

S O U T H E A S T E R N

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The Continuation of ‘A New Exchange’: Theological Interpretation of Scripture in Retrospect and Prospect

Grant D. Taylor

Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

Since this edition of *Southeastern Theological Review* discusses and gives examples of theological interpretation of Scripture (hereafter TIS), readers may desire a definition of TIS. Several forums, introductory books, and a dictionary¹ have covered this ground, so that this essay will not seek to do likewise. Instead, this brief essay will endeavor to show that as it is generally practiced today TIS represents what Karl Barth (1886–1968) believed was one of the primary goals of his *Church Dogmatics*: “... the initiation of a *new exchange* of views about the question of proper theology, the established knowledge of God, and the obedient service of God among men.”² Of course, by “new exchange” Barth did not exclude all the theological interpretations of scripture that preceded his work. Rather, he hoped his *Dogmatics* would facilitate new discussions. In particular he hoped to break out of old historical-critical discussions (though in general he accepted the critical conclusions of the OT and NT scholars of his day) to break into what he called “the strange new world of the Bible.” Since Barth has greatly influenced many current practitioners of TIS, the past and present of TIS owes much to this “new exchange” Barth initiated.

¹ See e.g. Greg Allison, “Theological Interpretation of Scripture: An Introduction and Preliminary Evaluation,” *SBJT* 14/2 (2010), 28–37; J. Todd Billings, *The Word of God for the People of God: An Entryway to the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010); Joel B. Green, *Practicing Theological Interpretation: Engaging Biblical Texts for Faith and Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011); idem, “The (Re)Turn to Theology,” *JTI* 1 (2007), 1–3; R. W. L. Moberly, “What is Theological Interpretation of Scripture?” *JTI* 3 (2009), 161–78; Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering an Ancient Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008); idem, “Biblical Theology and/or Theological Interpretation of Scripture” *SJT* 61 (2008), 16–31; idem, “What is Theological Interpretation? An Ecclesiological Reduction,” *IJST* 12 (2010), 144–61; Kevin Vanhoozer, ed., *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), hereafter *DTIB*; John Webster, “Editorial: Five Thoughts on Theological Interpretation of Scripture,” *IJST* 12 (2010), 116–17; Stephen Wellum, “The SBJT Forum: Theological Interpretation of Scripture,” *SBJT* 14/2 (2010), 78–84; the *Journal of Theological Interpretation*; and *Ex Auditu*, which publishes papers given at the annual Symposium on Theological Interpretation of Scripture of North Park Theological Seminary.

² Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (trans. Grover Foley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), xi–xii. Emphasis added.

The goal of this essay, then, is to research selected roots of TIS to illuminate its characteristics as presently practiced. This survey will provide background material for the next section, which will sketch some implications for the prospects of TIS. The final section proposes epistemological and ethical reasons for making the sufficiency of Scripture primary in doing theology. To look forward, then, we begin by looking back to see from whence TIS came.

Theological Interpretation of Scripture in Retrospect

Proponents of TIS position themselves in a particular way, both positively and negatively, toward the history of biblical interpretation.³ Theological interpretation of Scripture stands over against the kind of interpretation represented in the famous 1787 address of J. P. Gabler and *for* the kind championed by Karl Barth in the 20th century. Gabler and Barth serve in this essay as two exemplars, but not necessarily the verifiable originators, of contrasting approaches.⁴ Given the expanse of the period and scope of the material on the subject, this section includes a necessarily brief version of this history. Therefore I will examine Gabler's methods and significance, then note briefly the history of interpretation between his time and Barth's, and finally trace Barth's views as a stark contrast to Gabler's approach. This section will, it is hoped, illustrate the motives and concerns of TIS.

Against Gabler

Gabler's 1787 address at the University of Altdorf, "An Oration on the Proper Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology and the Specific Objectives of Each,"⁵ provides an example of the then-nascent historical-critical method that stemmed from Spinoza in the 17th century, and especially the rationalist presuppositions of the 18th century, that governed this kind of biblical interpretation. In his oration Gabler distinguished biblical theology from dogmatic theology. Gabler held that

³ This is especially the case with respect to the question of the historical-critical method in theology. See the discussion in Joel B. Green, *Practicing Theological Interpretation*, 43–70; cf. John Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism* (Louisville: WJK, 2007).

⁴ A good bit of work has been done in regard to the origins of historical-critical approaches and of theological interpretation. See, for example, H.G. Reventlow, *A History of Biblical Interpretation*, Volume 4: From the Enlightenment to the Twentieth Century (trans. Leo G. Perdue; RBS 63; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010); Michael C. Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁵ See John Sandys-Wunsch and Laurence Eldredge, "J. P. Gabler and the Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology: Translation, Commentary, and Discussion of His Originality" *SJT* 33 (1980), 133–58; reprinted in Ben C. Ollenburger, ed. *Old Testament Theology: Flowering and Future* (2d ed.; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 497–506. Citations of Gabler in this essay give the page numbers from Wunsch and Eldredge.

... there is truly a biblical theology, of historical origin, conveying what the holy writers felt about divine matters; on the other hand there is a dogmatic theology of didactic origin, teaching what each theologian philosophises (*sic*) rationally about divine things, according to the measure of his ability or of the times, age, place, sect, school, and other similar factors.⁶

Because Gabler believed the Bible should inform the church's theology, his method was to examine the OT and NT for the timeless, universal ideas found in the Bible and the Apocrypha and then to separate these from the time-bound ideas of the ancients. By comparing the universal ideas, which comported with rationalist notions of reality, across the OT and the NT one could come up with material for dogmatic theology. Gabler sought a pure biblical theology founded upon the work of historical criticism that abstracted the parts of the Bible from the whole.⁷

Gabler's proposal was more significant for its title and rationalist presuppositions than its content. Already J. S. Semler had called for the "free investigation of the canon" (1771–75) on the basis of a separation between religion and theology.⁸ Gabler followed in this line: "Religion ... is everyday, transparently clear knowledge; but theology is subtle, learned knowledge."⁹ Gabler saw these distinctions as essential for the proper establishment of both theology and religion:

"... that we distinguish carefully the divine from the human, that we establish some distinction between biblical and dogmatic theology, and after we have separated those things which in the sacred books refer most immediately in their own times and to the men of those times from those pure notions which divine providence wished to be characteristic of all times and places, let us then construct the foundation of our philosophy upon religion and let us designate with some care the objectives of divine and human wisdom. Exactly thus will our theology be made more certain and more firm"¹⁰

As a result of Gabler's method applied, the integrity of what had been held together in the history of the Church is precluded from the outset — indeed, held distinct from one another: the unity of the OT and NT, the Law and the Gospel, the church and the theologian, and history and theology.

⁶ Gabler, "Proper Distinction," 137.

⁷ See Mark Elliot, "Gabler, Johann Philipp" in *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters* (ed. Donald K. McKim; Downers Grove: IVP, 2007), 452–56.

⁸ *Abhandlung von freier Untersuchung des Kanon* (4 vols.; Halle: Carl Hermann Hemmerde, 1771–75); cf. H. Rollmann, "Semler, Johann Salomo" in *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters*, 910–14.

⁹ Gabler, "Proper Distinction," 136.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 138.

Though Gabler may not have intended it, nonetheless the effect remains that distinctions reign according to his proposal.¹¹

Gabler's address was influential because he identified three key distinctions that characterized academic biblical interpretation for the next 130 years: between biblical and dogmatic theology, between religion and theology, and between the church and the academy. As Peter Stuhlmacher notes, by the end of the 18th century "... for a very long time contact between the church's dogmatic tradition and scientific-critical theology was broken off."¹² After Gabler, the Bible became, in European universities at least, a literary resource for historical study of the Christian religion instead of historical revelation for theological reflection and Christian living. And Hans Frei suggests that due to the influence of Spinoza and even Cocceius in the 17th century and English Deism and German rationalism in the 18th century (e.g., Semler, Gabler), classic orthodox doctrines such as revelation no longer governed (or at times even influenced) biblical interpretation. It is not hard to see that a rupture occurred. Whereas the Reformers thought the literal sense and historical referents of Scripture were unified, after the 18th century biblical scholars generally kept them separate.¹³ Thus the Bible, especially the Pentateuch and Gospels, came to be read "critically," which means: "read Scripture like any other book," that is, apart from any prior theological or traditional commitments about the Bible.¹⁴

¹¹ Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale, 1974), 166, summarizes Gabler's approach: "Grammatical-historical and historical-critical analysis together rendered the full explicative meaning of texts for Gabler." Elliot, "Gabler," 452–53, argues that Gabler wanted to keep the Bible (both Testaments) together as a document. Yet it is difficult to follow Gabler's abstraction principle without, at some point, critically separating the Old from the New.

¹² Peter Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Toward a Hermeneutics of Consent* (trans. Roy A. Harrisville; Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 1977), 40–41.

¹³ Frei, *Eclipse*, especially pp. 17–182. According to Frei (*ibid.*, 55), the move toward more academic study of the Bible in Germany stems from an independence born in rationalism: "Not much of Protestant orthodoxy passed over into rationalist religious thought, but this one thing surely did: the antitraditionalism in scriptural interpretation of the one bolstered the antiauthoritarian stance in matters of religious meaning and truth of the other." Hence the essence of Frei's thesis is the breakdown in this period of reading the Bible as "realistic narrative" (*ibid.*, 324). To overcome this eclipse, Frei proposes an increased emphasis on reading the Bible as narrative, treating its literal sense as a world of history-like narrative. The "realistic sense" of the Bible, then, for Frei refers to this narrative unity of the words themselves. For a critique see Timothy Ward, *Word and Supplement: Speech Acts, Biblical Texts, and the Sufficiency of Scripture* (Oxford: Oxford, 2002), 150–61.

¹⁴See the classic later essay by the English scholar Benjamin Jowett, "On the Interpretation of Scripture," in *Essays and Reviews* (London: Longman, Green, Longman

Barth provided a stark challenge to this viewpoint even though he was not the only, or even the first, scholar to do so. Adolf Schlatter (1852–1938), one of Barth's teachers, argues for a theological reading of Scripture as proper to the character of Scripture itself: "As soon as the historian sets aside or brackets the question of faith, he is making his concern with the New Testament and his presentation of it into a radical and total polemic against it."¹⁵ Schlatter saw theological reading, i.e. faith, as intrinsic to the historical-exegetical task. Although Barth, then, was not the first to argue for a confessional reading of Scripture he does receive much more attention than Schlatter as the main exemplar of theological interpretation for the 21st century.

For Barth

Richard Burnett claims, "Karl Barth's break with liberalism in the summer of 1915 is the most important event that has occurred in theology in over two hundred years."¹⁶ Whether or not this is true requires a debate beyond the scope of this essay. It perhaps suffices to note that some major practitioners of TIS believe that it is so. From Barth's *Epistle to the Romans* (1919) to his *Church Dogmatics* (1932–1966), Barth asked questions and gave answers that continue to spur TIS. Two emphases stand out. First, Barth seeks to integrate his own brand of exegesis and dogmatics for the church. Second, he emphasizes Christology within a Trinitarian account of revelation. For these two reasons, but not only these, Barth serves as the "motivation and model" for TIS.¹⁷

Whereas Gabler argued for the clear separation between biblical and dogmatic theology, Barth sought to put them back together. His first and last major publications illustrate the point. The series of prefaces to *Romans* represent an impassioned back and forth between Barth and his numerous contemporary critics. In the preface to the second edition (1922) Barth declares his difference from the common scholarly approach: "The matter contained in the text cannot be released save by a creative straining of the sinews, by a relentless, elastic application of the 'dialectical method.' The critical historian

and Roberts, 1861), 330–433. The phrase "read Scripture like any other book" comes directly from Jowett's essay, p. 338.

¹⁵ Adolf Schlatter, "The Theology of the New Testament and Dogmatics" in *The Nature of New Testament Theology* (trans. and ed. Robert Morgan; SBT 25; London: SCM, 1973), 122. For a helpful investigation of Schlatter's epistemology and exegesis see Robert W. Yarbrough, *The Salvation Historical Fallacy? Reassessing the History of New Testament Theology* (Leiden: Deo, 2004), 81–114.

¹⁶ Richard E. Burnett, *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis: The Hermeneutical Principles of the Römerbrief Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 1.

¹⁷ Following the assessment of Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing*, 17; cf. Hans Madume, "Theological Interpretation After Barth" *JTI* 3:1 (2009), 143–56. Madume reviews three recent works on the theological exegesis of Karl Barth, and argues that we now need fewer works *about* Barth's exegesis and more work that integrates theology and exegesis in the way Barth modeled.

needs to be more critical.”¹⁸ By “critical” Barth means that most biblical commentators at that time needed to explicate theology from the text itself apart from historical concerns, and not settle for “... a disjointed series of notes on words and phrases.”¹⁹ For Barth the subject matter of the Bible, God, governed the exegetical task and this required more than he felt Liberals in biblical scholarship had given him to that point.

In *Evangelical Theology* (1963) Barth describes the science of theology as the science of the Incarnation. Above all, theology is “... concerned with Immanuel, God with us!”²⁰ Following a discussion of the devotional life of the theologian, he describes the relation of the theological disciplines. For Barth exegesis, biblical theology, and the church all cohere under the theology of the Immanuel:

The science of biblical theology does not work in empty space but in the service of the community of Jesus Christ, which is founded by prophetic and apostolic testimony. It is for this reason that it approaches these tests with a *specific expectation*... . Biblical theology expects that testimony to the God who calls for faith will confront it in these texts. Nevertheless, it remains unreservedly open to such questions as: Will this expectation be fulfilled? ... Is such exegesis ‘dogmatic’ exegesis? An affirmative answer has to be given only to the extent that the science of theological exegesis rejects, at the outset, every dogma which might forbid it the expectation just mentioned and might declare, from the beginning, its vindication to be impossible.²¹

At least for a confessing Christian theologian, no neat separation exists between religion and theology, between the church and the academy, or therefore between biblical and dogmatic theology. We must engage in *Church* dogmatics.²² This motivation in Barth stimulates much of the emphasis on “ecclesial location” in TIS.

A second major impetus for TIS can be found in Barth’s emphasis on Christology within his Trinitarian account of revelation. For Barth, “To say

¹⁸ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (6th ed.; trans. E. C. Hoskyns; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 8. Hans Frei, “Scripture as Realistic Narrative: Karl Barth as Critic of Historical Criticism” in *Thy Word is Truth: Karl Barth on Scripture* (ed., George Hunsinger; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 49–68, describes Barth’s tenuous and changing relationship with historical criticism. Cf. Burnett, *Karl Barth’s Theological Exegesis*.

¹⁹ Barth, *Romans*, 8.

²⁰ Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, 12.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 177–78. Cited in Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism*, 50–51, to whom I owe the reference.

²² Cf. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I.1: The Doctrine of the Word of God* (trans., G. W. Bromiley et al; eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance; London: T & T Clark, 2010) §4, 119. Theology is the study of *The Word of God for the People of God*, as the title of Billings’s recent book encapsulates.

revelation is to say "The Word became flesh." However, the Bible and the church's proclamation can only attest to and proclaim this fact, they cannot reproduce it as given.²³ Barth held to the fallibility of all human words and thus the indirect nature of the Word of God in the words of Scripture.²⁴ For Barth this principle stems from a more fundamental one (at least for Barth): the freedom of God to reveal himself. As such we may only know God insofar as he freely reveals himself in Jesus Christ. Timothy Ward notes,

The only permanent, true 'Word of God' in itself is therefore Jesus Christ ... the second person of the Trinity in human form, God come in the flesh. To identify anything else directly and permanently, in itself, with revelation or with the Word of God, as the Protestant orthodox did with Scripture, is for Barth, to threaten the supremacy of Jesus Christ.²⁵

Barth therefore made the event of the Word of God into the hermeneutical key for understanding the both the contents and the nature of Scripture.²⁶ To do so one has to separate the biblical text and the historical event.

In order to understand Scripture's relation to the event of revelation, then, we need the doctrine of the Trinity.²⁷ Barth argues forcefully, "The basis or root of the doctrine of the Trinity ... lies in revelation."²⁸ Furthermore the event of the incarnation is the revelatory event that grounds the doctrine of the Trinity: "According to the Bible God's being with us is the event of revelation. The statement, understood thus, that God reveals Himself as the Lord, or what this statement is meant to describe, and therefore revelation itself as attested by Scripture, we call the root of the doctrine of the Trinity."²⁹ This implies two key points for interpretation.

First, the doctrine of the Trinity is not equal to the biblical text but it "... translates and exegetes the text."³⁰ Second, true statements about the Trinity align with the statements about revelation insofar as "... revelation is correctly interpreted by the [doctrine of the Trinity]."³¹ From Barth, then, a Trinitar-

²³ Barth, *CD I.1*, §4, 119–20. Barth (*ibid.*, §4, 120) states, "It is Jesus Christ Himself who here speaks for Himself and needs no witness apart from His Holy Spirit and the faith that rejoices in His promise received and grasped."

²⁴ See, for example, his discussion of Paul in the "Preface to the Third Edition" of *Romans*, 19; *idem*, *CD I.1*, §4, 99–111; §5, 165–86; cf., Ward, *Word and Supplement*, 110–16; W. S. Johnson, "Barth, Karl," in *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters*, 64–65.

²⁵ Ward, *Word and Supplement*, 111; cf., Johnson, "Barth, Karl," 161; Barth, *CD I.1*, §4, 111–21.

²⁶ See Barth, *CD I.1*, §8, 315–16; cf. *idem*, *Evangelical Theology*, 12.

²⁷ Johnson, "Barth, Karl," 162.

²⁸ Barth, *CD I.1*, §8, 311. Barth (*ibid.*) claims to follow Calvin that "... the revelation attested in the Bible, is the basis of the doctrine of the Trinity, or that the doctrine of the Trinity is the appropriate interpretation of this revelation as such."

²⁹ Barth, *CD I.1*, §8, 307.

³⁰ Barth, *CD I.1*, §8, 308.

³¹ Barth, *CD I.1*, §8, 309–10.

ian hermeneutic for reading the Bible emerges.³² As W. S. Johnson states, “Triunity forms the implicit grammar that should guide all our ways of speaking of God.”³³ As we will see below, Barth indeed initiated a “new exchange” in theology and hermeneutics that sparked and still influences TIS.

Two Responses to Barth’s New Exchange: Stuhlmacher and Childs

Barth however was not the only 20th c. scholar to argue for TIS. In 1975, NT scholar Peter Stuhlmacher highlighted “... serious hermeneutical problems in Protestant biblical criticism ...”³⁴ in order to propose a more critically theological approach. He finds, like Barth, that historical-critical exegesis in itself as practiced by most academic NT scholars does not attempt to provide a theological interpretation of Scripture. Stuhlmacher argues, however, that historical-critical exegesis can provide this if it will 1) follow a hermeneutics of consent for the biblical texts and 2) operate with a recognition of the “... enduring hermeneutical relevance of the Third Article of the Apostles’ Creed.”³⁵

A hermeneutics of consent incorporates one’s openness to transcendence, methodological verifiability, and an awareness of the history of effects and interpretation between the biblical texts and us.³⁶ The first and third principles sound similar to Barth’s emphases on hearing the word of revelation and his great dependence, for instance, on Calvin. Stuhlmacher likewise points us backward in order to go forward: “By the hermeneutics of consent, done in our own contemporary and scientifically studied fashion, we reestablish connection with the Reformation’s hermeneutical model of Bible exposition.”³⁷ Even though, like Barth, Stuhlmacher argues for an increased connection between exegesis and dogmatics, he claims one may make such a connection by hewing closer to the Reformation understanding of Scripture, which Barth did not do with respect to revelation and illumination.³⁸ He also provides a much more in-depth exegetical method than Barth, as could be expected given their different academic specialties. Thus Stuhlmacher questions basic points in Barth’s “new exchange” while at the same time calling for some form of TIS. Stuhlmacher is much more a son of Schlatter, then, than of Barth.

Brevard Childs however followed in the footsteps of Barth.³⁹ His influence extends through his writings and those of his students (and their stu-

³² By “emerges” I do not mean for the first time, but in the context of Barth’s 20th c. “confessional” theology, and in the light of his significance for TIS.

³³ Johnson, “Barth, Karl,” 162.

³⁴ Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism*, 61. See *ibid.*, 61–75, for full description of the problems.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 90.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 83–87.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 88.

³⁸ See Ward, *Word and Supplement*, 106–30, esp. 130.

³⁹ See the similar trajectory traced in Treier, *Introducing*, 18.

dents),⁴⁰ and spurs TIS primarily in one major area: the canonical approach for biblical theology. Though Childs' approach to biblical theology began with the *Crisis in Biblical Theology* (1970), his *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (1992) provides his most comprehensive thoughts.⁴¹ The latter title (and subtitle) summarizes well his approach and its contribution to TIS. For Childs, "canonical" means the final form of the Bible, in its boundaries and shape and the processes leading to that shape, which is theologically binding on the community that reads it as Christian Scripture.⁴² One can read the whole Bible as Christian Scripture because the OT and NT both function as discrete witnesses to Jesus Christ. Both render Christ to us. Indeed for Childs the subject of the literal sense *is* Jesus Christ.⁴³

Childs in his biblical theology applies the words of Barth that the "critical historian needs to be more critical."⁴⁴ He often assumes or describes only briefly the results of source or redaction criticism before moving beyond them in order to comment on the theological meaning of the final form of a text in the canon.⁴⁵ The "canon," therefore, provides both interpretive

⁴⁰ Many contribute to TIS, Christopher Seitz is notable among them. For an appreciative essay, see Seitz, "'We Are Not Prophets or Apostles: The Biblical Theology of B. S. Childs'" in his *World Without End: The Old Testament as Abiding Theological Witness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 102–9. See also Mark S. Gignilliat, a former student of Seitz, *Karl Barth and the Fifth Gospel: Barth's Theological Exegesis of Isaiah* (Barth Studies; Burlington, Ver.: Ashgate, 2009); Richard Schultz, "Brevard Childs' Contribution to Old Testament Interpretation: An Evangelical Appreciation and Assessment," *Princeton Theological Review* 14 (2008), 69–94.

⁴¹ See especially Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970); idem, "The Exegetical Significance of Canon for the Study of the Old Testament," *VTSup* 29 (1977), 66–80; idem, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985); idem, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1992).

⁴² See Richard Schultz, "What is 'Canonical' About a Canonical Biblical Theology?" in *Biblical Theology: Retrospect and Prospect* (ed. Scott J. Hafemann; Downers Grove: IVP, 2002), 85.

⁴³ See Brevard S. Childs, "The Sensus Literalis of Scripture: An Ancient and Modern Problem" in *Beiträge zur alttestamentlichen Theologie* (eds. Herbert Donner et al.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht: 1977), 80–93; cf., Daniel R. Driver, *Brevard Childs: Biblical Theologian for the Church's One Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 92, who discusses a 1969 Yale University colloquium with Childs and Frei that illustrates Childs' early inclinations toward this approach.

⁴⁴ Barth, *Romans*, 8; cf., Philip Sumpter, "Brevard Childs as Critical and Faithful Exegete," *PTR* 14 (2008), 95–116.

⁴⁵ E.g., Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 419: "It is therefore quite impossible to speak theologically of Old Testament covenant without reckoning with the perspective of the final editors of the collection who shaped the literature as a whole." Cf. Schultz, "What is Canonical," 87.

boundaries and guidelines. Childs states the function of canon, for example, for interpretation of Isaiah:

The canonical shape provides the larger framework of scripture — a rule of faith — within which the interpretive function of exegesis is guided.... In sum, the canonical shaping of the prophetic corpus functions as a rule of faith, both negatively to exclude certain critical options, and positively to establish an authoritative context for the whole⁴⁶

Moreover, because of the “Christological Content of the Christian Bible,” the canon has “a semantic ‘given’ designated by its role as sacred scripture.”⁴⁷ Thus Childs allows for multiple levels of meaning in Scripture insofar as these levels accord with the canon, the rule of faith, which renders Christ.⁴⁸ Barth’s stress on Christology in explaining revelation takes center stage in Childs’ biblical theology. Childs followed Barth’s initiation of a new exchange, applied it to biblical theology in his canonical approach, and so provides further impetus for TIS.⁴⁹

Theological Interpretation of Scripture: “A New Exchange” Continued

Childs died in 2007, the same year the *Journal of Theological Interpretation* launched, two years after the publication of the *Dictionary of Theological Interpretation of the Bible*. By the first-decade of the 21st century, then, TIS was an enterprise in its own right and an exercise in academic discourse. This section thus sketches the characteristics upon which most scholars of TIS agree. As we shall see, there are large areas of continuing debate in TIS. Therefore in light of the sketch below we will discuss a few implications for the prospect of TIS.

Barth and Childs, and to an extent Stuhlmacher, show that TIS is above all about the proper starting point for reading Scripture in academic, not only ecclesial, settings. Restated, TIS purports to bring faith-formed, or confessional, readings of Scripture back into the halls of the academy. The rationalist distinctions and critical starting point(s) of Gabler must be overturned. As J. Todd Billings claims, “We start with faith in the triune God, a trust in Jesus Christ and the Spirit’s transforming power through Scripture. In reading

⁴⁶ Brevard S. Childs, *The Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 317.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 316.

⁴⁸ Driver, *Brevard Childs*, 246–54, describes how this emphasis evolved in Childs’ work.

⁴⁹ Moberly, “What is Theological Interpretation of Scripture?” 165; Schultz, “Brevard Childs’ Contribution to Old Testament Interpretation,” 90–92; Dennis T. Olson, “Seeking ‘the Inexpressible Texture of Thy Word’: A Practical Guide to Brevard Childs’ Canonical Approach to Theological Exegesis,” *PTR* 14 (2008), 53–68.

Scripture, we seek to know and have fellowship with God in a deeper way."⁵⁰ Billings' first phrase illumines the primary characteristic of TIS.

The primary characteristic is a Trinitarian hermeneutic that stems from an epistemology of faith. The adjective "theological" in TIS functions as a (call for) description of the ontological implications of three interrelated realities: the Triune nature of God, his act(s) of revelation, and the faith of the reader(s). Kevin Vanhoozer argues, "I believe that our grammatical analysis of biblical discourse is theologically incomplete until we have spelled out its ontological implications."⁵¹ "Theological" in TIS, then, refers to a confessional, "Trinitarian" interpretation of Scripture. John Webster and Christopher Seitz, for example, apply this principle to dogmatics and biblical studies, respectively.⁵²

Other characteristics build upon this Trinitarian principle. First, just as Barth leaned heavily on Calvin in his theological reflections, TIS emphasizes "pre-critical exegesis." In the light of Frei's historiography, practitioners of TIS seek to reclaim what was eclipsed as a result of the explosion of historical-critical method in biblical studies. As Seitz asks, "While we value historical approaches, might we do well to let a past before the rise of the historical-critical method also teach us a lesson about how to read?"⁵³ Following Barth and Childs, those who claim TIS seek to reflect theologically on this history and incorporate, in varying ways, some of the instincts and methods gleaned from the pre-critical period.⁵⁴

Second, TIS exhorts the practice of reading Scripture according to the Rule of Faith, summarized in the early Creeds of the Church.⁵⁵ The Rule "... is a summary of the church's confession about the basic story of the Christian

⁵⁰ Billings, *The Word of God*, 11. See also Richard B. Hays, "Reading the Bible with Eyes of Faith: The Practice of Theological Exegesis," *JTI* 1.1 (2007), 5–27.

⁵¹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Vanhoozer responds to the four horsemen of an apocalyptic panel discussion on *Remythologizing Theology*," *STR* 4/1 (2013), 73, emphasis original. Cf., idem, *Is There a Meaning in this Text? The Bible, The Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 455–68.

⁵² See especially John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Current Issues in Theology; Cambridge: Cambridge, 2003); Christopher Seitz, *The Character of Christian Scripture: The Significance of a Two-Testament Bible* (Studies in Theological Interpretation; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011).

⁵³ Christopher Seitz, *Prophecy and Hermeneutics: Toward a New Introduction of the Prophets* (Studies in Theological Interpretation; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 199.

⁵⁴ See Childs, *Struggle*, 299; Treier, *Introducing*, 39–56; Christopher A. Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1998); David C. Steinmetz, "The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis" in *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (ed., Stephen E. Fowl; Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 26–38; Frances Young, "The 'Mind' of Scripture: Theological Readings of the Bible in the Fathers," *IJST* 7 (2005), 126–41.

⁵⁵ Especially the Nicene Creed. See Christopher R. Seitz, ed., *Nicene Christianity: The Future for a New Ecumenism* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001); David S. Yaeger, "The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma: A Contribution to the Recovery of Theological Exegesis" in *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (ed., Stephen E. Fowl; Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 87–100; Green, *Practicing Theological Interpretation*, 71–98.

faith, as informed in the Bible.”⁵⁶ The Rule may serve in TIS as an example of the sort of “methodological verifiability” for exegesis of which Stuhlmacher wrote. That is, if one undertakes exegesis of the biblical texts in theological terms, the Rule helps norm or verify those terms. Childs especially influences this point.⁵⁷

Third, TIS represents a sustained discussion about the meaning of biblical texts and how Evangelical and Catholic interpreters alike describe meaning.⁵⁸ Hence questions of multiple meanings, polyvalence, and multivalence receive fresh attention within discussion about the nature of general and “theological hermeneutics.”⁵⁹ Jorge Garcia summarizes the thrust of what is agreed upon in this discussion: “A theory of scriptural meaning ... must begin in theology.”⁶⁰ Whereas Gabler and others sought meaning in a historical-critical interpretation of the Bible and theology, proponents of TIS seek meaning in a theological (Trinitarian) interpretation of the Bible and history.⁶¹

It is in place to offer an example on the third point identified above. Beneath the search for theological meaning in Scripture may lay a fresh perspective on an older, and traditional, sacramental view of history. Following Augustine, Barth, and Yves Congar and Henri de Lubac, Evangelical scholar Hans Boersma argues that “... periods of the Christian tradition and our present time are connected via a common sacramental participation in the eternal Word of God.”⁶² For Boersma this participatory reality *in God’s history* should challenge Evangelicals to reject “... the modern perspective on history,” in which our time is neatly separated from earlier times and events, as many modern historians see it.⁶³ This “sacramental view” of history shows an

⁵⁶ Billings, *The Word of God*, 17. Seitz, *Character*, 171 claims: “... it focuses on the ontological realities of God in Christ through the various economies of the OT;” cf. *ibid.*, 191–203.

⁵⁷ For example: Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 30–32; *idem*, *Struggle*, 315–17.

⁵⁸ See Treier, *Introducing*, 21–33; Hans Boersma and Matthew Levering, eds. *Heaven on Earth: Theological Interpretation in Ecumenical Dialogue* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013); and the Center for Catholic-Evangelical Dialogue: <http://www.ccedprograms.org/>.

⁵⁹ See Treier, *Introducing*, 127–56; cf., thesis number four of the “Nine Theses on the Interpretation of Scripture” in Ellen Davis and Richard B. Hays, eds. *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

⁶⁰ Jorge J. E. Garcia, “Meaning,” in *DTIB*, 499.

⁶¹ See Seitz, *Character*, 154–55; cf. Childs, *Struggle*, 317–20.

⁶² Hans Boersma, “Anchored in Christ,” *ChrCent* 128:3 (2011), 29. See *ibid.*, 28: “For Barth, revelation means sacrament: thus God’s revelation in Christ is ‘the basic reality and substance of the sacramental reality of His revelation.’” Boersma cites Book XI of Augustine’s *Confessions*. He notes in the article cited his indebtedness to the *nouvelle théologie* of Yves Congar and Henri de Lubac. See also Boersma, *Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

⁶³ *Ibid.* “Because we tend to regard the time period of the biblical author and our own small moment under the sun as two distinct or separate moments, (univocally) identical in kind, we believe that it is our job simply to find out what exactly the bib-

increasing confluence of Evangelical and Catholic viewpoints in TIS.⁶⁴ Furthermore the specific point may illumine the integration in TIS of Trinitarian presuppositions, pre-critical interpretation, and Christological exegesis for the meaning of the literal sense. The lines of biblical hermeneutics⁶⁵ are being redrawn, especially for Evangelicals, in the continuation of “a new exchange.”

Theological Interpretation of Scripture in Prospect

Theological interpretation of Scripture, therefore, is not a specific method for exegesis but rather a discussion and encouragement of a Christian practice of interpreting Scripture that can be characterized as ancient *and* modern.⁶⁶ Such practice includes vibrant and diverse discussion on a range of hermeneutical, theological, and ecclesial issues. The vibrant discussion however has not been received with universal acceptance.⁶⁷ Even those involved in the recent proliferation of TIS debate issues fundamental to its future. Treier surveys three areas: biblical theology, general hermeneutics, and the significance of a global church.⁶⁸

The persistence of these questions indicates a future for TIS within the academy. Yet how TIS impacts the preaching and teaching, worship, and mission of the church remains to be seen.⁶⁹ For one thing, if adherents of

lical author meant in any given biblical text in order to proclaim it as authoritative. Thus we simply move back from our contemporary time Y to the biblical time X in order to establish the theological or doctrinal teaching of the church today. And where we find discrepancies between our own cultural context and that of biblical times, we try to negotiate the degree to which we should adapt or accommodate to our current situation.”

⁶⁴ See Boersma and Levering “Introduction: Spiritual Interpretation and Re-aligned Temporality” in *Heaven on Earth*; cf. Matthew Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis: A Theology of Biblical Interpretation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008).

⁶⁵ By “biblical hermeneutics,” I have in mind not only special hermeneutics but the relationship between general and special (or theological) hermeneutics. See the discussion in Treier, *Introducing*, 127–56.

⁶⁶ As Treier, for instance, claims with his title and subtitle: *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice*.

⁶⁷ See for example, D. A. Carson “Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Yes, But ...” in *Theological Commentary: Evangelical Perspectives* (ed. R. Michael Allen; London: T & T Clark, 2011), 187–207; Stephen Wellum, “Editorial: Reflecting upon the Theological Interpretation of Scripture,” *SBJT* 14:2 (2010), 2–3; John C. Poirier, “Theological Interpretation and Its Contradistinctions,” *TynBul* 60:2 (2009), 105–18.

⁶⁸ Treier, *Introducing*, 103–86.

⁶⁹ Billings, *The Word of God*, xii, notes an irony within TIS: “In recent years, numerous books have sought to reclaim a theological approach to Scripture for the church; somewhat ironically, most are written exclusively for a scholarly audience.” Hence Billings targets the (ironically) forgotten audience of the church with his book. For a potential model, see the Center for Pastor Theologians: www.pastorth theologians.com.

TIS major in discussing the categories for theological reflection at the cost of actually doing biblical exegesis, one has to wonder what authority such theological statements will have in the long run. As Seitz observes, “Debates from a prior period most frequently emerge over a specific exegetical problem... . The exegesis urges and gives rise to the discussion of method.”⁷⁰ Theological categories, methods, and statements for the church must emerge from the church’s humble grappling with the written words of Scripture.

Also, despite the integrative approach of TIS its success in bridging the work of the academy (especially the seminary) and the church depends to some extent on how it impacts the shape and goals of theological education.⁷¹ Theological interpretation will not be likely to impact how theological students learn, or how they practice what they learn, if lectures on theological exegesis or the like occur within disjointed, distanced, and de-personalized forms of theological education. If genre consists of form and content and theological education is a particular genre of education, then we need more theological reflection on the form in which theological education occurs and not only the content to be delivered. Therefore more theological reflection is needed, for example, on the rationale for and effects of online education models for those training to do ministry. For ministry is an inherently communal not individualistic work. Thus we might ask, given Barth’s emphasis on incarnation: how does the incarnation impact how we do theological education;⁷² and, how does our anthropology govern the way we educate people created in the image of God?⁷³ Will we eschew not only the rationalist modes of biblical interpretation but also the atomized theological curriculums and rationalist view of humanity we inherited from the 18th and 19th centuries?

⁷⁰ Seitz, *Prophecy and Hermeneutics*, 200. Seitz gives Prov 8:22–23 in the writings of Athanasius as an example. The exegetical priority envisioned by Seitz may call for our fresh attention to the exegetical work of Schlatter and Stuhlmacher, for instance.

⁷¹ See Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 107–35; Robert C. Hill, *Breaking the Bread of the Word: Principles of Teaching Scripture* (Studia Biblica 15; Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1991); David S. Dockery, *Renewing Minds: Serving Church and Society through Christian Higher Education* (rev. ed.; Nashville: B&H, 2008).

⁷² See Paul R. House, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Narrow Way of Personal Theological Education* (forthcoming). House has been especially influential on my own thinking in this area.

⁷³ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Cultural Liturgies, vol. 1; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009). Theological interpretation has made some impact on theological curricula. The University of St. Andrews, for instance, offers the “MLitt Scripture and Theology,” previously named the MLitt Theological Interpretation of Scripture. See <http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/divinity/rt/instituteforbibletheologyhermeneutics/mlitt/>.

The Sufficiency of Scripture in Theological Interpretation of Scripture

Finally, the prospect of TIS will continue to be shaped by constructive answers given to the twofold question: what is the nature of Scripture and its role in theology? The consensus of TIS seems to be our need to configure hermeneutics in a Trinitarian way. Yet there seems to be less of a consensus on the nature of the Book from which our hermeneutic emerges and to which it is applied. Indeed, a diverse range of views on the nature of Scripture and its sufficiency for theology exists in TIS.⁷⁴

As with the retrospect above, we can only illustrate this point from the work of three contributors to TIS. Kevin Vanhoozer appropriates speech-act theory to present a doctrine of the Triune God's mighty speech acts,⁷⁵ which accounts for Scripture's being (ontology) by way of its doing (speech-action). As such Vanhoozer salutes Barth's emphasis on the activity of God in revelation, while maintaining a tight connection between God's Word and the words of the biblical text. Moreover, Vanhoozer defends the place of the authors in determining meaning and creatively argues for a classic Reformation perspective on the question: "Scripture governs theology."⁷⁶ Theology flows from Scripture, the inspired written down speech acts of God.⁷⁷

John Webster argues from a more Barthian perspective for the ontology of Holy Scripture. Since it comes as revelation from the utterly free, Triune God the doctrine of God is "... the proper location for a Christian theological account of the nature of Holy Scripture."⁷⁸ From this position the nature—revelation, sanctification, and inspiration—of Scripture, and our reading of it may be rightly understood. Because God's freedom grounds the nature of Scripture, two key points emerge. First, and in broad agreement with Vanhoozer, Holy Scripture governs the church not the other way around.⁷⁹ Second, a tension remains between God's Word and Spirit and the words of

⁷⁴ This is not an original observation. See Wellum, "Editorial," 2.

⁷⁵ See his *First Theology: God, Scripture & Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IVP: 2002), 127–203; idem, *Is There a Meaning in this Text*, 201–366; idem, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: WJK, 2005), 37–114. On speech-act theory see J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (2d ed.; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975); John Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

⁷⁶ Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 348.

⁷⁷ Vanhoozer agrees in this with exegetical-biblical theologians such as D. A. Carson. See e.g. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Exegesis and Hermeneutics" in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology: Exploring the Unity & Diversity of Scripture* (eds. D. A. Carson et al; Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), 52–64; D. A. Carson, "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology" in *ibid.*, 89–104.

⁷⁸ Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 39. Note for example this comment in *ibid.*, 32: "... faith is 'founded' on Scripture, not because of its formal property as inspired but because Scripture is the instrument of divine teaching which proceeds from God."

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 42–67.

the biblical text.⁸⁰ God norms theology and his word, Holy Scripture, indirectly bears witness to him because the Word was made flesh.

Stephen Fowl provides yet another option. Fowl responds to recent works in biblical theology⁸¹ with the argument that, “our discussions, debates, and arguments about texts will be better served by eliminating claims about textual meaning in favor of more precise accounts of our interpretive aims, interests, and practices.”⁸² Fowl thus asserts the importance of the history of (especially pre-critical) interpretation for refining and expressing our interpretive practices.⁸³ He argues for “underdetermined interpretation” which recognizes the contingency of any interpretation and therefore accords epistemological priority to no single method.⁸⁴ Fowl argues this way because he believes that “... the authority of scripture is not a property of biblical texts” but rather a derivative of the ecclesial communities who by the guidance of the Holy Spirit interpret and practice Scripture.⁸⁵ For Fowl, Scripture finds its authority in its use in the community of the church and the loving interpretive practices of that community.

These are not the only perspectives on Scripture and its sufficiency for theology within TIS. As noted, TIS enables fruitful conversations between Catholics and Protestants on questions of hermeneutics and, by extension, the relationship(s) between Scripture and tradition.⁸⁶ The prospect of TIS for impact on Protestant (especially Evangelical) and Catholic churches and schools alike, then, hinges on how a given scholar answers the question: what is Scripture and its role in theology? It remains necessary to ask this question for the prospect of TIS both because of the diversity of viewpoints advanced in response and TIS’s inherent claim to be interpreting *Scripture*—not *theology*—from the descriptor, “theological interpretation of Scripture.” The vibrancy of a diverse conversation requires careful attention to fundamental issues.

⁸⁰ See Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 40–41. Cf. John Webster, “Hermeneutics in Modern Theology: Some Doctrinal Reflections, *SJT* 51 (1998), 330–32, cited in Ward, *Word and Supplement*, 137, n. 1.

⁸¹ Especially Childs, *Biblical Theology*, and Francis Watson, *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997). See the analysis of Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis*, 118–31, to which this paragraph is indebted.

⁸² Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, 56.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 9–10: “... a theologically oriented history of Christian scriptural interpretation is ‘the theologically most crucial of all historical fields, including biblical studies, for those who think ... that the church’s future depends on its postcritical reappropriation of precritical hermeneutical strategies.’” Fowl cites George Lindbeck, review of *Biblical Hermeneutics in Historical Perspective: Studies in Honor of Kalfried Froelich* (ed. Mark Burrows and Paul Rorem; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) in *ModTheol* 10 (1994), 101–6.

⁸⁴ Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, 10.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 203.

⁸⁶ See, for example, the recent work of Edith M. Humphrey, *Scripture and Tradition: What the Bible Really Says* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013).

This final section, then, contains a proposal for a way forward in our answer to this question: what is Scripture and its role in theology? The proposal commends the view that Scripture is no less than God's word written—his covenant speech to his covenant people in Christ—and that it is therefore *fully* sufficient for salvation, life, and theology. As Ward has recently argued (in concert with Reformation confessions), this denotes the *material* and *formal* sufficiency of Scripture. That is, Scripture contains everything necessary to be known for salvation (material) *and* remains sufficient for its own interpretation (formal).⁸⁷ The formal sufficiency of Scripture refers in this proposal to the sufficiency of the grammar, structure, and logic of Scripture for doing theology. Within TIS large agreement exists on the material sufficiency of Scripture but not necessarily on its formal sufficiency. An emphasis on pre-critical interpretative practices and the ecclesial use of Scripture may privilege interpretation (past or present) over Scripture.⁸⁸ As Matthew Levering asks, "How are we to know when an ecclesial authority is interpreting Scripture in a scripturally well-formed way ... ?"⁸⁹ What norms or controls any given interpretation, whether it purports to be theological or not? To propose the full sufficiency of Scripture thus invites us to ask and answer the following: what epistemologically grounds our theology and what ethically norms our theology?

The full sufficiency of Scripture epistemologically grounds our theology. That is, we may seek to know God by way of "scripturally well-formed" interpretations of *the* epistemological base that God has provided: Holy Scripture. As Francis Watson rightly argues, the word of God is "textually mediated,"⁹⁰ and it is reliably and authoritatively done so in the texts of Holy Scripture. These texts, then, are sufficient for our knowing God and knowing how to know him. The authorization for our interpretations then come by the illumination of the Holy Spirit as we lovingly read Scripture (i.e. in faith).

⁸⁷ Ward, *Word and Supplement*, 16. The employment of Ward here should not be taken as a full agreement with the appropriateness of speech-act theory for the ontology of Scripture. See, e.g., Bowald, "The Character of Theological Interpretation," 171, n. 26 for a legitimate concern.

⁸⁸ This may or may not occur. The point is to stress the theoretical and practical significance of the sufficiency of Scripture, not to implicate any one scholar in denying the authority of Scripture. Though its authority certainly *seems* contingent to our interpretation in the work of Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*.

⁸⁹ Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis*, 125. One should note that Levering critiques Fowl from the Catholic perspective and therefore argues for more clarity from Fowl on the relationship between ecclesial authority, which he commends, and Scripture. Levering notes the latent difficulty in Fowl's view for norming biblical meaning. See *ibid.*, 130–31.

⁹⁰ Watson, *Text and Truth*, 1: "The Word made flesh is never encountered without textual mediation, for Jesus is only recognized as such on the basis of a prior textually. Jesus is initially acknowledged as Christ and Lord because that which takes place in him is 'according to the Scriptures'."

Ward argues this serves in return to authoritatively control, or ground, our theology because of what Scripture is and does. He states,

It is not that God's presence is 'guaranteed' by this 'way'; that would be a tendentious way to characterize it. Rather, Christ is faithfully conveyed to us by the polyphonic literary and generic diversity of Scripture. The Holy Spirit acts first to enable understanding and discernment of Christ so conveyed to us in Scripture, and supremely to stir up in us faithful and active response to him.⁹¹

The doctrine does not, however, ensure a particular effect; it does not guarantee "faithful Christian practice."⁹² God does this.

The illumination accorded by the Holy Spirit does not make certain our particular interpretations of Scripture but rather our saving knowledge of God, who in turn guides believers as they read the Bible. As Calvin claims, "Scripture will ultimately suffice for saving knowledge of God only when *its certainty* is founded upon the inward persuasion of the Holy Spirit."⁹³ For this reason Calvin, after claiming confidence in his presentation of the "Christian philosophy" of Scripture, points readers of his *Institutes* back to Scripture to test his own interpretations of Scripture in the same *Institutes*.⁹⁴ Thus the argument for the sufficiency of Scripture in theological interpretation is not an argument for the (perceived) certainty of our interpretations of Scripture.⁹⁵ Rather it is an argument for the sole epistemological base that the Triune God has given for reflection and action based upon his character, his creation, his will and his Son. Holy Scripture, the breathed out words of God written and therefore authoritative in the text, is that epistemological base.⁹⁶

The full sufficiency of Scripture also serves to ethically norm our theology. We can learn much from the history of interpretation and the tradition(s) of the Church. For example, the Early Church Creeds provide good, necessary summaries of the right doctrine that springs from Scripture in the crucial contexts of delineating truth from heresy. They summarize the boundaries of Christian faith in accordance with the Scriptures and thus form helpful reminders of those boundaries. The Creeds do not, however, tell us what

⁹¹ Ward, *Word and Supplement*, 301, critiquing David H. Kelsey, *Proving Doctrine: The Uses of Scripture in Modern Theology* (Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press Intl., 1999).

⁹² *Ibid.*, 302.

⁹³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; LCC; Louisville: WJK, 2006), I. VII. 13.

⁹⁴ John Calvin, "Subject Matter of the Present Work" in *ibid.*, 8: "Above all, I must urge him to have recourse to Scripture in order to weigh the testimonies that I have adduced from it." By "Christian philosophy" Calvin meant something like "biblical worldview." See *ibid.*, 7, n. 8.

⁹⁵ Cf. Ward, *Word and Supplement*, 53.

⁹⁶ See Anthony Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 184–5, cited in Ward, *Word and Supplement*, 47.

Christians are commanded to *do*, together, in light of that faith. The Creeds do not show us how we are to love God and our neighbors as ourselves. Only Scripture functions, as Vanhoozer states, "... as a criterion for understanding what is appropriate to say and do today on the basis of God's earlier speech and action."⁹⁷ Only Scripture narrates and provides the ethical norms that teach us how to live out the truth with one another. And only Scripture textually mediates this truth of God to us. The creeds and confessions that we recite together and sign before one another point us back to Scripture.

The argument for the sufficiency of Scripture therefore helps us delineate the choices we have made regarding the relationship of the Church, the creeds, the history of interpretation, and ourselves to Scripture. Ward helps us again on this point:

What the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture does recommend is the absolute necessity of careful, faithful, and subtle biblical exegesis as Christians try to listen for the divine voice on these issues; the doctrine is however insufficient to determine the exegetical results in advance. Thus, to assert the sufficiency of Scripture is not to imply that all questions of the functioning of Scripture in church and theology have been solved. However, it *is* to choose Scripture as one's supreme authority in Christian life and theology, and to decline other theological options.⁹⁸

Our clarity on this doctrine allows us to be more, not less, specific as to the effect of one's own ecclesial location on interpretation.⁹⁹ Significant differences remain between Catholic and Evangelical scholars, for example, on the Scripture-Church-tradition relationship.¹⁰⁰ Specificity on our differences allows us to be more, not less, loving toward others in the ongoing discourse about theological interpretation. Our clarity on this choice provides more, not less, room for ongoing faithful Christian interpretation of Scripture because like (but much less than) God's mercies, cultural changes are new every morning. These changes invite and indeed require new interpretations that reaffirm the verities of Scripture, because only Scripture reveals the promises of God in Christ for our transformation by the Spirit in Christ. Inasmuch as we need a theological interpretation of Scripture, then, we need a scriptural interpretation of theology.¹⁰¹ Evangelicals should be able to proceed with confidence that a proper understanding of biblical priority aids accurate historical-exegetical work that flows naturally and helpfully into theological reflection and healthy Christian practice.

⁹⁷ Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 237.

⁹⁸ Ward, *Word and Supplement*, 299. Emphasis original.

⁹⁹ For a stimulating Catholic perspective on this topic with application to theological vocation, see Bruce D. Marshall, "The Theologian's Ecclesial Vocation" *First Things* (October 2013), 41–5.

¹⁰⁰ This order indicates my own evangelical, Southern Baptist ecclesial context.

¹⁰¹ I owe this point to Paul R. House, from personal communication.

To stress the material and formal sufficiency of Scripture for theology is not to deny the need for other resources—ecclesial, philosophical, doctrinal, or historical—in constructing theology, especially in light of our ever-changing cultures. Explicating the effect of Scripture’s sufficiency in these cultures certainly requires integrative work. Rather it is to stress our love of the only Creator and Redeemer *by* humble submission to his written words, in *both* their content and form. We stress this for both right knowing (epistemology) and obedient doing (ethics), in all of life.

Conclusion

Theological interpretation of Scripture continues the new exchange prompted by Barth and in so doing continues to work against some dominant trends and methods of academic biblical interpretation set in the 18th c. The impact of TIS is already being felt within academia.

Through the work of others, especially Childs, TIS has pushed forward into this century to look for new ways to discern biblical meaning. Theological interpreters of Scripture take their hermeneutical and historical cues from interpreters from the Church’s past. The impact of TIS on the church, however, remains to be seen. This essay proposes that a clear choice for the material and formal sufficiency of Scripture in theology provides us the best epistemological ground and ethical norms for equipping the church for the glory of God in Christ. Schlatter once wrote, “We become fruitful for God when his word frees us from our own ideas, and his grace subjects our will to him.”¹⁰² To make the theological choice for the sufficiency of Scripture in theology points us in this fruitful direction for theological interpretation of Scripture.¹⁰³

¹⁰² Adolf Schlatter, *Do We Know Jesus?: Daily Insights for the Mind and Soul* (trans. Robert Yarbrough and Andreas Köstenberger; Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 36.

¹⁰³ I wish to thank Drs. Paul R. House, Mark Gignilliat, and Scott Kellum for reading previous versions of this article and providing helpful comments that greatly improved it. Any remaining errors, of course, are my own. I also want to especially thank Dr. Heath Thomas, editor of *STR*, for inviting me to publish this article. I am grateful for his kind conversation on this and many other topics that interest us both.