scripture but its verbal form (forma).”<sup>27</sup>

So Scripture should be interpreted theologically, firstly, because it is the Word *of God*, and now secondly, as we have already noted, it is the word *about God*. As the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* explains (Question 3):

- Q.** What do the Scriptures principally teach?
- A.** The Scriptures principally teach, what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.

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<sup>22</sup> John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2003), 36.

<sup>23</sup> Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 37.

<sup>24</sup> Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 37.

<sup>25</sup> Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 27.

<sup>26</sup> Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 37 (emphasis his).

<sup>27</sup> Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 38 (emphasis his).

The Bible is not merely a human record of human events in human history but a human and divine record of God's sovereign and supernatural work in and through history to make a name for himself and culminating in the historical death of his Son for the sins of his chosen people. But even more than that, the Bible is not just a record God's historical acts but is itself the very means by which he, through his Spirit continues to work in the present. Through Scripture the Spirit of God accomplishes, among other things:

- *understanding* (the knowledge of God),
- *salvation* (a right relationship with God),
- *transformation* (into the likeness of God), and
- *worship* (the glory of God).

These are all very important theological issues. The first reason the Scriptures need to be interpreted theologically is that they are not merely historical in nature, they are deeply theological. The second reason is this:

## **(2) We Do it Anyway So Let's Do It Well**

Anyone who says they do not come to Scripture with a theological agenda is just deluding himself or herself. The fact is we cannot avoid interpreting Scripture from within our own theological/church traditions and with our own agendas and presuppositions and theologies. Every Christian is in some sense and to some degree a systematic theologian before he begins his exegesis or Bible study. This is not to say that every systematic theology is good, useful, balanced, wise, or biblical; but it is to say that every Christian adopts some kind of systematic theology.

Though few of them realize it at the time, new Christians almost always learn systematic theology before biblical exegesis. Children or adults who go through catechetical instruction in a given church will be taught the major doctrines of the Christian faith through the lens of the particular denomination or theological tradition of that church (for me that happened to be, by God's design, in the Reformed Church).

People coming to faith in Christ in other contexts are often responding to even more-simplified presentations of the gospel in tract or booklet form or from speakers at some kind of evangelistic or outreach event. The most common form of such a presentation is probably one that focuses on God's desire to be in relationship with humanity, our alienation from him, Christ's

work on the cross as the solution to humanity's plight, and our need to respond in repentance, faith, and discipleship. Along the way, however embryonically, individuals are exposed to fundamental Christian doctrines about God, humanity, sin, salvation, and sanctification. These are all issues of systematic theology—and this is what guides in our understanding of God's word.

We saw how, for Wrede, NT scholarship was essentially a historical enterprise that sought to free itself from the shackles of dogmatic presuppositions. However, as McGrath notes,

[T]he idea that biblical exegesis is a neutral or value-free enterprise is to be rejected: its methods and presuppositions are seins- and ortsgebunden. The exegete brings to the text questions which he or she has been conditioned to ask through his or her experience, social position, political conviction, gender and so forth. The recognition that human thought—whether sociology, theology, ethics or metaphysics—arises in a specific social context is of fundamental importance to the sociology of knowledge.<sup>28</sup>

More recently, The Jesus Seminar has claimed that by applying certain “critical,” “scientific,” or “scholarly” criteria they have been able to arrive at a definitive answer to the question “What did Jesus Really Say?”<sup>29</sup> (the subtitle of its 1993 publication, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*). Critical scholarship, for The Jesus Seminar, meant making “empirical, factual evidence—evidence open to confirmation by independent, neutral observers—the controlling factor in historical judgments. Non-critical scholars are those who put dogmatic considerations first and insist that the factual evidence confirm theological premises.”<sup>30</sup> But as Wright, in a thorough critique of presuppositions and prejudices of The Jesus Seminar, observes,

The idea that by historical investigation one might arrive at a position of unbiased objective certainty, of absolute unconditioned

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<sup>28</sup> A. E. McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine: A Study in the Foundation of Doctrinal Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1990), 89 (see also 90).

<sup>29</sup> Emphasis added because that appears to be the sense in which the Seminar would have their title read, as their subtitle—*The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (underline added)—would seem to indicate.

<sup>30</sup> R. W. Funk and R. W. Hoover (eds.) *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (Sonoma: Polebridge; New York: Macmillan), 1993, 34 (see also pp. 1, 3, 5, 7).

knowledge, about anything, has been shot to pieces by critiques from a variety of points of view. All knowledge is conditioned by the context and agenda of the knower; all reconstructions are somebody's reconstruction, and each "somebody" sees the world through their own eyes and not their neighbor's. This is so widely acknowledged that one would have thought it unnecessary to state, let alone stress.<sup>31</sup>

Does this, then, mean that there is no such thing as genuine historical knowledge? Is it realistic to aim for an objective understanding of the text as it is or do ideology and theology so infect the relationship between text and reader that it makes such an aim unrealistic? Some scholars (such as the authors of *The Postmodern Bible*) would say "Yes."<sup>32</sup> I disagree. I believe we need to adopt a position that, on the one hand, recognises that with God's help we can come to an accurate understanding of the text, but on the other hand, recognises that our understanding will not be absolute. Even though our knowledge may be *partial*—we are only humans, not God remember—even though our knowledge may be *partial* it can still be *true*. How can we do this? Let me suggest three things:

- (1) First, we need to recognise that certain presuppositions are necessary for interpreting the text** (I will say what I think these are in a moment). To come to the text without any presuppositions or theology is to come to the text with an empty head. I take this point from Bernard Lonergan who in his book *Method in Theology* has labeled presuppositionless exegesis as "the Principle of the Empty Head."<sup>33</sup> And a person with an empty head is not very good at doing exegesis or Bible study! The presuppositions or preunderstanding that should inform all of our Bible Study must be a Christian one (in my case one that is steeped in the Reformed Tradition as outlined by its various creeds and catechisms). If you come to the Bible without any theological understanding you will struggle to reconcile the different texts that speak of God's sovereignty on the one hand and human responsibility on the other; or the texts that

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<sup>31</sup> N. T. Wright, "Five Gospels But No Gospel: Jesus and the Seminar." Pages 83-120 in *Authenticating the Activities of Jesus* (Edited by B. Chilton and C. A. Evans. Leiden: Brill, 1999), 96

<sup>32</sup> *Bible and Culture Collective. The Postmodern Bible* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995), 14: "Biblical scholars have been slow to awaken from the dream in which positivist science occupies a space apart from interests and values, to awaken to the realization that our representations of and discourse about what the text meant and how it means are inseparable from what we *want* it to mean, from how we *will* it to mean."

<sup>33</sup> B. J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1972), 157.

point to Christ's human nature on the one hand and his divine nature on the other hand. And so forth.

- (2) **Second, the student of the Bible must approach the text with the conviction that the text originates from outside of him or her.** The text is not a mirror in which we view ourselves or our own ideas. The text comes from outside of us. It originates from someone else. So the goal of interpretation must be to understand the meaning resident in the text. The author's—and I mean the divine and human authors'—Intended meaning. In order to discover the author's intended meaning we must use all of the tools of biblical study. So, for example, if we are studying one of Paul's letters, we would want to find out as much as possible about: the historical situation that promoted its writing; letter writing conventions of Paul's day; cultural elements in the letter that differ from our own 21st century western culture; the flow of thought in the passage we are looking at; we might even want to try and read it in Paul's original language of Greek, and so on. In other words, we want to try and understand Paul on his own terms as much possible. Having done that:
- (3) **Third, the student of the Bible needs to allow his or her own presuppositions or theology to be modified, reshaped, or even completely altered by the text itself.** We come to the text with our preunderstanding, but as we read the text, we allow it to challenge, correct, shape, and even transform those beliefs. Let me enlarge on that point by asking:

### What is the Proper Place of Theology in Exegesis?

What then is the proper place for systematic theology in biblical interpretation? For many scholars interpretation should be carried out exclusively in the following direction:<sup>34</sup>

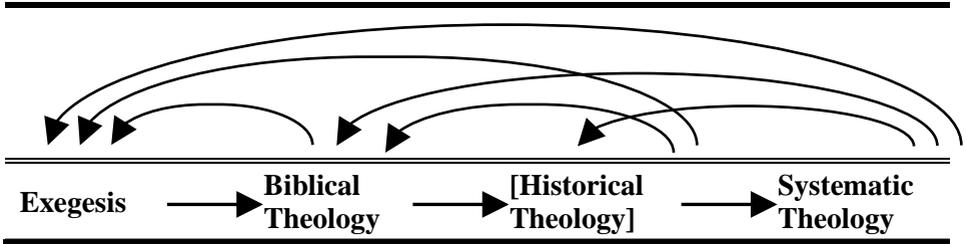


However, not only is such a paradigm unrealistic (as we have seen), it is

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<sup>34</sup>The diagram is from Carson, "Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: The Possibility of Systematic Theology." Pages 65-95 in *Scripture and Truth* (Edited by D. A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge. Leicester: IVP, 1983), 91.

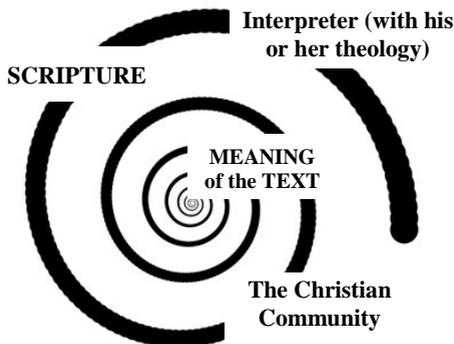
undesirable (we have already noted that we come to the Scriptures with our theology). Carson then proposes a better model:



In this diagram there are feedback lines as well as lines going forward. The lines going forward are important in so far as they recognize that all of our theology must be derived from Scripture as our ultimate source of theology. Nevertheless, the feedback lines remind us that our theology is, at the very same time, shaping our exegesis. J. I. Packer writes:

The maxim that exegesis and biblical interpretation are for the sake of an adequate theology is true; yet if one stops there one has told only half the story. The other half, the complementary truth which alone can ward off the baleful misunderstanding that a particular rational orthodoxy is all that matters, is that the main reason for seeking an adequate systematic theology is for the sake of better and more profound biblical interpretation.<sup>35</sup>

In the end, biblical exegesis cannot be separated from the concerns of systematic theology. The process might better be diagrammed like this:



<sup>35</sup> J. I. Packer, "Preaching as Biblical Interpretation." Pages 187-203 in *Errancy and Common Sense* (Edited by J. R. Michaels and R. Nicole. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 188.

As this diagram indicates: The goal of biblical interpretation is to discern the meaning of the Biblical text. The student of the Bible (along with all of his or her theology) comes to the Scriptures with the aim of discerning the meaning of the text in order to hear God’s word and as a result to know God better, to be transformed by that knowing to the glory of God. Moreover, as our diagram again indicates, this act is ultimately a communal and not an individual event (moreover, to ignore the value of the creeds in the process of biblical study is to ignore the God-given church community who gave them to us and is therefore the height of arrogance). We spiral closer to the meaning of the text as we carry out our interpretation prayerfully (in the presence of Christ), humbly (in submission to the Spirit), and dialogically (in conversation with other members of the Christian community).

All the while we are being guided by our theology, our creeds, our traditions and we seek the meaning of Scripture. And at the same time our study of the Scriptures is constantly deepening our theological understanding, challenging it, shaping it, maybe even transforming it—for Scripture is our supreme authority and not our creeds or traditions. The very fact that our creeds have been derived from an intense study of Scripture means they function as a faithful guide in our interpretation of them.

### **What Does It Look Like in Practice?**

I would like to try and put a little bit of flesh on the bones. This all sounds good in theory, but how does it work in practice? Recently I have been taking my eldest child (who has the very historical name of Jonathan Edwards) through the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*. We came to question 36:

- Q.** What are the benefits which in this life do accompany or flow from justification, adoption, and sanctification?
  
- A.** The benefits which in this life do accompany or flow from justification, adoption, and sanctification, are, assurance of God’s love, peace of conscience, joy in the Holy Ghost, increase of grace, and perseverance therein to the end.

We started talking about the last line: “perseverance therein to the end.” We then flipped over to the Confession to find out a little more about this and

there is a whole chapter on it—chapter 17. There are three paragraphs, the first of which reads:

They, whom God hath accepted in His Beloved, effectually called, and sanctified by His Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved.

Now, if our Creeds are to function as a guide in our interpretation of the Bible what do we do when we get to a text like Hebrews 6:4-6, which we then went on to read together:

For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.

We decided, initially at least, to be guided by the presupposition—based on the *Catechism* and *Confession* (we believe has good scriptural basis)—that a genuine Christian cannot totally or finally fall away from the Christian faith. This, then, meant, also approaching the text with the presupposition that these verses were not describing the experience of a genuine Christian. Armed with these presuppositions we went back to the text (this, as we noted earlier, is a constant movement back and forwards between text and theology—the one sharpening and shaping our understanding of the other).

Furthermore, armed with the conviction that good biblical interpretation involves reading everything in context, we decided that a better understanding of the text would be gained from reading the larger context of this passage. We began back at verse 4:

For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt. (vv 4-6)

We then read on noticing the very next verse began with the word “for” linking it to what went before:

***For*** land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned. (vv 7-8)

The word “for” introduces an illustration (verses 7-8) that clarifies what the author has been taking about in verses 4-6.<sup>36</sup> Namely, those who have “tasted the heavenly gift,” “shared in the Holy Spirit,” and “tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come” and yet have fallen away, are like the land that “drunk the rain that often falls on it,” yet nevertheless “bears thorns and thistles.” Grudem writes:

The author of Hebrews knows that there are some in the community to which he writes who are in danger of falling away in just this way (see Heb. 2:3; 3:8, 12, 14-15; 4:1, 7, 11; 10:26, 29, 35-36, 38-39; 12:3, 15-17). He wants to warn them that, though they have participated in the fellowship of the church and experienced a number of God’s blessings in their lives, yet if they fall away after all that, there is no salvation for them. This does not imply that he thinks that true Christians could fall away—Hebrews 3:14 implies quite the opposite. But he wants them to gain assurance of salvation through their continuing in faith, and thereby implies that if they fall away it would show that they never were Christ’s people in the first place (see Hebrews 3:6).<sup>37</sup>

Therefore the author wants to warn those in danger of slipping away from their Christian profession or their outward association with the church. He is warning them to watch out, because depending on external blessings and experiences is not enough. That is why he says in v 9:

Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation.

These are all good things, says the writer, but they did not accompany

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<sup>36</sup> See William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8* (Waco: Word, 1991), 1:142.

<sup>37</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994), 800.

salvation.<sup>38</sup> For this reason the writer immediately passes from this description of those who commit apostasy to a further analogy that shows that these people who fell away never had any genuine fruit in their lives. Verses 7-8 speak of these people in terms of “thorns and thistles,” the kind of crop that is brought forth on land that has no worthwhile life in itself even though it receives repeated blessings from God (in terms of the analogy, even though rain frequently falls upon it). Just as the “thorns and thistles” received the rain, so these false believers “tasted the heavenly gift.” As Grudem correctly observes:

We should notice here that people who commit apostasy are not compared to a field that once bore good fruit and is now does not, but that they are like *land that never bore good fruit*, but only thorns and thistles. The land may look good before the crops start to come up, but the fruit gives the genuine evidence, and it is bad.<sup>39</sup>

Not only were we guided in our exegesis by what we had learned in our Confessions and Catechisms, but our exegesis led us to a deeper understanding of the nature of what perseverance and apostasy can involve. In this way, our theology serves to sharpen our exegesis and our exegesis serves to sharpen our theology as iron sharpens iron.

## Conclusion

The goal of biblical interpretation, as we said earlier, is to hear the word of God and to behold the glory of God in Scripture and to be transformed by it (personal transformation is thus to be preferred over historical reconstruction and doxology is to be preferred over methodology). I would like to conclude with a sort of manifesto for the theological interpretation of Scripture in the form of ten brief points. A theological approach to Scripture, I believe, is to be governed by the following ten convictions:

- (1) that the principal interest of the Bible’s authors, of the text itself, and of the ongoing Christian community over time was theological: reading the Scriptures therefore meant coming to hear God’s word, to know God better, and to be transformed by that knowing;
- (2) that the ultimate goal of biblical interpretation is beholding the glory

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<sup>38</sup> See Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 230-31.

<sup>39</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 800.

of God in Scripture;

- (3) that there is a correspondence between the words of Scripture and the Word of God (the “Scripture principle”);
- (4) that a proper reading of Scripture is that which attends to the whole of Scripture as canon (the “canonical principle”);
- (5) that all theological interpretation is to be submitted to the biblical text (and not the interpreting community) as the ultimate authority and final arbiter on all theological matters;
- (6) that exegesis will be oriented towards specifically theological questions;
- (7) that scholarly tools and methods may be usefully employed in the theological exegesis of Scripture to the extent that they illuminate points 1-6 above;
- (8) that a theological interpretation of Scripture must occur “in the Spirit”;
- (9) that theological interpretation will ideally be practiced in community;
- (10) that the present fragmentation of theology into a set of discrete and disconnected disciplines (i.e. OT studies, NT studies, systematic theology, practical theology, church history, etc.) is to be resisted. While each discipline will have some inevitable division of labour, we must labour as far as possible to overcome these distinctions.