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## RETRIEVAL: ITS IMPORTANCE AND PITFALLS



RETRIEVAL: ITS IMPORTANCE AND PITFALLS

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*Editorial Office:* SBTS Box 832, 2825 Lexington Rd., Louisville, KY 40206, (800) 626-5525, x 4413 •  
*Editorial E-Mail:* journaloffice@sbts.edu

# Editorial: Retrieval: Its Importance and Pitfalls

STEPHEN J. WELLUM

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**Stephen J. Wellum** is Professor of Christian Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and editor of *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*. He received his PhD from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and he is the author of numerous essays and articles and the co-author with Peter Gentry of *Kingdom through Covenant*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Crossway, 2018) and *God's Kingdom through God's Covenants: A Concise Biblical Theology* (Crossway, 2015); the co-editor of *Progressive Covenantalism* (B&H Academic, 2016); the author of *God the Son Incarnate: The Doctrine of the Person of Christ* (Crossway, 2016) and *Christ Alone—The Uniqueness of Jesus as Savior* (Zondervan, 2017); the co-author of *Christ from Beginning to End: How the Full Story of Scripture Reveals the Full Glory of Christ* (Zondervan, 2018); and the author of *The Person of Christ: An Introduction* (Crossway, 2021), *Systematic Theology: From Canon to Concept*, vol. 1 (B&H Academic, 2024), and *It is Finished* (Union, 2025).

In recent theological discussion there has been a focus on the importance of “retrieval,” which is ultimately a good thing. In contrast to our present culture, which tends to focus on what is current, thus viewing the past with suspicion, theological retrieval seeks to learn from the past to address issues in our present day. This is significant because it reminds us that we are not isolated individuals, re-inventing the wheel all over again, but part of a theological heritage that we ignore to our detriment and peril. Our emphasis on *sola Scriptura* must be affirmed with deep conviction, both in theory and practice, but it is important to remember that *sola Scriptura* does not mean that we do not learn from the past. Tradition has a significant place in our theologizing, which includes not only the confessional and creedal heritage of the church but also the teaching of individual theologians throughout the ages.

No doubt, tradition does not have “magisterial” authority that Scripture alone does. Rightly, Scripture is the foundation (*principia cognoscendi*) of our theology and thus *norma normans*, i.e., “the ruling rule” of all of our theological formulations and conclusions. Yet, tradition that is consistent

with the teaching of Scripture has authority, albeit a “ministerial” authority. This is why creeds and confessions are rightly said to be *norma normata*, i.e., “the ruled rule” of our theology. If our theological formulations, as given by individual theologians, along with the creedal and confessional heritage of the church, are true to Scripture, they also serve as a secondary authority for us. We stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us, and even as Reformational Christians, it is important to remember that the Reformers never saw themselves as standing against tradition but instead affirming what the church had taught throughout the centuries, as judged and warranted by Scripture.

For this reason, a healthy emphasis on “retrieval” of past thought, as reflected in individual theologians, along with the creeds and confessions of the church, is both helpful and necessary for the church today. In fact, most current challenges and questions we face in theology have some precedent in the past. No doubt, there are a few issues that are “new,” which the church must address, often tied to the development of new technology. For example, how Christians should think of artificial intelligence, cloning, and various reproductive technologies was not an issue that previous theologians addressed. However, most issues that we face today are old in the sense that someone in the past taught them. This is why knowing history and historical theology is vital to dealing with many of the current issues we presently must address. As the old adage goes: If we do not learn from history, inevitably we are doomed to repeat its mistakes. This is why the current focus on retrieval is important for today’s church.

However, with that said, there are also pitfalls we must avoid. Not everything from the past is correct and consistent with the teaching of Scripture. For this reason, councils had to be called in order to articulate, confess, and proclaim the truth of God’s Word in contrast to false teachings. At the Council of Nicaea, the church had to reject false interpretations of Scripture that led to a denial of the deity of Christ and the doctrine of the Trinity. At Chalcedon, the church had to reject false ways of thinking about the relationship between the deity and humanity of Christ, thus correctly articulating the biblical teaching of the person of our Lord Jesus Christ. In the Reformation, the church had to reject false views of the sufficiency of Christ’s work and its application to us in our justification, adoption, sanctification, and ultimate glorification. In addition, the

Reformers had to clarify and articulate what biblical authority means and entails, including crucial hermeneutical issues of how to read and apply Scripture rightly. In our own day, the church has to articulate doctrine in such a way that defends the truth of Scripture on a whole variety of theological issues, especially in light of new technologies that question the biblical teaching regarding the nature of humans, human sexuality, and the doctrine of sin.

Yet, given the fact that not everything from the past is correct and consistent with Scripture, our retrieval of the past means that it has to be done carefully and under the authority of Scripture. If we are not careful, we can view a specific era in the church as *the* era to retrieve, often forgetting that no era ever captured the truth of Scripture in all its fullness. This is why our retrieval of the past must be more eclectic, in the sense that, we stand on the shoulders of our forefathers, we receive from them the best of what they teach, yet we do so by the normative standard of Scripture. Scripture, then, always serves as the norm by which we accept and reject the teaching of the past, and unless a biblical argument can be made to adopt a theological proposal of the past, we must be cautious about retrieving it for today.

In this issue of *SBJT*, our goal is to reflect on the proper employment of retrieval in our theologizing, while also avoiding its pitfalls. Shawn Wright's faculty address at Southern Seminary this year is a good place to begin since his lecture instructs us about these very matters, and it challenges us to retrieve the past with care and always under the authority of Scripture. Other essays, especially those of Ardel Caneday, Tom Sculthorpe, Michael Pereira, and Knox Brown, focus on important hermeneutical debates, especially debates regarding whether the ancient fourfold method of exegesis is something evangelicals ought to retrieve today. In the Patristic and Medieval eras, there was a strong emphasis on the fourfold sense of Scripture, something the Reformers rejected. Today, in our desire to learn from the past, the fourfold method of exegesis has made a comeback, but is this something we ought to retrieve? In some fashion, all of these essays wrestle with this question, and all of them question the wisdom of retrieving the *quadriga*, i.e., the fourfold meaning of Scripture. In addition, Michael Pereira and Knox Brown offer an extended review of Kevin Vanhoozer's *Mere Hermeneutics* — a book that is also wrestling with these crucial issues. For decades Vanhoozer has written on a proper interpretation of Scripture, and this review offers a

helpful summary and evaluation of his latest attempt to think about what it means to be biblical in our theological proposals. The last essays in the issue by Roberto Martinez and Jeffrey Beupre do not directly address the issue of retrieval, although both essays seek to learn from the past in order to make proper theological conclusions in the present in the doctrinal areas of theology proper and divine revelation.

My prayer is that this issue of *SBJT* will help the church think about the importance of retrieval in our doing of theology and also offer some legitimate warnings about some of its pitfalls. Ultimately, we need to be reminded that we do stand on the shoulders of giants in the church, but as important as these giants are, we must always learn anew to bring our thought captive to Scripture and under the Lordship of our Lord Jesus Christ.

# The Reformation, Baptists, and Biblical Retrieval Theology<sup>1</sup>

SHAWN D. WRIGHT

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**Shawn D. Wright** is Professor of Church History at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky. He earned his PhD from Southern Seminary. He has written numerous articles and *40 Questions about Calvinism* (Kregel Academic, 2019), *Theodore Beza: The Man and the Myth* (Christian Focus, 2015), and *Our Sovereign Refuge: The Pastoral Theology of Theodore Beza* (Wipf & Stock, 2007), and he also edited with Tom Schreiner, *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ* (B&H Academic, 2007). Dr. Wright also serves as the series editor for Crossway's 40-volume edition of *The Complete Works of John Owen*, working alongside Lee Gatiss. Dr. Wright is also a Pastor at Clifton Baptist Church, Louisville, Kentucky. He is married to Gretchen, and they have five adult children.

## INTRODUCTION

I'm thankful to Dr. Albert Mohler and Dr. Paul Akin for the invitation to give this address. And, thank you as well, all who are here this morning. I pray that this address benefits you.

As long as there have been Christians, they've cared about what their predecessors believed. But retrieval theology, so-called, does more than that. Seeing dangers all around, it looks back to the past and lets people and ideas from long ago set the agenda for the church's beliefs and practices in our day.

I'm not giving this address in a vacuum. Ours is a day, it seems, when more people than in the past are abandoning—or being tempted to abandon—evangelicalism under the guise of retrieval. Some are becoming Anglican (the church our Puritan forefathers labeled a “church but halfly reformed,” with its Protestant confession of faith but Catholic-like liturgical

practices<sup>2</sup>). Others are moving even farther away and joining the Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox church. I have in mind well-known figures like Matthew Barrett, Francis Beckwith, and Hank Hanegraaff.<sup>3</sup> But I'm also thinking of people I've known personally who've left the Protestant faith recently.

Before I get to the heart of my address, let me give you my twofold thesis. First: the biblically-revealed gospel sits in judgment over aggressive retrieval theology that would lead people away from Reformation Protestantism. Second: Baptists—who are the full-flowering of the Protestant Reformation—have a unique way of guarding the biblical gospel and protecting our churches from aggressive retrieval.

### THE ESSENCE OF RETRIEVAL THEOLOGY

As I begin, let me define retrieval theology. John Webster noted that there's not one dogmatic explication of this theology, but that "‘retrieval’ ... is a *mode* of theology, an attitude of mind and a way of approaching theological tasks."<sup>4</sup> Since then others have similarly argued for retrieval theology's posture as the key to this movement. David Buschart and Kent Eilers say it's a "style of theological discernment that looks back in order to move forward."<sup>5</sup> Gavin Ortlund concurs. He denominates retrieval theology as "an overall attitude guided by the conviction that premodern resources are not an obstacle in the age of progress but a well in the age of thirst."<sup>6</sup> Michael Allen and Scott Swain label it "a theological sensibility, not a system."<sup>7</sup> So, in sum, retrieval theology is "a mode of theology," "an attitude of mind," "a style of theological discernment," "an overall attitude," "a theological sensibility."<sup>8</sup>

Webster further delineates the "set of common concerns" driving those who pursue retrieval theology. Prominent among these are "dissatisfaction with the commanding role played by critical philosophy or by historical and hermeneutical theory in mainstream modern theology."<sup>9</sup> The Enlightenment, then, and the theology that flowed from it, is the culprit. Rescuing theology from the academy and giving it back to the church, the goal is to be able to describe the Christian faith in a way that is "unharassed by current anxieties" thus "enabling a certain liberty in relation to the present."<sup>10</sup>

Evangelicals—those I'm talking about in this address—have tended to be more specific in their reasons for employing retrieval theology. When

I discuss retrieval theology among evangelicals, here is my definition. A methodological orientation—especially related to the doctrine of God and biblical hermeneutics—driven by dissatisfaction with modern trinitarian theology and the quest for “the author’s original intention” and a corresponding fear of the inroads of Enlightenment thinking on evangelicals’ treatment of God and reading of the Bible. This method seeks to jump over the errors inspired by the Enlightenment and answer them by retrieving resources from the medieval era of the church’s history.<sup>11</sup> This movement coincides with—or perhaps is fueled by—many evangelicals’ concerns with the hypocrisy they’ve seen in their churches and the militant nature of postmodernity that leads many to seek a better way of thinking about God and themselves, about the liturgy of worship, and about a more robust way of reading Scripture. It is the desire to go back in time to a better way of doing theology—offering an escape from and an answer to the power of modernity—that drives some evangelicals who seek “retrieval for the sake of renewal” actually to leave evangelicalism altogether.<sup>12</sup> In the process of seeking to protect the gospel, they come to conclusions that are antithetical to the biblical gospel.

I have six cautions I would like to offer against aggressive retrieval theology. These are Protestant and Baptist insights into letting Scripture judge retrieval theology.

**CAUTION #1: BE HUMBLE AND WISE. FOR OLD IS GOOD, UNLESS IT’S BAD.**

Retrieval theology desires to listen to the past.<sup>13</sup> That’s a sign of humility, one of the key virtues we should all pursue. Someone, somewhere, at some time knew the Bible better than I do. Like Athanasius, who in order to qualify to be a deacon of the church in Alexandria—just a deacon!—had memorized the entire Psalter, one major prophet, one gospel, and all the Pauline epistles.

Someone at some time knew God more intimately than I do. I want to learn from the likes of John Owen who on his deathbed said, “I am going to him whom my soul hath loved, or rather who hath loved me with an everlasting love.”<sup>14</sup> I want to learn how to apply God’s word in my life and in our time. From martyrs like Polycarp of Smyrna, from parents like Monica who prayed fervently for the conversion of her son, Augustine.

But humility must have guardrails. Whom should I follow and imitate? How much? After all, Arius also served the Alexandrian church; presumably he had as much Scripture memorized as did Athanasius. But I don't want to follow him.

Beware of assuming that because something is old it must *ipso facto* be good.<sup>15</sup> Be careful not to have an over-realized eschatology about the past and how good it was. When someone tells me in frustration that they just wish their local church could be like the New Testament (NT) church, I'll often tell them to be careful which NT church they want to be like. Will it be the licentious church of Corinth or the verging-toward-heresy churches of Galatia? Even during the apostles' lifetimes things in the churches weren't going perfectly. Nor should we have the expectation that things have always be wonderful in the church's history.

If we advance just a matter of decades into the life of the church we see Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, separating the offices of bishop and elder (which are the same biblical office, according to Acts 20, Titus 1, and 1 Peter 5), and thus introducing a lynchpin of the episcopal system which fueled the whole Catholic enterprise.<sup>16</sup> And a mere 500 years later, we see Gregory I advocating for the unbiblical doctrine of purgatory—the doctrine that in many ways is the root of the Catholic sacramental system and its accompanying practices that led to Martin Luther's protestation. We could layer more and more examples like this: the rise of infant baptism after the time of Augustine; the use of icons in worship; etc., etc.

We must have some criteria by which to judge what is best from the church's doctrinal heritage. In other words, how do we know what to retrieve? I would suggest that some eras of the church's history, and some of its thinkers, are more important than others.

Consider how we evaluate Thomas Aquinas, who lived in the thirteenth century. Craig Carter's *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition* is his attempt to "recover the genius of premodern exegesis." Carter puts forth Thomas as the hero because of the medieval scholastic theologian's ability both to embody and promote Christian Platonism's recovery of classical theism and to exemplify biblical interpretation that is not hampered by "the neopagan philosophical naturalism of the Enlightenment" out of which "methodological naturalism became *the* central presupposition of exegesis."<sup>17</sup> According to Carter, the thirteenth century of Thomas was

“the peak of Western Christendom.”<sup>18</sup> Following a traditional Thomistic decline narrative of the middle ages, Carter avers that “The tragic breakdown of the medieval synthesis of faith and reason, which had been founded on the existence of universals and the doctrine of the analogy of being, after Thomas Aquinas’s majestic work in the thirteenth century, created the chaos and ferment in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries out of which the Enlightenment emerged.”<sup>19</sup> The “late Middle Ages,” he posits, “saw the tragic breakdown of the Christian Platonism of the High Middle Ages, symbolized above all by Thomas Aquinas’s great work of genius, the *Summa Theologica*.”<sup>20</sup> Carter, as he asserts, is “seek[ing] to promote Thomas Aquinas.”<sup>21</sup> Matthew Barrett joins Carter in making Thomas Aquinas the hero of his lengthy book, *The Reformation as Renewal*. Not only does Thomas receive the longest chapter in the book (a glowing account of how good his “pure Scholasticism” was<sup>22</sup>), but there’s very little in his thought that was not repeated by Martin Luther and John Calvin, according to Barrett’s account.<sup>23</sup>

Although Carter and Barrett laud Thomas and medieval scholasticism, that has not been the view of many significant Protestant thinkers.<sup>24</sup> We can see this by examining their evaluation of the most significant eras of the church’s history.

Calvin had high regard for the first four ecumenical councils, up to Chalcedon in 451, labeling that period “the purity of the golden age.”<sup>25</sup> Indeed, he argued that “for about five hundred years [after the apostles] ... religion was still flourishing, and a purer doctrine thriving.”<sup>26</sup> Disputing with Catholics about who was the true heir of the church, Calvin brought Chrysostom, Basil, Cyprian, Ambrose, and Augustine in as allies of Protestantism. As Anthony Lane observes, “The significant figures to whom Calvin appealed had all died by the middle of the fifth century.”<sup>27</sup>

Calvin judged that only Gregory I and Bernard of Clairvaux were “great champions of the truth in the Middle Ages.”<sup>28</sup> Absent from Calvin’s consideration is Thomas Aquinas, whom Calvin only cited four times.<sup>29</sup> The early church was significant for Calvin, especially Augustine theologically and Chrysostom exegetically. To Calvin, it seems that Thomas and most of the medieval period was quite irrelevant.<sup>30</sup>

Four stalwarts of Protestantism agreed with Calvin in promoting a decline narrative of the church in the Middle Ages after a period of relative purity in the ancient church of the first five or six centuries. In the seventeenth-

century Francis Turretin highlighted the significance of the “fathers” of the early church going up to Augustine, but included no one after him.<sup>31</sup> He referred to the first six centuries of the church’s history as the period “of purer (or at least of less impure) Christianity.”<sup>32</sup> The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth-century, he argued, was “nothing else than the purging of errors and corruptions brought by the papacy into the doctrine of faith and practice delivered by Christ.”<sup>33</sup> Turretin’s contemporary Petrus van Mastricht (Jonathan Edwards’s favorite theologian) also posited a decline narrative. The NT marked the beginning of the six “purer centuries” of the church’s history. The period from the sixth to the “bleak” tenth century was a rapid decline, interrupted in the centuries before the Reformation only occasionally by reform movements like the Waldensians.<sup>34</sup>

The eighteenth-century Baptist, John Gill, held a similar view, having little regard for the medieval church, though highly esteeming many patristic authors.<sup>35</sup> Finally, Charles Hodge, the nineteenth-century Princetonian, identified three areas of doctrinal progress over the span of church history. They were, first, the trinitarian and Christological definitions of the fourth and fifth century. Second came the clarification of the nature of human sin and divine grace in Augustine’s controversy with Pelagius in the fifth century. The third era of progress was the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation with its emphasis on justification and imputation. Hodge knowingly left out the entire Middle Ages. Even the most devout of the medieval scholastics, he urged, got the relationship between justification and sanctification wrong and were thus unhelpful guides.<sup>36</sup>

Many Reformed thinkers, then, argued that some eras of church history are more important to us than others. The earliest centuries of the church—including the trinitarian and Christological controversies culminating in the Nicene Creed of 381 and the Chalcedonian definition of 451, as well as the codification of Augustinian soteriology—are of great importance. Somewhere after Augustine, especially, the church fell into a period of decline regarding the doctrine of salvation (including notions of purgatory, transubstantiation and the propitiatory character of the mass), and also regarding the power and purity of the institutional church, especially the papacy. These were both addressed in the third essential period, the Protestant Reformation, which was, as B. B. Warfield quipped, “the triumph of Augustine’s doctrine of grace over Augustine’s doctrine of the church.”<sup>37</sup>

So, my first caution is: Be Humble and Wise. For Old is Good, Unless it's Bad.

**CAUTION #2: DON'T OVERREACT IN A TIME OF CRISIS.**

Many retrievalists fear that we're in a time of crisis that needs outside voices from the past to come in and correct our wrongheadedness and lead us into right thinking and action. The nemesis seen to have caused most of our problems is the Enlightenment.

Consider how concern about the Enlightenment factors into a movement to reconsider the way that evangelicals approach biblical interpretation. The argument goes like this. The Enlightenment led inexorably to German higher critical attitudes towards Scripture. The biblical text was no longer taken at face value; the goal was to get beneath the words of the text to find the real words of Jesus, not the accretions of later communities; God was no longer viewed as the ultimate author of Scripture.<sup>38</sup> To deal with this crisis, then, many retrievalists teach that we need to circumvent the Enlightenment's negative hermeneutical effects and recover the quadriga of the early and medieval church. The quadriga, that is, the "fourfold sense" of Scripture, which stressed the importance of the "spiritual" interpretation of Scripture alongside the literal reading of the biblical text, said there were three senses of Scripture in addition to the literal: the allegorical taught what to believe, the tropological showed how to live, and the anagogical pointed out what to hope for. Retrieval theology thus argues for the foolishness of resting in the "author's original intention" model of exegesis, which flowed from the Enlightenment.

Let me be as clear as possible: of course we should reject the higher criticism of Scripture! But there are several reasons to question the wisdom of reverting to the quadriga. First of all, not all medieval interpretation stressed the fourfold way of reading the Bible. There was a large vein of "literal" interpretation going on prior to the Reformation.<sup>39</sup> Second, there were many Bible-believing Christians in the post-Enlightenment era who didn't succumb to higher criticism, but who also didn't adopt the quadriga.

In addition, there's more historical reason for my caution. So third, the Reformers' hermeneutic was generally more literally-oriented than

veering into a spiritual-reading of the text. This is especially true of Calvin's commentaries and sermons and reminds us why he appreciated Chrysostom's work as much as he did.<sup>40</sup> Fourth, when the Reformers and their early followers addressed biblical hermeneutics, they regularly criticized the quadriga and promoted a literal reading of Scripture. And they did this prior to the onslaught of modernity!

This is the five-hundredth anniversary of William Tyndale's English NT. Tyndale once wrote that

The greatest cause of ... [the] captivity and the decay of the faith, and this blindness wherein we now are, sprang first of allegories. For Origen and the doctors of his time drew all the scripture unto allegories. Whose example they that came after followed so long, till they at last forgot the order and process of the text, supposing that the scripture served but to feign allegories upon; insomuch that twenty doctors expound one text twenty ways, as children make descant upon plain song. Then came our sophisters with their anagogical and tropological<sup>41</sup> sense with an antitheme [that is, the opposite of the true meaning] of half an inch, out of which some of them draw a thread of nine days long.<sup>42</sup>

One hundred years later, writing in 1626, Johannes Wollebius promoted a single meaning in the Bible. He taught that "The meaning [*sensus*] of any Scripture passage is always single [*unicus*]; however, in the Old Testament (OT) the meaning of prophecies is often composite—historical and typical."<sup>43</sup> Later that century Turretin agreed, arguing for only one sense in Scripture, the literal. The other three, he averred, are not different senses of Scripture but are varied ways in which one can apply the meaning of the text.<sup>44</sup> Mastricht followed suit. He explicitly opposed the fourfold sense of reading Scripture. The orthodox, he maintained, only allow the literal sense, that is, "that which the writer himself intends by his words." They certainly allow for figures and types in the Bible, and for "varied application" of the meaning of Scripture. But they did not allow the quadriga.<sup>45</sup>

Here is my point. We need to be careful not to overreact in a time of crisis and adopt methods of interpretation that are unnecessary. We do live in tumultuous times. We've seen the pagan, secular tenets of Enlightenment thought coming to roost in postmodernity's preposterousness all around us.

But we need to realize that this is really not such a big deal. After all, our Lord told us that “in this world you will have trouble” (John 16:33). In fact, the church has always experienced crisis. Just consider a few of the crises our brothers and sisters have faced over the centuries: The empire-wide persecution under Decius and Diocletian. The rise of Islam, its remarkable assent by 732, and its encroachment upon “Christian” Europe. The death of perhaps half of all Europeans by the black death in the span of five years in the fourteenth century. The murder of Anabaptists, of Protestants in France, of Protestants in England, of Christians right now in Nigeria. Black brothers and sisters suffering under the indignity of chattel slavery in America. Faithful believers feeling overwhelmed by the proof for evolution in Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species* in the middle of the nineteenth century. Late nineteenth and early twentieth century-American Christians being pushed out of their churches as the modernists won the seminaries, the missions boards, and the churches.

Every era of the church has felt like it was enduring a period of crisis, perhaps a period more intense than any that the church had experienced before. That makes sense to me. We can do our best to understand people from the past. But we can’t experience the reality of their day—I mean viscerally feel it—the way that they did. Every era of Christians has felt things are worse for them than for any other period in history. But I’m not convinced that is true. Things are difficult now. Just like they’ve always been.

That’s my second caution: Don’t Overreact in a Time of Crisis.

### **CAUTION #3: JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH ALONE AND ASSURANCE OF SALVATION ARE STILL CENTRAL.**

Those advocating a return to “classical theism” and the Great Tradition of the church insist that we must begin all things with God himself, examining who he is *ad intra* (that is, intrinsically to himself) rather than with what God thinks about or how he acts towards creation, especially humanity, *ad extra* (externally to himself).<sup>46</sup> This, they assert, is what the Nicene tradition, Augustine, Aquinas, Owen, and Turretin did.

Webster has exercised tremendous influence in this regard. On more than one occasion, he rebuked modern theologians for failing to look at the most signal single issue: God. For instance, he wrote, “The principal object or matter

of Christian theology is God ... Christian theology considers God absolutely, that is, God in himself in his antecedent self-existent perfection, integrity, beatitude, and simplicity as Father, Son, and Spirit, prior to and apart from any relation to creatures.”<sup>47</sup> Webster critiques those who do not begin with “God in himself,” only focusing on God’s deeds.<sup>48</sup>

It’s unfortunate that Thomas has assumed the mantle of “classical theism” in much of the discussion about God in our day. But it’s undeniable that he has. Thomas’s views are the norm for both Webster and for James Dolezal.<sup>49</sup> But Thomas’s trinitarian thought is not without its problems. Michael Reeves critiques Thomas cogently. He argues that “Because Aquinas gave preeminence to an Aristotelian, unrelational doctrine of God, his soteriology inevitably defaulted away from the idea of God giving us *himself* by his Spirit. What God seemed to offer, and what people thus began to desire, was this other thing, this ‘created grace.’”<sup>50</sup>

Here’s my concern. In “classical theism’s” elevation of Thomas to almost the patron saint of orthodoxy, they’ve unwittingly opened the way for much more than Thomas’s doctrine of God proper to come into the evangelical stream of consciousness. Thomas’s theology is a system. Barrett and others may try to make it as Protestant-sounding as they can, but ultimately the effort fails.<sup>51</sup> Beckwith is right: for Thomas justification begins with “the infusion of grace at Baptism” because “the baptized Christian literally partakes in the Divine Nature.” Thomas advocated praying for the dead, the sacraments as means of obtaining God’s grace, and transubstantiation as essential to the sacrifice of the mass.<sup>52</sup> By elevating Thomas to almost canonical status, well-intentioned retrieval theologians may well have opened a floodgate that won’t be shut before many have abandoned Protestantism.

Yet, friends, we have extremely good reasons to remain Reformation Protestants. At its core, Protestantism answers the question: How can I, a wretched sinner, be saved by the holy God? That is, the heart Protestantism is about a relationship with a holy, forgiving, relational God.<sup>53</sup>

Calvin certainly thought so. Calvin did not include a lengthy discussion of theology proper in his *Institutes*. David Wells demonstrates how Calvin’s anti-speculative doctrine of God contrasted sharply with medievals like Aquinas. Wells observes that for Calvin God was central. He writes that Calvin

had no place for mere, empty speculation about God. What is given to us is only what we have in God's Word and this revelation is given, not that we should speculate but, rather, worship and adore. This was (Wells continues), in fact, quite a departure from the way that God had so often been treated especially in the medieval period. And it is what led Warfield to say that what Calvin had done was to rediscover Christ "as religion." He meant by that that the knowledge of God, as revealed in Scripture and entered into through Christ, is knowledge that properly enters the soul, that sings, that worships, that inspires joyful obedience and self-giving service. This is the real knowledge of God.<sup>54</sup>

Wells and Warfield are right. To go from Thomas to Calvin on the doctrine of God is to pass from idea to relationship.

Remember the very cause of the Protestant Reformation. Carter Lindberg paints a depressing picture of the late medieval Catholic church. The church "promot[ed] a type of pastoral care designed to make people uncertain about their salvation and thus more dependent upon the intercessions of the church."<sup>55</sup> Thomas Aquinas was no better than the later nominalists (contra Barrett), for to Thomas, "we become righteous before God as we do righteous acts, as we do good works," since "grace does not do away with nature but completes it."<sup>56</sup> Dietrich Kolde's *Mirror of a Christian Man*, a popular Catholic catechism reprinted through the Reformation era, depicts the uncertainty that faithful Catholics lived with. "There are three things I know to be true that frequently make my heart heavy," it asserted. "The first troubles my spirit, because I will have to die. The second troubles my heart more, because I do not know when. The third troubles me above all. I do not know where I will go."<sup>57</sup>

"I do not know where I will go" when I die. That was Luther's burden. And his zealous attempt for comfort and a definitive answer to that quandary alone explains the Reformation. The Reformation was a concerted effort to be able to say: I know where I will go when I die. I have trusted in Jesus, whose righteousness is mine, and so I will indeed go to heaven.<sup>58</sup> The biblical gospel led to assurance of salvation. According to Luther, the gospel renounces "the wicked idea of the entire kingdom of the pope, the teaching that a Christian man must be uncertain about the grace of God toward him. If this opinion stands, then Christ is completely useless ... Therefore the papacy is a veritable torture chamber of consciences and the

very kingdom of the devil.” Rome propounded “the monster of uncertainty” (he said) that was antithetical to the gospel. What sinful, doubting believers needed was a theology that “snatches us away from ourselves and places us outside ourselves, so that we do not depend on our own strength, conscience, experience, person, or works but depend on that which is outside ourselves, that is, on the promise and truth of God, which cannot deceive.”<sup>59</sup>

Assurance of salvation was at the heart of the Protestant Reformation. It’s central to Calvin’s discussion of faith and justification. It’s front and center in Puritanism as well.<sup>60</sup> The *Westminster Confession of Faith* asserts that Christians can have certainty of their salvation due to the finished work of Christ for them.<sup>61</sup> And Richard Sibbes argued that “comfort [for believers]... came most of all from assurance of one’s salvation,” which served as a “balm after the Roman ‘doctrine of doubting.’”<sup>62</sup> For this reason, Sibbes and other Protestants urged that “popery” and its sacraments “are physicians of no value, [but] rather tormentors”<sup>63</sup> because of “the popish doctrine that I ought to [i.e., must] doubt.”<sup>64</sup>

This is no small matter. Some, it seems, are being deluged by the weight of the thought of Thomas Aquinas, failing to see that his soteriology holds together as a whole. You might like Thomas on participation, or on realism, or on the beauty of the so-called divine liturgy, but beware. Thomas’s doctrine of salvation is synergistic. Michael Horton summarizes Thomas’s doctrine of justification in this way. For Thomas “there are two types of grace (operating and cooperating), five effects (healing the soul, movement of the will to the good, good acts, perseverance and attaining glory) and four requirements of justification (infusion of grace [at baptism], faith, repentance and forgiveness).”<sup>65</sup> According to Francis Beckwith, Thomas “was more a Proto-Tridentine Catholic than a Proto-Protestant.”<sup>66</sup> Carl Trueman argues that “The insight of the Reformation on assurance was key, theologically and pastorally.” It is so central that (he asserts) “it is one thing that every convert to Roman Catholicism from Protestantism must lose.” That’s why Trueman concludes: “Speaking for myself, all the liturgical beauty of Rome, all the tradition, all the clarity of the authority structure (and that clarity is often, I think, more in the eye of the beholder than in the Church itself) cannot compensate for the loss of this: I know I have been purchased by the precious blood of Christ.”<sup>67</sup>

Friends, it will be all the difference in the world to you on your deathbed if you are trusting in Christ plus your efforts, or if you trust in Christ alone.

That's my third caution: Justification by Faith Alone and Assurance of Salvation are Still Central.

My final three, and brief, cautions flow from the Baptist perspective on the Protestant Reformation.

#### **CAUTION #4: KEEP THE BIBLICAL VIEW OF THE CHURCH CENTRAL.**

The Bible, and our Protestant and Baptist tradition, teaches that there are two churches: the universal church (all Christians, at all times, everywhere) as well as local churches (fellowships of believers in one place at one time). This matters when considering retrieval theology because the word "church" gets employed ambiguously by some promoting retrieval. In so doing they can seemingly allow "church history" to be the voice of God in "the church."

Take Barrett as an example. He is at pains to insist that the voice of the high scholastic medieval era was the voice of the true church. But Protestant reformers like Calvin took issue with that. We've seen that Calvin had a negative view of the medieval era. That was bolstered by the way in which he clarified that there were two distinguishing marks (*notae*) of the true (i.e., Protestant) church that set it apart from the Catholic church. The true church was marked, first, by the right preaching of the gospel; and, second, by the right practice of the sacraments (that is, practicing them in such a way that did not controvert the gospel, the very thing that the regenerative baptism and the Mass of Rome did). This is an inconvenient truth that conflicts with the narrative Barrett's creating in which the church is constant from its early days, across the Middle Ages, up to the Reformation, only being interrupted by the intrusion of nominalist thinking on the very eve of the sixteenth century. So, he merely notes in passing that Protestants disagreed with Rome on salvation and the church while they agreed on so much else (like so-called "classical theism").<sup>68</sup>

Like Calvin, Baptists should disagree with Barrett. Baptists' only original idea in the whole history of the church has been in our understanding of the church. And it's a profound one: The church is to be composed only of those who have made a credible profession of faith in Jesus Christ and have

been marked out by believer's baptism. Regenerate Church Membership is the mark of the Baptist church.<sup>69</sup>

Many implications regarding retrieval theology flow from this, the most important one regarding our understanding of the promises made to the church in the NT and where we seek their fulfilment. Allen and Swain, for example, teach that because of the on-going work of the Holy Spirit and his anointing of the church, as the church employs its renewed wisdom it will arrive at the truth. Church tradition possesses authority for them. They claim, "The Spirit of Christ teaches the church in sufficient and unmixed verity such that the church need not seek theological understanding from any other source or principle."<sup>70</sup> "Christ lays the foundation of the church in the prophets and apostles in order to build upon the foundation by the Spirit's illuminating work in and through the renewed reason of the people of God."<sup>71</sup> As much as Allen and Swain go on to assert that tradition is still subordinate to Scripture, Baptists should be wary of such a positive view of the Spirit's guidance of the collective wisdom of self-proclaimed Christians if for no other reason than that the tradition of the church is diffuse and always in flux. Which voice exactly are we supposed to be listening to as the on-going voice of the Spirit? Baptists have not downplayed the ongoing role of God the Holy Spirit in guiding and caring for his church. But we have found that guidance related more closely to Scripture than some retrievalists do, as the next two cautions clarify.

That's my fourth caution: Keep the Biblical View of the Church Central.

#### **CAUTION #5: BAPTISTS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN WILLING TO PART FROM THE CHURCH'S TRADITION.**

The recovery of the gospel in the Reformation was carried to the next level in the Puritan tradition which began telling their infant-baptized children that they must be born again. The Congregationalists in this tradition began using local church covenants, marking commitments their church members would make before the Lord to each other. The English Baptists rose out of this soil.<sup>72</sup> They considered themselves to be following in the footsteps of the teachings of Luther and Calvin. They also clearly considered themselves heirs of the Puritan tradition.<sup>73</sup> But Baptists did not remain Congregationalists.

They left. They abandoned the Puritans for one simple reason: they came to the conclusion that the Bible taught that it was only those who had been justified by faith alone, who had been born again, who were to be baptized and become covenanted members of local churches. Baptists, in this sense then, when judged according to the teaching of the NT, are the most thorough of all Protestant Reformers.<sup>74</sup> They rejected the *corpus permixtum* (“mixed body”) view of the church that had marked the church since at least the time of Augustine in the fifth century. They were willing to break with the unanimous confession of the church for twelve hundred years!

In other words, they put Scripture above tradition. When the Bible trumped the church’s received doctrine, they felt obligated to follow God’s word rather than what had been taught and practiced for centuries. The tradition of the church in this regard had no binding authority on them. Because they held to *sola scriptura*, they critiqued their fellow Protestants for bowing to tradition rather than the Bible’s clear testimony when it came to defining and marking the church. They taught that the defining characteristic of the church was regenerate church membership, which was marked by believer’s baptism.

Related to retrieval theology, then, we must remember that we are part of a group of churches that has stood for the authority of Scripture above that of tradition. We have prioritized fidelity to Scripture over fidelity to how the church collectively has organized itself and formulated its doctrine.

That’s my fifth caution: Baptists Have Always Been Willing to Part from the Church’s Tradition.

#### **CAUTION #6: TRADITION HAS NO INDEPENDENT AUTHORITY.**

Here I’m just drilling deeper on the previous caution.

Protestants want Scripture to be our ultimate authority and to give due regard to the church’s collective wisdom as we determine how to put our theology together. But the danger—for all the reasons already noted, as well as just for those of us who find history intriguing and inspiring—is that we’ll let the tradition (or at least the part of it we know about and are presently considering) begin to sit in judgment over what Scripture can mean. Many of us have had the experience of reading someone, realizing that he offers a scintillating view of God or some aspect of revealed truth,

and then — knowingly or not — started to see Scripture and reality through that person's lenses. I had that experience years ago when reading J. I. Packer who sent me into the thought of Calvin, Owen, and Edwards. I loved learning about the big God they taught. It was refreshing. Dare I say, it was at times almost intoxicating? So much so, that while in seminary I wrestled with whether or not I would abandon my Baptist principles and become a paedobaptist. I experienced what I think many retrievalists have experienced: they've (probably unconsciously) let someone else's theology start to determine the way that they interpret Scripture.

Unfortunately, some proponents of retrieval theology have begun characterizing those who disagree with their methodology and conclusions as "biblicists" (their word). These malefactors want to let Scripture determine their theology; they don't pay enough attention to the Great Tradition or classical theism. Barrett does this explicitly, describing biblicists as those who irresponsibly proof-text, undervalue the use of philosophy in theology, and overemphasize the human authorship of Scripture.<sup>75</sup>

Let me suggest a better path forward. It comes from our Baptist tradition and the manner in which Baptists have dealt with this very issue. Baptists are a confessional people. We have always noted the importance of adopting written confessions of faith for our denominations, our associations, and our churches. Southern Seminary's *Abstract of Principles*, though, indicates Baptists' view of confessions. Our confession abstracted the gist of the meaning of both the First and Second London Baptist Confessions. Those confessions were too detailed to be useful for the seminary. So they shortened them to their main points, resulting in our *Abstract*.<sup>76</sup> Baptists have felt the freedom to edit confessions, to revise them, to change them according to their understanding of Scripture.

We can see this Baptist emphasis in a slight word change between the Presbyterian *Westminster Confession of Faith* and its later adaptation by Baptists in the 1689 Confession. Westminster teaches that people are bound to what "is either expressly set down in Scripture, or *by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture*" (1.6). Baptists clarified these words in this way: people must believe what "is either expressly set down *or necessarily contained in the Holy Scripture*" (1.6). They highlighted this by the first sentence they wrote on Scripture, one absent from the Presbyterian confession: "The Holy Scripture is the *only* sufficient, certain,

and infallible rule of all saving knowledge, faith, and obedience.”<sup>77</sup> Baptists insist that the Bible alone is our ultimate source of authority.

This is a different orientation from some promoters of retrieval theology who see the tradition as almost on par with the authoritative Scripture.

Friends, we all come to Scripture with preconceptions and with a history that affects how we interpret Scripture. We need to test our biblical interpretations against those who have also studied Scripture. But *sola scriptura* means just that: the Bible is the *alone* authority in what we are to believe and how we are to live. The Bible must *always* sit in judgment over the validity of an opinion — even if I like how intriguing, or anti-modern, or “meaningful” that idea or practice is. My likes or dislikes, my feelings, must be subordinated to God’s authoritative, inerrant word.<sup>78</sup>

In conclusion, the biblically-revealed gospel sits in judgment over aggressive retrieval theology that would lead people away from Reformation Protestantism. And Baptists — who are the full-flowering of the Protestant Reformation — have a unique way of guarding the biblical gospel and protecting our churches from aggressive retrieval.<sup>79</sup> May God give us grace to do that.

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<sup>1</sup> This article was given as Dr. Shawn Wright’s Faculty Address at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky on February 4, 2026.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., “But Halfly Reformed,” in Patrick Collinson, *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement* (1967; reprint Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 29–44.

<sup>3</sup> The literature on why people leave evangelicalism is extensive. See, e.g., Scot McKnight, “From Wheaton to Rome: Why Evangelicals Become Roman Catholic,” *JETS* 45/3 (2002): 451–72; Robert L. Plummer, ed., *Journeys of Faith: Evangelicalism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and Anglicanism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012); Kenneth J. Stewart, *In Search of Ancient Roots: The Christian Past and the Evangelical Identity Crisis* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2017), 187–207, 253–73.

<sup>4</sup> John Webster, “Theologies of Retrieval,” in Kathryn Tanner, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 584.

<sup>5</sup> W. David Buschart and Kent D. Eilers, *Theology as Retrieval: Receiving the Past, Renewing the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2015), 12.

<sup>6</sup> Gavin Ortlund, *Theological Retrieval for Evangelicals: Why We Need Our Past to Have a Future* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 17.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain, *Reformed Catholicity: The Promise of Retrieval for Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2015), 12. They denominate their view “Reformed catholicity” rather than theological retrieval, but the idea is the same as we can see from their subtitle.

- 8 This indiscriminate nature of retrieval theology explains why it has expressed itself in so many varieties in our day—the Roman Catholic *nouvelle théologie* and *ressourcement* of Henri de Lubac, Karl Barth's retrieval of the Reformation tradition, Donald Bloesch's "consensual Christianity," Thomas Oden's "paleo-Orthodoxy," Robert Webber's ancient-future Christianity, the theological interpretation of Scripture, Radical Orthodoxy, the emergent church, the *ressourcement* Thomism of Matthew Levering and Gilles Emery, evangelical retrieval theology, and others. For varieties of retrieval theology, see Allen and Swain, *Reformed Catholicity*, 4–12. Darren Sarisky, ed., *Theologies of Retrieval: An Exploration and Appraisal* (London and New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), is a collection of essays on varieties of retrieval theology, as is the entirety of Buschart and Eilers's book.
- 9 Webster, "Theologies of Retrieval," 584.
- 10 Webster, "Theologies of Retrieval," 584–85.
- 11 Retrieval theology also has adherents who seek to retrieve the patristic era. Space limitations only allow me to deal specifically with those who are especially seeking to retrieve Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) from the medieval era.
- 12 For "retrieval for the sake of renewal," see Christopher R. Hanna, *Retrieval for the Sake of Renewal: Timothy George as a Historical Theologian* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2022). "Renewal through retrieval" is also the goal of Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain, "Introduction," *Christian Dogmatics: Reformed Theology for the Church Catholic*, ed. Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2016), 2.
- 13 This is the title of another book that advocates retrieval: Stephen R. Holmes, *Listening to the Past: The Place of Tradition in Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002).
- 14 Asty, "Memoir," p. xxxii, in Crawford Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism: Experiences of Defeat*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 262.
- 15 Others disparage history and need a healthy dose of C. S. Lewis's critique of "chronological snobbery" and the value of reading old books. C. S. Lewis, "Introduction," to Athanasius, *St. Athanasius on the Incarnation* (1944; reprint Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary, 1982), 3–10.
- 16 See, e.g., Ben Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons*, 79. The texts are Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5, 7; and 1 Peter 5:1–2. Others have recognized this. "In attempting to learn from ecclesiastical history what usages prevailed in the apostolic churches, there is danger of error from two causes: the writers of ecclesiastical history were uninspired men, and therefore fallible; and the churches of the times after the apostles, may have departed from the order first instituted." John L. Dagg, *Manual of Theology. Second Part. A Treatise on Church Order* (1858; reprint, Harrisonburg, VA: Gano, 1990), 90.
- 17 Craig A. Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition: Recovering the Genius of Premodern Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2018), 250, x-xiii. I argue this even though Carter says that John Calvin is the hero of his story (250). Numerous others have pointed out the manner in which modern biblical interpreters should learn from the premodern tradition. Among them are David C. Steinmetz, "The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis," *Theology Today* 37 (1980): 27–38; and Robert Louis Wilken, "In Defense of Allegory," *Modern Theology* 14.2 (1998): 197–212.
- 18 Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition*, xvii.
- 19 Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition*, 11 n.14. For a traditional Thomistic account, see Etienne Gilson, *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938).
- 20 Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition*, 86.
- 21 Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition*, 250.
- 22 For example, Matthew Barrett, *The Reformation as Renewal: Retrieving the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2023), 204; cf. 164. The chapter on Thomas is 90 pages long, over 10% of the book's length.
- 23 This rising interest of evangelicals in the thought of Thomas has been ably discussed recently by Leonardo De Chirico, *Engaging with Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Approach* (London: Apollos, 2024).
- 24 For critiques of some aspects of Barrett's argument see Peter Opitz, "'Reformation as Renewal': Recatholicizing the Reformers by Manipulating Their Message?," *The Hanover Review: The Journal of the London Lyceum* 3.1 (2024): 36–58; and Daniel W. Houck, "Prolegomena to Any Future Account of Aquinas's Augustinianism: A Response to Matthew Barrett," *The Hanover Review: The Journal of the London Lyceum* 3.1 (2024): 59–66.
- 25 Calvin, *Institutes* 4.9.8; in Anthony N. S. Lane, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999), 41. A summary of sorts of Lane's argument can be found in Anthony N. S. Lane, "John Calvin: Catholic Theologian," *Ecclesiology* 6 (2010): 290–314.
- 26 Calvin, *Institutes* 1.11.13; in Lane, *John Calvin*, 40–41.

- 27 Lane, *John Calvin*, 41. Lane notes that for Calvin, “After the golden age the church fell into decline. This took place gradually and there is no one date given when the church ‘fell’. Calvin gives different dates for different stages of the decline: belief in the carnal presence of Christ [in the eucharist] had prevailed for more than 600 years; the heights of papal power were reached only 400 years previously; compulsory confession is less than 300 years old; other errors and darkness have been around for ‘some centuries’” (Lane, 42).
- 28 Lane, *John Calvin*, 43.
- 29 Lane, *John Calvin*, 45. Whether this was from lack of engagement with Thomas personally (perhaps Calvin was citing from an intermediary source) or whether Calvin knew Thomas well and just didn’t appreciate him, we can’t determine.
- 30 This is not to say that Calvin was not familiar with aspects of medieval theology. See David C. Steinmetz, “The Scholastic Calvin,” in *Protestant Scholasticism: Essays in Reassessment*, ed. Carl R. Trueman and R. Scott Clark (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1999), 16–30; and Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 39–61. On some reformers’ use of Thomas, see David S. Sytsma, “Sixteenth-Century Reformed Reception of Aquinas,” in Matthew Levering and Marcus Plested, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception of Aquinas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 121–43. “Calvin found support for the Protestant doctrine of justification in Augustine, Ambrose, and Bernard—a very short list!” (Stewart, *In Search of Ancient Roots*, 85–86).
- 31 Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed., James T. Denison, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1997), 3:4.
- 32 Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3:59. Certainly God still had his elect during the medieval period in groups like the Waldensians. Even within the Catholic church “the hearts of the hearers were often more holy than the mouths of the priest and teachers” so God has his elect there. Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3:66.
- 33 Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3:142.
- 34 Things were so bad, according to Mastricht, that prior to the Reformation there were times when no church existed that a Christian could be part of. Petrus van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, trans. Todd M. Rester, ed. Joel R. Beeke (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2025), 5:344–46.
- 35 John Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity: Or, A System of Evangelical Truths, Deduced from the Sacred Scriptures* (1809; reprint, Paris, AR: Baptist Standard Bearer, 1995), li. Note the fourth part of Gill’s defense of Calvinism, which is an examination of the so-called “five points of Calvinism” from the church fathers up to Jerome (d. 420), but not any medieval theologians. See Gill’s *The Cause of God and Truth in Four Parts* (1855; reprint, Paris, AR: Baptist Standard Bearer, 1992), 220–328. Gill’s use of patristic sources has received attention recently. See, e.g., Richard A. Muller, “John Gill and the Reformed Tradition: A Study in the Reception of Protestant Orthodoxy in the Eighteenth Century,” in *The Life and Thought of John Gill (1697–1771): A Tercentennial Appreciation*, ed. Michael A. G. Haykin (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 51–68; Steven Tshombe Godet, “The Trinitarian Theology of John Gill (1697–1771): Context, Sources, and Controversy” (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2015), 122–80; David Mark Rathel, “A Case Study in Baptist Catholicity: The Scriptures and the Tradition in the Theology of John Gill,” *Baptist Quarterly* 49.3 (2018): 108–16; David Rathel, “John Gill and the Rule of Faith: A Case Study in the Baptist Retrieval of Tradition,” *Southeastern Theological Review* 14.2 (2023): 55–72; and Christopher Green, “Baptist Catholicity in the Ecclesiology of John Gill (1697–1771),” *Themelios* 49.3 (2024): 643–55.
- 36 Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 1:117–18. Note that Hodge, like Calvin before him, had high esteem for mystics like Bernard of Clairvaux for his opposition to the formality and ritualism that reigned in the church during his lifetime (1:79).
- 37 Benjamin B. Warfield, “Augustine and His ‘Confessions,’” in *Calvin and Augustine*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 383. I thus disagree with Ortlund’s critique of Warfield: “In Warfield’s method of retrieval, Augustine’s theology seems to get sifted through the grid of the Reformation such that the good in Augustine’s theological legacy is distinguished from the bad basically by its sixteenth-century consequences” (Ortlund, *Theological Retrieval for Evangelicals*, 29).
- 38 This is the scenario put forward, e.g., by Patrick Schreiner, “Baptists, Classic Interpretation, and the Christian Tradition,” in *Baptists and the Christian Tradition: Towards an Evangelical Baptist Catholicity*, ed. Matthew Y. Emerson, Christopher W. Morgan, and R. Lucas Stamps (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2020), 149–50; and Stephen Wellum, *Christ Alone: The Uniqueness of Jesus as Savior*, The 5 Solas Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 290–91.

- 39 See Richard A. Muller, "Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation: The View from the Middle Ages," in Richard A. Muller and John L. Thompson, ed., *Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 3–22; Ian Christopher Levy, "The Literal Sense of Scripture and the Search for Truth in the Late Middle Ages" *Revue d'Histoire Ecclésiastique* 104 (3–4): 783–827.
- 40 See, e.g., the many times that Calvin used Chrysostom in Lane, *John Calvin*. On Calvin's literal reading of Scripture, see David L. Puckett, *John Calvin's Exegesis of the Old Testament*, Columbia Series in Reformed Theology (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995). Erik T. Lundeen has recently suggested that the categories of "literal" and "allegorical" were not tight when it came to Reformation Protestants' interpretation of Scripture. Erik T. Lundeen, *The Reformation of the Literal: Prophecy and the Senses of Scripture in Early Modern Europe* (London: T&T Clark, 2025). I would just observe that many in the history of the church have recognized the challenges of interpreting prophecy. The debated point is rather how to interpret non-prophetic biblical material.
- 41 Original: "chopological."
- 42 William Tyndale, *The Obedience of a Christian Man*, 1527–28, in *Tyndale's Works*, ed. Henry Walter (1848; reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2010), 1:307. I've modernized the old English. My thanks to Nathan W. Parsons for providing me with this quote.
- 43 Johannes Wollebius, *Compendium Theologiae Christianae*, in *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. and trans. John W. Beardslee III (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 34.
- 44 Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:149–53.
- 45 Maastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, trans. Todd M. Rester, ed. Joel R. Beeke (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2018), 1:168–69.
- 46 Not all stalwarts of the Reformed tradition fall neatly into the system of so-called "classical theism." See Thomas H. McCall, "A Hopeless Hodge-Podge of Theology? The Retrieval of 'Classical Theism' and the Curious Case of Charles Hodge," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 17 (2023): 261–77.
- 47 John Webster, "What Makes Theology Theological?," *Journal of Analytical Theology* 3 (2015): 2. Webster does go on to argue that after considering God in himself theology must consider him "in his works towards creatures." My point is not that Webster made no allowance for sinful humanity's relationship with God, but that the overwhelming force of his first point drowned out the power of his second.
- 48 Willem Maarten Dekker, "Review Article: John Webster's Retrieval of Classical Theology," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 12 (2018): 61. Webster urges, "there is one principal Christian doctrine, the doctrine of God the Holy Trinity, immanently and transitively considered, of which all other doctrines are extensions" (Dekker, 60).
- 49 Willem Dekker notes that "Webster's theology is based on Aquinas. [Webster] basically takes over the entire structure of theology from him" (61). James E. Dolezal, *All That Is in God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Classical Christian Theism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2017).
- 50 Michael Reeves, "The Holy Trinity," in *Reformation Theology: A Systematic Summary*, ed. Matthew Barrett (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), 194. Reeves later noted that in his "Disputation against Scholastic Theology" Luther took "square aim at Aquinas's nonbiblical, Aristotelian foundations" (195).
- 51 Barrett's attempt is mirrored by others who argue that the first generation of reformers were quite Catholic. See, e.g., J. Todd Billings, "The Catholic Calvin," *Pro Ecclesia* 20.2 (2011): 120–34; Charles Raith II, "Calvin's Critique of Merit, and Why Aquinas (Mostly) Agrees," *Pro Ecclesia* 20.2 (2011): 135–66.
- 52 Francis Beckwith, "Doting Thomists: Evangelicals, Thomas Aquinas, and Justification," *Evangelical Quarterly* 85 (2013): 220–21. Gerald Bray similarly notes the ways in which Thomas's view of justification is anti-Protestant. Gerald Bray, "Late Medieval Theology," in *Reformation Theology: A Systematic Theology*, ed. Matthew Barrett (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 87–88. Stephen Wellum shows the manner in which the Protestant reformers corrected "Rome's sacramental theology of merit" with their biblical notion of penal substitution. Wellum, *Christ Alone*, 175. Wellum notes that in medieval thought "[t]he grace that is communicated through the sacraments is infused so that our very nature is transformed, and by this infusion, we are enabled to cooperate with God to merit eternal life" (172).
- 53 Kevin J. Vanhoozer argues that the Protestant Reformation was a reaction against the corruption of the biblical gospel through the addition of non-biblical material in medieval Catholicism. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Holy Scripture," in *Christian Dogmatics: Reformed Theology for the Church Catholic*, ed. Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2016), 36.
- 54 David Wells, *The Courage to be Protestant*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 101–102.
- 55 Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1996), 58.

- 56 Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 63.
- 57 Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 63–64.
- 58 See Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 64–70.
- 59 Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians 1535, Chapters 1–4*, trans. Jaroslav Pelikan, in *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1963) 26: 386–87, in Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 67.
- 60 For instance, see William Perkins, *A Reformed Catholic*, in *The Works of William Perkins*, ed. Shawn D. Wright and Andrew S. Ballitch (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2019), 7:25–26.
- 61 Chapter 18. See Joel R. Beeke, *Assurance of Faith: Calvin, English Puritanism, and the Dutch Second Reformation*, American University Studies (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), 151–73.
- 62 Mark E. Dever, *Richard Sibbes: Puritanism and Calvinism in Late Elizabethan and Early Stuart England* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2000), 162.
- 63 Richard Sibbes, “The Bruised Reed and Smoking Flax,” in *Works of Richard Sibbes*, ed. Alexander B. Grosart (1862–64; reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1973), 1:77. Similarly, see Sibbes’s critique of the inadequacies of the medieval church (1:52).
- 64 Richard Sibbes, “A Learned Commentary or Exposition Upon the First Chapter of the Second Epistle of S. Paul to the Corinthians,” in *Works of Richard Sibbes*, ed. Alexander B. Grosart (1862–64; reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1973), 3:467, in Dever, *Richard Sibbes*, 181.
- 65 Michael Horton, *Justification*, New Studies in Dogmatics (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 1:122, in De Chirico, *Engaging with Thomas Aquinas*, 50.
- 66 Francis J. Beckwith, *Never Doubt Thomas: The Catholic Aquinas as Evangelical and Protestant* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019), 104, in Leonardo De Chirico, *Engaging with Thomas Aquinas*, 51.
- 67 Carl R. Trueman, *Crisis of Confidence: Reclaiming the History Faith in a Culture Consumed with Individualism and Identity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2024), 110.
- 68 E.g., Barrett, *The Reformation as Renewal*, 203–04.
- 69 According to John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2019), 91–116, who titles chapter four, “Regenerate Church Membership: The Baptist Mark of the Church.”
- 70 Allen and Swain, *Reformed Catholicity*, 18.
- 71 Allen and Swain, *Reformed Catholicity*, 41. Reflecting their Thomistic leanings, they also assert, “The fact that tradition can err does not disqualify its status as a divine institution.... In the case of this institution the principle applies as well: grace restores and perfects nature” (Allen and Swain, *Reformed Catholicity*, 21). Vanhoozer has a better view of tradition, saying it is valuable only when its teachings are parallel to what is revealed in Scripture. Vanhoozer, “Holy Scripture,” in *Christian Dogmatics*, 51.
- 72 See, for example, Timothy George, “The Reformation Roots of the Baptist Tradition,” *Review and Expositor* 1989 (86): 9–22. In the rest of my discussion, though, I will limit myself to the Particular Baptist side, out of which Southern Baptists sprang in the nineteenth century.
- 73 Anthony L. Chute, Nathan A. Finn, and Michael A. G. Haykin, *The Baptist Story: From English Sect to Global Movement* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2015): “Baptists are children of the Puritans” (14).
- 74 See John Quincy Adams, *Baptists, the Only Thorough Religious Reformers* (1876; reprint Rochester, NY: Backus, 1980); G. Stephen Weaver, “Baptists as Thorough Religious Reformers: The Reformation as Source of Seventeenth-Century Baptists” (paper presented at the 69th Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society November 17, 2017, Providence, Rhode Island); Jason G. Duesing, “Baptist Contributions to the Christian Tradition,” in Matthew Y. Emerson, Christopher W. Morgan, and R. Lucas Stamps, ed., *Baptists and the Christian Tradition: Towards an Evangelical Baptist Catholicity* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2020), 329–50.
- 75 Barrett, *The Reformation as Renewal*, 21.
- 76 Gregory A. Wills, *Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1859–2009* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 31–33.
- 77 See the discussion in L. Russ Bush and Tom J. Nettles, *Baptists and the Bible*, rev. ed. (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1999), 44–51.
- 78 See John M. Frame, “In Defense of Something Close to Biblicism: Reflections on *Sola Scriptura* and History in Theological Method,” *WTJ* 59 (1997): 269–91.
- 79 Compare the first three theses of Matthew Y. Emerson and R. Lucas Stamps, “Conclusion: Toward an Evangelical Baptist Catholicity,” in *Baptists and the Christian Tradition: Towards an Evangelical Baptist Catholicity*, ed. Matthew Y. Emerson, Christopher W. Morgan, and R. Lucas Stamps (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2020), 353.

# Mystery and Fulfillment: The Historical- Allegorical Nature of Scripture's Storyline

ARDEL B. CANEDAY

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**Ardel B. Caneday** is a Teaching Elder at Christ Bible Church, St. Paul, Minnesota, a Board Member and Writer for "Christ Over All" ([www.christoverall.com](http://www.christoverall.com)), and an Adjunct Professor of New Testament and Greek at the University of Northwestern, St. Paul, Minnesota, where he taught for 31 years. He received his PhD in New Testament from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. He has published numerous magazine articles and journal essays, co-authored *The Race Set Before Us* with Thomas Schreiner, and co-edited *Four Views on the Historical Adam* with Matthew Barrett. He is writing a commentary on the Gospel of John. He is married to Lois. They have two adult sons and six grandchildren. He maintains a blog, "All Things Christian" ([www.abcaneday.com](http://www.abcaneday.com)).

## INTRODUCTION

Contemporary academics continue to engage in an ancient and perennial, but misplaced debate over *literal* versus *figurative* as modes of interpreting the Bible, rather than as modes of communication which are integral to the text's *sensus literalis*.<sup>1</sup> The *sensus literalis* is the meaning assigned to a text by its author as signified by the words of the text within their grammatical-historical-literary context, including cases where the intention is expressed through figurative portrayal, whether by simile, metaphor, parable, foreshadowing, prefiguration, or allegory. Thus, a text's *sensus literalis* obligates us to allow the meaning of Scripture to control how we read the text. The contemporary retrieval of the medieval *Quadrige* for interpreting Scripture, as a more complete reading strategy than any modern method,

is a species of the ancient debate.<sup>2</sup> This retrieval sustains the medievalists' mistake of identifying the ostensive fourfold sense—literal, allegorical, tropological, and anagogical—as modes of interpretation.

As I have argued repeatedly in lectures, presentations, and published essays, I do so again. First, we fundamentally misplace this discussion when we classify *literal* and *figurative* as hermeneutical issues or modes of interpretation. *Literal* and *figurative* are not proper descriptions of how we interpret any text or speech. Rather, *literal* and *figurative* are modes of communication that speakers and writers use to refer to and describe the realities they portray. Second, allegorical, tropological, and anagogical are also not ways of interpreting; they are also modes of speech or writing. For example, an allegory calls for readers to read it for what it is—an allegory—not to engage in *allegorical interpretation*, which creatively assigns symbolic significance to the narrative's various aspects. The author of an allegory, not its readers, assigns its diverse representational implications.

Thus, this is my thesis: "God's scriptural revelation progresses along a historical storyline with prefigurations of the promised Messiah embedded in allegorical narratives, parabolic episodes, and typological events, persons, places, and institutions accompanied by moral and spiritual instruction."

## **1. MISTAKEN INTERPRETER-ORIENTED DEBATES OVER USES OF THE OT IN THE NT**

Few assumptions in contemporary Christianity are more persistent, divisive, and misleading than the notion that we must interpret biblical texts either *literally* or *figuratively*.<sup>3</sup> From the early days of the Christian church, around these two terms, rival hermeneutical camps have gathered: the *literal*, allegedly concerned with reality, facts, and history, and the *figurative*, with symbolism and theology. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, theological disagreements between dispensationalists and covenant theologians over how God's covenant promises disclosed in the Old Testament (OT) were fulfilled in the Messiah and witnessed to by the New Testament (NT) tended to fixate on the human exercise of hermeneutics, with debates over what "literal interpretation" means.<sup>4</sup> Vern Poythress's *Understanding Dispensationalists* did much to narrow this gap. Yet to advocate for *typological* or *figural interpretation* while simultaneously rejecting *allegorical*

*interpretation*, as popularly understood and practiced, is less than persuasive, especially for Evangelicals who have been instructed to revere grammatical-historical interpretation.<sup>5</sup>

### ***A. Claims that the NT Radically Reinterprets the OT***

When George E. Ladd challenged dispensationalism's approach to the Scriptures, he guaranteed rejection by many because he confused the roles of the Bible's readers and writers, obscuring them, even bequeathing to readers an authority that does not belong to them by claiming "that the Old Testament prophets must be interpreted in light of their fulfillment in the person and mission of Jesus. We have seen that this involves *reinterpretation*. Sometimes the fulfillment is different from what we would expect from the Old Testament."<sup>6</sup> Thus, he claimed,

Because of the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, Peter transfers the messianic Davidic throne from Jerusalem to God's right hand in heaven. Jesus has now been enthroned as the Davidic Messiah on the throne of David, and is awaiting the final consummation of his messianic reign ... [I]n his exaltation Jesus becomes the Messiah in a new sense: he has begun his messianic reign as the Davidic king... This involves a rather *radical reinterpretation* of the Old Testament prophecies, but no more so than the *entire reinterpretation* of God's redemptive plan by the early church. In fact, it is an essential part of the *reinterpretation* demanded by the events of redemptive history.<sup>7</sup>

Many grasped the kernel of truth Ladd expressed while failing to recognize the error that encased it, reproducing his error, even as they adjusted their understanding of Scripture citing Scripture. On the other hand, it is understandable that Ladd's talk of "radical reinterpretation" was off-putting to dispensationalists, deepening the theological and hermeneutical division.

More appealing to some dispensationalists were Richard Longenecker's explanations of a few difficult NT uses of the OT, such as the use of Hosea 11:1 in Matthew 2:15—"This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I called my son'"—or Paul's alleged "allegorical interpretation" of the Abraham narrative in Genesis (Gal 4:21–31).<sup>8</sup> Longenecker explains that, occasionally, the NT writers interpreted the OT creatively from a "revelatory stance" of "privileged apostolic insight," a stance he claims we cannot reproduce.<sup>9</sup>

***B. Claims that the Bible's Types Are Discernible Only Retrospectively***

Concerning biblical types, retrospective interpretation of the OT found early advocacy from Francis Foulkes, who contended, "Typology reads into Scripture a meaning which is not there in that it reads in the light of the fulfillment of the history. This is not exegesis, drawing out from a passage what the human author understood and intended as he wrote. Nevertheless, it does not read a new principle into the context; it interprets the dealings of God with men from the literal context, and then points to the way in which God has so dealt with men in Christ."<sup>10</sup> R. T. France and David L. Baker followed Foulkes' explanation of biblical types. France insisted, "A type is not a prediction; in itself it is simply a person, event, *etc.* recorded as historical fact, with no intrinsic reference to the future. Nor is an antitype the fulfillment of a prediction; it is rather the re-embodiment of a principle which has been previously exemplified in the type."<sup>11</sup> Baker agrees: "It is only in retrospect that an event, person or institution may be seen to be typical."<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, definitions that view OT types as prophetic dominate recent literature.<sup>13</sup>

***C. A Measure of Rapprochement between Contrary Views***

Nevertheless, early in the final decade of the last millennium, some Dispensationalists found a modicum of common ground with covenant theologians, with Progressive Dispensationalists affirming that with Christ's advent, God's Kingdom has *already* come in some sense.<sup>14</sup> Despite this progress, debates have continued to focus on *literal* and *figurative interpretation*, a dualism that rests on a classification error, mistakenly displacing a property of the text—how the biblical author has presented a thing—with a property of the act of interpretation—*how* the reader is to approach the text. The category mistake results in confusion: exegetes disagree over hermeneutical methods that Scripture's text does not authorize, pastors deliver sermons that rest on dubious claims, and congregants reproduce the confusion preachers and scholars incite.

***D. Allegorical Interpretation Rejected in Favor of Typological Interpretation***

Many evangelical scholars sustain confusion by rejecting *allegorical interpretation* but commending the ongoing practice of *typological*

*interpretation*. Thus, to the degree they feature a human activity, which they call *typological interpretation*, to the same degree, they generate confusion concerning God's providential, revelatory activity that establishes biblical *typology*. For example, Greg Beale explains, "Typological interpretation involves an extended reference to the original meaning of an Old Testament text which develops it but does not contradict it. Put another way, it does not *read into* the text a different or higher sense, but *draws out* from it a different or higher application of the same sense."<sup>15</sup>

In his recent book, *Typology*, James Hamilton agrees with G. K. Beale, characterizing his understanding of Scripture's use of Scripture as predominantly typological interpretation. So, "the Old Testament authors intended to create the typological points of historical correspondence and escalation for which the New Testament authors claim fulfillment."<sup>16</sup> Consequently, the uses of earlier Scriptures by later writers are valid, correct, and established as normative. By this, Hamilton means that "through their interpretation of earlier Scripture, later biblical authors instruct their audiences regarding how to interpret the Bible."<sup>17</sup> He opposes Longenecker's conclusion that some uses of the OT by the apostles cannot be reproduced.<sup>18</sup> Against this, the "normative hermeneutic" requires "typological interpretation," readings that "align with the normative interpretations provided by the biblical authors themselves."<sup>19</sup>

Following the publication of his book, *Typology* (2022), Hamilton now hints that he is moving away from orienting his discussion hermeneutically, using the expression "typological interpretation," to one that features the proper domain: God's revelatory and providential acts in history. A careful reader will observe that, when he defines "typological interpretation," Hamilton subtly shifts his orientation from the reader's interpretation of divine revelation to God's giving of revelation. This adjustment, to feature typology as revelatory, is in the right direction and commendable.<sup>20</sup> Thus, he states, "Typology is not [sic] mere literary contrivance, nor is it a result of the imaginative creativity of either the biblical authors or those who interpret them. God ordained that the parallels would actually happen, and he also providentially ensured that the biblical authors would notice them."<sup>21</sup> To support this, he cites Earle Ellis, who states in the foreword to Goppelt's *Typos: The Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New*, "Typological exegesis assumes a divine

sovereignty over history.”<sup>22</sup> Goppelt contends that “typology is the method of interpreting Scripture that is predominant in the New Testament and characteristic of it.”<sup>23</sup> Yet, a few pages later, he contends that it “is not a hermeneutical method with specific rules of interpretation.”<sup>24</sup>

Though not clearly expressed, it seems that Hamilton’s understanding of biblical typology now approaches what I have long been expressing. Two factors suggest this. First, he stands aloof from figural reading and figural interpretation. He senses an unduly strong association of the expression with Richard Hays, who claims that “figural reading” of Scripture does not require that either those who wrote the OT or the characters in the Bible’s storyline were consciously aware of predicting or prefiguring Christ.<sup>25</sup> Hamilton’s dismissal of figural reading sweeps aside several others who prefer figural over typological, in concert with Hays, but who also criticize Hays’s insistence that the NT writers engaged the OT by “reading backwards.” Second, in a more recent publication on biblical typology, Hamilton avoids any mention of typological interpretation by focusing his discussion on the OT writer’s intention, not generated by readers.<sup>26</sup> He rebuts the charge that recognizing typology throughout the Scriptures is dangerous by emphasizing that “the person, event, or institution was presented as a type by the author of the text recounting the archetypal instance.”<sup>27</sup>

### ***E. The Ascendancy of Interpretation-Focused “Figural Reading” among TIS Advocates***

Both non-evangelical and evangelical scholars, including Christopher Seitz, Richard Hays, Don Collett, Kevin Vanhoozer, Daniel Treier, and others, have contributed significantly to the diverse contemporary movement known as the Theological Interpretation of Scripture (TIS).<sup>28</sup> Each one shows a distinct emphasis, revealing both shared commitments and meaningful differences. Integral to their TIS approach is their embrace of “figural reading,” an expression they regard as broadly inclusive of all biblical figurations, types, and allegories.<sup>29</sup> Whether directly or incidentally, they all draw on Erich Auerbach’s explanation: “Figural interpretation establishes a connection between two events or persons in such a way that the first signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second involves or fulfills the first.”<sup>30</sup>

Hays's retrospective-reinterpretation approach is reminiscent of Ladd's, when he contends, "A Gospel-shaped hermeneutic necessarily entails *reading backward*, reinterpreting Israel's Scripture in light of the story of Jesus."<sup>31</sup> As I have argued elsewhere, Hays, like many others, foregrounds Scripture's *reception*—its *hearing* and *interpretation*—over its *production*—God's *speaking*, *acting*, and *revealing*. Hays explains, "There is ... a significant difference between *prediction* and *prefiguration*. Figural reading need not presume that the OT authors—or the characters they narrate—were conscious of predicting or anticipating Christ. Rather, the discernment of a figural correspondence is necessarily retrospective rather than prospective."<sup>32</sup> This is true if we lodge figuration in the realm of hermeneutics rather than in the biblical text, as Hays does. Hays restates and reinforces his claim: "Another way to put this point is that figural reading is a form of intertextual interpretation that focuses on an intertextuality of *reception* rather than of *production*."<sup>33</sup> Thus, Hays contends that we, like the NT writers, are locked into reading and interpreting the OT *retrospectively* and *figurally*. Hence his clever phrase: "reading backwards."

Hays's unambiguous differentiation of *prefiguration* from *prediction*, and of *reception* from *production*, is integral to his "reading backwards" proposal. Yet he also seems to subvert his own cause with statements that inherently acknowledge that the OT's figuration is *anticipatory*, *forward-looking*. For example, Hays states, "All four canonical Gospels declare that the Torah and the Prophets and the Psalms mysteriously *prefigure* Jesus. The author of the Fourth Gospel puts the claim succinctly ... 'If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me' (John 5:46)."<sup>34</sup> He also affirms, "The Gospels teach us to read the OT for *figuration*."<sup>35</sup> He reinforces this anticipatory function by stating that the "literal historical sense of the OT ... *points forward typologically* to the gospel story."<sup>36</sup> Thus, though he may not realize it, Hays affirms the OT's *prefiguring* of the very thing his "reading backwards" attempts to guard against. If the Torah, the Prophets, and the Psalms "*prefigure*" Jesus, then he undercuts his strong distinctions of *prefiguration* from *prediction* and *reception* from *production*. Thankfully, his inconsistency renders his proposal closer to Scripture's self-representation than he understood.

Given the confusion traced above, Hays's critics legitimately wonder whether he ascribes the figural correspondences between the OT and

the NT to the interpretive and narrative ingenuity of the Evangelists rather than to God's revelation through the prophets, because he anchors his discussion within the domain of hermeneutics. That *interpretation* controls his discussion is evident from his dominating nomenclature—*hermeneutical strategy, retrospective reading, figural exegesis, figural readings, figural interpretation, and revisionary retrospective hermeneutical move*.<sup>37</sup>

Don Collett and Kevin Vanhoozer share much in common with Christopher Seitz, who published *Figured Out: Typology and Providence in Christian Scripture* (2001), well before Hays published his *Reading Backwards* strategy (2014). Seitz counters the notion that figuration is retrospective, given the significant inclusion of “providence” in his subtitle, a major feature of his thesis. He states, “The focus for our present purposes is on the explicitly *theological character of the rule [of faith] and its hermeneutical consequences, chief among them, that as the Son and the Father are one, so, too, is the witness to them from the Old and New Testaments, which witness is perceived by eyes of faith through the work of the Holy Spirit*.”<sup>38</sup> More recently, he reasserted God's providential authority over the OT's persons, places, and events, which prefigure their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Thus, Christ's apostles and their associates did not retrofit the OT to the new era brought about by the Messiah's advent, a theme evident in Hays's approach. Rather, “The first witness [i.e., the Old Testament] has been so formed by God in its literal sense in advance; it is pre-formed.”<sup>39</sup>

Don Collett (2020) agrees with Seitz that “Scripture's literal sense is not merely an authorial or historical sense but fully embedded within a creational and providential ‘rule’ for reading Scripture's canonical, final, or ‘full’ form.”<sup>40</sup> Thus, Collett takes issue with Hays's contention that the NT writers read the OT “backwards.” He argues that the notion that “the Old Testament's figural sense” is “the function of a retrospective reading performed by New Testament authors” eliminates it from being “a native resident residing within its literal sense.”<sup>41</sup> Thus, Collett rightly insists that the OT's reference to and mediation of Christ “depends upon the inspired words the Spirit gave to its authors *and* the providential linkage of those words with Christo-trinitarian realities.”<sup>42</sup>

Kevin Vanhoozer echoes Seitz and joins Collett against Hays's contention that the NT writers read the OT “backwards,” because the figural correspondence “is necessarily retrospective rather than prospective.”<sup>43</sup>

Like Seitz and Collett, Vanhoozer prefers the broader category, “figural interpretation,” which includes all figures of speech, but especially “allegory and typology, the two main species of figural interpretation.”<sup>44</sup> He claims that “no single term better describes the heart and soul of mere Christian biblical interpretation than *figural*.”<sup>45</sup> Thus, he poses the question that generated his book: “*Can a mere Christian hermeneutic be both literal and figural?*”<sup>46</sup> Then he proceeds to demonstrate “why figural reading is integral to seriously literal interpretation.”<sup>47</sup> His choice of “figural” accounts for the numerous figures of speech—similes, metaphors, etc.—that fill the Bible. Of particular concern to Vanhoozer are not those figures that relate to speech but those that focus on “persons, things, and events,” in other words, what Scripture calls “types,” “shadows,” etc.<sup>48</sup> As he uses the term, he has in view figures that result “from divine intention to establish a relationship between two or more things, such that the former represents or betokens the latter: ‘One event or utterance figures another when, while remaining unalterably what it is, it announces or communicates something other than itself.’”<sup>49</sup> He offers a rather simplistic contrast between humans, who “do things with words,” and God, who “communicates by doing things with *things*.”<sup>50</sup>

Richard Hays’s discussion of a *figural reading* of Scripture foregrounds the reader and the reader’s *reception* more than the divine *production* of Scripture.<sup>51</sup> Vanhoozer’s advocacy also focuses on the reader’s *reception* but gives a larger role to Scripture’s *production*: “*Figuration*—the making of figures—is a way of viewing and experiencing things as part of a unified pattern of divine activity in history. These figures are the glue that unify biblical narrative and give it coherence.”<sup>52</sup> To illustrate his point, he could have selected an undisputed reference, but he appeals to the Apostle Paul’s argument in Romans 9 and 11, claiming, “Israel *figures* the church.”<sup>53</sup> He argues that God, “the primary figurative agent,” enlarges the meaning of “Israel” while remaining loyal to the nation.<sup>54</sup> Then, Vanhoozer offers this succinct statement of “the mere Christian principle of figural interpretation: *Human readers figure God’s figurations after him*,” which features God as the author of history.<sup>55</sup>

## 2. FIGURATION — TYPOLOGY, ALLEGORY, AND PARABLE — IN SCRIPTURE'S HISTORICAL DISCOURSE

Scripture's speech, God's Word, corresponds to God's self-revelation in action, weaving together history and symbol, fact and figure, in an inseparable, coherent unity. To read Scripture faithfully requires attending to its own *sensus literalis*, its communicative mode, which includes its historical-allegorical-parabolic texture, whereby the mystery of Christ is disclosed within historical events. Against the contemporary retrieval of a Medieval reading and interpretive paradigm that construes Scripture's types and figurations as *reading* or *interpretive* strategies, this presentation contends that all types, prefigurations, foreshadowings, allegories, and parables mentioned or hinted at in the OT by the writers of the NT belong intrinsically to the revelatory fabric of Scripture's *sensus literalis*. Thus, we must reject taking any of these revelation-embedded characteristics and transpose the *descriptive phrase*, "figural revelation," for example, into a *prescriptive phrase*, "figural interpretation." This is not merely a quibble over terminology.

Why be concerned with these kinds of apparently unwitting transpositions? Biblical scholars induce others to follow their practice, whether for good or ill. If we unwittingly ascribe to *our interpretation of Scripture* an authority that properly belongs only to *God's giving of his revelation*, the invalid shift is consequential. It confuses and ignites fruitless and silly interpretive disputes that lead to theological standoffs, such as those that tended to dominate the 20<sup>th</sup> century between advocates of *literal reading* and those who defended *figurative reading*. Both sides prolonged the confusion because literal and figurative are not modes of interpretation but are modes of speaking or writing to convey concepts and portrayals of reality.<sup>56</sup>

God's authorized revelatory figurations compel us to speak of *figural revelation*, not of *figural interpretation*. This properly focuses our attention on the text's authority and clears away bedeviling confusion. I have offered numerous presentations and published several essays to develop this case with exegetical detail, focusing attention on crucial NT uses of the OT, demonstrating that the apostles and their associates, who ground their beliefs concerning Messiah Jesus in the OT, do not engage in literal, figurative, figural, typological, parabolic, or allegorical interpretation of Scripture. I have maintained that interpretation itself cannot be literal

or figurative, any more than it can be figural, typological, or allegorical.<sup>57</sup> Add two more to these: tropological and anagogical, advocated by those retrieving the *Quadriga*. All these descriptors belong to written texts or spoken discourse, *not* to our interpretation of them. When interpreters label their reading of any portion of Scripture “literal,” “figurative,” “redemptive-historical,” “typological,” “allegorical,” “tropological,” or “anagogical,” they unwittingly pave the way to superimpose their own hermeneutical reading agenda onto the text, however much they protest to the contrary. Our responsibility is not to interpret a given text literally, figuratively, redemptive-historically, typologically, allegorically, tropologically, or anagogically, but to interpret the text faithfully in keeping with the kind of written revelatory discourse it is. This requires us to read Scripture on its own terms, tracking and portraying as accurately as possible the contours and features of the divine *progression of revelation*. Acknowledging that all the listed adverbs or adjectives are proper descriptors of *God’s written word*, not of *our interpretive strategy*, though regularly overlooked, is decisive for doing appropriate exegesis from which good theological formulations arise, for it honors the character of divine revelation as historically embodied and linguistically mediated.

In what follows, my objective is not to rehearse the breadth of my work on this subject, spanning three decades and scattered throughout numerous essays, whether published in books, journals, or online articles. Rather, my focus will be on three instructive NT passages concerning God’s imbuing of OT characters, events, places, and institutions with prophetic foreshadowing functions, whether typological, allegorical, or parabolic. These three passages demonstrate that the NT writers believed that God providentially ordered and imbued historical events, persons, places, and institutions with typological, allegorical, and parabolic significances for those individuals who were present then and preserved a prophetic record of these in Scripture for us in these last days.

#### **A. “Now These Things Happened Typologically to Them” (1 Cor 10:11)**

Of the fifteen uses of τύπος in the Greek NT, only three refer to OT portions that typologically prefigure aspects of the Messianic Age (Rom 5:14; 1 Cor 10:6; Heb 8:5).<sup>58</sup> This rarity does not imply that biblical types are few, as some mistakenly conclude.<sup>59</sup> Rather, these few uses of τύπος by the NT are

only suggestive of the full measure of how extensively figural representations are woven throughout the OT's fabric acknowledged by the NT writers. These three uses of τύπος contribute to a larger cluster of terms — τύπικως, ἀληθινός, ἀλληγορέω, ἀντίτυπος, σκιά, ὑπόδειγμα, παραβολή — that provide significant apertures through which one can discover and account for numerous other OT prefigurations of the Messiah and his coming Kingdom. Thus, the volume of OT prefigurations fulfilled in Christ Jesus is not small but extensive, whether the NT writers expressly point them out, subtly allude to them, or echo them instinctively as manifestly essential aspects of the OT backstory concerning the Messiah's prophesied and prefigured coming.

Contemporary Bibles translate the noun τύποι in 1 Corinthians 10:6 and the adverb τύπικως in 10:11 altogether too anemically, under the influence of the KJV. The ESV translates 10:6, "Now these things took place as *examples* for us," and 10:11, "Now these things happened to them as an *example*." These translations are inexcusably dull, shrouding, even concealing, the richness and depth of old-covenant prefigurations of new-covenant fulfillments conveyed by the passage.

After Paul reminds the Corinthians of God's providential redemption of Israel from bondage in Egypt by making a way for them through the Red Sea, a baptism into Moses (Exod 13:21; 14:21–22, 29), by spiritual food from heaven and spiritual drink from the Rock, which is Christ, he pastorally warns them that God was displeased with most of them, so they perished in the wilderness. From this, he admonishes, "These things took place as *types* of us that we might not crave evil as those lusted" (10:6).<sup>60</sup> He expands this admonition by citing five additional occasions when Israelites angered the Lord: 1) Sending of Quail (Num 11:33); 2) Golden Calf (Exod 32:6); 3) Sexual Immorality (Num 25:1, 9); 4) Bronze Serpent (Num 21:4ff; Ps 78:18); 5) Korah's Rebellion (Num 16:41–49).<sup>61</sup>

It is then that Paul reiterates with intensity, "Now these things happened to them typologically and were written down for our instruction, to whom the ends of the ages have arrived" (10:11). How could the apostle have expressed more clearly that the adverb, "typologically" does not describe his *reading of the Scriptures* but *God's written accounts of his providential ordering* of Israel's trials and failings as they wandered in the wilderness due to unbelief? Thus, Paul was not engaged in "figural reading," "typological exegesis," or "allegorical interpretation." Typology is not the work of Bible readers,

other than to discern it. Typology is God's work, imbuing his acts in history concerning persons, places, events, and institutions with figural or typological significance. Thus, typology belongs to God's revelatory work, which the apostle reinforces by stating that God saw to it that "these things were written down" in Scripture by his prophets "for our instruction, to whom the ends of the ages have arrived" (10:11b).<sup>62</sup> To reiterate, typology entails two divine activities: first, God's providential acts that he suffuses with earthly representational consequences of heavenly realities, and second, his authorizing holy men of old to write those events down in Scripture to preserve them as instruction for God's people through all time but especially for those in the latter days, when Christ who was present with Israel in shadow forms will come in body.<sup>63</sup>

In 1 Corinthians 10:1 – 13, Paul recites several distinct episodes of Israel's reception of God's kindnesses, met with her unfaithfulness and disobedience, drawing upon them as warnings for us Christians to "take heed lest we fall" (1 Cor 10:12). Here, he speaks of these distinct individual occurrences as "types" (τυποί). He also underscores that each of these distinct *types* "happened to them typologically and are written down for our instruction, to whom the ends of the ages have arrived" (10:11). Though he uses the passive voice for both verbs—*happened* and *were written down*—two things are obvious: (1) God designed and planned each of these incidents and imbued them with significance for the Israelites of old, but also (2) God ordained prophets to preserve these episodes in his written Word as eschatological warnings for Christ's "ends-of-the-ages people."

The composition of Scripture's mystery, which attains resolution with Jesus the Messiah's coming, is analogous to a well-crafted mystery novel, with a climax that offers no simplistic resolution but obliges readers to return to earlier chapters to trace clues among the characters, events, settings, institutions, and the plotted conflict.<sup>64</sup> This analogy is inverted, of course, because God does not replicate mystery writers; rather, whether they realize it or not, writers of mystery novels, who are made in God's image, mimic the writing of God's grand mystery. God's authoring of Scripture's mystery embeds presaging clues throughout the OT, concealing the gospel in advance within his revelatory acts and words which emerge from Scripture's penumbras with the arrival of God's Messiah.<sup>65</sup>

**B. “Now These Things Are Written Allegorically” (Gal 4:24)**

Paul’s statement in Galatians 4:24—ἀτινά ἐστιν ἀλληγορούμενα—perpetually ignites diverse and competing interpretations. Many exegetes, influenced by the ancient Antiochenes versus the Alexandrians, have claimed that Paul really had in mind typology, or perhaps a restrained allegory that fades into typology.<sup>66</sup> Others have sided more with the Alexandrians.<sup>67</sup> Given their focus on hermeneutical disputes, no matter which position scholars adopt, because Paul states, ἀτινά ἐστιν ἀλληγορούμενα, they tend to fall in line by claiming the apostle employs either *typological* or *allegorical interpretation*. Thus, instead of locating the allegory’s origin in the Genesis narrative itself, with God providentially governing and imbuing the historical events, characters, and places with representational significance, they tend to locate it in Paul’s interpretive skill. Thus, for example, Longenecker contends that such an interpretation is not reproducible but was restricted to the apostles.<sup>68</sup>

It is unreasonable to suppose that as the apostle reaches the capstone of his argument (Gal 4:21–5:1) that he would expect to persuade the Galatians against the Judaizers by founding his argument in nothing more than some alleged “privileged apostolic insight” or his clever adroitness in crafting an impressive allegory from the Genesis narrative, on the authority of the Christophany along the Damascus Road and his reception of “the revelation of Jesus Christ” (Gal 1:2ff). Against Longenecker’s proposal, in his efforts to convince his converts in Galatia that those Jewish teachers who are determined to get them to receive circumcision so they can become authentic children of Abraham, the Apostle Paul appeals to Scripture, not to some alleged private revelation. Paul does not ground the faith of his converts in his apostolic authority but in the authority of God’s Word, the Holy Scriptures.<sup>69</sup>

Thus, entirely unsatisfying are approaches to Galatians 4:21–5:1 that assume the apostle devised an allegory by nimbly assigning symbolic representations to people, places, and events in the Abraham narrative of Genesis.<sup>70</sup> Instead, the apostle contends that the Abraham narrative embedded in Genesis is an allegory that the Prophet Isaiah recognized and used in his prophecy, alluding to Sarah (Isa 54:1), from which Paul quotes.<sup>71</sup>

Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear;  
break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labor!

For the children of the desolate one will be more  
than those of the one who has a husband (Gal 4:27).

To underscore that God assigned allegorical significance to people, places, and events, Paul arranged his appeal to the Genesis narrative in an A-B-C-B-A chiasm. He asks, (A) “Do you not hear the Law” (4:21), (B) then states, “For it is written” (γέγραπται γάρ), (C) then announces with a paraphrastic phrase, ἅτινά ἐστιν ἀλληγορούμενα, “these things are written allegorically,” (B’) then restates, “For it is written” (γέγραπται γάρ), (A’) he asks, “But what does the Scripture say?” (4:30).<sup>72</sup>

| Verses | Chiasm | Scripture Citation Formulas              |
|--------|--------|------------------------------------------|
| 4:21   | A      | Do you not hear the Law?                 |
| 4:22   | B      | For it is written                        |
| 4:24   | C      | These things are wrtten<br>allegorically |
| 4:27   | B’     | For it is written                        |
| 4:30   | A’     | But what does the Scripture say?         |

Given how Paul structures his argument, he makes it clear that he does not creatively conjure an allegory by agile manipulation of Genesis. Instead, the apostle expects his readers to follow his reasoning from the Scriptures, as the Bereans did, who diligently examined the Scriptures to confirm Paul’s teachings (Acts 17:10–11). Without expressly stating it, his argument acknowledges that God providentially ordered the unfolding drama of the accounts concerning Abraham. Thus, he believes that the writing of the Genesis narrative concerning Abraham, guided by the Holy Spirit, is a God-designed allegory, with persons, events, and places he suffused with representational significance for the instruction of the characters in the episodes and for all who would read the accounts from that day forward. Thus, “Sarah and Hagar, with their respective sons, born in vastly different ways, allegorically prefigure two distinctly different covenants and those who trace their spiritual descent from them. Either one’s lineage traces to Isaac through promise or to Ishmael from the law covenant.”<sup>73</sup> Paul’s appeal to what is written as allegorical emphatically excludes translating the

paraphrastic phrase, “Now, this may be *interpreted* allegorically” (ESV). The KJV, “Which things are an allegory,” is much better than contemporary English translations.<sup>74</sup> Better yet: “Now these things are written allegorically.”

Thus, we must reject talk of *allegorical interpretation*, which means something different from the *interpretation of an allegory*. John Bunyan drew on the allegorical storyline of the Bible to write *The Pilgrim’s Progress* as an allegory. Neither the allegory of the Abraham narrative in Genesis nor Bunyan’s allegory calls for *allegorical interpretation*. We do not interpret them allegorically; rather, we recognize their allegorical nature and interpret them accordingly. Craig Blomberg correctly affirms that all of Jesus’s parables are allegories.<sup>75</sup> And we reject submitting them to *allegorical interpretation*, the product of fanciful imaginations.

Thus far, we have seen that types and allegory are embedded in God’s redemptive-historical revelation. Thus, to terminate confusion, Christian scholars should abandon talk of *typological exegesis*, *allegorical interpretation*, or *figural reading*. Typology, allegory, and figuration all originate in God’s *production of revelation*, not in our *reception of revelation*. As readers, we discern and discover prefigurations, types, and allegories. All are organically prophetic concerning the good things to come with the Messiah, and all are written in Scripture by God’s appointed prophets of old.<sup>76</sup>

### **C. “Abraham ... Received Isaac Back from the Dead in A Parable” (Heb 11:19)**

Παραβολή occurs fifty times in the NT but only twice outside the Synoptic Gospels, once each in Hebrews 9:9 and 11:19. Our English versions tend to conceal both uses, which, if mindfully read, function similarly to Paul’s uses of ἀτινά ἐστιν ἀλληγορούμενα in Galatians 4:24 or τύπος in Romans 5:14 and 1 Corinthians 10:6.<sup>77</sup> To translate ἐν παραβολῇ in Hebrews 11:19 “in a manner of speaking” (NIV) or “figuratively speaking” (ESV; NRSB; CSB) is woefully inadequate. “As a type” (NASB) is also misleading because Hebrews uses “type” and “antitype” in ways different from how Paul and Peter use these terms. Hebrews uses “type” to refer to the heavenly reality that casts an earthly shadow (τύπος, Heb 8:5) and “antitype” (ἀντίτυπος, Heb 9:24) to refer to the earthly copy of the heavenly original (Heb 9:24).<sup>78</sup>

As the preacher uses παραβολή, it intersects with ὑπόδειγμα (copy, sketch, prototype, model) and σκία (shadow), both of which are used in Hebrews 8:5,

but παραβολή adds depth, dimension, and scope to these terms, referencing an episodic drama. As used in Hebrews 9:9, speaking of Israel's Temple, the Douay-Rheims version aptly translates παραβολή as "parable," the essential sense it bears in the Gospels, though the Preacher's use concerns OT narratives concerning real events, persons, institutions, and places that are earthly shadows of heavenly realities, while Jesus's use also portrays heavenly realities but with non-historical events, persons, and places.

The Preacher uses καὶ ἐν παραβολῇ ἐκομίσατο to capture the symbolic function of the episode from the Abraham narrative, in which God commanded him to sacrifice Isaac on the mountain where he would receive his son back from the dead, in keeping with his belief in God, who promises. Of course, the Preacher's use of παραβολή to designate its symbolic nature does not suggest that the episode reported in Genesis 22 is fictional. Rather, he already used *parable* to refer to the symbolic function of the wilderness tabernacle as the earthly shadow of the heavenly sanctuary with its priestly ministrations amid its special furnishings. Thus, when the Preacher uses "parable" again, he means that the entire narrative account involving a mountain, Abraham, his only son, wood, fire, an altar, a knife, and a ram caught in a thicket is an earthly drama divinely suffused with representations of a heavenly reality concerning God's design for his only Son, represented by the well-placed ram that became the substitutionary sacrifice for the boy.

Nevertheless, some exegetes are excessively reticent to concede that the Preacher's ἐν παραβολῇ refers to anything more than Isaac's deliverance from death, which they call a "type or figure of the resurrection of the Son of God, Jesus Christ."<sup>79</sup> For example, William Lane rejects the idea that ἐν παραβολῇ includes the entire episode of Genesis 22, including the anticipated sacrifice of Isaac and the turn of events when he escaped death when the ram became his substitute, which Abraham's belief anticipated.<sup>80</sup>

More confidently, Philip Hughes affirms, "It is not surprising that from the earliest times this event has been seen by the church as parabolic or typical of the death and resurrection of Christ."<sup>81</sup> As the episode unfolds, it is punctuated by symbolic activity and conversation, all of which is an earthly parable of the heavenly reality God planned for his promised Seed of Abraham.<sup>82</sup> Isaac's question—"Father ... but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"—with Abraham's believing reply—"God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son."—obligates readers to

acknowledge that the entire episode narrated in Genesis 22 is parabolic, an earthly shadow of the heavenly reality, with each element imbued with symbolism. Though the Preacher appeals only to Abraham's reception of Isaac as confirming his belief in the resurrection, it is evident that the whole episode is a parable infused with representations that go beyond its use in Hebrews 11:19 to highlight the enduring resilience of Abraham's faith. Isaac and his father, Abraham, are historical earthly shadows engaged in a parable that portrays realities far larger than either could fully grasp at the time. The parabolic drama was an earthly shadow of God's redemptive plan to provide the heavenly Lamb as a substitutionary sacrifice. Thus, the parable God arranged for Abraham to dramatize as an earthly shadow of the heavenly reality including giving life to the dead, reaffirmed God's covenant promise, "In Isaac your seed shall be named" (Heb 11:18). In this acted-out parable, Abraham did receive his only son, Isaac, back from the dead (Heb 11:19).<sup>83</sup>

The NT writers convincingly demonstrate that the OT's types, allegories, and parables of heavenly realities are not products of their apostolic ingenuity or interpretive creativity but of God's providential and redeeming acts, preserved for us through the writings of his chosen prophets of old. God himself, as the primary speaker and actor in history, providentially imbued the events, persons, places, and institutions of Israel's antiquity to serve as copies, shadows, and parables of heavenly realities with representational significances that prophetically foreshadow corresponding realities that arrive in the latter-day revelation of his Son, the Messiah Jesus. To speak, therefore, of *typological*, *allegorical*, or *figural interpretation* is to mislocate what properly belongs to the divine act of revelation. These are not modes of reading or interpretation but modes of speaking and writing by which God reveals the mystery of Christ through historical discourse. To interpret Scripture faithfully is to honor its mode of speech as it portrays the realities of God's redemptive deeds and words in unfolding history.<sup>84</sup>

Scripture's readers discern the historical figurations God has inscribed in his Word. Faithful exegesis attends to this revelatory texture—the historical-allegorical unity of God's speech in Scripture—wherein word and event correspond. Only by recognizing typology, allegory, and parable as intrinsic to the *sensus literalis* of Scripture can we honor the integrity of divine revelation and the coherence of its Christ-centered design.

## **CONCLUSION: FAITHFUL INTERPRETATION AND THE MYSTERY OF REVELATION**

In sum, we need to engage in retrieval, not of the *Quadrige* or the “Great Tradition,” but of Scripture’s testimony concerning God’s redeeming acts in history. Recovering Scripture’s own account of God’s communicative mode concerning his appointments of earthly shadows of heavenly things foreshadowing all that was to be inaugurated with the Messiah’s coming requires that we relinquish the persistent but misguided habit of assigning to interpreters what belongs properly to God’s revelatory work through his appointed prophets. The Bible’s unity—textually, historically, and Christologically—rests not upon creative hermeneutical strategies, whether “figural,” “typological,” “allegorical,” “paraboliol,” or otherwise, but upon the sovereign providence by which God ordered, imbued, and recorded in Scripture his acts in history. Literal and figurative are not rival hermeneutical postures but complementary modes by which Scripture speaks. Typology, allegory, parable, and every other figural feature woven into the storyline of Israel are not reader-produced interpretations but God-produced revelations, in authorized historical events and authoritatively reported by the prophets and apostles in Scripture.

Thus, like the debates between dispensational and covenantal theological systems, or between advocates of retrospective figural reading and those who stress the plain sense, Scripture’s *sensus literalis*, the contemporary retrieval of the *Quadrige* falters because its advocates obfuscate the locus of figuration. By foregrounding the reader’s role in reading the text, they obscure Scripture’s own testimony that God has prefigured the Messiah within Israel’s history through modes of discourse intrinsic to its *sensus literalis*. Faithful reading of Scripture, therefore, neither retrofits the OT to the New nor invents symbolic correspondences; it attends to what God has done and said. When we allow Scripture’s historical-typological-parabolic-allegorical texture to regulate our reading, the mystery of Christ appears not as a hermeneutical construction but as the divinely embedded telos toward which the entire canon moves. Such recognition restores interpretive humility and honors Scripture’s integrity and authority as God’s unified, providentially ordered, and Christ-centered revelation.

- <sup>1</sup> This statement does not at all deny the *sensus literalis*, which is the meaning assigned to a text by its author as signified by the words of the text within their grammatical-historical-literary context, including cases where that intention is expressed through figurative portrayal, whether metaphor, parable, foreshadowing, prefiguration, or allegory. A text's *sensus literalis* obligates us to allow the meaning of Scripture to control how we read the text.
- <sup>2</sup> Three engaged in this retrieval are Craig A. Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition: Recovering the Genius of Premodern Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018); Hans Boersma, *Scripture as Real Presence: Sacramental Exegesis in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017); and Patrick Schreiner, *The Four Senses of Scripture: Learning from Ancient Way of Reading the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2026), forthcoming.
- <sup>3</sup> For example, Charles C. Ryrie contends for "Literal hermeneutics. Dispensationalists claim that their principle of hermeneutics is that of literal interpretation. This means interpretation that gives to every word the same meaning it would have in normal usage, whether employed in writing, speaking, or thinking. It is sometimes called the principle of *grammatical-historical* interpretation since the meaning of each word is determined by grammatical and historical considerations. The principle might also be called *normal* interpretation since the literal meaning of words is the normal approach to their understanding in all languages. It might also be designated *plain* interpretation so that no one receives the mistaken notion that the literal principle rules out figures of speech" (*Dispensationalism*. Revised and Expanded [Chicago: Moody Press, 1995], 80). Emphasis original.
- <sup>4</sup> Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 78–117.
- <sup>5</sup> Poythress states, "So types are a natural starting point for a discussion with dispensationalists. Since grammatical-historical interpretation will find the same symbolic, typological significance within prophecy, it shows how prophecy also has an organically unified relation to NT believers. Typological relations cannot merely be dismissed as a secondary application. The major weakness of classic dispensationalist interpretive theory, at this point, has been the neglecting of the integration of *typological interpretation* with grammatical-historical interpretation" (*Understanding Dispensationalists*, 115. Emphasis added).
- <sup>6</sup> George E. Ladd, *The Last Things*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 18. Emphasis added.
- <sup>7</sup> George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, reprint 1991, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 336. Emphasis added.
- <sup>8</sup> Richard Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975). In courses with John C. Whitcomb, Jr., he advocated for Longenecker's hermeneutic.
- <sup>9</sup> Richard N. Longenecker, "Can We Reproduce the Exegesis of the New Testament?", *Tyndale Bulletin* 21 (1970), 3–38. This approach appealed to Robert L. Thomas, "The New Testament Use of the Old Testament." In *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, ed Robert L. Thomas, (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 241–70.
- <sup>10</sup> Francis Foulkes, *The Acts of God: A Study of the Basis of Typology in the Old Testament* (London: Tyndale, 1958), 38–39.
- <sup>11</sup> R. T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament: His Application of Old Testament Passages to Himself and His Mission* (London: Tyndale Press, 1971; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1982), 39–40. Cf. David L. Baker offers a generic definition of a biblical type as an "event, person, or institution" within Scripture that functions analogically "as an example or pattern for other events, persons, or institutions" (*Two Testament, One Bible: The Theological Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments*, Third edition [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2010], 181).
- <sup>12</sup> Baker, *Two Testament, One Bible*, (183). Observe that for Baker, τύπος means "typical" as in "characteristic" or "representative," a sense significantly reduced from the meaning the traditional view accepts. Hence, his insistence that types, characteristic patterns, can be recognized only retrospectively.
- <sup>13</sup> Beale, *Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, 24. Cf. Richard M. Davidson, "The Eschatological Hermeneutic of Biblical Typology," *TheoRhema* 6.2 (2011), 12, 16. He defines typology as "a study of the Old Testament salvation historical realities or 'types' (persons, events, institutions) which God has specifically designed to correspond to, and predictively prefigure, their intensified antitypical fulfillment aspects (inaugurated, appropriated, consummated) in New Testament salvation history."
- <sup>14</sup> Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, eds., *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).
- <sup>15</sup> Greg Beale, "Did Jesus and His Followers Preach the Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts? An Examination of the Presuppositions of Jesus' and the Apostles' Exegetical Method," in *The Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts? Essays on the Use of the Old Testament in the New*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 395.

- 16 James M. Hamilton, Jr., *Typology: Understanding the Bible's Promise-Shaped Patterns*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2022), 25.
- 17 Hamilton, *Typology*, 25.
- 18 Hamilton, *Typology*, 25–26.
- 19 Hamilton, *Typology*, 25.
- 20 “Typological interpretation establishes historical correspondence on the basis of linguistic points of contact . . . quotations, repeated sequences of events, and similarities in salvation historical significance and covenantal context. As these features are discerned in the text, interpreters detect author-intended parallels between people, events, and institutions, and they have textual warrant to perceive a growing significance in the repeated patterns. The Holy Spirit’s inspiration ensured that the biblical authors infallibly interpreted earlier Scripture and inerrantly presented it” (Hamilton, *Typology*, 27). Emphasis added.
- 21 Hamilton, *Typology*, 26.
- 22 Earle Ellis, “Foreword,” to Leonhard Goppelt, *Typos: The Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New*, trans. Donald H. Madvig (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), xv.
- 23 Goppelt, *Typos*, 198. Emphasis added.
- 24 Goppelt, *Typos*, 202. He identifies three essential features concerning types: (1) a recognizable correspondence between the OT type and the NT antitype must be present; (2) both the OT type and the NT antitype must be rooted in “historical facts — persons, actions, institutions,” not within obscurely concealed meanings of the text; and (3) escalation from the OT type to the superior NT antitype must be evident.
- Most scholars who follow Goppelt’s classic, *Typos*, tend to locate biblical types within the domain of hermeneutics, advocate for *typological interpretation* or *figural interpretation*, and regard this as a “reading strategy” or “exegetical method.” G. K. Beale describes biblical typology both as “typological interpretation” and as an “exegetical method” (“Did Jesus and His Followers Preach the Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts? An Examination of the Presuppositions of Jesus’ and the Apostles’ Exegetical Method,” *The Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts: Essays on the use of the Old Testament in the New* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994], 395) and as an “exegetical method” (*Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, 24).
- 25 Hamilton, Jr., *Typology*, 4. He cites Hays’s claim, which I will address shortly.
- 26 James M. Hamilton, Jr., “Author-Intended Typology in the Chiastic Structure of the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15:1–21),” *JETS* 67.3 (2024): 463–74.
- 27 Hamilton, “Author-Intended Typology,” 464.
- 28 See the critique of TIS by D. A. Carson, “Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Yes, But . . .” in *Theological Commentary: Evangelical Perspective*, ed. R. Michael Allen (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 187–207. Carson lists six propositions to expose “that along every axis the good and the questionable are almost inextricably entangled” (p. 188): (1) TIS attempts “to transcend barren exegeses generated by historical-critical methods, and especially those readings of Scripture that are ‘historical’ in the sense that they are frankly anti-supernatural interpretations determined by post-Enlightenment assumptions about the nature of history.” (2) “TIS aims to bring biblical studies and theology closer together.” (3) “TIS accords greater credibility to pre-critical exegesis — patristic, medieval, reformational — than to contemporary exegesis, and especially to patristic readings.” (4) “TIS aims to be God-centered as opposed to human-centered (including human-hermeneutical-rules-centered).” (5) “TIS commonly insists we ought to read Scripture through Trinitarian lenses.” And (6) “TIS tends to see Scripture less as a set of propositions disclosing God than as the story of God and his saving plan of redemption.”
- 29 See Christopher Seitz, *Figured Out: Typology and Providence in Christian Scripture* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2001), 9–10; Richard Hays “Figural Exegesis and the Retrospective Recognition of Israel’s Story,” *BBR* 29.1 (2019): 32–48; Don C. Collett, *Figural Reading and the Old Testament: Theology and Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020); Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Mere Christian Hermeneutics: Transfiguring What It Means to Read the Bible Theologically* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2024), 153–59; and Daniel J. Treier, “Theological Hermeneutics, Contemporary” and “Typology,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed., Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 787–93 and 823–27. Treier prefers “figural reading” over “typological interpretation” and calls it a “reading strategy” (825–26).
- 30 Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), 73.
- 31 Richard Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 358.
- 32 Richard Hays, *Reading Backwards: Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel Witness* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 2.

- 33 Hays, *Reading Backwards*, 2.
- 34 Hays, *Reading Backwards*, 3; *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels*, 3. Emphasis added.
- 35 Hays, *Reading Backwards*, 15. Emphasis original.
- 36 Hays, *Reading Backwards*, 15. Emphasis added.
- 37 All these are Hays's own expressions (*Reading Backwards*).
- 38 Seitz, *Figured Out*, 6.
- 39 Christopher Seitz, *The Elder Testament: Canon, Theology, Trinity*, (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2021), 46.
- 40 Collett, *Figural Reading and the Old Testament*, 3.
- 41 Collett, *Figural Reading and the Old Testament*, 145. It is curious that in his book, Collett neither cites nor engages Hays's later works that specifically present his "figural reading" arguments: (1) *Reading Backwards* (2014); and (2) *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (2016).
- 42 Collett, *Figural Reading and the Old Testament*, 131.
- 43 Hays, *Reading Backwards*, 2.
- 44 Vanhoozer, *Mere Christian Hermeneutics*, 152.
- 45 Vanhoozer, *Mere Christian Hermeneutics*, 153.
- 46 Vanhoozer, *Mere Christian Hermeneutics*, 153.
- 47 Vanhoozer, *Mere Christian Hermeneutics*, 153.
- 48 Vanhoozer, *Mere Christian Hermeneutics*, 154.
- 49 Vanhoozer, *Mere Christian Hermeneutics*, 153.
- 50 Vanhoozer, *Mere Christian Hermeneutics*, 153.
- 51 Hays, *Reading Backwards*, 2.
- 52 Vanhoozer, *Mere Christian Hermeneutics*, 154.
- 53 Vanhoozer, *Mere Christian Hermeneutics*, 154. It is curious why Vanhoozer chose this when the reference of Israel in Romans 11:25 is so widely disputed. See, e.g., Jared Compton & Andrew David Naselli, *Three Views on Israel and the Church: Perspectives on Roman 9–11: Perspectives on Romans 9–11*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2019).
- 54 Vanhoozer, *Mere Christian Hermeneutics*, 154.
- 55 Vanhoozer, *Mere Christian Hermeneutics*, 154.
- 56 Ardel B. Caneday, "Genesis, Interpretation of Chapters 1 and 2 (Factual View)," in *Dictionary of Christianity and Science* (eds. Paul, Copan, Tremper Longman III, Christopher L. Reese, and Michael G. Strauss, [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017], 320–23).
- 57 This is contra Kevin Vanhoozer, who reasons, "Figural interpretation is as universal (catholic) a reading practice as literal interpretation. And therein lies the paradox: *Can a mere Christian hermeneutic be both literal and figural?* Before we can answer, we must define our terms, and this entails clarifying the distinction between allegory and typology, the two main species of figural interpretation" (*Mere Christian Hermeneutics: Transfiguring What It Means to Read the Bible Theologically* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2024], 153).
- 58 See Rom 5:15; 6:17; 1 Cor 10:6; Phil 3:17; 1 Thess 1:7; 2 Thess 3:9; 1 Tim 4:12; Titus 2:7; Acts 7:43, 44; 23:25; John 20:25 (2X); Heb 8:5; 1 Pet 5:3. Concerning ἀντίτυπος, see Heb 9:24 and 1 Pet 3:21, used with different referents. Paul alone uses the adverb τυπικῶς in 1 Cor 10:11. The noun ὑποτύποις occurs only in 1 Tim 1:16 and 2 Tim 1:13.
- 59 Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., follows Herbert Marsh, who acknowledged only those types specifically named in the NT. (*The Uses of the Old Testament in the New* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1985], 102–10).
- 60 For detailed exegesis of 1 Cor 10:1–13, see Richard M. Davidson, *Typology in Scripture*, 250–80. Davidson convincingly demonstrates that we should translate "these things took place as types of us" (ταῦτα τύποι ἡμῶν ἐγενήθησαν, 10:6; pp. 252–56). David Garland disagrees: "But this meaning is unlikely here because that would entail that the Corinthians will also displease the Lord and perish, and Paul writes to *prevent* this from happening" (*1 Corinthians*, BECNT [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003], 459).
- 61 Twice, within 1 Cor 10, Paul speaks of the Messiah as present among the Israelites, first as the Rock from which "spiritual water" flowed to quench their thirst, and then, he expressly instructs, "We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer" (10:9–10). See Ardel B. Caneday, "We Must Not Test Christ as the Israelites Tested Him and were Killed by Serpents: The Pastoral Significance," presented at the 75<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, San Antonio, Texas (November 14–16, 2023).

- 62 On Paul's use of εἰς οὐδὰ τέλη τῶν αἰώνων κατήγγηκεν, see Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 458–59; also, Roy E. Ciampa & Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 465. Cf. C. Marvin Pate, *The End of the Age Has Come: The Theology of Paul* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 105–108.
- 63 Concerning Christ's presence throughout the period of the OT, see Ardel B. Caneday, "We Must Not Test Christ as Israelites Tested Him and Were Killed by Serpents: The Pastoral Significance of Christ as the Object of Israel's Disobedience." Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, November 14–16, 2023, San Antonio, Texas.
- 64 I do not borrow the idea from Peter Enns, though he argues similarly; but his analogy is from the reader's vantage point, not the author's, and this agrees with his conclusions concerning uses of the OT in the NT that I do not share. He illustrates his "Christotelic" reading of the OT: "To read the OT 'Christotelically' is to read it *already knowing* that Christ is somehow the *end* (*telos*) to which the OT story is heading; in other words, to read the OT in light of the exclamation point of the history of revelation, the death and resurrection of Christ... [I]t is like reading a story and finally grasping the significance of the climax, and then going back and reading the story in light of the end" (Peter Enns, "Fuller Meaning, Single Goal," *Three Views on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, eds. Kenneth Berding and Jonathan Lunde [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008], 214).
- 65 On this theme, see G. K. Beale and Benjamin L. Gladd, *Hidden But Now Revealed: A Biblical Theology of Mystery* (Downers Grove, IL: 2014). See also D. A. Carson, "Mystery and Fulfillment," 393–426.
- 66 In favor of typology, see Leonhard Goppelt, *Typos: The Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New* (trans. Donald H. Madvig; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 139–40. See also Andrew Perriman, "Rhetorical Strategy of Galatians 4:21–5:1," *Evangelical Quarterly* 65 (1993): 27. Cf. F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on Galatians* (NIGNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1982), 217, where he states, "He is not thinking of allegory in the Philonic sense. ... [H]e has in mind that form of allegory which is commonly called typology." See Bruce, "Abraham Had Two Sons: A Study in Pauline Hermeneutics," in *New Testament Studies: Essays in Honor of Ray Summers in His Sixty-Fifth Year* (ed. by Huber L. Drumwright & Curtis Vaughan; Waco, TX: Baylor University, 1975), 83. See also Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University, 1989), 116.
- 67 In favor of allegory, see James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (Black's New Testament Commentaries; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 247–48. Cf. Richard Longenecker, *Galatians* (WBC; Dallas: Word, 1990), 209–10. See also R. P. C. Hanson, *Allegory and Event: A Study of the Sources and Significance of Origin's Interpretation of Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1959; repr. 2002), 83, who states, "Paul ... used allegory as an aid to typology, a method of interpreting the Old Testament which, however fanciful some of its forms may be, does at least regard history as something meaningful."
- 68 Richard N. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 126–29 with 218–20.
- 69 See A. B. Caneday, "Covenant Lineage Allegorically Prefigured: 'Which Things Are Written Allegorically (Galatians 4:21–4:31)," *SBJT* 14.3 (2010): 50–77.
- 70 For example, Richard N. Longenecker posits, "But if we view Paul's use of the Hagar-Sarah story here in Galatians 4:21–31 as principally an *ad hominem* argument [appeal to emotion rather than to reason]—that is, responding in kind to some treatment of the same story by his Galatian opponents—then we need not see Paul saying that allegory was built into the biblical narrative itself, but rather, that the biblical narrative is now being treated by interpreters (whether the Judaizers, or Paul, or both) in an allegorical fashion" ("Galatians 4:21–31," 194). Cf. F. F. Bruce, who states, "Paul now endeavours to reinforce his argument by means of an allegorical interpretation of the Genesis story of Hagar and Sarah, with their respective sons Ishmael and Isaac. Paul himself calls his interpretation 'allegorical' (v 24)—that is to say, the entities in the story stand for something other than their *prima facies* sense, whether that 'something other' was intended by the original author (as, say, in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*) or is the contribution of the interpreter (and even when it is the contribution of the interpreter, the interpreter frequently thinks that he is bringing out the intention of the original author)" (*Galatians*, 214–15).
- 71 Caneday, "Covenant Lineage Allegorically Prefigured," 55–56, 58–59.
- 72 Caneday, "Covenant Lineage Allegorically Prefigured," 55–56.
- 73 Caneday, "Covenant Lineage Allegorically Prefigured," 67.

<sup>74</sup> Peter J. Leithart correctly comprehends my argument and expresses agreement: “Caneday rightly draws the larger conclusion about Paul’s reading of the Abrahamic narrative and of Scripture as a whole: ‘Paul reads Scripture’s story of Abraham as historical narrative invested with symbolic representations embedded within the characters and the two contrasting births of two sons — one by natural order, the other by divine promise. Hence, the Genesis text itself, not Paul’s interpretation of the text, is allegorical while simultaneously upholding the historical authenticity of those characters and events’” (“Written Allegorically,” *First Things* [Sept. 26, 2014]); (“Written Allegorically,” *Theopolis* [Sept. 26, 2014]). David I. Starling engages “Covenant Lineage Allegorically Prefigured,” but adopts the notion that Paul engaged in “allegorical interpretation” (“Justifying Allegory: Scripture, Rhetoric, and Reason in Galatians 4:1–5:1,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 9.2 [2015]: 227–45).

<sup>75</sup> On the correlation of parable and allegory, see Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), 29–69. He properly concludes that the parables of the Gospels are allegories (p. 69).

<sup>76</sup> Jonathan Edwards is highly instructive concerning revelatory figuration God embedded in both creation and his Word: “We find by the Old Testament, that it has ever been God’s manner from the beginning of the world, to exhibit and reveal future things by symbolical representations, which were no other than types of the future things revealed. Thus when future things were made known in visions, the things that were seen were not the future things themselves, but some other things that were made use of as shadows, symbols, or types of the things.” (“Types of the Messiah,” in *Typological Writings*, ed. Wallace E. Anderson, vol. 11 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993], 152).

What Edwards affirms concerning Scripture he also rightly affirms concerning God’s created order, because God designed both to shadow the Messiah: “I am not ashamed to own that I believe that the whole universe, heaven and earth, air and seas, and the divine constitution and history of the holy Scriptures, be full of images of divine things, as full as a language is of words; and that the multitude of those things that I have mentioned are but a very small part of what is really intended to be signified and typified by these things: but that there is room for persons to be learning more and more of this language, and seeing more of that which is declared in it, to the end of the world, without discovering all.” Jonathan Edwards, “Images of Divine Things,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 3, ed. Clyde A. Holbrook (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 404.

Together, these two works express Edwards’s conviction, I share, that reality is inherently figural, typological, analogical, or parabolical, reflecting the Christ:

- Christ is the archetype of all types.
- Creation and Scripture are the twin media of divine communication.
- Typology is ontology — the structure of being itself is figural and teleological, ordered toward revelation and participation in divine glory.

<sup>77</sup> See, for example, Paul Ellingworth, who observes, “Παραβολή here clearly does not mean a narrative parable, as in the synoptics. It has rather the older sense of a rhetorical figure of speech involving a comparison ... [T] he παραβολή is secondary to the reality to which it corresponds. The underlying way of thinking is typological” (*Hebrews* [NIGCNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993], 440, cf. 604). Cf. Moises Silva, ed., “παραβολή,” *NIDNTT*, vol. 3, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 609. Concerning Hebrews 9:9 and 11:19, he states, “In both of these passages the sense of the term seems to be ‘type.’” Ellingworth and Silva do not account for how Hebrews uses either τύπος or αντίτυπος. See the discussion in the text above.

<sup>78</sup> Cf. BDAG s.v. “παραβολή” (first definition, 759) “someth. That serves as a model or example pointing beyond itself for later realization, type, figure,”

<sup>79</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews* (Nashville: B&H, 2015), 358.

<sup>80</sup> William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9–13* (WBC 47B; Dallas: Word, 1991), 363. Lane makes two crucial exegetical decisions: (1) He claims, “It is not necessary to believe that Abraham recognized the connection between the receiving of Isaac from the altar and resurrection from the dead,” which is the Preacher’s emphatic point. And (2) He reasons, “For the writer the sacrifice of Isaac is not a type of the sacrificial death of Christ (as it is already in the early second century, cf. *Barn.* 7.3). There is no evidence for this early period that the narrative of Gen 22 had been related to the cross and resurrection of Jesus.”

<sup>81</sup> Philip E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 321.

<sup>82</sup> Ponder the progression of the episode, how it screams parabolic representations.

- God’s command. “Take your son, your only son, whom you love — Isaac — and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you” (22:2).

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- Abraham's belief. "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you" (22:5).
  - Abraham's preparations. "And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in hand the fire and the knife" (22:6).
  - Isaac's question; Abraham's faith. "Isaac said to his father Abraham, 'My father!' And he said, 'Here I am, my son.' He said, 'Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?' Abraham said, 'God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son'" (22:7–8).
  - Abraham constructs an altar. "When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son" (22:9–10).
  - The presence of the angel of the Lord. "But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, 'Abraham, Abraham!' He said, 'Here I am.' He said, 'Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me'" (22:11–12).
  - The Lord provided a substitute for Isaac. "And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son" (22:13). This echoes the earlier, "And on the third day, Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar" (22:4).
  - Abraham named the place. "So, Abraham called the name of that place, 'The Lord will provide'; as it is said to this day, 'On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided'" (22:14).
- <sup>83</sup> Paul appeals to Isaac's uncommon conception, born of Abraham and Sarah, a woman who was not only barren but also long past the age of conceiving children, as biblical-historical evidence of resurrection. Paul contends that Isaac's conception and God's creation of all things from nothing are of the same order, for Abraham believed in him "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" (Rom 4:17).
- <sup>84</sup> See Ardel B. Caneday, "Geerhardus Vos: The Recovery of Biblical Theology from Its Corruptors" (Part 1) (October 13, 2025), *Christ Over All*; and "Geerhardus Vos's Biblical Theology: Four Features, Four Insights, Four Errors" (Part 2) (October 14, 2025), *Christ Over All*.

# Mimetic Christian Hermeneutics: A Response to Multiple or Expanded Sense(s) in Scripture

THOMAS J. SCULTHORPE

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**Thomas J. Sculthorpe** is the Director of the Kenwood Institute, the Editor of the *Kenwood Bulletin*, and an elder at Kenwood Baptist Church, Louisville, Kentucky. He earned his PhD in Biblical Theology from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky. Dr. Sculthorpe has published a number of articles. He and his wife, Allison, are members at Kenwood Baptist Church, and they have six children.

## INTRODUCTION

Imitation is a prominent feature of the New Testament (NT) authors' characterization of the Christian life. Believers are to imitate their leaders as they imitate Christ (1 Cor 11:1). I intend to apply this exhortation to hermeneutics. A "mimetic" Christian hermeneutic, then, is one that imitates the interpretive practices of the biblical authors themselves. *How* should Christians read the Bible? We should read it like the biblical authors did. The crux of the matter is the role of authorial intent in interpretation, which must be grounded in a conception of dual authorship that is both biblically demonstrable and logically defensible. The continuing debate regarding whether contemporary Bible readers *even can* imitate the interpretive practices of the biblical authors furnishes a question related to this ongoing hermeneutical conversation. Our goal is to outfit the people of God with a rich, sound, accessible hermeneutic that illuminates the meaning of

the Word of God to us and enables us to apply it in our lives with wisdom, precision, and discernment.

My thesis is twofold. First, the intent of the inspired human author of a text of Scripture is the sole object of interpretation. Second, the biblical authors themselves read the Scriptures in accordance with authorial intent. These two assertions coalesce into a simple exhortation—in our own interpretation of the Scriptures we must imitate the interpretive practices of the biblical authors. Our Christian hermeneutic must be “mimetic.”

My thesis will be pursued in three parts. First, I will argue for inspired human authorial intent as the sole object of biblical interpretation and propose a comprehensive hermeneutical theory for reading biblical texts in canonical context. Second, I will respond to specific features of Kevin Vanhoozer’s recent publication *Mere Christian Hermeneutics* and Patrick Schreiner’s employment of the fourfold sense in *The Transfiguration of Christ*. Finally, in an attempt to both defend and demonstrate my thesis and respond to Richard Blaylock’s argument for “privileged hermeneutical space” in a recent *JETS* article, I will show how the “seventy sevens” prophecy delivered to Daniel by the angel Gabriel as recorded in Daniel 9 does not undermine my exhortation to imitate the interpretive practices of the biblical authors but coheres with and enhances it.

### **AUTHORIAL INTENT IS THE OBJECT OF INTERPRETATION**

The testimony of Scripture about itself according to Stephen Wellum in his recently published systematic theology is that “Scripture is *God’s Word written*, the unfolding of his eternal plan, the product of God’s mighty action through the word and by the Spirit, whereby *human authors freely wrote* exactly what God intended them to write without error.”<sup>1</sup> Here Wellum is summarizing the implications of Paul’s assertion that every Scripture is “*God-breathed*” or “*inspired*” (2 Tim 3:16) and Peter’s explanation that the biblical authors “*spoke from God*” (2 Pet 1:21) from which many of our confessional statements derive the conviction that “Scripture has for its author God.”<sup>2</sup> In short, as B. B. Warfield wrote many years ago, “What Scripture says, God says.”<sup>3</sup> The Bible contains the “word-act revelation” of God; thus, he is its originator and, in this sense, its author.<sup>4</sup>

The Lord chose, however, to reveal his Word *through* the human authors of Scripture *by means of inspiration*, which is evident in Peter's explanation: "Not by the will of man was a prophecy ever carried along, but being carried along by the Holy Spirit, *men spoke* from God" (2 Pet 1:21).<sup>5</sup> The human authors of Scripture wrote. What they wrote was from God, or inspired (2 Tim 3:16), and they themselves were inspired, or "carried along" by the Holy Spirit, but the human authors consciously wrote the Scriptures. Thus, the Bible is what John Webster has called a "sanctified creaturely reality," divinely sourced but written down in space and time by men.<sup>6</sup> In the inspired texts of the Bible we observe the height of human literary ingenuity and artistry and, hearing directly from the Lord, biblical texts are unique among all other literature in their inerrancy and authority. Therefore, Scripture is uniquely suited to benefit readers in both wisdom, knowledge, and understanding in accordance with reality and in righteous living. Through Scripture alone the morning star, Jesus Christ, rises in our hearts (2 Pet 1:19) as we hear the Word concerning Christ and, by the grace of God, believe (Rom 10:17). But we must not allow our affirmation of the dual authorship of Scripture to minimize the divinely ordained mechanism by which the Lord chose to reveal his Word. The Lord *carried along* his chosen vessels to write *his* words at particular times and in particular contexts. Therefore, the object of biblical interpretation is properly the intended meaning of the inspired *human* author of the text.

The intent of the divine author, then, is only realized by inspiration through the human author who wrote the text. Therefore, there is no reason to bifurcate divine and human intent for a given biblical text. Readers have no access to an intent beyond that of the human author of the text because all we have are the words on the page. Divine intent and human intent in a given text are the same. The divine author means only what he inspired the human author to mean.<sup>7</sup> Kevin Chen says it this way,

For standard hermeneutical approaches that rightly focus on the intent of the human author, [distinguishing the divine author's intent from the human author's intent] confuses the task and goal of interpretation... From a hermeneutical standpoint, there is no systematic way of *distinguishing between the human intent and the divine intent*, or, equivalently, of ascertaining the divine intent that goes beyond the meaning of the words of the human author...

*sound hermeneutical methodology for any text is geared toward determining the human author's intent.*<sup>8</sup>

Abner Chou concurs,

Second Peter 1:21 reminds us God moved certain men to speak, such that their message is actually from God. Man's words *precisely* communicate God's own ideas. The way the apostles quote Scripture affirms that alone is the meaning of the text. They interchangeably discuss what the "prophet" spoke (Rom 10:16) with what "God spoke through the prophet (Acts 28:25) with what the 'Scripture spoke'" (Gal 3:8). This affirms *human intent is God's intent* and this unified intent is the legitimate meaning of Scripture.<sup>9</sup>

The assertion that divine and human intent are the same in a given text raises three rejoinders. First, the unique nature of Scripture demands a special hermeneutic distinct from the general hermeneutical principles proffered by E. D. Hirsch Jr. in *Validity in Interpretation*.<sup>10</sup> In response, having already affirmed the unique nature of Scripture relative to all other literature, since the biblical texts were written by men according to the will of God, we should interpret them according to the same principles by which we interpret any other literary works written by men. I would argue that the uniqueness of the Bible—that it is the very Word of God—lies primarily in its inerrancy and authority, which affect how readers respond to the text rather than how we determine its meaning. Again, the substance of the doctrine of inspiration is that men wrote the Bible consciously and with conscious intended meaning that perfectly cohered with the intent of the Lord who carried them along. The uniqueness of the Scriptures impacts how we respond to the text, which is post-exegetical, rather than how we pursue exegesis itself.

Several NT texts do either explicitly state or imply that full understanding of what the Bible teaches is either granted or restricted by the Lord.<sup>11</sup> I would argue that this reality applies to all things rather than specifically or especially to understanding the Bible. Overcoming the tendency of sinful humanity to suppress in unrighteousness the truths of God's eternal power and divine nature evident in creation (Rom 1:18–20) must be granted by the Lord as well. Furthermore, consider Jesus' critique of Nicodemus that, as a

teacher of Israel, he did not “know” what Jesus was talking about concerning the nature and necessity of regeneration (John 3:10). Jesus then said to him, “What we know we speak about, and to what we have seen we testify, and you do not *receive* our testimony” (John 3:11). The foremost problem is one of belief rather than interpretive ability as Jesus is purposefully using an opaque metaphor for regeneration rather than an explicitly OT concept like heart circumcision (Deut 30:6) or replacement (Ezek 36:26), with which Nicodemus likely would have been much more familiar. Nicodemus must receive the testimony of Jesus that he is Messiah, which at this point in the narrative he will not, which is a manifestation of unbelief rather than exegetical inability. Jesus said the same to Jewish leaders on the Sabbath: “You search the Scriptures because you think in them you have eternal life, and these are these things that testify about me, and *you are not willing to come to me* so that you may have life” (John 5:39–40), and more explicitly, “If you *believed* Moses, you would *believe* me, for that one wrote about me. But if the writings of that one you do not *believe*, how will you *believe* my words?” (John 5:46–47).<sup>12</sup>

So, it is not that the Bible demands a special hermeneutic because it is the Word of God; it demands a special *response*. We all know brilliant but unbelieving biblical scholars who make helpful contributions to interpretive conversations and who even understand that the NT teaches that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of OT messianic anticipation. The problem is that they do not *believe* it, which is at the heart of Paul’s dichotomy between the natural and spiritual in 1 Corinthians 2:14–15.

A second rejoinder is that divine intent arises from, and expands the meaning of, the text when it is considered in canonical context.<sup>13</sup> In my view, when scholars refer to canonical context they mean one of two things—either inner-biblical interpretation or Theological Interpretation of Scripture (TIS).<sup>14</sup> In the case of inner-biblical interpretation, readers observe an inspired human author’s interpretation and/or application of an earlier text in his context and to serve his own purpose.<sup>15</sup> In such cases, the object of interpretation remains the intent of the human author who is quoting, alluding to, or otherwise making use of a biblical text in his own composition, and in such cases a later author’s use of earlier Scripture does not change the meaning of that text.<sup>16</sup>

In the case of TIS, on the other hand, some argue that biblical texts can take on expanded meanings — either in keeping with the human author’s meaning or not — when read by Christian people with Christian imaginations in context with the rest of the Bible.<sup>17</sup> Apart from textual validation, however, such readings depart the realm of hermeneutics proper and enter the realm of reader response, for the only basis for arguments concerning validity is the author’s intended meaning evident in the words he wrote.<sup>18</sup> If the inspired human author did not intend a connection between texts, there is no recourse to the divine author’s intent apart from reader contribution, which is not hermeneutically valid. John Webster is helpful here again as he has argued that appeals to divine intent apart from the human authors undermine the creaturely reality of the Bible.<sup>19</sup> The method for reading and interpreting biblical texts in their canonical context with the highest degree of hermeneutical validity is to observe author-intended inner-biblical interpretation according to the forward-looking, anticipatory trajectory of the Scriptures themselves.

Where inner-biblical interpretation observes or indicates typology specifically, there are two relevant points to clarify. First, I agree with Ardel Caneday that typology is an intentional feature of divine revelation rather than an interpretive contrivance and imposition on the text on the part of readers.<sup>20</sup> Thus, typological trajectories are intended by the inspired human authors of the Bible.<sup>21</sup> Second, while the canonical *significance* of the earlier text is illuminated by later interpretations, the scope and substance of the *meaning* of the earlier text does not change at all because its meaning is inextricably tied to its author.<sup>22</sup> So, while the Lord certainly providentially ordained typology in historical persons, events, and institutions, divine authorial intent does not arise from, or expand upon, human authorial intent when texts are interpreted in the context of the whole canon. Inspired human authorial intent is evident in inner-biblical interpretation at the canonical level, which impacts the significance of individual texts that contribute to a typological trajectory rather than their meanings.<sup>23</sup>

A final rejoinder is that the NT authors often claim that the gospel entails a mystery revealed. For example, Paul closed his epistle to the Romans, “Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery having been *kept secret* for long ages but now is *disclosed*” (Rom 16:25–26).

Many scholars, of whom D. A. Carson may be representative, argue that in examples such as this one Paul and the NT authors claim that the mystery revealed is the full *meaning* of OT texts now evident in their fulfillment in Christ.<sup>24</sup> I would argue, however, that fulfillment in Christ does not impact the meaning of OT texts; rather, the things anticipated in OT texts but not yet realized *have come to be* in Christ. Mystery revealed does not refer to the “transfigured” or expanded meaning of things previously recorded.<sup>25</sup> It does not refer to something that people have tried to uncover but have failed to comprehend, which is what modern usage of the word “mystery” would suggest.<sup>26</sup> It refers to the time and person for which the prophets were diligently searching the Scriptures and about which they were prophesying for centuries (1 Pet 1:10–11). The one to whom the OT texts look forward has come, as Paul wrote in Colossians 2:2, “that the hearts [of all who have not seen me face to face] may be encouraged ... unto the knowledge of the *mystery of God, namely, Christ.*”

Returning briefly to Romans 16, Vanhoozer argues regarding the revelation of the mystery in Paul’s gospel “now disclosed, and through the prophetic Scriptures ... made known to all the nations” (Rom 16:26) that the OT texts have been “illuminated” or “transfigured” by the light of Christ so that their literal sense is now “thickened,” by which he means that their meaning has been expanded in context with the revelation of Christ himself and the writings of the NT.<sup>27</sup> What I have argued above regarding the nature of mystery revealed stands here — Paul is not saying that the *meaning* of the OT texts has changed, but that the anticipatory trajectories contained in the OT have come to their fulfillment in Christ and in this way they are an integral part of the gospel message, for the identity and work of Christ only make sense in light of the message of the prophets.

In summary, my argument throughout this section has been that the intended meaning of the inspired human authors is the object of biblical interpretation.<sup>28</sup> This assertion best accounts for the progressive nature of the Scriptures themselves, for their dual authorship, and for inspiration as the mechanism by which the very Word of God is contained in a creaturely object written by men in time and space.

## THE HERMENEUTICS OF THE BIBLICAL AUTHORS AS EXEMPLAR

The inspired-human-authorial-intent-centered hermeneutic that I have summarized could be called “mimetic” in the sense that Bible readers should seek to read the Scriptures like the biblical authors themselves did. The interpretive practices of the biblical authors — especially observed in 1) Moses’ worldview forming narration of historical events spanning from before his lifetime through the forty years of wandering in the wilderness and 2) in the inner-biblical interpretations by both later OT authors and the apostles in the NT — serve as our exemplar.

Moses himself set the stage and trajectory for subsequent revelation by interpreting and narrating persons and events that preceded him according to his own type as “the prophet” (Deut 18:15) and the exodus of Israel from Egypt.<sup>29</sup> The interpretation of the Pentateuch and other earlier Scriptures by later OT authors always proceeds according to the intent of the human author of the antecedent text, which I labored to demonstrate in my published work on the interpretations of Isaac’s birth from barrenness in the Nazirite forerunner type (cf. esp. Judg 13 and 1 Sam 1) and in the prophet Isaiah’s anticipation of new exodus Edenic restoration (Isa 51:1–3).<sup>30</sup> The apostles follow the example of the prophets in always interpreting OT texts as fulfilled in Christ according to the intent of the OT authors, which I endeavor to explain in my published work on Matthew’s interpretation of the “Son of God type” in his quotation of Hosea 11:1 (Matt 2:15) and also on the OT resurrection typology antecedent to Paul’s claim that Christ was raised from death on the third day “according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor 15:4).<sup>31</sup> Where the biblical authors allude to, interpret, and employ Scripture, their interpretive perspective is always formed by the intent of the inspired human authors of Scripture. Therefore, our own Christian hermeneutic must imitate theirs.<sup>32</sup>

My purpose in this section is to respond to two recent hermeneutical proposals by prominent fellow evangelical scholars, namely, Patrick Schreiner’s employment of the fourfold sense, or *quadriga*, in his recent book *The Transfiguration of Christ* and Kevin Vanhoozer’s magisterial work *Mere Christian Hermeneutics*. Their proposals are every different, so I will address them in turn, but they also display a similarity in interpretive method that I will highlight as departing from the example of the

biblical authors, and this in addition to the apparently coincidental appeal to the transfiguration narrative in the Synoptic Gospels as a hermeneutical key in both works. In short, attempts to both revive the fourfold sense and fold multiple senses into one “thickened” or “transfigured” literal sense in canonical context muddle interpretation by appealing to multiple authorial intentions.

First, although Schreiner does not attempt a full explanation and defense of the fourfold sense in his book, he does employ it and he has a forthcoming volume in which he intends to offer a fully formed argument in favor of its usefulness. The fourfold sense is a hermeneutical method in which readers draw out of the text four senses, or meanings—literal, spiritual or typological, tropological or moral, and anagogical or eschatological. Following Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, Schreiner argues that the literal sense, which is the product of grammatical-historical exegesis and thus is tied to human authorial intent, is the basis for the others. In other words, the spiritual senses must organically develop from the literal sense.<sup>33</sup> This mooring of the additional senses to the literal is a necessary and commendable hermeneutical guardrail.

What is unclear, however, is what exactly the ground for claiming additional senses, or meanings, that organically arise from the literal sense is if they are not discerned through grammatical-historical exegesis? Schreiner’s answer is, “The spiritual sense listens for the voice of the omnipresent divine author urging us to connect the dots from one part of the canon to the other.”<sup>34</sup> It is on this assertion that I am focusing my response. Aside from the bare grammatical problem of a “sense” listening rather than the reader, Schreiner affirms multiple intentions in the dual-authored biblical canon, which muddles interpretation as I have already argued. Opening this door inevitably leads to the words on the page becoming mere symbols to which meaning is assigned from the outside rather than communicative tools that reveal intent from their source.<sup>35</sup> It is the human authors of Scripture that connect dots between texts for readers, which they consciously do via inner-biblical interpretation. If a canonical connection between two texts cannot be validated textually because it is not intended by the human author, it lacks hermeneutical validity because the only remaining basis is the reader’s own contribution. To use Schreiner’s language, if *readers* “connect the dots,” if the connection originates in *readers* apart from human authorial intent,

*readers* are shaping the reading of the text rather than the text shaping readers. While I heartily affirm an active Christian imagination informed by the Scriptures in reading them, such an imagination cannot be the only basis for an extended “sense” of a text.<sup>36</sup>

Two final points on the four senses. First, proponents of the fourfold sense, including Schreiner, do not claim that every biblical text *intends* or *contains* these four senses. But if that’s true, the three spiritual senses then have unavoidably become an extratextual interpretive grid through which the text is read and, further, they necessarily originate in the reader to some degree even if the reader attempts to connect them to the human author’s intention, that is, the literal sense. Again, the connection originates in the reader rather than the author. Second, Schreiner elevates the four senses over the oft appealed-to meaning and application evangelical hermeneutical paradigm.<sup>37</sup> This comparison is apt because applications in teaching and preaching are very much reader responses to the text that ought to organically arise from the literal sense but that involve reader imagination, the post-interpretive activity that Hirsch calls “significance.”<sup>38</sup> Thus, the problem here is not drawing a moral and eschatological sense out of every text to exhort believers and give them hope; rather, the problem is claiming that these reader-response senses are part of the meaning of the text and intended by the divine author. It is unfortunate, in my opinion, that Schreiner’s otherwise precise, studious, and reverent exegesis of the transfiguration narrative is so overshadowed by an unnecessary appeal to the *quadriga*.

Thus, in my estimation an acceptable employment of the fourfold sense would include the meaning of the text intended by the inspired human author; the possibility of typological implication if it is (1) intended by that same author and (2) interpreted as such by later biblical authors; and two forms of application or significance—moral exhortation and hopeful assurance.

On the other hand, and second, Vanhoozer does not claim that there are multiple senses or meanings in a given text of Scripture. Instead, he argues for a “transfigured” literal sense, which encompasses “thickened,” or expanded, and illumined meaning when the text is read in the context of the whole canon of Scripture on the basis of divine authorial intent.<sup>39</sup> So, distinction between the divine author and the human author allows for distinction in

intent and thickening of literal meaning because the divine author intends something beyond but coherent with his inspired human author. And such readings can be conducted forward through the canon or backward.<sup>40</sup> Here is Vanhoozer in his own words,

My claim, then, is twofold: 1) divine authorial intent comes into focus in canonical context, and 2) this canonical intentionality is synonymous with God's trans-figural intent. Trans-figural interpretation follows the way God makes the biblical words run and figures fly: beyond the human authorial intent, through history, across the canon, and from their original to their ultimate referents... we should avoid defining the literal sense apart from divine authorship or limit divine authorship to the semantic constraints and historical contingencies of the Bible's human authors.<sup>41</sup>

And yet, limiting his own authorship to the constraints of his prophets is precisely what the Lord chose to do in revealing his Word to his created world. I agree with Vanhoozer that "God makes the biblical words run," but he does this through inspiration of his human authors and his providential ordering of history into typological trajectories that anticipate and are fulfilled in Christ and are observable through inner-biblical interpretation by those human authors. We are not limiting divine authorship in pursuing inspired human authorial intent; the Lord limited himself.

One very important issue that I have raised today that is absent in any meaningful sense from Vanhoozer's work is the interpretation of earlier biblical texts by OT authors and their subsequent casting of those expectations into the future to be realized in the promised one to come. The eschatological frame of reference appears only to apply to post-resurrection readers.<sup>42</sup> Such an apparent limitation detaches Vanhoozer's entire project from the practice of the biblical authors at least to some degree. The focus of the book is almost exclusively on how contemporary believers should read the Bible ultimately as a single book with one divine author. As I have argued, this approach leaves the progressive nature of the Scriptures themselves unacknowledged and inevitably introduces reader response into the interpretive equation because there is not a tangible starting point for questions regarding hermeneutical validity. Observing the interpretive

practices of the inspired biblical authors is the necessary precursor to a mimetic Christian hermeneutic.

While Vanhoozer's proposal is certainly more in keeping with the classical Reformed conception of literal and spiritual sense than the *quadriga*, and he is cognizant of the necessity that a text has one sense or meaning rather than four, his method nonetheless departs from the apostolic example along with Schreiner's.<sup>43</sup> Despite this difference in defining the senses, the distinction in authorship leading to distinction in meaning runs through both books as does their appeal to the transfiguration narrative as a hermeneutical tool, which itself is questionable.<sup>44</sup> Thus, ultimately, my response to both is the same. Distinguishing between the divine and human authors and their intended meanings in the text of Scripture unnecessarily muddles interpretation and departs from the interpretative practices of the biblical authors themselves. The OT is certainly a fully furnished but dimly lit room upon which the light of Christ in the NT shines.<sup>45</sup> This reality, however, does not necessitate an expansive, canonical divine intent; rather, individual OT texts with intentionally prospective typological meaning—the furniture in the room—attain to their full, glorious *significance* in their typological trajectories as they are interpreted by later authors and, finally, fulfilled in Christ as presented by the NT authors.

To summarize this section, while Schreiner's work is primarily exegetical, Vanhoozer's relishes the theoretical and historical and, for a more-than-four-hundred-page book on hermeneutics, it is decidedly lacking in demonstration by way of extended exegesis of biblical texts. Such exegesis is a necessary component of sweeping hermeneutical proposals so readers can actually see what the theory looks like in practice.

A mimetic Christian hermeneutic best in keeping with the example of the biblical authors themselves respects the mechanism by which the Lord gave revelation—inspiration—by making human authorial intent the object of interpretation for a given text. It also respects the manner by which the Lord gave revelation—temporal, formal, and material progression—through forward reading of the canon and observation of author-intended inner-biblical interpretation.<sup>46</sup> Thus, we truly imitate the biblical authors themselves.

Some, however, argue that in some cases the prophetic or apostolic example cannot be imitated in full.

## **PRIVILEGED HERMENEUTICAL SPACE: A RESPONSE TO RICHARD BLAYLOCK**

In a recent article in *JETS*, Richard Blaylock argues that biblical interpreters can imitate the hermeneutics of the biblical authors in most cases, but there are some that must be attributed to what he calls “privileged hermeneutical space (PHS).”<sup>47</sup> PHS is another expression for Richard Longenecker’s “revelatory stance,” which the biblical authors occupied but which contemporary interpreters do not.<sup>48</sup> Blaylock, however, tempers Longenecker’s thesis that interpreters today cannot imitate the biblical authors at all by asserting, “The biblical authors’ hermeneutic is *generally replicable* but not *entirely* applicable because the prophets and the apostles occupied PHS.”<sup>49</sup>

While I commend Blaylock’s exhortation to Christians to “pattern their approach to Scripture after the hermeneutical example of the prophets and the apostles,” ultimately his attempt at nuanced third-wayism falls flat because his affirmation of “fuller sense” in canonical context is essentially in agreement with Vanhoozer’s “transfigured” literal sense in canonical context, both of which appeal to divine authorial intent. Blaylock writes, “I agree with those who argue that biblical texts can have a fuller sense (*sensus plenior*); in other words, texts may have a divinely intended sense that goes beyond . . . the human author’s intention.”<sup>50</sup> Blaylock’s “fuller sense” is Vanhoozer’s “thickened literal sense.”

Blaylock’s foremost example of PHS is Daniel’s interpretation of Jeremiah’s prophecy of seventy years in exile (Daniel 9:20–27). According to Blaylock, “Gabriel reveals the *divine* interpretation of the Jeremiah prophecies that Daniel had been reading . . . the *heavenly* meaning . . . a *deeper* understanding of the meaning” of Jeremiah 25:11–12 and 29:10.<sup>51</sup> So, in reading the Jeremiah scroll Daniel understood what Jeremiah, the human author, intended — namely, seventy literal years of exile — but Daniel did not grasp the fullness of the prophecy’s *divine* intent, that is, the meaning intended by the divine author.

In addition to the hermeneutical problems associated with distinguishing between human and divine intent in inspiration that I have already addressed in response to Schreiner and Vanhoozer, there are two problems with Blaylock’s proposal. First, there are tacit indications in

the book of Jeremiah itself, especially in Jeremiah's interpretation of Deuteronomy 30, that the seventy years prophecy included an intentional extended symbolic meaning. That Jeremiah's conception of post-exilic restoration is formed by Moses' prophecy in Deuteronomy 30:1–14 is evident in his repeated use of the phrase "The Lord will restore your fortunes" (Jer 29:14; 30:3, 18; 31:23; 32:44; 33:7, 11, 26), which first appears in Deuteronomy 30:3.<sup>52</sup> The first instance in Jeremiah 29:14 even occurs in close context with one of the references to a seventy year period prior to restoration to the land. In Jeremiah 29:10–14, the Lord promises that after seventy years of Babylonian rule he will "restore" Judah to their place, and then when they call out to him, come to him, pray to him, and seek him with their whole heart, he will hear and be found, and he will "restore" their fortunes. Not only does Jeremiah adopt Moses' distinction between physical return to the land and heart circumcision (cf. Deut 30:1–6) in his twofold "restore," he also situates the key phrase "restore your fortunes" *after* the turning of the people back to the Lord with their whole hearts.<sup>53</sup> Moses prophesied the same, where "restore your fortunes" included both return to the land (Deut 30:3–5) followed by heart circumcision (Deut 30:6) resulting in covenantal devotion and life.<sup>54</sup> Therefore, it is likely that Jeremiah understood the seventy year period to be both literal with respect to the rule of the Babylonians and a return to the land and symbolic with respect to the eschatological whole-heart restoration of the people of God.

The time stamp given to situate Daniel's vision is "the first year of Darius son of Ahasuerus, from the seed of the Medes, who was made king over the kingdom of the Chaldeans" (Dan 9:1), which was likely 538 BC and, thus, would have aligned with the seventy year reign of Babylon prophesied by Jeremiah (Jer 29:10). Daniel has observed the fall of the Babylonian empire and prays that the Lord would enact what he promised, namely, the eschatological salvation of his people. In response, the angel Gabriel gives him new revelation expanding the seventy years to "seventy sevens" (Dan 9:24). Daniel's request follows the evident meaning of Jeremiah 29:10 and he seeks to activate the Lord to accomplish the "restoration of fortunes," namely, spiritual restoration. Thus, both Gabriel and Daniel interpret Jeremiah according to his consciously intended dual meaning as I summarized above. Gabriel's "not yet" answer does not necessarily mean that Daniel misunderstood Jeremiah; rather, it can simply

mean that the extension of Jeremiah's seventy years was undefined. Gabriel granted "understanding" (Dan 9:22–23) to Daniel regarding the precise future timing of Jeremiah's "restoration of fortunes" (Jer 29:14) and Moses' "heart circumcision" (Deut 30:6).

Second, I would argue that Daniel 9 is not properly an example of inner-biblical interpretation, so it does not support the thesis of Blaylock's article at all. When inspired biblical authors received direct divine revelation as Daniel did in this case, that new revelation did not change the meaning of antecedent texts, nor did it "thicken" the sense, nor did it reveal a sense of the antecedent text unintended by the human author but intended by the divine author. Gabriel's message concerning "seventy sevens" did not change the meaning of Jeremiah; rather, it added an installment in progressive revelation that enhanced Daniel's—and now any other Bible reader's—understanding regarding the precise timing of eschatological salvation.<sup>55</sup> In this case Daniel absolutely occupied a privileged position as a prophet receiving revelatory visions, but that is precisely the point—the canon of Scripture was not yet closed.<sup>56</sup> Daniel was not properly interpreting an earlier text and applying it to his audience. He received new revelation and narrated the occasion of the vision and its content *without interpretation*. So, in one sense, I agree with Blaylock that Daniel 9 represents something that Bible readers today cannot replicate because it narrates direct revelation, which is no longer available or relevant. On the other hand, I think raising Daniel 9 in this way is a category error because it is not properly an instance of inner-biblical interpretation by an inspired human author.

Therefore, interpreters of the Bible can and should imitate the interpretive practices of the biblical authors evidenced in the Scriptures themselves. PHS applies to the biblical authors where they received direct revelation from the Lord, which is an altogether different textual event from a conscious inner-biblical interpretation of an earlier text by an inspired author.

## CONCLUSION

This article could be subtitled "A Once-for-All Rejection of the Fourfold Sense" for two reasons: 1) to highlight the hermeneutical proposal that I think departs most from the example of the biblical authors and 2) to attempt to encompass all hermeneutical proposals involving additional

or expanded senses in my critique. I am not arguing that Vanhoozer's and Schreiner's methods are the same, nor am I saying that Blaylock is somehow invoking the fourfold sense into his argument regarding imitation of the biblical authors. My argument is: any conception of biblical interpretation that involves multiplied senses or an expanded sense based on divine authorship in distinction from the inspired human author's intent evident in the text departs from both the example of the biblical authors and from logically sound hermeneutical principles. My response here is almost certainly not "once-for-all," but in my opinion a Christian hermeneutic in which the object is one, fixed, intended meaning by the dual author of Scripture — the inspired human author — best accounts for the biblical data itself, best imitates the practices of the prophets and apostles, and is the most logically defensible.

Biblical theology and hermeneutics originate with Moses in the Pentateuch, develop and proceed through the interpretation of the Pentateuch and other texts by later inspired authors, and reach their fulfillment in the Lord Jesus Christ as explained by the apostles. This progression is how the Scriptures were produced and how they were received and canonized by the people of God.<sup>57</sup> Respect for this progression, along with a conception of dual authorship that emphasizes inspiration and identifies the inspired human author's intention as the object of interpretation, is the foundation for a mimetic Christian hermeneutic.

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen J. Wellum, *Systematic Theology: From Canon to Concept*, vol. 1 (Brentwood: B&H Academic, 2024), 1:110, emphasis mine.

<sup>2</sup> This statement was originally published by William Whitaker, *A Disputation on Holy Scripture, against the Papists, Especially Bellarmine and Stapleton*, trans. and ed. William Fitzgerald (1588; repr., Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 2000), 407.

<sup>3</sup> B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1980).

<sup>4</sup> For more on Scripture as God's "word-act" revelation, see Wellum, *Systematic Theology*, 174–77. See also Geerhardus Vos, "The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline," in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2001), 10, and G. E. Ladd, "Biblical Theology, Nature of," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, rev. ed., 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 1:506.

<sup>5</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of biblical texts are my own.

<sup>6</sup> John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2003), 21.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas J. Sculthorpe, "He Makes Her Desert Like the Garden of YHWH: A Typological Understanding of the Birth of Isaac as Resurrection from Death" (PhD Diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2024), 19–23.

<sup>8</sup> Kevin S. Chen, *The Messianic Vision of the Pentateuch* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2019), 18–19.

- <sup>9</sup> Abner Chou, *The Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers: Learning to Interpret Scripture from the Prophets and Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2018), 28.
- <sup>10</sup> E. D. Hirsch Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University, 1967). On the distinction between general and special hermeneutics, see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Mere Christian Hermeneutics: Transfiguring What It Means to Read the Bible Theologically* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2024), 269. For an argument defending the necessity of special hermeneutics that do not prioritize the intent of the human authors in biblical interpretation, see Craig S. Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition: Recovering the Genius of Premodern Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018), 32–33, 44, 57–58.
- <sup>11</sup> See, for instance, Paul's assertion that the gospel is "veiled to those who are perishing" by "the god of this world" (2 Cor 4:3–4).
- <sup>12</sup> See James M. Hamilton Jr., "John," in *ESV Expository Commentary: John–Acts*, eds. Iain M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton Jr., and Jay Sklar (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 9:121–24, and James M. Hamilton Jr., *In the Beginning Was the Word: Finding Meaning in the Literary Structure of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2025), 93–95.
- <sup>13</sup> For more on the "canonical horizon" as one of three necessary interpretive contexts in biblical hermeneutics, see Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 259–311, and Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), 118–129.
- <sup>14</sup> For two self-attesting explanations of TIS methodology, see Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008) and Vanhoozer, *Mere Christian Hermeneutics*.
- <sup>15</sup> See Russell L. Meek, "Intertextuality, Inner-Biblical Exegesis, and Inner-Biblical Allusion: The Ethics of a Methodology," *Biblica* 95.1 (2014): 280–91.
- <sup>16</sup> For examples of hermeneutical proposals that involve expanded meaning in canonical context, see Douglas J. Moo and Andrew David Naselli, "The Problem of the New Testament's Use of the Old Testament," in *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, ed., D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 737–46, and Aubrey Sequeira and Samuel C. Emadi, "Biblical-Theological Exegesis and the Nature of Typology," *SBJT* 21.1 (2017): 11–34.
- <sup>17</sup> See especially #9 in Trier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, 200, affirmed and cited from Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays, eds., *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 3–5.
- <sup>18</sup> This statement encompasses the main thesis of Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*. I am aware that Hirsch himself later adjusted his thesis; see E. D. Hirsch Jr., "Meaning and Significance Reinterpreted," *Critical Inquiry* 11, no. 2 (Winter 1984): 202–25. I agree with his earlier work in *Validity*, and I think his later adjustments detracted from the value of his contributions to hermeneutical discussions broadly.
- <sup>19</sup> Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 39.
- <sup>20</sup> See Ardel B. Caneday, "Biblical Types: Revelation Concealed in Plain Sight to be Disclosed — 'These Things Occurred Typologically to Them and Were Written Down for Our Admonition,'" in *God's Glory Revealed in Christ: Essays on Biblical Theology in Honor of Thomas R. Schreiner*, eds., Denny Burk, James M. Hamilton Jr., and Brian Vickers (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2019), 135–55.
- <sup>21</sup> James M. Hamilton Jr., *Typology: Understanding the Bible's Promise-Shaped Patterns* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2022), 26–28.
- <sup>22</sup> On the distinction between meaning and significance in hermeneutics, see Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 8–9, 57, 62–64; Chou, *The Hermeneutics of the Biblical Authors*, 30–34; and Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 261–62.
- <sup>23</sup> Specifically with reference to how NT authors interpret OT texts, Iain Provan argues that the "communicative intentions" of those who compiled the biblical texts into the canon carried exegetical import and shaped how the intended meaning of individual texts were explained; see Iain Provan, *The Reformation and the Right Reading of Scripture* (Waco: Baylor University, 2017), 86, 102. I affirm Provan's argument but would place any hermeneutical developments due to canonical placement under the realm of significance rather than expanded meaning, which would place the canonizers in an inner-biblical interpretive position themselves.
- <sup>24</sup> See D. A. Carson, "Mystery and Fulfillment: Toward a More Comprehensive Paradigm of Paul's Understanding of the Old and the New," in *Justification and Variegated Nomism: The Paradoxes of Paul*, eds., D. A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien, and Mark A. Sieffrid (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 409, 411–12, 432–35.

- 25 See Vanhoozer, *Mere Christian Hermeneutics*, 402, for a definition of “transfigured” sense under “literal sense,” which reads, “the meaning of the human-divine biblical discourse when read grammatically-eschatologically in canonical context.”
- 26 Louw, Johannes P., and Eugene A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 28.77, and “μωσῆριον G3696” in Moisés A. Silva, rev. ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2014), 3:350–57.
- 27 Vanhoozer, *Mere Christian Hermeneutics*, 167–80, especially 167–68.
- 28 Even though Provan does argue for a “double literal sense,” which includes on the one hand the conscious intent of the original inspired author and on the other hand the intent of those who arranged the canon, he makes no appeal to the divine author’s intention in canonical organization. It would appear that the canonizers were as inspired as the authors themselves and were performing a form of inner-biblical interpretation in their arranging of the material in accordance with the intent of the original inspired authors; see Provan, *The Reformation and the Right Reading of Scripture*, 96, 102, and Vanhoozer’s interaction with him in Vanhoozer, *Mere Christian Hermeneutics*, 172–75.
- 29 See Seth D. Postell, “Reading Genesis, Seeing Moses: Narrative Analogies with Moses in the Book of Genesis,” *JETS* 65.3 (2022): 437–55. James Hamilton argues that the promise of redemption in Genesis 3:15 shapes the typological patterns observed through inner-biblical interpretation in the rest of the canon culminating in Christ; see Hamilton, *Typology*, 6–17.
- 30 Sculthorpe, “He Makes Her Desert Like the Garden of YHWH.” See also Thomas J. Sculthorpe, “Birth from Barrenness as Resurrection from Death: Typological Structures in Genesis,” *Presbyterion* XLVIII no. 2 (Fall 2022): 48–66.
- 31 Thomas J. Sculthorpe, “Plenior, Praegnans, or Progressive: Inner-Biblical Interpretation and Authorial Intent,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 26, no. 3 (Fall 2022): 50–71 and Thomas J. Sculthorpe, “Why Does Moses Call the Promised Savior a Seed? Resurrection Typology in Genesis 1–3,” *Kenwood Bulletin* 1.1 (Fall 2025): 41–61.
- 32 For the opposite conclusion, see Richard N. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), who argues that the biblical authors were inspired by God to correctly interpret earlier biblical texts and that, because contemporary readers are not inspired, we cannot imitate them.
- 33 Patrick Schreiner, *The Transfiguration of Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Reading* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2024), 29, and his oft-cited main source Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, trans. E. M. Macierowski, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).
- 34 Schreiner, *The Transfiguration of Christ*, 29.
- 35 Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 126n37.
- 36 On the necessity of an imagination formed by the Scriptures in interpretation, see James M. Hamilton Jr., *What is Biblical Theology?: A Guide to the Bible’s Story, Symbolism, and Patterns* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 15–16, which Hirsch defines as the “shared type” between author and reader (see Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 64–66).
- 37 For instance, see Daniel M. Doriani, *Getting the Message: A Plan for Interpreting and Applying the Bible* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1996).
- 38 See note 22.
- 39 See note 27.
- 40 Vanhoozer, *Mere Christian Hermeneutics*, 271–83.
- 41 Vanhoozer, 175, 77.
- 42 Vanhoozer, *Mere Christian Hermeneutics*, 139–141. I argue that the “eschatological frame of reference” appears only to apply to Christian readers after the resurrection because Vanhoozer repeatedly claims that the ultimate referent of Scripture is Christ. Vanhoozer calls this a “Christian frame of reference” on page 138. I agree with this assertion in principle, but room must be made for a category like “seed of the woman” or “one to come” in the OT because Christ had not yet come.
- 43 For more on the classical Reformed conception of the literal sense, see Michael J. Pereira, “‘And Now the Lord Has Sent Me His Spirit’: the Divine Missions, the Literal Sense, and Reading the Old Testament,” *JETS* forthcoming.

- 44 Vanhoozer explains, "Jesus' transfiguration is an underappreciated hermeneutical resource, which Western theology has for the most part neglected... it provides a unique vantage point from which to think about the ends and means of Christian hermeneutics in distinctly Christological terms," in *Mere Christian Hermeneutics*, 24–25.
- 45 See B. B. Warfield, "The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity," in *Biblical and Theological Studies* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1952), 22, and Caneday, "Biblical Types: Revelation Concealed in Plain Sight to be Disclosed," 155.
- 46 Vanhoozer defines the formal principle of "mere Christian hermeneutics" as "a trans-figured literal sense" and the material principle as "the knowledge of God concentrated and communicated in the shining face of Jesus Christ," in *Mere Christian Hermeneutics*, 24. In my dissertation, I argue that the formal principle of progressive revelation is author-intended typology evident in inner-biblical interpretation and the material principle is covenant; see Sculthorpe, "He Makes Her Desert Like the Garden of YHWH," 243–44.
- 47 Richard M. Blaylock, "Can We Read Like the Prophets and the Apostles? A Nuanced Answer to an Important Question," *JETS* 67.3 (2024): 421–46.
- 48 Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period*, xxxiv–xxxviii.
- 49 Blaylock, "Can We Read Like the Prophets and the Apostles?" 446, emphasis original.
- 50 See especially Blaylock, "Can We Read Like the Prophets and the Apostles?" 437n103, where he refers to and affirms Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 264.
- 51 Blaylock, "Can We Read Like the Prophets and the Apostles?" 435, emphasis mine.
- 52 The prophet also applies this phrase to Moab (Jer 48:47), Ammon (Jer 49:6), and Elam (Jer 49:39) as representative nations indicating that new covenant blessings will extend beyond Israel and Judah in keeping with the promise to Abraham (Gen 12:3).
- 53 See also Deut 4:29–30 where Moses situates the seeking of the Lord with the whole heart "in the last days," which is a reference to eschatological salvation; see Chen, *Messianic Vision of the Pentateuch*, 19n39. For more on the phrase "in the last days" in the Pentateuch, see John H. Sailhamer, *The Meaning of the Pentateuch: Revelation, Composition and Interpretation* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009), 395–97, 557–60, 571–73.
- 54 The specific sequence of events in Deut 30:1–6 is exile, repentance, regathering and return to the land, multiplication, heart circumcision, covenantal fidelity, and life. Thus, Jeremiah, in his inspired interpretation of Deut 30, likely in context with Deut 4:29–31, appears to clarify that physical return will precede spiritual restoration, all of which is encompassed by the phrase "restore your fortunes."
- 55 Others who interpret Dan 9:24–27 as new revelation include James M. Hamilton Jr., *With the Clouds of Heaven: The Book of Daniel in Biblical Theology*, NSBT 32 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2014), 109, and Gary Edward Schnittjer, *Old Testament Use of Old Testament: A Book-by-Book Guide* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2021), 617–29.
- 56 This assertion is confirmed by Blaylock's own speculation regarding the possible source(s) of Matthew's fulfillment language concerning Jesus being from Nazareth (Matt 2:22–23); see Blaylock, "Can We Read Like the Prophets and the Apostles?" 444–46.
- 57 For more on chronological canonization, see Roger T. Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church and its Background in Early Judaism* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1985).

# “The True Sense and Meaning of the Holy Scriptures”: The Reformed Hermeneutic of Benjamin Keach<sup>1</sup>

**MICHAEL PEREIRA**

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**Michael Pereira** is a PhD candidate in Systematic Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky, where he also earned his Master of Divinity. Michael has published a number of articles in such places as *JETS* and “Christ Over All” ([www.christoverall.com](http://www.christoverall.com)). He is married to Allison, and together they are members at Kenwood Baptist Church, Louisville, Kentucky, where they serve in youth and college ministry. Additionally, Michael serves as the Operations Assistant for the Kenwood Institute and the Managing Editor for the *Kenwood Bulletin*.

## INTRODUCTION

“Benjamin Keach, you are here convicted, for writing, printing and publishing, a seditious and schismatical book.”<sup>2</sup> Thus bellowed the judge sentencing Benjamin Keach, the Baptist (1640–1704), for his writings in the book *The Child’s Instructor; or, a new and easy Primer*. The “seditious and schismatical” teachings in this book were believer’s baptism and the millennial reign of Christ. While it seems fantastical to us today that such doctrines would result in a person being thrown in jail, placed in a pillory, and made to watch his books burned, this was the reality of Benjamin Keach with similar occurrences for other dissenting leaders in seventeenth-century England. This persistent belief during this century that Baptists were at worst dangerous and heretical schismatics or at best second-class citizens

caused many Baptists and their ministers to suffer much during this era. All this occurred despite persistent efforts, especially from Particular Baptists, to show themselves orthodox, Reformed, and loyal to the Crown.<sup>3</sup>

Both time and the hard work of Particular Baptists in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries have allowed for us today to see that such Baptists do indeed stand within the Reformed tradition. Among the prominent Particular Baptist leaders and pastors of this period who faithfully proclaimed God's word and worked for the removal of these prejudices was Benjamin Keach. One key area in which the early Particular Baptists stood within the Reformed tradition was in their framing of the single sense or meaning of Scripture. In this essay, I will examine the hermeneutics of Benjamin Keach related to the sense or meaning of Scripture and demonstrate that Keach advocated for a standard Reformed approach to the meaning of Scripture. To do this, I will first give a short biography of Keach's life and ministry to familiarize readers with this early Baptist minister, and then I will move to an examination of Keach's relevant works. Lastly, I will compare his ideas with those of Francis Turretin whose approach to the meaning of Scripture represents the mainstream Reformed approach on the matter.

### **THE LIFE OF BENJAMIN KEACH**

On February 29, 1640, Benjamin Keach was born to John and Joyce Keach, who baptized Benjamin, along with his six siblings, in the local Anglican parish church.<sup>4</sup> Being a family without means, Benjamin's parents were not able to provide him a formal education. After first working in a trade, "his capacious soul soon aspired after higher things."<sup>5</sup> Although not much is known about Keach's conversion and his process of becoming convinced of believer's baptism, evidently Keach at the age of fifteen came to be persuaded of his need to be baptized as a believer after much study of Scripture.<sup>6</sup> This baptism was performed by John Russel, a General Baptist, and sometime afterward, Keach joined the General Baptist congregation in Buckinghamshire.<sup>7</sup>

After marrying Jane Grove of Winslow (d. 1670) with whom Keach had three surviving children, Keach was called to serve as pastor in a General Baptist church in Winslow. These early years of Keach's ministry

saw persecution come with the restoration of Charles II.<sup>8</sup> The arrest, unjust trial, sentencing, and brutal punishment of Keach recounted in the introduction above occurred as a result of Keach's first publication titled, *The Child's Instructor; or, a new and easy Primer* (1664).<sup>9</sup>

Having been baptized and discipled in the General Baptist way, Keach was persuaded of the Arminian teachings common to the General Baptists. Once, however, Keach came to London “where he had a greater opportunity of consulting both men and books,” and learned the doctrinal differences between the General and Particular Baptist groups. Keach “examined the point more closely, and in a few years came to such a determination as fixed his judgment in this point for his whole lifetime afterwards.”<sup>10</sup> Keach had become a convinced Particular Baptist. As Michael Haykin writes, this move was likely influenced by his newfound acquaintance Hanserd Knollys. After his wife Jane died in 1670, Keach married Susannah Partridge (d. 1732) in 1672, and Knollys officiated the ceremony.<sup>11</sup> Also in 1672, Keach began a Particular Baptist church on Tooley Street in Horselydown, Southwark.<sup>12</sup>

During his ministry at Horselydown, Keach “perhaps more than any other Baptist of the last quarter of the seventeenth century, committed his convictions to paper in an attempt to establish church polity among his fellow Baptists, and to support and defend Baptists as they continued their efforts to justify their religious existence in both pre- and post-Toleration England.”<sup>13</sup> The two main controversies which occupied his public ministry were his defense of the declining cause of Calvinism and the hymn-singing controversy.<sup>14</sup> Writing the works *The marrow of Justification* (1692), *A Medium betwixt two Extremes* (1698), and *Gospel Mysteries Unveil'd* (1704), Keach proclaimed the sovereign electing grace of God, the total depravity of sinners, the sacrifice of Christ for the elect, justification by faith, and the free offer of the gospel to all. During the hymn-singing controversy, Keach led the cause of the goodness and biblical nature of hymn singing, publishing works such as *The Breach Repaired in God's Worship* (1691).<sup>15</sup> Finally, after approximately thirty years of faithful ministry, Benjamin Keach died on July 18, 1704, of “distemper.”<sup>16</sup> Of the legacy of Keach, Nettles states, “largely owing to the energy of Keach, Baptists had become a definitive force in the development of English Dissent.”<sup>17</sup>

## KEACH ON THE SENSE(S) OF SCRIPTURE

While Keach differed from other Reformed brethren on specific interpretive issues such as baptism's mode and subjects, his broader biblical hermeneutic was in step with the Reformed tradition. Of his work in *Tropologia* (1681), Keach states that he has "kept all along within the Bounds of that Gravity, and Orthodoxy of Matter, which the Christian Religion Requires, and the Reformed Protestants profess."<sup>18</sup> Of course, on a topic as broad as biblical interpretation, several nuances to Keach's approach to biblical interpretation or to his theological place among Reformed Protestants and even Particular Baptists could be noted.<sup>19</sup> For our purposes and given the constraints of this work, however, we will focus on how Keach construed the sense(s) of Scripture in relation to the Reformed tradition.

To summarize his views before turning to the specifics, Keach believed that there is but one true sense of any passage of Scripture, although in cases of OT typology this sense is composed of a direct literal sense and indirect mystical sense. The pertinent works of Keach which will be examined here are his *Tropologia* (1681),<sup>20</sup> some published sermons titled *The Counterfeit Christian* (1691), and his *Gospel Mysteries Unveil'd* (1701).

### *The Literal Sense and the Mystical Sense*

Keach's work in *Tropologia* was intended to equip readers with an understanding of the "metaphors, allegories, and other tropes and figures of speech" and of the nature of the types in Scripture. From this work we gain much insight into his view of the sense of Scripture. In his sections on the "schemes" or figures in Scripture, he discusses the quotations of the Old Testament (OT) in the New (NT) and the issue of the sense of these passages as intended by the Holy Spirit. He writes, "The sense intended by the Holy Spirit is either literal, or typical and mystical."<sup>21</sup> Regarding OT prophecies about Christ quoted in the NT, Keach says, "In an immediate literal sense, there are frequently quotations which concern Christ, of whom the prophets prophesied, *κατα το ρητον*, word for word, as Isa. vii. 14."<sup>22</sup> Key to understanding Keach on this sort of literal sense is his use of the phrases "immediate" and "*κατα το ρητον*." As will become further clarified when we discuss Keach's notion of the "mystical sense," this literal sense is what the author (here the Spirit through the prophets) referred to directly or

immediately “word for word.” In the cases mentioned in the context where the prophets referred directly to Christ, the passage has an “immediate literal sense.”

This sort of “immediate literal sense” can also be diversely understood given the context of its usage, all while possessing for Keach the fundamental notion of immediacy of reference. Keach can sometimes speak of the “literal sense” as what the normal, proper sense of the words convey. In his later discussion of baptism as a burial, he notes the common agreement of the learned that “the primary, proper, and literal signification of βαπτίζω, *Baptiso*, is, *Mergo, immergo, submerge, obruo, item tingo, quod fit immergendo*.”<sup>23</sup> This is the sense literally or properly taken. Keach also speaks, however, more broadly of the “literal sense” in terms of genre, namely, historical Scriptures. In his *Gospel Mysteries Unveil’d*, Keach rebukes those “who turn literal, plain, or historical Scriptures into allegories.”<sup>24</sup> Historical Scriptures stand opposite of the genre of “tropical Scriptures” such as “parables, metaphors, allegories, and similitudes.”<sup>25</sup> However, we are not to think that for Keach “tropical” or metaphorical Scriptures are excluded from the category of “literal sense” when considered more broadly as that to which the author referred to immediately or directly according to the scope of the place. This is evidenced in *Tropologia* by the way Keach labels the sense of passages which use metaphorical language as the “literal sense” because they have their immediate, direct referent in Christ. These passages are Amos 9:11 (“In that day I will raise up the fallen booth of David, and wall up its breaches; I will also raise up its ruins and rebuild it as in the days of old”) and Zechariah 13:7 (“Awake, O sword, against My Shepherd, and against the man, My Associate,” declares the LORD of hosts. “Strike the Shepherd that the sheep may be scattered; and I will turn my hands against the little ones”).<sup>26</sup> Thus, for Keach, the term “literal sense” can be used to refer to 1) the proper, primary signification of words themselves, 2) the nature of the genre of historical Scriptures which primarily use words according to this proper signification, 3) that which is more broadly referred to immediately by the author in his discourse, whether the words be used according to their primary or figurative signification.

This summary brings us to Keach’s view of the mystical sense of Scripture. On the one hand, Keach refers to the hidden spiritual meaning intended by the speaker in parables (which are allegories) as the “mystical sense.”<sup>27</sup>

On the other hand, Keach also refers to the sense intended by the Spirit in typological passages of Scripture as the “mystical sense.” Regarding this latter usage, Keach states, “The sense intended by the Holy Spirit is either literal, or typical and mystical.” The term “mystical” describes the full sense intended by the Spirit when there is an *immediate* referent the words signify (the type) and a *mediate* referent also signified by the words but indirectly (the antitype).<sup>28</sup> Typological passages are called the “mystical sense” because, as Keach states, “a typical sense is when things hidden, or unknown, whether present, or to come, especially when the transactions recorded in the Old Testament prefigure the transactions in the New, are expressed by external action, or prophetic vision.”<sup>29</sup> Speaking in the context of the sense intended by the Spirit in those passages of the OT quoted in the NT, Keach explains, “There are citations in a mediate and typical sense out of the Old Testament, respecting Christ and his mystical body the Church: as Exod. xii. 46, about the paschal lamb applied to Christ, John xix. 36; the brazen serpent, Numbers xxi. 8, 9, with John iii. 14, 15; Jonah ii. 1, 10, with Matt. xii. 39, 40; Adam and Eve, Gen ii. 23, 24, with Eph. v. 31, 32.”<sup>30</sup> When the Spirit spoke in OT Scriptures of something that was typological, the immediate referent was the type, and this could be described as the literal sense due to this immediacy from the words themselves.<sup>31</sup> However, the Spirit also intended from the words to speak of the antitype, albeit indirectly or mediately through the type. This is what Keach refers to as the sense which is typical or mystical.

Later on in his work, Keach further expounds what he means in these statements. In his discussion on types, Keach states, “An historical type is the mystical sense of Scripture, whereby things acted or done in the Old Testament ... prefigured and adumbrated things acted in the New Testament times, with respect especially to Christ the Antitype, who is, as it were, the kernel inclosed in all those shells of Old Testament ceremonies, types, or acts, etc.”<sup>32</sup> Such types may be expressly pointed out in Scripture either directly or indirectly (an “innate” or “natural” type), or they may be types not specified in the NT but “gathered to be such by interpreters” from the Scripture itself according to “fair probabilities agreeable to the analogy of faith” (“inferred” types). Opposed to these legitimate types are illegitimate types “without any foundation in, or shadow of sense, from the literal sense of the text.” Keach continues, “Of the latter sort, are the wild

fantastical conceits of papists, and some others, who make types where there are none.”<sup>33</sup>

The correct interpretation of types is a significant concern for Keach, seen in his provision of nine canons by which to properly interpret and understand types in Scripture. His sixth canon is helpful for our purposes. It states, “In expounding the types of the Old Testament, we are to examine accurately, whether the shadow, or the truth, represented by a shadow, be proposed; that is, whether the prophets prophesy of Christ under the umbrage or shadow of types, or in express terms, viz., speaking of our Savior in a literal sense.” Keach argues that we need to discern between when the OT prophets speak of Christ directly in “express terms,” in other words, “κατὰ τὸ ρητόν,”<sup>34</sup> and when they speak of Christ in terms of the type which shadowed him forth. In the former case, this would be according to a literal sense, since Christ would be spoken of immediately or directly apart from the figuring role of the type. In the latter case, Christ would be truly spoken of and intended, yet it would be so mediately through the representation of the type.<sup>35</sup> Keach’s statements here and in places seen above, however, about the intended manner of the Spirit’s/the prophets’ speaking must be investigated to understand the relationship between this literal sense and the mystical sense.

### ***The Unity of Meaning: A Single Sense***

To interpret Keach in the places we have seen as advocating for a multiplicity of meanings in the text of Scripture would be a fundamental misunderstanding. This would be to misconstrue his own usage of categories and to fail to put Keach in historical and theological context. In this section I will examine Keach’s view of the single sense of Scripture, and in the next, I will compare Keach to some of his Reformed contemporaries.

The first and clearest place to discern Keach’s broadest notion of the sense of Scripture is in the 2<sup>nd</sup> London Confession, the republication of which in 1689 was partly spear-headed by Benjamin Keach. His name appears in the prefix to the 1689 edition as one of the pastors approving and presenting the confession of the Baptist faith.<sup>36</sup> Section 1.9 of the Confession states, “The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture it self: And therefore when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold but one) it must be searched by other

places that speak more clearly.”<sup>37</sup> Here we have Keach’s affirmation that the “true and full sense of Scripture” is “not manifold” (as in the quadriga) “but one.”

This principle of the singularity of Scripture’s sense or meaning in any place is naturally evidenced in Keach’s own writings. In Keach’s thought, the key to this unity of sense is the intention of the Spirit. As we saw in Keach’s statement above, “The sense [singular] intended by the Holy Spirit, is either literal, or typical and mystical.”<sup>38</sup> In his sixth canon on typology which calls for distinguishing direct and typological prophecies of Christ, Keach states the following:

The reason depends upon the custom of prophetical speech, yea, of God himself, speaking by the prophets, by which they are wont to make a sudden transition from the type to the antitype, from a corporeal to a spiritual thing; and when the speech is of another thing, to turn themselves to Christ, the kernel, as it were, of the scripture, and prophecy of him, not under the shadow of types, but in express terms.<sup>39</sup>

Despite the distinction between immediacy and mediacy of the prophetic reference to Christ in the OT, Keach views both kinds of discourse as one in sense or meaning whenever they occur because they are both grounded in God’s intention through the prophetic authors.

Keach distinguishes properly interpreted types from bad, “extorted” types, “without any foundation in, or shadow of sense, from the literal sense of the text.”<sup>40</sup> A proposed type is not a valid type unless the literal, immediate sense indicates it is such. Therefore, the mystical sense in which Christ is seen in the type is not truly separate from this literal sense, because the literal sense itself is not understood if the mystical sense is not seen in the letter. The sense considered as a whole is one, and the use of the phrases “literal” and “mystical” describe two aspects of the one sense.<sup>41</sup>

This unity of sense grounded in divine intention is also evident in Keach’s comments in *Gospel Mysteries Unveil’d*, in which he states the following:

And whereas Types in the Old Testament respect only some Persons or Things, (as I said before) and their Antitypes; so they are such Persons and Things, which none but whom God himself made use of as Types; Men are not to frame,

or make Types, nor ought any to attempt once so to do; for after that rate Men may turn all Historical Scriptures into Allegories, as some will have Pharaoh a Type of the Devil. I am satisfied that all Persons and Things that were Types under the Old Testament, God hath somewhere or another given us Grounds to believe, that they were Types or Figurative.<sup>42</sup>

For Keach, the types (the mystical sense) are only established by God who designed and intended them and are evident in the text of Scripture itself.

The same principle of intention applies to “Tropical Scriptures” (i.e., “Parables, Metaphors, Allegories, and Similitudes”).<sup>43</sup> “Therefore,” Keach states, “in [Jesus’] Parables, if we would understand the Mind of God in them, we must always take Care to consider the main Design and Scope of them; or which the Sacred Story tends, or what our Lord chiefly designeth therein.”<sup>44</sup> The mind of God in the parable is understood if we attend to what Christ intended to communicate in the parable. For example, in the “To the Reader” section of *The Counterfeit Christian*, Keach discusses a possible interpretation of the parable in Matthew 12:43–45 which he expounds in the book. Stating his differing opinion, he says the following: “yet I do not believe the Lord Jesus intends to shew hereby they do all after that manner fall from their ... Religion and Profession: Tis evident to me, he applies it to the Pharisees ... If the Scope of the ... be considered, That our blessed Savior designed by this Parable to see ... the State of the Pharisees.”<sup>45</sup> Despite the fact that some words on this page of the edition used here of *The Counterfeit Christian* are sometimes illegible, Keach’s point is clear. Even of Scriptures which are parabolic and allegorical in genre, proper interpretation is determined by the text itself, according to the design and scope of the author. Parabolic, figurative, or allegorical Scriptures do not possess a multiplicity of distinct meanings, but they have a unified, singular sense based on the intention of the author/speaker, even if this sense be compound or mystical.<sup>46</sup>

This point that allegories, parables, and similitudes do not multiply the sense of Scripture is further evidenced in Keach’s “The Epistle to the Reader” affixed to *Tropologia*. After giving a helpful list of distinctions between types and allegories, Keach provides a set of guidelines for identifying and interpreting allegories. First, Keach writes that “there is a great difference betwixt an *Allegorick* Exposition of Scripture, and an Exposition

of *Allegorick* Scripture.” He goes on to say that the “first is that which the Fathers and School-men fail in, *i.e.* when they allegorize plain Scriptures and Histories, seeking to draw out some secret meaning, other than appears in the Words, and so would fasten many Senses upon one Scripture.” This practice he denounces saying, “This is indeed unsafe, and is justly reprobable; for this makes clear Scripture dark, and obtrudes Meanings on the Words never intended by the Spirit.” Thus, the authority and perspicuity of Scripture is jeopardized by this practice of “fastening many Senses upon one Scripture.”<sup>47</sup>

In contrast to this interpretive violence, Keach says, “An Exposition of *Allegorical* Scripture is the opening and expounding of some dark Scripture (wherein the Mind of the Spirit is couched and hid under Figures, etc.) making it plain and edifying, by bringing out the Sense according to the meaning of the Holy Spirit in the place, tho at first it seems to bear no such thing.” The example he gives of this sort of exposition of allegorical Scripture is Jesus’ own interpretation of his parable (an allegory) in Matthew 13 concerning the sower and the seed.<sup>48</sup> There is one sense of even allegorical Scriptures, namely, the sense intended by the Spirit.

To summarize, Keach believed that the *one sense* of any Scripture could be either literal or mystical. For Keach, the term “literal” could refer to different realities seen in the text of Scripture. It could refer to 1) the proper, primary signification of words themselves, 2) the nature of the genre of historical Scriptures which primarily use words according to this proper signification, 3) that which is more broadly referred to immediately by the author in his discourse, whether the words be used according to their primary or figurative signification. When the Spirit through the prophets intended a typological correspondence in Scripture, the antitype seen under the Gospel is the “mystical sense.” For Keach this term can also apply to the spiritual meaning of parables whose intended meaning does not lie on the surface. As seen in light of Keach’s writings and the 2<sup>nd</sup> London Baptist Confession, however, when these elements of literal and mystical are present, they not constitute properly separate senses, but elements of one and the same sense intended by the Holy Spirit.

Keach does not, however, appear to name this one sense intended by the Holy Spirit. His writings in the *Tropologia* are focused on particular uses of Scriptural words and the nature of types and metaphors and do not provide

in one place a thoroughgoing, systematized consideration of the sense of Scripture. The next section will consider the relevant work of Francis Turretin on the literal sense to show Keach’s hermeneutical continuity within the Reformed tradition. In doing so, it will suggest what Keach likely would have termed the one sense of Scripture of which the 2<sup>nd</sup> London Baptist Confession speaks.

### COMPARING BENJAMIN KEACH AND FRANCIS TURRETIN

Widely known as a masterful synthesizer of the Reformed Scholastic era, Francis Turretin (1623–87) serves as an excellent point of comparison to judge the continuity of Keach’s hermeneutic with that of the broader Reformed tradition. In comparing Keach to Turretin, I do not intend to pass over those closer to Keach in his social, religious, and political context. Rather, the point in this comparison is to show the points of continuity with Keach’s understanding of the sense of Scripture with what was the consensus amongst Reformed Orthodox on this topic, and Turretin is an excellent representative and articulator of this consensus.<sup>49</sup>

Given the significant debate between the Reformed (with Protestants generally) and Roman Catholics regarding the authority of Scripture, Turretin in his *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* reserves a whole topic to the question “Whether the Scriptures have a fourfold sense: literal, allegorical, anagogical, and tropological. We deny against the papists.”<sup>50</sup> After stating the position of the Roman Church, Turretin asserts that “only one true and genuine sense belongs to the Scriptures. That sense may be twofold: either simple or compound.”<sup>51</sup> He goes on to state that a simple or historical literal sense “contains the declaration of one thing without any other signification.” This sort of simple literal sense is seen in doctrinal Scriptures (i.e., epistles) and the non-typological histories of Scripture. This simple literal sense can be proper, when the words carry normal signification, or it can be figurative, when the words are used figuratively or metaphorically. Turretin continues, “The composite or mixed sense is in prophecies as types, part of which is in the type, part in the antitype.” To avoid any confusion, Turretin explains “This does not establish two senses, but two parts of one and the same sense intended by the Holy Spirit, who with the letter considers the mystery.”<sup>52</sup>

When the true and genuine sense is compound or composite, the “literal sense is sometimes taken more widely for the whole compass of the sense intended by the Holy Spirit (whether in type or antitype) and so contains within it the mystical sense [i.e., the antitype fully revealed in Christ].” He then explains the terminology sometimes employed for this compound literal sense by stating that the term “literal sense” can be “taken more strictly for that which the words immediately and proximately afford and so is distinguished from the mystical (which is signified not so much by the words as by the things which the words signify), which arises only mediately from the intention of the speaker.”<sup>53</sup> Thus, when the sense or meaning is compound, the full literal sense intended by the Holy Spirit is composed of both a more narrowly construed literal sense (the type the words immediately refer to; e.g., the paschal lamb of Ex. 12:46) and the mystical sense (what the type refers to by virtue of “the intention of the speaker”; e.g., Christ the unblemished lamb).<sup>54</sup>

The correspondence between Keach’s and Turretin’s construal of the sense of Scripture is striking in one way, though in another way not surprising given that this construal was commonplace amongst the Reformed and Reformed Orthodox.<sup>55</sup> Both men operate with the same categories regarding the literal sense—a term which can be understood in one of the three following ways: (1) the proper, primary signification of words themselves, (2) the nature of the genre of historical Scriptures which primarily use words according to this proper signification, (3) that which is more broadly referred to immediately by the author in his discourse, whether the words be used according to their primary or figurative signification. For both theologians, the antitype revealed in Christ is described as the “mystical sense.” Further, both insist that there is *only one sense* intended in any place by the Holy Spirit and, thus, that this “literal sense” and “mystical sense” constitute *one compound meaning*. For these theologians, one cannot truly understand the type or the thing immediately signified by the words without also understanding the antitype or the thing mediately signified by the words, because they together form one meaning intended by the Spirit.

The one thing that Turretin fills in which is left unnamed by Keach is the name of the single sense intended by the Holy Spirit, namely, the “[compound] literal sense.” Turretin makes clear that “the whole compass of the sense intended by the Holy Spirit (whether in type or antitype)” can be

called the "literal sense."<sup>56</sup> Given the prominence of this term amongst the Reformed to describe this unified sense intended by the Spirit, it is likely that this would be the term assumed by Keach for this sense as well.<sup>57</sup>

Another element key to this discussion which does not appear to be addressed explicitly by Keach is the nature of the relationship between divine and human authorial intent in the production of this one literal sense. Keach, along with Turretin, refer frequently to the compound literal sense being intended by the Spirit.<sup>58</sup> This wording is significant, because it reflects the common way the Reformed and Reformed Orthodox understood divine and human authorial intent in the Old Testament to be related. Though the prophets wrote with Christ and his salvation as their ultimate referent, sometimes they did not completely understand the mysteries and shadows inherent to the meaning of their own writings. But the Spirit of God bearing them along did, and the coming of the Son pulled back the veil from the shadows and mysteries of the OT.

This common belief amongst the Reformed and Reformed Orthodox may be seen in the writings of John Calvin (1509–1564), the works of whom Keach regularly cited in his own writings.<sup>59</sup> In his commentary on Daniel 12:8, Calvin writes that Daniel "could not attain unto the meaning of these predictions, which were so extremely obscure, and this was needful to their full and thorough comprehension."<sup>60</sup> Elsewhere commenting on Romans 16:25–26, Calvin correlates 1 Peter 1:12 with this passage saying that when the OT authors were given their message from the Lord, "God was at that time silent, though he spoke; for he held in suspense the revelation of those things concerning which he designed that his servants should prophecy."<sup>61</sup> The OT authors did indeed bear witness to Christ, but they did so in terms of shadows and types, consciously searching for and awaiting their unveiling (1 Peter 1:10–12). Calvin continues, "For although the Prophets formerly taught all those things which have been explained by Christ and his Apostles, yet they taught them with so much obscurity, that in comparison with the clear brightness of the gospel light, it is no wonder that those things are said to have been hidden which are now made manifest."<sup>62</sup> But, when the revelation of God's mystery came in Christ, "then only," Calvin asserts, "were opened the treasures of celestial wisdom when God appeared to his ancient people through his only-begotten Son, as it were face to face, all shadows having been done away."<sup>63</sup> Thus, Calvin affirms that the

human authors knowingly testified of the Christ to come, but they did so with a degree of obscurity, awaiting when the Spirit's intent would be made clear by the unveiling of the mysteries and the dispelling of the shadows.

The same idea is articulated by John Owen (1616–1683), who was Keach's most frequently cited source.<sup>64</sup> In his magisterial work *Pneumatologia*, Owen writes the following which is worth quoting in full:

[The Holy Ghost] did not, indeed, so enlighten and raise [the prophetic authors'] minds as to give them a distinct understanding and full comprehension of all the things themselves that were declared unto them; there was more in their inspirations than they could search to the bottom of. Hence, although the prophets under the Old Testament were made use of to communicate the clearest revelations and predictions concerning Jesus Christ, yet in the knowledge and understanding of the *meaning* of them they were all inferior to John Baptist, as he was in this matter to the meanest believer, or "least in the kingdom of heaven." Therefore, for their own illumination and edification did they diligently inquire, by the ordinary means of prayer and meditation, into *the meaning of the Spirit of God* in those prophecies which themselves received by extraordinary revelation, 1 Pet. i. 10, 11.<sup>65</sup>

Thus, for Owen, we see that the human authors knowingly bore witness to Christ but could not understand the full meaning of their own words, testifying as they did to mysteries concerning Jesus Christ. But they did search diligently into "*the meaning of the Spirit of God* in those prophecies which themselves received by extraordinary revelation."<sup>66</sup>

With this theological context provided, when the one meaning of Scripture possessed a mystical sense, it is the Spirit's intent that we are truly seeking for, as Keach and Turretin state, because the human authors only partially understood these mysteries. None of the authors above viewed this reality as created different, indeterminate, or manifold senses of a Scriptural text. Rather the unity of the single sense was preserved by the fundamental unity involved in the relation between the intention of the prophet who sometimes testified dimly to future realities and the intention of the Spirit who with the shadow spoke of the mystery in fullness.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, I have argued that Benjamin Keach's beliefs on the meaning or sense of Scripture are entirely consonant with the broader Reformed tradition on Scripture's one sense. This was demonstrated through examining key works in which Keach discusses the literal sense of Scripture as well as the mystical sense of Scripture. As was shown above, these elements were, on the one hand, distinguished, but never separated so as to constitute two different meanings. Turretin, who represents the mainstream of the Reformed tradition on this matter, presents the sense of Scripture in a conceptuality identical to Keach's. Both were united in the Protestant concern that God's voice be clearly heard in Scripture, which is the sole ultimate authority and itself the only infallible rule of interpreting Scripture.

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- <sup>1</sup> Quote taken from *Tropologia; A Key to Open Scripture Metaphors, in Four Books*. (London, City Press, 1858), ix. Picture of Benjamin Keach taken from Benjamin Keach, *Gospel Mysteries Unveil'd* (London, R. Tookey, 1701).
  - <sup>2</sup> Thomas Crosby, *The History of the English Baptists* (London, Printed for the Author and sold by... Aaron Ward, 1740), 2:202.
  - <sup>3</sup> See the title page of the London Confession of 1644. The title page reads as follows (I have modified the capitalization) “The Confession of Faith, of those Churches which are commonly (though falsely) called Anabaptists; Presented to the view of all that feared God, to be examined by the touchstone of the Word of Truth: As likewise for the taking off those aspersions which are frequently both in Pulpit and Print, (although unjustly) cast upon them,” *The Confession of Faith*, (London, 1644). See the Confession's preface, “To all Christian Readers” for the development of this idea.
  - <sup>4</sup> Austin Walker, *The Excellent Benjamin Keach* (Dundas, ON: Joshua Press, 2004), 39. Benjamin was the sixth of seven children.
  - <sup>5</sup> Thomas Crosby, *The History of the English Baptists* (London, 1740), 4:269.
  - <sup>6</sup> Crosby, *The History of the English Baptists*, 4:269.
  - <sup>7</sup> David A. Copeland, *Benjamin Keach and the Development of Baptist Traditions in Seventeenth-Century England*, *Studies in Religion and Society*, vol. 48 (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2001), 15.
  - <sup>8</sup> Thomas J. Nettles, *The Baptists: Key People Involved in Forming a Baptist Identity* (Fearn, Scotland: Mentor, 2005), 1:163.
  - <sup>9</sup> For a further concise account of this narrative in addition to another occasion of persecution wherein Keach was nearly killed, see Michael A. G. Haykin, *Kiffen, Knollys, and Keach: Rediscovering our English Baptist Heritage* (Petersborough, Canada: H&E Publishing, 2019), 142–44.
  - <sup>10</sup> Crosby, *The History of the English Baptists*, 4:271.
  - <sup>11</sup> Haykin, *Kiffen, Knollys, and Keach*, 144.
  - <sup>12</sup> Haykin, *Kiffen, Knollys, and Keach*, 145.
  - <sup>13</sup> Copeland, *Benjamin Keach and the Development of Baptist Traditions in Seventeenth-Century England*, 13.
  - <sup>14</sup> Haykin, *Kiffen, Knollys, and Keach*, 145–61.
  - <sup>15</sup> For more on these and other controversies as well as elements of Keach's doctrine, see Haykin, *Kiffen, Knollys, and Keach*, 146–61; Copeland, *Benjamin Keach and the Development of Baptist Traditions in Seventeenth-Century England*, 17–69; Nettles, *The Baptists*, 1:166–88.
  - <sup>16</sup> Copeland, *Benjamin Keach and the Development of Baptist Traditions in Seventeenth-Century England*, 17.
  - <sup>17</sup> Nettles, *The Baptists*, 1:163.
  - <sup>18</sup> Benjamin Keach and Thomas Delaune, *Tropologia, or, a key to open Scripture Metaphors* (London: John Richardson and John Darby for Enoch Prosser, 1681), Bk. II: sig. A3r.

- 19 For a source which gives excellent historico-political and theological context to Keach as a theologian within the Reformed and Dissenting contexts, see Jonathan W. Arnold, *The Reformed Theology of Benjamin Keach (1640–1704)*, Centre for Baptist History and Heritage Studies, 11, (Oxford: Centre for Baptist History and Heritage, 2013). See also the work of D. B. Riker, *A Catholic Reformed Theologian: Federalism and Baptism in the Thought of Benjamin Keach, 1640–1704*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought, 35 (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009). On the relation of Keach's understanding of how the literal sense of Scripture related to millenarian eschatology, see Arnold, *The Reformed Theology of Benjamin Keach*, 207–208.
- 20 *Tropologia* was not only authored by Keach but also by the Irish Baptist Thomas Delaune. Delaune translated the work of Salomon Glassius's *Philologia Sacra* which was included in the *Tropologia*. On this, see James Barry Vaughn, "Public Worship and Practical Theology in the Work of Benjamin Keach (1640–1704)" (PhD diss., University of St. Andrews, 1989), 92–93. Due to its massive size, *Tropologia* was published in two volumes originally, with the first volume (1681) containing books I–III. Book I included the first part of the translation of *Philologia Sacra*. The second volume (1682) contained book IV and the second part of *Philologia Sacra*. For this information see Walker, *The Excellent Benjamin Keach*, 188–89; James Christopher Holmes, "The Role of Metaphor in the Sermons of Benjamin Keach, 1640–1704," (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2009), 86–89. For more information on the general background of *Tropologia* see Holmes, "The Role of Metaphor in the Sermons of Benjamin Keach," 82–93. The version of *Tropologia* from which I will cite unless otherwise indicated is *Tropologia; A Key to Open Scripture Metaphors, in Four Books*. (London, City Press, 1858). Cf. Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics* (PRRD), 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 2:453, n.44.
- 21 Keach, *Tropologia*, 217. One must be careful not to anachronistically read into this use of "mystical" ideas of mysticism. Nothing could be further from Keach's intent or the intent of the rest of the Reformed Orthodox when they routinely use this term. See below for the explication of what was meant by this term.
- 22 Keach, *Tropologia*, 217. I have not modified Keach's spelling and I have kept the Greek text as presented in the source. Keach goes on to list a paragraph full of citations of the OT in the NT in which the OT speaks directly (immediately) about Christ.
- 23 Keach, *Tropologia*, 629.
- 24 Keach, *Gospel Mysteries Unveil'd*, bk.1:7.
- 25 Keach, *Gospel Mysteries Unveil'd*, bk.1:2. "Tropical" or "metaphorical" can be used by Keach to describe the use of particular words as well as the use of genre. See *Tropologia*, 629–30.
- 26 Keach, *Tropologia*, 217–218. For Keach's summary of how to distinguish when a text's words are to be understood properly and literally versus when they are to be understood figuratively and parabolically, see *Gospel Mysteries Unveil'd*, bk. 1:4.
- 27 Keach, *Gospel Mysteries Unveil'd*, bk. 1:18, 35, 58, 216; bk. 2:235; bk. 3:119.
- 28 Keach, *Tropologia*, 217–218.
- 29 Keach, *Tropologia*, 228.
- 30 Keach *Tropologia*, 218. The text incorrectly cites "Matt. xii. 39, 40" when it should be Matt. 12:39, 40.
- 31 Keach, *Tropologia*, 232.
- 32 Keach, *Tropologia*, 231.
- 33 Keach, *Tropologia*, 232. The example Keach gives is from a Roman Catholic theologian who "makes the Son of David, yea, Christ himself, a type of the pope of Rome," citing 2 Sam 7:13 as typifying the supremacy and kingdom of the pope (232).
- 34 Keach, *Tropologia*, 217.
- 35 For Keach, this literal-mystical dynamic applies to other types in Scripture such as literal and mystical Babylon. See *Tropologia*, 862–93. See esp. 882, 886.
- 36 See William L. Lumpkin and Bill J. Leonard, eds., *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed. (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2011), 216–22.
- 37 *A Confession of Faith Put forth by the Elders and Brethren Of many Congregations of Christians (baptized upon Profession of their Faith) in London and the Country*, (London, 1677), 8. I am using the 1677 edition since it is the same in content to that which was republished in 1688 and the years following.
- 38 Keach, *Tropologia*, 217.
- 39 Keach, *Tropologia*, 235.
- 40 Keach, *Tropologia*, 232.

- <sup>41</sup> Toward the end of *Tropologia*, Keach gives several examples of the types of the OT and their relation to Christ, the antitype (972–96). We are not, however, to see these mystical fulfillments in Christ as different spiritual senses not essential in unity with the literal type. Earlier in his work, Keach makes clear the unified nature of the meaning of mystical passages of Scripture where the type signifies the antitype. Also, in this section when speaking of David’s referent in the Psalms, Keach states, “Many things that David speaks in the book of psalms, which some are ready to think he spake to himself, yet, such a type was he of Christ, that they are directly applicable to none but Jesus Christ, &c.” (978). Once again, we see intention of the speaker grounding Keach’s view on the unity of sense.
- <sup>42</sup> Keach, *Gospel Mysteries Unveild*, bk. 1:2.
- <sup>43</sup> In *Gospel Mysteries Unveild*, bk. 1:1–2, Keach presents several distinctions between types and tropical Scriptures. Space will not allow for a full discussion of his distinctively Reformed approach here.
- <sup>44</sup> Keach, *Gospel Mysteries Unveild*, bk. 1:3. He also states, “Moreover, the main Scope or Design of a Parable, is commonly to be understood, either from our Savior’s more general or more particular Exposition of it, or else from his main and principal Design, which may be gathered from the Preface to it, or else from the Conclusion thereof” (3, cf. 58).
- <sup>45</sup> Keach, *The Counterfeit Christian, or The Danger of Hypocrisy* (Southwark, 1691). A.2, [3].
- <sup>46</sup> E.g., *Gospel Mysteries Unveild*, bk. 1:58.
- <sup>47</sup> Keach, “The Epistle to the Reader,” in *Tropologia* (1681), A. 6.
- <sup>48</sup> Keach, “The Epistle to the Reader,” in *Tropologia* (1681), A. 6. Even where some today may think Keach over-read the parables or allegories of Christ (as some did in his own day), Keach saw himself as staying within the scope of the Jesus’s intended meaning in his expositions of the parables. See his “To the Impartial Reader” in *Gospel Mysteries Unveild*, A–A2v. See also p.3 of the work itself.
- <sup>49</sup> Compare the following exposition of Turretin’s thought with Muller’s summary of the Reformed Orthodox view of the sense of Scripture in Muller, *PRRD*, 2:469–502.
- <sup>50</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave, (New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1994), 1:149. The following section on Turretin has been adapted with permission from Knox Brown and Michael Pereira, “Seeing Christ in the Letter: A Review of Kevin J. Vanhoozer’s *Mere Christian Hermeneutics*,” Christ Over All, last modified October 31, 2025, <https://christoverall.com/article/concise/seeing-christ-in-the-letter-a-review-of-kevin-j-vanhoozers-mere-christian-hermeneutics/>.
- <sup>51</sup> Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:150.
- <sup>52</sup> Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:150.
- <sup>53</sup> Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:151.
- <sup>54</sup> Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:150.
- <sup>55</sup> See Muller, *PRRD*, 2:469–502.
- <sup>56</sup> Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:150.
- <sup>57</sup> For more on the notion of the “literal sense” and its usage and meaning in the Reformed and Post-Reformed Orthodox era, see Muller, *PRRD*, 2:469–502.
- <sup>58</sup> E.g., Keach, *Tropologia*, 217; Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:149, 150, 151, 152.
- <sup>59</sup> See Arnold, *The Reformed Theology of Benjamin Keach*, 45.
- <sup>60</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of the Prophet Daniel*, transl. Thomas Myers (Edinburgh: The Calvin Translation Society, 1853), 2:385.
- <sup>61</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, transl. John Owen (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1849), 2:555.
- <sup>62</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, 2:555.
- <sup>63</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, 2:556.
- <sup>64</sup> Arnold, *The Reformed Theology of Benjamin Keach*, 40.
- <sup>65</sup> John Owen, *IINEMATOAOTIA*, vol. 3 *The Works of John Owen*, ed. by William H. Goold, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 132, emphasis added.
- <sup>66</sup> Owen, *Works*, 3:132, emphasis added.

# Metaphysics, Meaning, and the Fourfold Sense: Assessing the Christian Platonist Hermeneutic

**KNOX BROWN**

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**Knox Brown** is a PhD candidate in Systematic Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky. He serves as an associate editor at “Christ Over All” ([www.christoverall.com](http://www.christoverall.com)), where he has published a number of articles. He is married to Esther, and they are at First Baptist Church of Fisherville, Fisherville, Kentucky.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Among those advocating for a return to premodern hermeneutics, two of the most vocal scholars are Hans Boersma and Craig Carter, both of whom advocate for spiritual interpretation grounded in a Christian Platonist metaphysic.<sup>1</sup> In particular, both Boersma and Carter argue for a form of Christian Platonism which they call “sacramental ontology,” according to which all of creation participates in God sacramentally. Because Scripture participates in God sacramentally, it must be read spiritually. Thus, Boersma and Carter both argue that we ought to read Scripture according to the fourfold sense, though they differ in how to do so. Carter emphasizes that all spiritual senses derive from, depend on, and deepen the literal, while Boersma focuses on meditatively seeking the sacramental presence of Christ in *lectio divina*, which results in a fourfold reading. Though Boersma and Carter are cobelligerents in the Christian Platonist cause, both their metaphysics and their hermeneutics differ at significant points. I will first examine each author’s metaphysic and hermeneutic, demonstrating that

each, in his own way, practices the kind of metaphysically grounded reading he commends. The Christian Platonist use of the fourfold sense stands or falls on metaphysical grounds. After evaluating each position, I conclude that while both proposals helpfully resist naturalistic reductionism, neither fully resolves the tension between spiritual interpretation and determinate meaning — and that “Christian Platonism” itself may be too broad a category to bear the hermeneutical weight placed upon it.

## HANS BOERSMA

### *Sacramental Ontology*

Let’s begin with Hans Boersma’s Christian Platonist hermeneutic, for the simple reason that Craig Carter himself states that Boersma’s sacramental ontology is “essentially the same” as his (Carter’s) Christian Platonism.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, Boersma develops his sacramental ontology with greater precision and detail than Carter does, making his work a more natural starting point.

Both Boersma and Carter begin their definitions of Christian Platonism by describing what its opposite is. Thus, Christian Platonism is understood by its opposition to naturalism, mechanism, nominalism, relativism, and skepticism.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the world exists by participation in God.<sup>4</sup> For Boersma, this means that God’s relationship to the world is one of real sacramental presence. Most recently, he has articulated this as God’s being “embodied” in creation<sup>5</sup> by means of the divine energies (i.e., according to the Palamite essence-energies distinction).<sup>6</sup> Boersma thus argues that creation is not only *ex nihilo* but also *ex deo*.<sup>7</sup> Creation does not possess its own independent being, but is a “theophanic manifestation” of God’s own being in an “inferior mode.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, creation is simply God appearing in a creaturely mode.<sup>9</sup> The Christian Platonist metaphysic is therefore “a kind of pan-en-theism”<sup>10</sup> in which God provides the form and immaterial substance for all created being.<sup>11</sup> Yet this does not eliminate the Creator-creature distinction, for God does so only by means of the divine energies, and even then, the participatory relationship is analogical.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, it is still right to speak of creation as a divine embodiment since the energies are “God himself” yet are distinct from the essence.<sup>13</sup> Because of this, every

interaction with the created world is a supernaturally charged event: it is an encounter with God's own transcendent being and sacramental presence.<sup>14</sup>

Boersma distinguishes his sacramental view of creation from one which would see the created world merely as a sign pointing away from itself toward the creator. A sign, Boersma argues, does not possess the reality to which it points.<sup>15</sup> The yellow diamond with an image of a deer warning me that such creatures might cross the road is not imbued with "deer-ness," nor is the reality of deer (whether a particular deer or the universal) in any sense present in the sign.<sup>16</sup> Creation, Boersma argues, is not like this. Instead, it is a sacrament in which the reality to which it points (God) really *inheres* it.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, God and creation "co-inhere" and are "mystically entwined" with one another, as do all sacraments and the realities to which they point.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the world is suffused with God's real sacramental presence.

In his earlier work (through at least 2018's *Seeing God*), Boersma denied the essence-energies distinction,<sup>19</sup> and he did not begin employing the specific language of "panentheism" until 2023.<sup>20</sup> However, Boersma has long held that God inheres creation sacramentally, which, apart from the essence-energies distinction, would result in a *stronger* panentheism than that which he now espouses. By employing the essence-energies distinction, Boersma is now able to maintain his doctrine of God's sacramental presence in its strongest sense (panentheism) without entwining God's essence itself with creation. Whether the essence-energies distinction itself holds or is compatible with divine simplicity and other doctrines of classical theism is another question. Yet it provides his Christian Platonist metaphysic with an anchor in tradition and allows him to affirm the maximal poles of God's transcendence (in essence) and immanence (in energies).

### ***Scripture as Real Presence: Boersma's Sacramental Hermeneutic***

Boersma's doctrine of Scripture is fundamentally informed by his understanding of the God-world relationship.<sup>21</sup> For Boersma, Scripture is a place of Christ's sacramental presence. In fact, it is just Christ's sacramental presence that makes Scripture God's Word.<sup>22</sup> This means that Scripture is another embodiment of the Logos, like the rest of creation.<sup>23</sup> However, Scripture is a more intense locus of Christ's sacramental presence, since it participates in him more perfectly than does creation generally.<sup>24</sup> To say that Christ's sacramental presence is in all of creation implies that Christ's

sacramental presence is in every book, but Boersma could not be clearer that Scripture is “unlike any other book”—“the Scriptures are holy, set aside for a unique purpose.”<sup>25</sup> Moreover, Boersma repeatedly gives Scripture its own category as an embodiment of the Logos, implying that Christ’s presence in Scripture is more than a mere extension of his general presence in creation.<sup>26</sup>

Boersma has become popular today as a proponent of “premodern” allegorical exegesis.<sup>27</sup> Boersma grounds such interpretation in the sacramental nature of Scripture, which is grounded in his broader sacramental ontology. The task of the interpreter is thus not primarily to understand the intended message of the text’s human author (what Boersma calls the “literal” or “historical” meaning of the text), but rather to spiritually encounter the presence of Christ himself who is mystically and sacramentally present in the text.<sup>28</sup> Interpretation is therefore not a matter of understanding authorial intent but of mystical communion or “encounter.”<sup>29</sup> The most important “meaning”<sup>30</sup> the text has for Christians is thus whatever leads to a spiritual sight of him. Such a mystical encounter with Christ is always beyond the literal/historical meaning, since “the real presence of the new Christ-reality [is] *hidden* within the *outward* sacrament of the biblical text.”<sup>31</sup> Therefore, “biblical texts have multiple, even innumerable, meanings.”<sup>32</sup> Nonetheless, these meanings must accord with the church’s creeds and overall tradition, since the same Logos who is sacramentally embodied in the Scripture and in the believer is embodied in the church as well.<sup>33</sup> In this way, a sacramental encounter between the believer and Christ in Scripture is mediated by Christ’s sacramental presence in the church.<sup>34</sup>

The reader arrives at the mystical encounter with Christ in Scripture by means of *lectio divina* (divine reading). The process of *lectio divina* involves four steps: reading (*lectio*), meditation (*meditatio*), prayer (*oratio*), and contemplation (*contemplatio*). Each of these four steps corresponds to one of the four senses found in the *quadriga*, or fourfold sense: in reading, we discern the literal; in meditation, the allegorical; in prayer, the moral (tropological); and in contemplation, the anagogical.<sup>35</sup> Thus, Boersma argues, the good reader of Scripture first pays attention to its words, that is, the external trappings of the literal sense in which the deeper Christological meaning is hidden. Here, the reader confronts their slothfulness, disciplines themselves to pay close attention to each word of the text, and seeks the

historical meaning.<sup>36</sup> But a good reader will move beyond this in meditation, memorizing and repeating the Scriptures they read in order to engage their imagination to picture Christ in the words of the text, thereby discovering the allegorical sense.<sup>37</sup> Meditation is “the process of picturing the crucifixion (or some other biblical event) in our minds” so that we can ascend “from Scripture to contemplation.”<sup>38</sup> True meditation “aims beyond the words of the Bible,” making the text a vehicle for picturing Christ, especially Christ crucified.<sup>39</sup> After meditation, the reader ascends to the truly supernatural levels of interpretation: prayer and contemplation. In prayer, our whole selves are brought before God (the object of our meditation) and are painfully confronted with our sin and weakness.<sup>40</sup> This gives us the tropological sense, or the moral imperative of the text. Yet in this agonizing struggle to see the face of God, we are brought not only to grief, but also to joy and comfort as we arrive at the goal of our reading, contemplation of God himself. Here, the soul is caught up in ecstasy as it moves beyond a meditation on Christ’s humanity to a contemplation of his divinity itself. The full experience of contemplation is rare, but it is an encounter that transcends sense perception and brings the subject out of time and into eternity.<sup>41</sup> Here, the contemplator encounters the anagogical sense of Scripture: the beatific vision itself.<sup>42</sup>

For Boersma, the process of *lectio divina* is not a “method” but a “spiritual discipline.”<sup>43</sup> Thus, while one reads Scripture for all four of its senses, one cannot do so simply by applying steps in an interpretive formula. Instead, the four senses naturally arise out of the spiritual and mystical practices of reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation. For this reason, the interpretive process does not yield merely one meaning, nor only four meanings (one for each sense), but several. “Meaning is not a static object that is ours to figure out, rather, meaning occurs in an encounter.”<sup>44</sup> A given text will therefore have infinite possible meanings, since there are an infinite number of potential encounters with the infinite God. Yet Boersma reminds us that while *lectio divina* is “inherently subjective and experiential,” it is not a purely subjective enterprise because it is “shaped by the church’s prior reading” of Scripture which “has safeguarded the truth of biblical witness to the living God.”<sup>45</sup> In this way, tradition mediates and safeguards the exegete’s sacramental encounter with Christ. The exegete must therefore submit themselves to the authorities of Scripture, tradition, the church,

and Christ, each of which is sacramentally present in the others (by means of their shared participation in Christ), such that all these authorities are in harmony.<sup>46</sup>

## CRAIG CARTER

### *Christian Platonism as Reformed Thomism*

Craig Carter's thesis is bold: "Christian Platonism is the theological metaphysic of the Great Tradition," and recovering it is key to reclaiming and preserving Nicene Orthodoxy.<sup>47</sup> So what is Christian Platonism? Carter begins by defining Platonism, before moving to the distinctly Christian character of "Christian Platonism." Like Boersma, Carter first provides a negative definition of Platonism: it is the opposite of naturalism. That is, all forms of Platonism "believe that true explanation always a top down, never a bottom-up, process and that the true explanatory framework will converge on the smallest possible number of principles."<sup>48</sup> Finally, Platonism is teleological, since all things participate in greater (purposeful) realities. So much is true of Platonism. But what of Christian Platonism? Christian Platonism's uniqueness lies in the fact that rather than being merely "sacramental" (like Platonism), it is "sacramental-historical."<sup>49</sup> That is, Christianity affirms not only that this world participates in greater eternal realities, but also that *in history* God created the world *ex nihilo* (marking the beginning of history) and then *entered* history by becoming incarnate in Jesus Christ. Now, God is gathering a people to himself (the church), and soon Christ will return to bring history to its final end.<sup>50</sup> If one denies the sacramental character of Christianity, Carter argues, they will end up a materialist. But if one denies Christianity's historicity, they will fall into Gnosticism. Theological liberals have already found themselves in one of these ditches (materialism), while Roman Catholics are continually tempted to veer into the other (Gnosticism). It is Reformed Christianity—specifically, "Reformed Thomism," that, according to Carter, best maintains the Christian Platonism of the Great Tradition.<sup>51</sup>

So just how does Carter's Christian Platonism work? Is his version of sacramental participation merely anti-naturalism, or is it a fuller proposal like Boersma's panentheism? Though Carter states that his Christian Platonism mirrors Boersma's sacramental ontology,<sup>52</sup> his metaphysical claims

are much more modest. For Carter, Christianity “is sacramental because it holds to the reality of universals, which Thomas Aquinas understood to be ideas in the mind of God.” Thus, creation participates in God both by way of participation in created universals (in God’s mind), and by way of *being created*, participating in God as its source and ground of existence.<sup>53</sup> In particular, Carter defends a version of Christian Platonism which he calls “scholastic realism” or “Reformed Thomism.”<sup>54</sup> Because Reformed Thomism locates universals in the mind of God, it is able to solve the impasse between Plato and Aristotle: universals are outside creation, in God’s mind (Plato), but particular objects, designed as they are by the same God, really do participate in and correspond to those universals.<sup>55</sup>

Before we turn to Carter’s hermeneutic, it is worth noting that Boersma criticizes Aquinas for limiting participation merely to causality and correspondence (the two features stressed by Carter), indicating that Carter’s Christian Platonism is more circumscribed than Boersma’s sacramental ontology.<sup>56</sup> Nonetheless, Carter’s Christian Platonism also results in a fourfold reading of Scripture, and to that we now turn.

### ***Craig Carter and the Fourfold Sense***

In many ways, Craig Carter’s Christian Platonism exists for the goal of hermeneutics. The twin aims of his project are (1) to recover the Classical Theism of Nicene Orthodoxy, and (2) to bring academic hermeneutical theory in line with the best of evangelical (and Great Tradition) preaching.<sup>57</sup> Each of these, Carter argues, requires some kind of Christian Platonist metaphysic, whether the Reformed Thomism he holds or a comparable variation that can still maintain the principles of Ur-Platonism.<sup>58</sup> The focus of this essay is Carter’s attempt to revise modern hermeneutics, particularly by the employment of the fourfold sense. The first issue, therefore, is how Carter’s metaphysic affects his doctrine of Scripture.

The first thesis in Carter’s doctrine of Scripture is that the Bible is divinely inspired. This means that in interpreting Scripture, we must consider not only the human authorial intent, but the divine authorial intent as well.<sup>59</sup> Carter emphasizes that such a doctrine of Scripture is only possible thanks to Christian Platonism’s denial of naturalism. According to Carter, texts of Scripture may be either by miracle, providence, or both. In the miraculous category, Carter places those texts in which the human author

saw a vision, or heard the voice of the Lord directly. These texts fall under a “dictation” theory of inspiration.<sup>60</sup> Those Scriptures in which the human author did research, interviewed eyewitnesses, and then wrote, or those parts of the text that were compiled, redacted, and supplemented by editors fall under providential inspiration. Nonetheless, all the texts of Scripture, whether inspired by providence or miracle, are fully inspired and result in a text that is exactly as intended by God.<sup>61</sup>

The miraculous aspect of inspiration prevents reducing the biblical message to only what its human authors could have known or consciously intended based on their historical milieu. Not only that, but both kinds of inspiration prevent identifying the meaning of Scripture exclusively with what its human author(s) intended: dictation (miracle) only requires that God intended the message of the text (not the human author), while editorial revision prevents identifying the meaning of the text with a single human author, and therefore with a single human author’s intent.<sup>62</sup> In other words, a “single meaning” approach to Scripture fails, because such an approach cannot help but identify the meaning with the human author.<sup>63</sup> Thus, a richer hermeneutic which seeks the divine authorial intent, rather than merely the human, is necessary.

To discover the divine intent of the text, Carter proposes that we seek Christ in the OT in a number of ways, ranging from identifying direct fulfillment of messianic prophecies, to fourfold interpretation, to prosopological exegesis.<sup>64</sup> Though fourfold interpretation is listed as one option among five for seeing Christ, it seems to function more as an umbrella term for the other four, since these others all involve Christological reading (allegory), as well as moral application (tropology), and an orientation to future hope (anagogy).<sup>65</sup> Each of these five approaches must be rooted in the “literal sense,” which Carter defines as “the divine author’s intended meaning as communicated through the human author’s words.”<sup>66</sup> This is a little confusing, since Carter frequently states that the fuller or spiritual sense (which seems to be the sense intended by the divine author) is “an extension or expansion of the literal sense.”<sup>67</sup> Despite this inconsistency, Carter ultimately concludes that the “plain sense” of the text (both its literal and spiritual meaning) is the divine authorial intent, which is “the meaning of the text as embedded in the chapter, book, testament and canon as a whole.”<sup>68</sup> Each of the five methods for finding Christ, then, is legitimate

whenever it can defensibly be linked to the “literal sense,” (as an expansion or otherwise) within the context of the canon as a whole, regardless of human authorial intent.<sup>69</sup> Yet in one way or another, every text in Scripture has a spiritual sense (or four senses), which are objectively in the text and just need to be rightly discerned.<sup>70</sup>

Carter recognizes that the hermeneutic he proposes could be twisted to make Scripture’s meaning indeterminate. Therefore, in addition to a grounding in the literal sense, proper interpretation must be connected to “the ontological reality of Jesus Christ” who as the fulfillment of the Scriptures provides “the basis of the objectivity of the literal sense.”<sup>71</sup> Christ, as he is revealed in the whole canon of Scripture by the Holy Spirit, is the ultimate subject (*skopos*) of Scripture, and the control on its meaning.<sup>72</sup> Therefore, discerning Scripture’s Christological sense (the divine intent) requires not a neutral method employed upon the text, but a humble faith that submits itself to the text as an answerable subject. In other words, proper reading is a spiritual discipline. In this way, Scripture is able to correct our reading, our understanding of God, and our presuppositions, even while it is informed by them.<sup>73</sup>

## EVALUATION AND CRITIQUE

Thus far, I have surveyed two self-avowed Christian Platonists and their use of the fourfold sense. What are we to make of the results? I’ll begin by drawing some initial conclusions that apply to both authors, before evaluating each in more detail. First, it must be said that at least in their own approaches, both Boersma and Carter demonstrate their claims that hermeneutics is downstream from metaphysics. Whatever else one might say about their systems, it seems clear that Boersma’s hermeneutic is consistent with his metaphysic, as is Carter’s. Additionally, both men see God as the Bible’s ultimate author, and are thus most concerned with his intent. Though they perhaps differ on their definition of divine intent—Carter emphasizes divine *authorial* intent in canonical context, whereas Boersma focuses on God’s intent to make himself sacramentally present—both see God’s intent as ultimately determinative for Scripture’s meaning. This means that for both Carter and Boersma, Scripture is really about Christ. The spiritual sense(s) is not a tack-on to a more fundamental meaning, but the primary sense. In an

age when many academics either deny authorial intent entirely or struggle to integrate it into their hermeneutic, these emphases ought to be commended.

However, even the quick survey of the Christian Platonist positions presented here raises some issues. For one, it is readily apparent that Christian Platonism is a very broad concept. While there are some similarities in their aim and general outlook, Boersma and Carter appear to be doing radically different things, both in their metaphysics and their hermeneutics. If Christian Platonism encompasses both immaterial panentheism and Reformed Thomism, it is not clear to me that it is a meaningful metaphysical concept. It is true that both Boersma's panentheism and Carter's Reformed Thomism are opposed to naturalism, but beyond that the similarities are not obvious. Divine embodiment in creation (Boersma) is a far cry from correspondence between particular creatures and ideas in the mind of God (Carter). When it comes to hermeneutics, this situation repeats itself. Though both approaches seek Christ, Boersma's does so via a mystical encounter with his sacramental presence in one of Scripture's infinite possible meanings, whereas Carter seeks Christ via a limited number of objective, intended meanings—those of the divine author, revealed in the canon as a whole. Additionally, Boersma makes the Great Tradition's communal experience of Christ the guardrail against improper interpretation, which Carter explicitly rejects as heretical.<sup>74</sup> It seems to me that it might be better to define the similarities between Boersma and Carter's metaphysics negatively (e.g., "anti-naturalism" or "anti-nominalism") or generically (e.g., "supernaturalism," "realism," or "spiritual interpretation") rather than with a technical term ("Christian Platonism") that suggests more affinity than the positions within it actually share. In the end, I fear that "Christian Platonism" is a label that obscures more than it illumines, both in metaphysics and in hermeneutics.

With Boersma's proposal specifically, there are yet more serious problems. First and foremost, it seems that his sacramental ontology reduces Scripture's uniqueness to one of degree, not of kind. Boersma states that Scripture is God's Word, precisely because Christ, the Word, is sacramentally present in it. Yet Boersma also claims that Christ is sacramentally present everywhere. In other words, that which makes Scripture unique is not divine inspiration, but a common metaphysical feature of the whole cosmos. Of course, Boersma does believe that Scripture is unique—but he repeatedly states

that the uniqueness of Christ's embodiment in various places is merely one of degree, not one of kind.<sup>75</sup> Thus, Scripture's uniqueness would have to be reduced to its being a sort of hotbed of sacramental presence, meaning that the encounters with the reality of Christ possible in its pages are clearer and more intense. But in theory, the same kind of sacramental encounter is possible anywhere—even other books—because the same Christ who is embodied in Scripture is sacramentally present everywhere.<sup>76</sup>

Secondly, Boersma's assertion that biblical texts have infinite possible meanings threatens to bring about interpretive chaos where any interpretation is legitimate. The literal sense cannot provide the necessary guardrail, since the spiritual sense must go beyond it.<sup>77</sup> Boersma recognizes this issue, and so he limits legitimate meanings to those which are mediated by the experience of the church throughout history—the tradition. But this simply raises the question: which tradition? The history of the church is filled with vehement controversies from the patristic era to our own, and Boersma's proposal would leave us without a way to adjudicate between them. A living voice of the tradition—a magisterium<sup>78</sup>—is therefore necessary. Boersma is familiar with this implication—it is the very conclusion he finds in Yves Congar, one of his major influences, when Congar was advocating for a similar position to the one Boersma now espouses.<sup>79</sup> Though Boersma notes that Congar opposed an “active magisterium,” he nonetheless maintained that a magisterium was necessary to receive and adjudicate what belongs in the tradition and what does not.<sup>80</sup> Short of such a living and authoritative voice speaking on behalf of the tradition, the guardrail Boersma proposes collapses, bringing us crashing back into subjectivism. Those who do not desire either postmodern reader-response interpretation and will not accept a magisterial authority therefore cannot embrace Boersma's hermeneutic.<sup>81</sup>

Finally, Boersma's panentheistic metaphysic threatens to blur the Creator-creature distinction by collapsing all created being into God. Though Boersma believes that the essence-energies distinction sufficiently wards against this, I am unconvinced. Here, I am simply raising the issue, as I hope to provide more substantial engagement with Boersma's pantheism in future articles.

Carter's Christian Platonism differs from Boersma's substantially, and in very welcome ways. Metaphysically, Carter follows Thomas Aquinas in identifying participation as correspondence to ideas in the mind

of God, thereby refusing to equate God's being with the being of the world. And hermeneutically, Carter insists that all Scripture's spiritual senses develop from, and must be grounded in, its literal sense. I am thankful for Carter's insistence on these issues, and in the main, I agree with his overall claim that the Bible is spiritual and must be read as the Word of God, according to his authorial intent. However, two issues give me pause: his handling of the miraculous/providential distinction in inspiration, and his underdeveloped account of how the restricted literal sense controls the spiritual.

To begin with, I worry that the division Carter draws between miraculous and providential inspiration is overdrawn. This would be a minor point, if it did not have downstream effects on Carter's hermeneutic. When he comes to texts that are "miraculously inspired" (e.g., by dictation or vision), Carter seems to set the human authorial intent aside. This is especially a problem when Carter employs prosopological exegesis. If Christ is the one speaking, in say, Psalm 40, then it is irrelevant whether David meant anything by the Psalm—he simply overheard and reported the voice of Christ. One only needs to turn to the NT, identify Christ as the proper speaker, and listen to his voice in canonical context.<sup>82</sup> In my view, this opens too wide a gap between human authorial intent and divine authorial intent, which opens the door to the same kind of "anything goes" atmosphere Boersma's hermeneutic falls into. If the NT sets the pattern for our reading of the OT (as Carter agrees it does), then a hermeneutical method which divorces certain texts from their literary and historical contexts by presenting them as eternal divine speech opens a fairly wide door for modern interpreters to smuggle their own meanings into the text. This is not to say that God does not speak miraculously or directly in the Bible—far from it! Yet it is important to recognize that even when the Bible's human authors received supernatural revelation, they still made intentional choices regarding the presentation, structure, and delivery of that material for their own audience and future generations. Thus, every biblical text—no matter how "ordinary" or "supernatural" the mode of revelation seems—is concursively inspired, such that both human and divine authorial intentions are fully operative in the communicative act. While the meaning the divine author intends may go further than the human author's (which it certainly does, since God's speech to us is the full canon)—it is nonetheless

rooted in, and a flowering of, the human intent. This means we cannot ever brush past the text's original intent in its immediate and epochal contexts, even as we press on toward its full meaning in the canonical context.<sup>83</sup>

Related to this, I found myself both appreciative of and yet unsatisfied with Carter's articulation of the relationship between the literal and spiritual senses. Part of this is due to some inconsistency in Carter's use of the terms (especially literal sense). As noted earlier, sometimes Carter defines the literal sense as the divine author's intent in the context of the full canon of Scripture, while elsewhere he uses it to mean the historical sense (or perhaps human author's intent) out of which the spiritual sense must develop. Yet in reality, this inconsistency reflects a commendable effort to keep literal and spiritual sense united. Carter appears to hold to two literal senses: the restricted literal sense, identifiable with the text's historical meaning, and the "extended literal sense," identifiable with the "spiritual sense" or the divine author's intended meaning as revealed by the whole canon.<sup>84</sup> However, it is not clear what relationship the restricted/historical sense has with the extended literal sense in Carter's work. Carter repeatedly discounts human authorial intent as insufficient for establishing Scripture's meaning. Insofar as Carter simply means that human authorial intent cannot establish Scripture's *full* meaning, it is a point well taken. But Carter also claims that the human author's intent is not determinative for the text's historical meaning, and he never rehabilitates the relationship between human authorial intent and historical meaning such that the restricted literal sense can control the spiritual sense.<sup>85</sup> Perhaps this was beyond his project.

Nonetheless, I believe it is essential to demonstrate that even in the text's historical meaning there is an open-endedness toward future revelation. In other words, I believe it is possible, using textual evidence, to demonstrate that the human authors of Scripture *intended* for their message to be developed further by the divine author, as he brought redemptive history to its culmination.<sup>86</sup> One cannot simply say that the spiritual sense is grounded in the literal while laying human authorial intent aside. Though a given human author's intent may not be exhaustive (e.g., because of inspired editors or compilers who arranged the text later), it is nonetheless vitally connected to the text's historical meaning, such that the full meaning brought about by the divine author must be a development of and expansion

upon that which the human author intended. This doesn't make God a servant of the human author, because the original human author wrote under inspiration—the human intent is subsumed into the divine intent, since the human being intended exactly what God wanted them to intend (including openness to or even foreshadowing of future development by God). Apart from at least some grounding in the intent of the OT's human authors, the apostolic hermeneutic could be guilty of turning the OT into a wax nose, thereby licensing us to do the same. And once this occurs, we are not far from the dilemma Boersma's hermeneutic entails, in which either subjectivism or a magisterium must reign.

## CONCLUSION

There is much to affirm in the Christian Platonist retrieval of the fourfold sense. Both Hans Boersma and Craig Carter rightly insist that the Scriptures are written by God, about Jesus Christ, and addressed to his people. In this way, Christian Platonism rightly pushes against the naturalistic tendencies of modern hermeneutics. Yet general resistance to naturalism is not sufficient to establish either a metaphysic or a hermeneutic. Adopting a "Christian Platonist" use of the fourfold sense can mean anything from a mystical reading of Christ's sacramental presence in Scripture based in pantheism (Boersma), to Carter's Reformed approach which sees the literal and spiritual senses as nearly one, such that spiritual reading is simply an extension of literal reading. Moreover, both proposals undermine Scripture's objectivity, and therefore its authority. Boersma does this openly, granting Scripture as many meanings as there are possible encounters with Christ—that is to say, infinite meanings—so long as these encounters are mediated by the traditional experience of the church. Carter, by contrast, labors to avoid this pitfall yet still leaves the door open due to an impoverished account of inspiration and a lack of clarity regarding the relationship between human and divine authorial intent. Scripture must have a determinative meaning if it is to lay claim on us and draw us to repentance. When the meaning of Scripture is made subjective, it must surrender its authority either to each interpreter, or to a magisterium adjudicating between competing subjective interpretations. A truly Christian metaphysic and a right Christian hermeneutic must build on the anti-naturalism of Christian Platonism while

pressing toward greater specificity normed by Scripture. In particular, a right hermeneutic requires a strong doctrine of concursive inspiration, accounting for the ways in which both human and divine authors intended all that they wrote, toward a single objective meaning that would only reach its fullness with the completion of the sending of the Son and Spirit and the closing of the canon. Such a hermeneutic requires both an asymmetrical account of authorial intent in which the divine author intends all that the human author intends and more, while the human author intends their work to be part of a greater unfolding story, such that all the fullness the divine author brings expands and develops the human author's open-ended eschatological intent.<sup>87</sup> This article alone cannot settle the question of whether evangelical Christians ought to recover the fourfold sense. Nor can a brief survey of Christian Platonism address all the questions necessary for a Christian metaphysic. Yet whatever answers we bring to these questions, we must refuse both the naturalism that flattens Scripture into merely human words and the subjectivism that dissolves its meaning into ours. The God who spoke concursively through human authors intends to be heard — and can be.

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<sup>1</sup> Though others have adopted the term “Christian Platonism” both in academic work and the blogosphere, Boersma and Carter are two of the leading proponents of rooting theological hermeneutics in a Christian Platonist metaphysic. See, e.g., Paul M. Gould, “Christian Metaphysics and Platonism,” in *Four Views on Christian Metaphysics*, ed. Timothy M. Mosteller (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2022); James Matthew Wilson, *The Vision of the Soul: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty in the Western Tradition* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2017), 97–107; James Bryson, “A Vision of Christian Platonism,” *The North American Anglican*, September 29, 2020, <https://northamanglican.com/a-vision-of-christian-platonism/>; *Christian Platonism: A History*, ed. Alexander J. B. Hampton and John Peter Kenney (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021). Gould proposes that a “Christian Platonic metaphysic [is] the best overall metaphysical theory,” in contrast to other forms of Platonism and articulations of Christianity according to other metaphysical theories. For Gould, the fundamental insight of Christian Platonism is its account of the relationship between abstract objects (understood as divine ideas) and the physical world. Wilson, by contrast, focuses his book on Christian Platonism's role in western culture (particularly in its teaching on the soul's natural desire for transcendental beauty and truth), and the need to reclaim it for political and social conservatism. Bryson's work is a review of Wilson's book, but he spends as much of his time articulating his own forthcoming view (which emphasizes the sacramental character of Christian Platonism), as he does reviewing Wilson. Hampton and Kenney provide a monumental, edited volume, which though made up primarily of historical description, is also intended for prescriptive ressourcement in the present day. These are only examples, to say nothing of the Cambridge Platonists and others. None of these four approaches need to be at odds with each other — though they are not necessarily fully compatible either. I only intend to demonstrate that proposals of “Christian Platonism” are wide-ranging, occurring in various disciplines (historical, philosophical, theological, political, cultural, and artistic), and may or may not be related to one another. It is therefore necessary to delimit the conversation to one form or articulation of Christian Platonism. Other authors, such as Matthew Levering, also advocate a return to exegesis based on premodern participatory metaphysics. However, Levering does not refer to his project as “Christian Platonism” in any publication that I am aware of, and for that reason I have excluded him from this study. Nonetheless, both Boersma and Carter cite his work favorably as

a project that parallels their own. See Matthew Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis: A Theology of Biblical Interpretation* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008).

- 2 Craig A. Carter, *Contemplating God with the Great Tradition: Recovering Trinitarian Classical Theism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 8n19. It is worth noting that Carter wrote this in 2021, prior to many of Boersma's publications which I reference in this article.
- 3 This negative definition of Christian Platonism is drawn from Lloyd P. Gerson, *From Plato to Platonism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 9–19. For its use by both Carter and Boersma, see Craig A. Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition: Recovering the Genius of Premodern Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 79–84; Hans Boersma, *Five Things Theologians Wish Biblical Scholars Knew* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021), 43; cf. Robert Lyon, "What Is Christian Platonism? (Part 1): An Introduction in Three Steps," *Christ Over All*, August 5, 2024.
- 4 Hans Boersma, *Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), passim; Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition*, 61–91.
- 5 Hans Boersma, "God as Embodied: Christology and Participation in Maximus the Confessor," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 67, no. 1–2 (2023): 147–175; "Participatory Metaphysics and Creation Out of God," *Heythrop Journal* 66 (2025): 273.
- 6 Hans Boersma, "Modernity and God-Talk," *First Things*, October 21, 2025, <https://firstthings.com/modernity-and-god-talk/>.
- 7 Boersma, "Participatory Metaphysics and Creation Out of God."
- 8 Boersma, "Participatory Metaphysics and Creation Out of God," 271, 274.
- 9 Hans Boersma, "A Metaphysic of Love: God Beyond Being," *New Ressourcement* 3, no. 1 (2026): 216–40.
- 10 Boersma, "God as Embodied," 174.
- 11 Boersma, "A Metaphysic of Love," 218, 220. Boersma states that particulars do not have their own substances, rather, they exist merely as relative manifestations of God's own substance. At the same time, Boersma denies substance metaphysics entirely, preferring to speak of love as more fundamental than being. Nonetheless, God's sacramental is that which makes the creature what it is. Cf. Boersma, "Participatory Metaphysics and Creation Out of God," 266–74, in which Boersma criticizes Thomas Aquinas for being unwilling to admit that God is the formal cause of created beings, indicating that he ought to have accepted that "God himself [is] the real presence that makes the creature what it is" (267). Likewise, Boersma criticizes materialism as such, that is, the idea that matter exists or that things have potentiality in themselves, apart from the direct agency of God (268–274). Combined with Boersma's claim that the immaterial substance of creation emanates from God by an act of the divine will (269), it appears that Boersma's claim is that God, in His energies, is in some sense the form and the substance of created being. He not only provides the creature form and substance as an efficient cause—Boersma criticizes Aquinas for limiting participation to this (266)—but in some sense provides them out of Himself (*ex deo*).
- 12 Boersma, "Participatory Metaphysics and Creation Out of God," 274.
- 13 Boersma, "Modernity and God-Talk"; "God as Embodied"; cf. John Meyendorff, introduction to *The Triads*, by Gregory Palamas (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1983), 7, 19.
- 14 Thus, in "Modernity and God-Talk," Boersma argues that without a sacramental pantheism grounded in the essence-energies distinction, we will be tempted to live *etsi Deus non daretur*—as if God did not exist. Boersma charges both traditional articulations of divine simplicity (i.e., that God is identical to his attributes) and a view of creation as a mere sign with reinforcing the modernist tendency to live as if God did not exist. Boersma, "Modernity and God-Talk." Boersma reiterates this on the about page of his personal website, stating "In modernity, we have come to see the world around us as nothing but symbols: material objects separate from each other and separate from their origin in God," Hans Boersma, "About," accessed March 28, 2026, <https://hansboersma.org/about>.
- 15 Hans Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie and Sacramental Ontology: A Return to Mystery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 141–143; *Heavenly Participation*, 22.
- 16 This is precisely the illustration Boersma uses in *Heavenly Participation*, 22–23.
- 17 Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*, 22–25. Here, Boersma first defines sacraments as signs which co-inhere, and are co-inherited by, the reality to which they point, and then claims that the whole world is a sacrament of God. Boersma reiterates this in several places, including the about page of his website. Hans Boersma, "About," accessed March 28, 2026, [hansboersma.org/about](https://hansboersma.org/about); cf. Hans Boersma, "10 Questions with Hans Boersma: A Conversation about Metaphysics, Ressourcement, and the Local Church," *Credo Magazine* 12, no. 3 (December 5, 2022); Boersma, "Participatory Metaphysics and Creation Out of God," 265.

- 18 Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*, 22–23; *Seeing God: The Beatific Vision in the Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 99.
- 19 Boersma, *Seeing God*, 413. Boersma acknowledges this shift in his thinking in “Modernity and God-Talk.”
- 20 Boersma’s first use of the term, that I am aware of, is in “God as Embodied,” 174.
- 21 Boersma explicitly states that his understanding of the “relationship between God and the world” is a sacramental ontology. Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*, 21.
- 22 Boersma, *Five Things*, 38.
- 23 Hans Boersma, *Scripture as Real Presence: Sacramental Exegesis in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 115–116. Cf. also Boersma, “God as Embodied,” 153.
- 24 I have been unable to find a place where Boersma states this directly. However, it is everywhere implied in his writing.
- 25 Boersma, *Five Things*, 65; *Pierced by Love: Divine Reading with the Christian Tradition* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2023), 1. Boersma further notes that the terms “holy” and “divine” are interchangeable. Thus, in saying that Scripture is holy, Boersma is also saying that it is divine, ostensibly in a unique sense (*Pierced by Love*, 2).
- 26 Boersma, *Scripture as Real Presence*, 114, 116; “God as Embodied,” 153, etc.
- 27 Boersma, *Scripture as Real Presence; Sacramental Preaching: Sermons on the Hidden Presence of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016); *Pierced by Love*.
- 28 Boersma, *Scripture as Real Presence*, 12–13, 42, 201, etc.
- 29 Boersma, *Pierced by Love*, 3–5.
- 30 I have put meaning in scare-quotes because while Boersma would define subjective spiritual encounters with the text as meaning, I am not convinced that this is a valid use of the term. Following Kevin Vanhoozer, E. D. Hirsch, Richard Lints, and many others I hold that texts have a single objective meaning, which is closely related to, if not identical with, that which the author(s) intended. This single meaning may have multiple layers, but it remains an objective meaning. Scripture, as a dually authored text complicates this picture, in that there are multiple authorial intents. Yet as I argue below, these are connected such that meaning remains dependent on authorial intent. Cf. Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993); Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009); *Mere Christian Hermeneutics: Transfiguring What It Means to Read the Bible Theologically* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2024); E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967); Michael J. Pereira, “‘The Lord God Has Sent Me and His Spirit’: The Divine Missions, the Literal Sense, and Reading the Old Testament,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 68, no. 4 (2025): 639–61.
- 31 Boersma, *Scripture as Real Presence*, 12, emphasis added; cf. *Pierced by Love*, 2–4, 44–46, 96–113, 204–206. In emphasizing the hiddenness of the text’s (many) spiritual meanings, Boersma seeks to demonstrate that these are separate and different from the text’s literal meaning.
- 32 Hans Boersma, “No Method but Christ: An Overview of Spiritual Interpretation and Biblical Exegesis,” *First Things*, February 2025, 11; cf. *Scripture as Real Presence*, 114–115, 128; *Pierced by Love*, 4.
- 33 Boersma, “God as Embodied,” *Scripture as Real Presence*, 116.
- 34 Boersma, *Scripture as Real Presence*, 116–118, 159–186.
- 35 Boersma, *Pierced by Love*, 43–47.
- 36 Boersma, *Pierced by Love*, 43, 51–69. Boersma states in one line that lectio is concerned to discover “the historical meaning of the text” (43), but his chapter on doing lectio has nothing to say about pursuit of the historical meaning, focusing instead almost entirely on the rigorous attentiveness required in lectio as an antidote to sloth and therefore as a preparatory step for the higher levels. It seems unlikely that Boersma would identify even the text’s literal/historical meaning as that meaning which its human author intended, though in any case, he spends little time dealing with the literal sense. In his chapter on the literal sense in *Scripture as Real Presence*, Boersma likewise focuses on attentiveness to the words of the text, interpreted through theological-metaphysical convictions, more than on attentiveness to the human author’s original intent (Boersma, *Scripture as Real Presence*, 27–55).
- 37 Boersma, *Pierced by Love*, 5–6, 46, 71–89, 107–113, 115–139. Boersma states that “imagination is the key faculty which enables the encounter [with Christ] to happen” (*Pierced by Love*, 5–6).
- 38 Boersma, *Pierced by Love*, 27–28.
- 39 Boersma, *Pierced by Love*, 111–113, 115–139.
- 40 Boersma, *Pierced by Love*, 46, 141–160.
- 41 Boersma, *Pierced by Love*, 187–188.

- 42 Boersma, *Scripture as Real Presence*, 258.
- 43 Boersma, *Pierced by Love*, 4–5, 15–16, 209.
- 44 Boersma, *Pierced by Love*, 211.
- 45 Boersma, *Pierced by Love*, 211.
- 46 Boersma, *Scripture as Real Presence*, 111–120; *Nouvelle Théologie and Sacramental Ontology*, 231–241.
- 47 Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition*, 66.
- 48 Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition*, 81, citing Gerson, *From Plato to Platonism*, 15. Just before this, Carter also summarizes Gerson's five principles of Ur-Platonism cited earlier; cf. Carter, *Contemplating God with the Great Tradition*, 291–292.
- 49 Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition*, 83.
- 50 Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition*, 83–84.
- 51 Carter, *Contemplating God with the Great Tradition*, 7–9; cf. *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition*, 82; "The Superiority of Pre-Critical Metaphysics: Why We Need to Recover Christian Platonism," *Journal of the Institute of Reformed Baptist Studies* 6, no. 1 (2019): 5–25. Carter also states that it is the Reformer John Calvin who brings the exegetical tradition of the Great Tradition to its peak, *Interpreting Scripture*, 165, 170.
- 52 Carter, *Contemplating God with the Great Tradition with the Great Tradition*, 8n19; cf. *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition*, 57.
- 53 Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition*, 57, 83.
- 54 Carter, *Contemplating God with the Great Tradition*, 7–9, 42n36, 291–293. Though his discussion of Reformed Thomism is brief, Carter provides several principles which it maintains: 1) "Reformed Thomism holds to the doctrine of God outlined by Thomas Aquinas in the first forty-three questions of the *Summa Theologiae*," 2) it "affirms the Reformation *solus*," 3) it affirms creation ex nihilo as the foundation of all things' relation to God, and 4) "Reformed Thomism distinguishes conceptually between the immanent and economic Trinity." Carter also notes that Reformed Thomism affirms the historic reformed confessions but given the disagreements between those confessions it does not seem right to identify the entire Reformed confessional heritage as a feature of the metaphysic itself. I believe on that final point Carter simply means to state that one cannot identify oneself as part of the Reformed tradition without ascribing to at least one of the statements which define what the Reformed tradition is.
- 55 Carter, *Contemplating God with the Great Tradition*, 292. Carter identifies this as a feature of all scholastic realism, not only Reformed Thomism.
- 56 Boersma, "Participatory Metaphysics and Creation Out of God," 265–266.
- 57 For the first, see Carter, "The Superiority of Pre-Critical Metaphysics"; *Contemplating God with the Great Tradition*. For the second, see Carter, "Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Response to Daniel Block, Elliott Johnson and Vern Poythress," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 22, no. 3 (2018): 129–141; *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition*; "Premodern Approach," in *Five Views of Christ in the Old Testament*, ed. Brian J. Tabb and Andrew M. King (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2022), 239–266.
- 58 Carter, "The Superiority of Pre-Critical Metaphysics," 6.
- 59 Carter, "Preaching Christ from the Old Testament," 131–132.
- 60 Note, Carter conflates the terms "verbal plenary inspiration" and "dictation theory," *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition*, 38.
- 61 Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition*, 37–42; "Premodern Approach," 249–250.
- 62 Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition*, 42–45.
- 63 Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition*, 57; "Premodern Approach," 241–242.
- 64 These five are 1) as the direct fulfillment of certain messianic prophecies, 2) as the antitype of Old Testament types, 3) according to the fourfold sense, 4) as the new Israel who recapitulates Israel's story, and 5) as the speaker of certain Old Testament texts, which can be interpreted prosopologically (Carter, "Premodern Approach," 239–240).
- 65 Though one could infer this from his discussion in "Premodern Approach," it becomes more evident in Carter's responses to his fellow authors in *Five Views*. See Craig A. Carter, "Rejoinder," in *Five Views of Christ in the Old Testament*, ed. Brian J. Tabb and Andrew M. King (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2022), 290–292.
- 66 Carter, "Premodern Approach," 243.
- 67 Carter, "Premodern Approach," 251, 253, 258, 259; *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition*, 165.
- 68 Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition*, 165; "Preaching Christ from the Old Testament," 137.

- 69 Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition*, 165. Carter seems to imply that not all methods will be reasonably connected to the literal sense in a given text, so the interpreter should have all five tools of Christological exegesis at their disposal.
- 70 Carter, "Rejoinder," 292.
- 71 Carter, "Premodern Approach," 255.
- 72 Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition*, 253–254. Carter also considers the positions that the Bishop of Rome, "the communal sense of the community of faith," or "individual experience" provide the control on meaning, but rejects them. He considers the last two positions heretical, and though he does not agree that the magisterial office of the Pope bears the responsibility to adjudicate meanings, he considers it a legitimate position worthy of debate.
- 73 Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition*, 33. For Carter, the interpretive process is circular—we must understand God to understand Scripture, but we come to understand God by understanding Scripture—yet it is not a vicious circle, since God's Word ultimately always retains the ability and authority to correct us.
- 74 Boersma, *Pierced by Love*, 211; cf. Zach Kendrick, "Reading the Bible Sacramentally," interview with Hans Boersma, *Reading for the Glory* (podcast), March 10, 2026, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N8AUhLtAJVl>; Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition*, 254; "Premodern Approach," 290.
- 75 Boersma, "God as Embodied," 165. In many ways, this parallels Rusty Reno's assertion that "proper interpretation proves itself to be such when our reading of Scripture accords with what the church teaches" (R. R. Reno, *The End of Interpretation: Reclaiming the Priority of Ecclesial Exegesis* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022], xv).
- 76 Portions of the above paragraph are adapted from Knox Brown, "Christian Platonism or Christian Panentheism? A Critique of Hans Boersma's Sacramental Ontology" (paper presented at the 77th Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Boston MA, November 18, 2025).
- 77 In fact, it seems Boersma is even willing to let the spiritual sense cut against the literal sense, as evidenced by his interaction with Origen's exegesis of Joshua. Based on Origen's reading, Boersma argues those who read the book of Joshua literally and identify its meaning with its human author's intent are forced either "to justify the violence inherent in the Old Testament or to abandon the Old Testament as Christian Scripture." Thus, a spiritual meaning must be found to sanitize the literal meaning of the text (Boersma, *Scripture as Real Presence*, 111, 123).
- 78 E.g., the pope in Roman Catholicism.
- 79 Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie and Sacramental Ontology*, 234–239; cf. 209ff where Boersma finds Marie-Dominique Chenu making similar claims, though Boersma is less enthusiastic in his endorsement there; cf. Yves M. J. Congar, *Tradition and Traditions: The Biblical, Historical, and Theological Evidence for Catholic Teaching on Tradition*, trans. Michael Naseby and Thomas Rainborough (San Diego: Basilica, 1966), 188, 205, 269–70; *The Meaning of Tradition*, trans. A. N. Woodrow (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2004), 70–72, 81, 152. Both Congar sources are as cited in Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie and Sacramental Ontology*, 234–235n244–246.
- 80 Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie and Sacramental Ontology*, 234–236.
- 81 For an earlier version of this argument, see Knox Brown, "The Wild, Wild West, the Sirens of Rome, and the Hermeneutics of Christian Platonism," *Christ Over All*, August 7, 2024, <https://christoverall.com/article/concise/the-wild-wild-west-the-sirens-of-rome-and-hermeneutics-of-christian-platonism/>.
- 82 Carter deals with prosopological exegesis and Psalm 40 in *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition*, 192–201.
- 83 For these three contexts, see Lints, *The Fabric of Theology*.
- 84 Carter uses the phrase "extended literal sense" in "Preaching Christ from the Old Testament," 134; cf. "Premodern Approach," 265.
- 85 Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition*, 38–45.
- 86 In some ways, this parallels Jason DeRouchie's critique of Carter's premodern approach (Jason S. DeRouchie, "Response to Craig A. Carter (The Redemptive-Historical, Christocentric Approach)," in *Five Views of Christ in the Old Testament*, ed. Brian J. Tabb and Andrew M. King [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2022], 284–289).
- 87 For an example of this hermeneutic, see Michael J. Pereira, "The Lord Has Sent Me and His Spirit." Vanhoozer articulates something similar, though not in this language, in *Mere Christian Hermeneutics*.

# The Reception of the Psychological Analogy of the Trinity in Reformed Theology: Augustine, Late Medieval Scholasticism, and Francis Turretin

ROBERTO A. MARTINEZ

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**Roberto A. Martinez** is one of the pastors of Iglesia Bautista Gracia y Verdad, a Hispanic Reformed Baptist congregation in Louisville, Kentucky, and serves with the Hispanic Program at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky. He holds a Masters of Divinity from Southern Seminary and is currently pursuing a PhD in Systematic Theology at Southern Seminary. His academic interests include Reformed Scholasticism, with particular attention to the theology of Francis Turretin. He has previously published in *SBJT* and at “Christ Over All” ([www.christoverall.com](http://www.christoverall.com)). Roberto is married to Valentina, and they have two daughters.

## INTRODUCTION

While the patristic and medieval roots of the psychological analogy of the Trinity have been widely explored within Roman Catholic theology, its reception in the Reformed tradition has received comparatively little attention. Richard Muller, in *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, offers the most comprehensive treatment currently available in the literature.<sup>1</sup> He concludes that Reformed theologians generally distanced themselves from “all forms of rational argumentation toward the doctrine of the Trinity and allowed only limited use of traditional metaphors and similes in their

expositions.”<sup>2</sup> This assessment is correct, yet it can be further refined through a closer analysis of what this “limited” appropriation of the analogy actually entails. To that end, my purpose is to examine how Reformed Orthodoxy received the psychological analogy by focusing on the Trinitarian theology of one of its key representatives, Francis Turretin.<sup>3</sup>

I argue that Turretin receives the psychological analogy in a strictly limited and non-determinative manner. He retains its illustrative value for the generation of the Son, yet rejects its extension to the Spirit’s procession because it exceeds the warrant of Scripture. In doing so, Turretin operates within a broadly Thomistic metaphysical framework, yet he is significantly more restrictive than either Augustine or Aquinas in his use of the psychological analogy. Whereas they employ the analogy to offer a genuine — though analogical — account of the divine processions, Turretin confines it to a limited, illustrative role and resists granting it explanatory force. Thus, his approach constitutes a distinctly Reformed retrieval of the Augustinian–Thomistic tradition: he affirms its metaphysical grammar while deliberately circumscribing the analogy’s doctrinal function within Trinitarian theology.

This study proceeds in three steps. First, I will situate the psychological analogy within its development from Augustine to late medieval scholasticism. Second, I will examine Turretin’s reception of the analogy within this framework, focusing on his doctrine of the *imago Dei* and his account of the divine processions. Finally, I will present the implications of this reading for the Reformed tradition, arguing that it reflects a principled restriction rather than a rejection of the analogy.

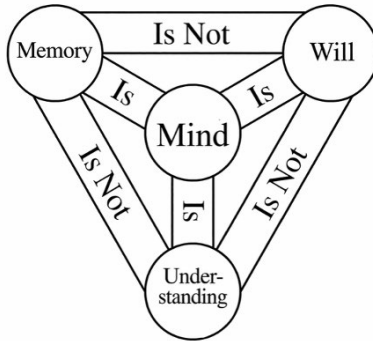
## THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALOGY IN CHRISTIAN TRADITION

The psychological analogy of the Trinity occupies a central place in the development of Trinitarian doctrine. Far from being a marginal feature, it has often played a significant role in articulating the nature of the divine processions. In what follows, I will first define the analogy, then examine its formulation in Augustine, and finally trace its development in late medieval scholasticism.

The psychological analogy, following Russell Friedman, may be defined as a model according to which “human psychology—the study of the human soul, and particularly the human mind, its architecture and

its activities—can be employed to explain or clarify the Trinity.”<sup>4</sup> In this sense, the faculties of the mind—intellect, memory, and will—are used to illuminate our understanding of unity and distinction in the Trinity.<sup>5</sup>

Figure 1. Basic Diagram of the Psychological Analogy.<sup>6</sup>



At the risk of simplification (see Figure 1), the human mind may be described as a single, unified reality, considered under three inseparable faculties: intellect, memory, and will. Each of these faculties is truly mind and fully participates in the same mental reality, yet none of them is identical with the others. The intellect is not the will, the will is not the memory, and the memory is not the intellect; nevertheless, none of them exists autonomously, but always as distinct modes of the one mind. Analogously, just as the mind is one reality expressed through distinct yet inseparable faculties, so Trinitarian theology confesses one divine essence subsisting in three really distinct persons. Finally, the faculties of the mind exhibit a certain order: memory corresponds to the first movement of the intellect, understanding proceeds from memory, and the will follows as the perfection of the intellectual act. Each faculty is the whole mind in act, yet each is distinct according to its order and relation to the others. This ordered relation renders the analogy especially fitting, insofar as it provides a conceptual framework for thinking about processions that are internal, non-temporal, and without division—thus offering an analogical point of contact for understanding the generation of the Word and the spiration of love within the unity of the divine essence. In this way, the faculties of the

mind serve to clarify how God can have real internal processions in ordered relations without multiplication, division, composition, or subordination. It is to Augustine, who first articulated this analogical framework, that we now turn.

### ***Augustine of Hippo***

Augustine stands as the conceptual origin of the psychological analogy.<sup>7</sup> He was among the first to clarify the identity and distinction of the divine persons through the use of the analogy, drawing on the language of John's Gospel (John 1:1–3, 14).<sup>8</sup> While many assume that his analogy begins with an attempt to locate the most suitable analogies in creation for understanding the Trinity, Augustine's analogies are instead deeply rooted in his doctrine of creation.<sup>9</sup>

For Augustine, creation is the unified work of the triune God, in which every creature bears “a trace of the Trinity” through the Father's Word and the Spirit's goodness.<sup>10</sup> Among all creatures, humanity—created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26)<sup>11</sup>—is the only creature that can reflect the Divine Logos and participate through him in the likeness of God.<sup>12</sup> This participation, as Augustine elaborates, is rooted in the very nature of the human soul,<sup>13</sup> which in its rational structure mirrors the nature of divine processions.<sup>14</sup>

Building on this foundation, the bishop of Hippo expands the idea of humanity's unique role in reflecting God's image in *The Trinity* (*De Trinitate*). He urges the reader “to ascend inwardly” among the “intelligible things that are supreme and everlasting” to find “some trinity if we can.”<sup>15</sup> In this inward ascent, *he proposes several mental analogies that illustrate how the human mind mirrors the intra-Trinitarian life both in its unity and diversity.*<sup>16</sup> He explores *mind*, (*mens*), *its self-knowledge* (*notitia sui*), *and its self-love* (*amor sui*).<sup>17</sup> For Augustine, these faculties of the mind are intimately and necessarily related to one another because they share an equality and consubstantiality that serve to reflect the persons of the Trinity.<sup>18</sup> Augustine states these faculties are “inseparable from each other, and yet each one of them is substance, and all together they are one substance or being, while they are also posited with reference to one another.”<sup>19</sup>

He also proposes a second image: memory (*memoria*), understanding (*intelligentia*), and will (*voluntas sui*). This is, according to Augustine, “a

clearer trinity” because these faculties cannot be understood without reference to each other.<sup>20</sup> Although distinct, they are not independent but are united in one essence and mutually dependent for their existence. In Augustine’s words, these three “are not three lives but one life, nor three minds but one mind... not three substances but one substance.”<sup>21</sup> Therefore, Augustine concludes: “When it turns to itself in thought, a trinity is formed, in which a word can also be perceived. This trinity... is formed out of the very act of thought, with the will joining the two together. It is here, then, more than anywhere, that we should recognize the image we are looking for.”<sup>22</sup>

Finally, a third image is memory (*memoria*), knowledge (*intelligentia*), and love of God (*voluntas*). Unlike the two previous analogies, which had the self as their primary object, this analogy seeks an image whose true end is God.<sup>23</sup> Augustine asserts that, through God’s grace, the human mind overcomes the limitations imposed by the Fall and “truly recalls its Lord.”<sup>24</sup> Though humanity has lost the fullness of its original happiness, the mind—as created in God’s image—retains the capacity to “remember and understand and love him by whom it was made.” This process of inward renewal enables the mind to attain true wisdom—not through its own power but by participating in God’s supreme light.<sup>25</sup> In this inward process toward God, “the mind... is being renewed in the recognition of God according to the image of him who created (Col 3:10) man to his own image, and... thus achieves wisdom in the contemplation of things eternal.”<sup>26</sup>

As Maarten Wisse observes, Augustine’s project in *De Trinitate* does not culminate in a psychological theory of the Trinity but in a Trinitarian anthropology. Through the contemplation of the *imago Dei*, the human mind is drawn back toward the triune God whom it has rejected through sin.<sup>27</sup>

Augustine’s account of the *imago Dei* as a Trinitarian image within the human soul provides the foundational framework for all subsequent developments of the psychological analogy. Medieval theologians, despite their differences, begin from Augustinian assumptions, extending and refining his insights. Yet, as we will see, what changes in the medieval period is not the basic structure he establishes, but the degree of explanatory weight assigned to the analogy. To understand this development more fully, we now turn to its treatment in late medieval scholasticism.

***Late-Medieval Reception***<sup>28</sup>

As Russell Friedman explains, Trinitarian debates in the late medieval period can be broadly characterized by a sustained refinement of the psychological analogy as a means of clarifying the distinction of divine persons.<sup>29</sup> Medieval theologians began from Augustine's insight that creation bears the marks of its triune Creator; yet, unlike Augustine, they developed a far more complex and systematic account of how these vestiges are present in rational creatures created in the image of God.

This complexity is due, in part, to the "notable rise in the use of philosophical and linguistic insights," and also the increasing debate "over the proper explanation of traditional trinitarian language."<sup>30</sup> In this context, the psychological analogy was employed as one of the fundamental theological tools to articulate a rationally coherent account of unity and distinction among the divine persons against a range of ancient heresies that challenged Trinitarian orthodoxy.<sup>31</sup>

However, its development and use were far from uniform. Medieval theologians differed significantly regarding the nature of divine processions.<sup>32</sup> Consequently, they disagreed over the applicability and scope of the psychological analogy for explaining the divine processions without compromising divine simplicity.<sup>33</sup> Accordingly, we examine below this diversity of approaches by tracing two principal trajectories in the medieval use of the psychological model: the strong and the soft use of the analogy.

*Strong Use of the Analogy*

The strong use of the psychological analogy emerges within the Franciscan tradition, "relying on an emanation account of personal distinction."<sup>34</sup> As Friedman explains, it is characterized, first, by construing the divine processions in direct correspondence with the operations of intellect and will, such that "the Son quite literally is a Concept produced by the Father's intellect, and the Holy Spirit is Love produced by the will shared by the Father and the Son"<sup>35</sup>; and, second, by the integration of medieval cognitive theory in order to articulate, with greater metaphysical precision, the origin of the divine persons.<sup>36</sup> In this sense, as White concludes, it presupposes "a more restricted or modest doctrine of divine simplicity" and thus offers a more kataphatic, quasi-univocal account of the processions and the persons.

<sup>37</sup>

Scotus, one of the most significant representatives of this view, employs the psychological analogy to argue for real distinctions within the divine being.<sup>38</sup> He contends that if God knows himself, there must be a distinction between the knower and the act of knowing — that is, the concept that proceeds from this act. On this basis, Scotus maintains that “a person is truly produced by the act of the intellect as a productive source, and another person by the act of the will as a productive source, and not just metaphorically on account of some type of extraneous likeness.”<sup>39</sup> As Friedman observes, this distinction constitutes “the foundation of Scotus’ strong use of the psychological model of the Trinity,” since they allow him to explain “the nature of the sources of the divine emanations: both why these sources produce, and why they produce in two irreducibly distinct ways.”<sup>40</sup>

### *Soft Use of the Analogy*

The soft use of the psychological analogy emerges within the Dominican tradition, finding its most influential expression in Aquinas’s relational account of the divine processions. For him, the analogy neither grounds nor generates the doctrine of the divine processions; rather, it serves to demonstrate their logical soundness, affirming that reason does not contradict revelation.<sup>41</sup> Only through divine illumination can the intellect speak analogically of this mystery.<sup>42</sup> Accordingly, as White explains, the analogy in Aquinas functions in a modest apophatic sense — truly analogical, never univocal — while still offering genuine insight into God’s inner life.<sup>43</sup>

Aquinas develops his doctrine of the two immanent processions in God by appealing to the faculties of the mind — understanding and will — in order to clarify the mystery of the divine life.<sup>44</sup> In the act of understanding, the intellect generates an interior word (*verbum mentis*) that proceeds from it without departing, remaining fully internal and sharing the same intellectual nature as its source.<sup>45</sup> In the act of willing, by contrast, “the imprint of love emerges within the lover’s own affectivity,” such that through love, the good itself becomes interior to the will of the lover, in a manner parallel to the way an object of knowledge is interior to the intellect of the knower.<sup>46</sup> From this, Aquinas concludes that “the Son proceeds as intellect” and the Holy Spirit “proceeds as love of the will,” just as in creatures “possessing intellect and will, there is found the representation of the Trinity by way of image, since there is found in them the word conceived, and the love proceeding.”<sup>47</sup>

These divergent uses of the psychological analogy reveal that it is not a self-interpreting device, but a theological instrument whose proper scope is determined by prior theological and metaphysical commitments. The contrast between strong and soft uses thus reframes the central issue: not whether the analogy may be employed, but how far its explanatory force may be extended without collapsing the distinction between divine and human modes of knowing and loving. Recognizing this point is crucial, for, we will see below, the Reformed tradition does not merely replicate patristic and medieval models, but offers a theological appropriation of this doctrine, shaped by distinct doctrinal commitments that deliberately restrict the scope of the psychological analogy—a move that comes into particular focus in the Trinitarian theology of Francis Turretin.

### **THE RECEPTION OF THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALOGY IN THE REFORMED TRADITION**

The theological significance of the psychological analogy is inseparable from two closely related questions: the nature of the *imago Dei* in the human soul and the extent to which this image can bear genuine explanatory weight with respect to the divine processions. These issues, first developed in Augustine and variously extended in the medieval tradition, receive a more deliberately qualified treatment in the theology of Francis Turretin. Therefore, to clarify his limited and non-determinative use of the psychological analogy, I will examine both elements as they are articulated in the *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*.

#### ***Image of God and the Metaphysical Caution***

Like many of the Reformers and their successors, Turretin adopts a markedly cautious posture toward the notion of vestiges of the Trinity in the human soul.<sup>48</sup> Although he engages extensively with Augustine and Aquinas in his discussion of creation (Topic V, QQ I–XIV), his treatment of the Trinitarian structure in the human soul remains notably absent.

While Turretin does not directly critique the Augustinian account of the Trinitarian image in the soul, other figures within the Reformed tradition, like John Calvin, adopt a more critical posture.<sup>49</sup> In his commentary on Genesis, Calvin explicitly says:

Augustine, beyond all others, speculates with excessive refinement for the purpose of fabricating a Trinity in man. For in laying hold of the three faculties of the soul enumerated by Aristotle, the intellect, the memory, and the will, he afterward out of one Trinity derives many... I acknowledge, indeed, that there is something in man which refers to the Father, and the Son, and the Spirit: and I have no difficulty in admitting the above distinction of the faculties of the soul: although the simpler division into two parts, which is more used in Scripture, is better adapted to the sound doctrine of piety; but a definition of the image of God ought to rest on a firmer basis than such subtleties.<sup>50</sup>

Turretin's own approach reflects a comparable reserve, though expressed less polemically.

His definition of the *imago Dei* begins by articulating both what the image is not and what it is. Negatively, he insists that the divine image must be understood in an ectypal manner: "which is made after a copy of another thing, or similitude itself."<sup>51</sup> This means specifically that the image does not consist of:

A participation of the divine essence (*as if the nature of man were a shadow of the divine* and a certain particle of the divine breath, as the Gentiles hold). For in this way the Son of God only is 'the image of the invisible God' (Col. 1:15)—the essential and natural, and no mortal can attain to it because the finite cannot be a partaker of the infinite.<sup>52</sup>

In positing this, he not only repudiates pagan pantheistic conceptions of the soul as a divine emanation but also implicitly corrects certain medieval tendencies, particularly within the Franciscan tradition, that appeal to the Trinitarian image in the human soul as a means of explaining the divine processions as emanations in a quasi-univocal manner.<sup>53</sup>

Conversely, Turretin rejects any notion of the univocity of being.<sup>54</sup> He maintains that participation in the divine life is never "essential, formal, and intrinsic," but rather "analogical, accidental, and extrinsic." This means that participation for Turretin is grounded in effects "analogous to the divine perfections produced in us by the Spirit according to the image of God."<sup>55</sup> In other words, believers truly partake of the divine life (cf. 2 Pet 1:4), yet

this participation takes place through an “imperfect similitude” with respect to nature, gifts, and state, rather than by essence.<sup>56</sup>

Positively, Turretin locates the image in the “gifts bestowed upon man by creation.”<sup>57</sup> These created gifts include both internal faculties and external prerogatives, including features rooted in the very constitution of human nature (such as intellect and will) and qualities superadded to it (such as original righteousness and dominion).<sup>58</sup> These gifts, as a whole, situate humanity in a unique position within the created order as the visible creature “more closely allied to God.”<sup>59</sup>

Turretin adds that these gifts are mainly made up of three elements: 1) The ontological element in the very nature of the human soul. Turretin describes the soul as spiritual and incorruptible, “immortal intrinsically and as to its faculties, viz., the intellect and will and the liberty arising from both.”<sup>60</sup> These faculties, which “belong eminently and most perfectly to God,” are impressed upon the soul by way of created similitude.<sup>61</sup> Even after the Fall, “the essence of the soul and the gifts” remain, indicating that this ontological aspect of the image is not entirely effaced.<sup>62</sup>

2) The moral element consisting in original righteousness. This refers to the gifts bestowed upon humanity at creation, by which there existed perfect harmony among the human faculties and full conformity to the will of God.<sup>63</sup> Turretin maintains that Adam was created upright (Eccl. 7:29), possessing a disposition ordered toward perfect obedience.<sup>64</sup> Although this righteousness is supernatural in origin, it is nonetheless connatural to human nature, insofar as it is “necessary to the perfection of innocent man.”<sup>65</sup> For this reason, he rejects the notion that Adam was created in a state of *pura naturalia*, affirming instead that righteousness belonged to humanity from the beginning.<sup>66</sup> This position enables him to distance himself both from the Thomistic doctrine of pure nature and from Pelagian moralism, while affirming that the loss of this righteousness entails total depravity and the absolute necessity of grace — central commitments of Reformed theology.<sup>67</sup>

3) The functional element of the image expressed in humanity’s dominion over creation, which is the authority to govern and order the created world reflects, in a finite and analogical manner, the justice and sovereignty of God.<sup>68</sup>

In sum, Turretin generally aligns with a Thomistic metaphysics that rejects any idea of univocity of being. The *imago Dei*, in this sense, does not function as an explanatory bridge to the divine processions. However, unlike the Augustinian and medieval tradition, Turretin does not develop a robust account of the *vestigia Trinitatis*, nor does he employ the structure of the human soul as a contemplative pathway into the divine life. Instead, the image is situated within a covenantal and redemptive framework, leaving no room for a purely natural state.<sup>69</sup>

### ***Divine Processions and the Psychological Analogy***

Turretin's treatment of the immanent life of God begins with a careful acknowledgment of the limitations of human language and conceptual categories in articulating divine mysteries. At the outset of his discussion of the divine processions, he recognizes that while distinctions within the Trinity may be classified—whether as real, formal, virtual, or personal—such categories “very imperfectly adumbrate” the mystery of God's inner life, precisely because they are derived “from human and finite things.”<sup>70</sup> Consequently, he cautions that it is better to rest in the general affirmation that a distinction exists, while acknowledging that “what and how great it is cannot be comprehended and expressed by us.”<sup>71</sup>

Conversely, Turretin maintains that the one that most nearly approximates a proper clarification of this mystery is the modal distinction (*distinctio modalis*).<sup>72</sup> As he put it, persons are distinguished by “certain modes by which they may be characterized.”<sup>73</sup> These modes do not introduce a real or formal distinction (*realiter*), but they are distinguished eminently and analogically, “as mode from the thing” (*modus a re*).<sup>74</sup>

This distinction, as Turretin clarifies, cannot introduce any composition in God, precisely because of the fundamental axiom of divine simplicity.<sup>75</sup> As he explains, “we do not have a thing and a thing, but a thing and the modes of the thing.”<sup>76</sup> To put it another way, the modal distinction within the divine essence does not posit something really distinct from that essence, since modes are not parts but manners of subsistence. Accordingly, the essence “is not compounded but *distinguished*.”<sup>77</sup>

In this sense, for Turretin, the personal properties of the divine persons (relative and modal) are not understood as accidents nor additions to the divine being, nor do they constitute a second essence alongside it. They are,

as Turretin explain, not formally identical with the divine essence considered in the abstract: “It is God in the concrete, but not in the abstract.”<sup>78</sup> Thus, *divinity* denotes the divine essence in the abstract, whereas “God the Father,” “God the Son,” and “God the Spirit” signify that same divine essence subsisting according to the mode of paternity, filiation, and spiration. Thus, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are truly and fully God, yet not reducible to the essence considered abstractly, thereby preserving a real distinction among the persons without compromising divine simplicity.<sup>79</sup>

In sum, each person of the Trinity “is indeed God in concrete,” yet cannot be identified with the essence taken absolutely, since that essence subsists inseparably in the three persons and is defined by its triune modes of subsistence.<sup>80</sup>

This metaphysical framework is decisive for our purposes. By grounding personal distinction in modes of subsistence rather than in any composition or division within the divine essence, Turretin establishes from the outset that the mystery of the Trinity cannot be explained through created categories in any univocal or determinative manner. Consequently, as we will see below, his appropriation of the psychological analogy remains strictly analogical, subordinate, and non-explanatory with respect to the divine processions (i.e., a “soft use of the analogy”).

However, rather than functioning as an explanatory principle, the psychological analogy is carefully circumscribed and employed in a secondary, pedagogical manner—a pattern that becomes evident in his treatment of the generation of the Son.

### *The Generation of the Son*

Turretin affirms that the Son proceeds from the Father by way of “eternal generation.”<sup>81</sup> In continuity with Nicene Trinitarianism, he upholds the Son’s eternal and consubstantial nature (*homoousios*) while insisting that the manner of this generation transcends human comprehension and cannot be “conceived or explained by us” (cf. Isa. 53:8).<sup>82</sup> For Turretin, the mystery of the generation of the Son stands at the very center of orthodox Christian confession—a conviction consistently upheld by the Church Fathers, including Ambrose, Gregory of Nazianzus, Athanasius, and Hilary, all of whom urged reverent silence before what is ineffable. Accordingly, he maintains that we must simply confess that

the Son “was begotten,” without presuming to explain this truth through human reasoning.<sup>83</sup>

In this context, Turretin identifies two principal errors within medieval scholasticism—likely directed against stronger deployments of the psychological analogy and certain emanationist tendencies.<sup>84</sup> First, such approaches transgress the limits established by Scripture. Second, they attempt to investigate and explain “the mode of this generation,” which is “not only ineffable but also incomprehensible even to the angels themselves.”<sup>85</sup> In contrast to such approaches, Turretin refuses to treat the psychological analogy as an explanatory model capable of disclosing the inner logic of the divine processions. Given the infinite distance between Creator and creature, Turretin regards any univocal use of human faculties (e.g., memory, intellect, and will) to describe the divine life as prone to anthropomorphic distortion because the divine processions “greatly differ (whether we consider the principle, the mode, or the end).”<sup>86</sup> In short, he stands in continuity with Aquinas in rejecting any univocal application of the psychological analogy, since “the finite is incapable of the infinite.”<sup>87</sup>

This caution was particularly significant in Turretin’s theological context, where Socinian and Arian critiques frequently targeted the doctrine of the Trinity. A univocal deployment of the psychological analogy could easily be construed as an attempt to comprehend fully the divine mystery, thereby providing opponents with grounds to dismiss the doctrine as speculative, unnecessary, or overly complex.<sup>88</sup>

Nevertheless, Turretin does make qualified use of the analogy in relation to the mental procession of the Son.<sup>89</sup> He notes that analogies drawn “either from the mind, which by understanding itself forms the idea and image of itself within itself ... or from the sun, from which rays simultaneously emanate,” may, to some extent, “illustrate this mystery.” This reflects a distinctly “soft” use of the psychological analogy: it serves to illuminate what has been revealed without functioning as a causal or explanatory account of the divine processions, since it cannot provide “a full and accurate determination of the mode of this generation.”<sup>90</sup> The warrant for such usage lies in Scripture itself, which speaks of Christ as the Son of God, the Logos, “Wisdom,” “the image of God,” and “the brightness of the Father’s glory.”<sup>91</sup>

Accordingly, the mystery of generation must be approached with theological sobriety: we affirm “the fact (τῷ ὄντι)” — clearly revealed in Scripture — while refraining from any attempt to define or investigate “the mode,” which remains wholly incomprehensible, and is therefore to be left to “God, who alone most perfectly knows Himself.”<sup>92</sup> In this way, Turretin preserves the analogy as a legitimate theological aid while decisively denying it any explanatory or determinative role in accounting for the generation of the Son. However, as will become evident, this limited use cannot be extended to the procession of the Spirit.

### *The Procession of the Spirit*

Turretin begins his treatment of the Spirit’s procession, affirming both the eternality and consubstantiality of the Spirit’s procession. The Spirit shares “the same numerical essence” with the other divine persons.<sup>93</sup> For Turretin, what distinguishes this procession from the generation of the Son lies in the distinct relations of origin by which the persons are constituted: they are “different persons who stand related to each other in origin.”<sup>94</sup> Beyond this, however, “the nature of that distinction cannot be explained and may more safely be unknown than inquired into.”<sup>95</sup>

Turretin regards this approach to the procession of the Spirit as fully consistent with the orthodox confession of the Christian faith, as attested by many of the Church Fathers.<sup>96</sup> In order to prove this, he appeals to authorities such as John of Damascus and Augustine, that affirm the ineffability of this mystery.<sup>97</sup> Thus, as in the case of the generation of the Son, the precise nature of this distinction remains incomprehensible to all created intellects.

Turretin turns to the psychological analogy as developed within scholastic theology, saying: “I know that the Scholastics wish to derive this difference from the operation of the intellect (*modum intellectus*) — hence he is called the Wisdom of God; but procession by way of the will (*modum voluntatis*) — hence he is called Love and Charity.” Yet he contends that, lacking firm scriptural grounding, such an analogy, “entangles rather than explains.”<sup>98</sup> In this sense, whereas a limited, analogical use may be cautiously admitted with respect to generation of the Son, Turretin refuses to extend even this qualified use to the procession of the Spirit.

For Turretin, the psychological analogy is not a sufficient foundation for establishing what differentiates divine processions. Instead, he articulates this distinction in three ways:

1) in the principle, because the Son emanates from the Father alone, but the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son together. 2) In the mode, because the Son emanates by way of generation, which terminates not only on the personality, but also on the similarity (on account of which the Son is called the image of the Father and according to which the Son receives the property of communicating to another person the same essence; but the Spirit by way of spiration, which terminates only on the personality and by which the proceeding person does not receive the property of communicating that essence to another person). 3) In the order, because as the Son is the second person and the Spirit the third, generation in our mode of conceiving precedes spiration (although they are really coeternal).<sup>99</sup>

Turretin grounds the distinction of the processions not in speculative analogies drawn from the human mind, but in relational, modal, and ordered distinctions that remain faithful to the limits of revelation. This threefold account is decisive, for it preserves real differentiation among the persons, avoiding any univocal or explanatory use of the psychological analogy.

In sum, Turretin's concern is not that the psychological analogy is inherently false, but that, lacking clear scriptural warrant, it risks assuming more explanatory weight than revelation permits. While he appears more at ease employing intellectual language in reference to the Son, he is notably hesitant to ground the Spirit's personal distinction in categories such as will or love. In his judgment, such an approach risks speculative excess and ultimately obscures rather than clarifies the true basis of distinction, which lies not in psychological operations but in relations of origin.

## CONCLUSION

Turretin's treatment of the psychological analogy fits well within Richard Muller's general thesis: Reformed theologians tended to avoid both "Augustine's more speculative psychological analogies," preferring instead the patristic restraint exemplified by Gregory of Nazianzus.<sup>100</sup>

In this context, Turretin's use of the psychological analogy serves to illuminate and enrich this thesis in several ways. Particularly, it may be articulated in two key respects. First, Turretin's position may be understood as a moderated or qualified retrieval of the Thomistic account of the psychological analogy—that is, a soft use of the analogy. This is confirmed by the fact that 1) Turretin operates within a metaphysical and theological framework that, in many respects, aligns with the Thomistic tradition, and 2) he permits a limited, illustrative use of the psychological analogy in relation to the Son. Turretin, in this sense, does not follow the nominalist and minimalist tendencies associated with William of Ockham, in which the analogy is excluded altogether, and the knowledge of God is construed in radically apophatic terms.<sup>101</sup>

Consequently, the stronger criticisms in the *Institutes* are primarily directed against emanationist tendencies and against more robust deployments of the analogy that imply the possibility of a quasi-univocal knowledge of the divine processions.<sup>102</sup> His rejection does not stem from an aversion to metaphysics or philosophical theology *per se*.<sup>103</sup> Rather, it reflects his deep conviction that theological speculation must remain subordinated to special revelation.<sup>104</sup> The problem, in his judgment, is not merely methodological but doctrinal: speculative reasoning that exceeds the bounds of Scripture obscures rather than clarifies the doctrine of the Trinity—particularly in contexts where precision is required to respond to heresy.<sup>105</sup>

Second, Turretin's use of the psychological analogy is not a mere repetition of the Thomistic account, but a deliberately qualified appropriation of it. Two features define his more moderate deployment of the analogy. First, in contrast to Aquinas—who develops the psychological analogy more fully and assigns it a more prominent role in his Trinitarian theology, arguably even beyond Augustine—Turretin deliberately refrains from granting it such doctrinal weight in his theology.<sup>106</sup>

As Muller rightly observes, for the Reformed Orthodox “the doctrine of the Trinity is not a proper place for extensive rational demonstration and argumentation.”<sup>107</sup> In contrast, their call was to ground the traditional language and formulation of Trinitarian doctrine more fully and explicitly in Scripture than had been done for centuries.<sup>108</sup> As a result, Turretin's

approach is primarily deeply exegetical and secondarily firmly rooted in the classical tradition.<sup>109</sup>

Second, Turretin exhibits a marked reservation regarding the description of the Spirit's procession as Love.<sup>110</sup> Unlike Augustine and the medieval tradition more broadly, he does not find sufficient scriptural warrant for construing this procession in explicitly volitional terms. While certain biblical texts (e.g., John 1:1–3; Heb 1:3; Prov 8:22–31) may suggest analogical patterns supporting the Son's generation as Word or Wisdom, Turretin judges that such evidence is not sufficiently explicit to sustain a systematic account grounded in human psychological faculties—particularly when applied to the Spirit.

<sup>1</sup> Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 4 vols (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 4:20–21, 68–69, 73, 85–86, 114–115, 138, 157–165, 167, 287–288, 371–372, 376–378, 409–410.

<sup>2</sup> Muller, *PRRD*, 4:157.

<sup>3</sup> Turretin belongs to the period of High Orthodoxy (ca. 1640–1725), which, according to Muller's explanation, is characterized by a greater theological synthesis and a more codified approach to defending Reformed doctrine. This period intensifies polemics against doctrinal adversaries, addresses internal controversies like Amyraldianism, and expands debates on the Trinity with the Socinians. It also features a more explicit understanding of theological tradition, including contributions from the Middle Ages. Muller, *PRRD*, 1:31–32. In *Ad fontes argumentorum*, Mullers asserts that "Reformed orthodoxy was, after all, a living movement reflective of its own contexts and not merely a carbon copy of the thought of the Reformers: but what we can declare, with some confidence, is that the developing tradition of Reformed theology in the seventeenth century paid close attention to its roots in the Reformation and was concerned as it encountered new adversaries and new problems." Richard A. Muller, *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 53.

<sup>4</sup> Russell L. Friedman, *Medieval Trinitarian Thought from Aquinas to Ockham* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 50.

<sup>5</sup> As will be shown below, there is not a single psychological analogy of the Trinity; rather, both Augustine and later medieval theologians develop multiple such analogies. In this instance, I focus on the most well-known formulation in order to illustrate its theological function.

<sup>6</sup> The diagram presented here is based on the classical "Trinity shield" (*scutum fidei*), a well-known visual summary of the non-negotiable boundaries of Trinitarian orthodoxy—namely, that each divine person is fully God, yet not identical to the others, while God remains one. In this study, I adapt the logical structure of this traditional schema as a pedagogical tool to elucidate the psychological analogy, applying its "is/is not" relations to the faculties of the human mind (intellect, memory, and will) in order to clarify unity and distinction without confusion or division. I first encountered this way of explaining the psychological analogy through the teaching of my mentor, Dr. Kyle Claunch, in his course on the doctrine of the Trinity during my doctoral studies.

<sup>7</sup> Edmund J. Fortman, *The Triune God: A Historical Study of the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1982), 148; For a more extensive explanation of the psychological analogy in Augustine, see Lewis Ayres, "Augustine on the Trinity," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity*, ed. Matthew Levering and Giles Emery, Oxford Handbooks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 133–134; Likewise, Ayres in chapter eleven and twelve of his book *Augustine and the Trinity* explains in detail the best way to understand what Augustine is doing in chapter 8–15 in *The Trinity (De Trin)*. Lewis Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity*, Cambridge Books Online (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511780301>.

- 8 Friedman, *Medieval Trinitarian Thought from Aquinas to Ockham*, 3.
- 9 For a more extensive treatment of the image of God in Augustine and its relation to the Trinity, see chapters 1 through 4 in John Sullivan, *The Image of God: The Doctrine of St. Augustine and Its Influence* (Dubuque, Iowa: Priory Press, 1963).
- 10 Augustine, *City of God*. XI. 24, 225. This view expresses, as Lewis Ayres observes, more than the principle of inseparable operations. He affirms that created being carries the *impressio Trinitatis* — a mark of the triune causality *ad extra* that ultimately directs the mind toward the eternal relations *ad intra*. Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity*, 278.
- 11 Augustine, *On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis (On Gen)*. XVI, 55, p. 183.
- 12 Augustine, *On Gen*. XVI, 58, 61, p. 184–186; see also Augustine, 83 *Different Questions*. 23, p. 50.
- 13 Augustine, *City of God*. VIII–XVI. 233; Friedman, *Medieval Trinitarian Thought from Aquinas to Ockham*, 3.
- 14 Friedman, *Medieval Trinitarian Thought from Aquinas to Ockham*, 54–55.
- 15 Augustine, *De Trin*. XII, 4, 25.
- 16 These include: (1) mind, self-knowledge, and self-love; (2) memory, understanding, and will; and (3) memory, understanding, and love of God. Augustine, *De Trin*. XV, 1, 4; VIII, 5, 14, 25; XV, 1, 4; IX, 1, 8.
- 17 This analogy begins with the triad that Augustine established in Book VIII, consisting of love, the lover, and the beloved: “love means someone loving and something loved with love. There you are with three, the lover, what is being loved, and love” Augustine, *De Trin*. VIII, 5, 14, 25. When this distinction is applied to the concept of self-love, it suggests a unity and diversity appropriate for reflecting the internal mode of Trinitarian life.
- 18 Augustine affirms that: “Just as you have two somethings, mind and its love, when it loves itself, so you have two somethings, mind and its knowledge, when it knows itself. The mind therefore and its love and knowledge are three somethings, and these three are one thing, and when they are complete they are equal.” Augustine, *De Trin*. IX, 1, 4. For detail analysis see Sullivan, *The Image of God*, 118–119.
- 19 Augustine, *De Trin*. IX, 1, 8.
- 20 Augustine, *De Trin*. XV, 1, 4.
- 21 Augustine, *De Trin*. X, 4, 18.
- 22 Augustine, *De Trin*. XIV, 3, 13.
- 23 Despite this, the self in Augustine’s theology should not be understood as entirely independent of God, who is the true object of the image. Sullivan, *Image of God*, 136; Augustine states that the last trinity discovered in man is a trinity that “belongs to the outer man, because it has been brought in from bodily things which have been sensed outside” Augustine, *De Trin*. XV, 1, 5.
- 24 Augustine, *De Trin*. XIV, 4, 21.
- 25 Augustine, *De Trin*. XIV, 4, 15.
- 26 Augustine, *De Trin*. XV, 1, 5.
- 27 Maarten Wisse, *Trinitarian Theology Beyond Participation: Augustine’s De Trinitate and Contemporary Theology*, T&T Clark Studies in Systematic Theology, v. 11 (T&T Clark, 2011), 149.
- 28 Trinitarian theology, metaphysics, and medieval theories of the mind are highly complex and very specialized fields. For this reason, my treatment is by no means exhaustive. Therefore, I have a very more modest aim: I seek simply to offer a general synthesis of two main metaphysical approaches to the use of the psychological analogy in medieval Trinitarian theology. For exhaustive treatment on the topic, see Friedman, *Medieval Trinitarian Thought from Aquinas to Ockham*.
- 29 Friedman, *Medieval Trinitarian Thought from Aquinas to Ockham*, 3; see also Muller, *PRRD*, 4:37.
- 30 Muller, *PRRD*, 4:20. Aquinas, for example, combines Augustinian and Aristotelian insights into human cognition. From Aristotle, he appropriates the view that intellectual knowledge culminates in the formation of an intelligible concept, while from Augustine he retains the emphasis on the interior act by which understanding is completed. The resulting notion of an interior or “mental word” functions as a conceptual synthesis of these traditions and supplies the philosophical basis for Aquinas’s use of the psychological analogy. Friedman, *Medieval Trinitarian Thought from Aquinas to Ockham*, 52, 55, 79.
- 31 As Thomas Joseph White notes, the analogy proved particularly effective against Arianism, which located the divine processions outside of God, and Sabellianism, which denied real distinctions within the divine essence. White, *The Trinity*, 392.
- 32 White, *The Trinity*, 374–375.
- 33 Friedman argues that “A number of theologians from the early to the mid-fourteenth century take defending God’s absolute simplicity to be the most important goal in trinitarian theology.” *Medieval Trinitarian Thought from Aquinas to Ockham*, 98

- 34 Friedman, *Medieval Trinitarian Thought from Aquinas to Ockham*, 51.
- 35 Friedman, *Medieval Trinitarian Thought from Aquinas to Ockham*, 51; emphasis mine. As Friedman comments, "For the Franciscans in general, psychological theory, for example theories of concepts and their formation, could and should be used to answer trinitarian questions, and there is an incredibly close interaction in their writings between trinitarian theology and what we would today call the philosophy of mind." *Medieval Trinitarian Thought from Aquinas to Ockham*, 51.
- 36 Friedman in *Medieval Trinitarian Thought from Aquinas to Ockham*, 59–60. For a detailed account on the philosophical psychology and the background of later-medieval theory of cognition, see 76–93.
- 37 White, *The Trinity*, 375.
- 38 Richard Cross explains that Scotus distinguishes this notional act of love from God's essential love common to the three persons: the notional act presupposes knowledge and has the divine essence itself as its proper object. Richard Cross, *Duns Scotus*, Great Medieval Thinkers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 63. Other important representatives of this view are Henry of Ghent and Peter Auriol. Friedman elaborates in these authors' use of the psychological model extensively in *Medieval Trinitarian Thought from Aquinas to Ockham*.
- 39 Scotus, I *Ordinatio* (Ord). D13, no. 21, 23 translated and quoted in Friedman, *Medieval Trinitarian Thought from Aquinas to Ockham*, 75. Similarly, Auriol, arguing contra the more Thomistic account elaborated by Durandus of St. Pourçain says: "The Holy Spirit does not pertain to love metaphorically or transumptively, rather most properly. For an exemplar is not called such because of its likeness to the image — quite the opposite: the image is called such because of its likeness to the exemplar. The trinity, however, that pertains to the image in us consists in a word pertaining to the intellect and a spirit that pertains to love. Therefore, it is not because of their likeness to [the word and spirit] as they exist in us, that the Word and Spirit in the divine, whose image is in our soul, will pertain to the nature (ratio) of intellect and of love, but rather vice versa." Auriol, *Scriptum*, D10, art. 3 translated and quoted in Friedman, *Medieval Trinitarian Thought from Aquinas to Ockham*, 113–114. Auriol's claim marks a decisive intensification of the psychological analogy. By reversing the direction of likeness, he refuses to treat the mental word and love in the human soul as merely accommodated images of the divine processions. Instead, he insists that the divine Word and Spirit are the primary realities, while human cognition and love are images precisely because they participate in and derive from these divine exemplars. Then, the divine persons are understood as subsisting acts of intellect and will, and human mental operations are intelligible only as secondary participations in these divine processions.
- 40 Friedman, *Medieval Trinitarian Thought from Aquinas to Ockham*, 109.
- 41 Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (Summa). Q32, art. 1. The mystery of the Trinity, he insists, is knowable only through revelation and thus lies beyond the natural comprehension of human reason. As White clarifies: "Aquinas is not pretending to discover this analogy, since it has clear roots in the New Testament and has already been subject to developed consideration in the Fathers before him, as well as in the reflection of other medieval thinkers. He does, however, develop his own interpretation of the tradition, which depends in part on his unique understanding of cognition and volition in human beings, and how these processes may be thought of by similitude to the processions in God." *The Trinity*, 413.
- 42 Aquinas's doctrine of analogy secures real theological knowledge without compromising divine incomprehensibility. Gilles Emery, *The Trinitarian Theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 108; cf. Aquinas, *Summa*, I, Q15, art. 3, 5; I *Commentary on the Sentences* (Sent). D25, Q1, art. 1.
- 43 White, *The Trinity*, 375, 385. The foundation of Aquinas's psychological analogy lies in God as the ultimate exemplar, not in humanity. This means that faculties such as memory, understanding, and will are present in God as their original source. Humans possess these faculties analogically, mirroring God's ability to understand, love, and will. This distinction is vital, as Aquinas does not attempt to resolve the mystery of the Trinity through anthropology. Aquinas says in the *Summa* that in humanity it is possible to find asserts Aquinas, it is possible to find "some likeness to God, copied from God as from an exemplar. Yet this likeness is not one of equality, for such an exemplar infinitely excels its copy." Aquinas, *Summa*. Q95, art. 1.
- 44 Aquinas explicitly rejects any transitive conception of procession such as those implied by Arianism and Sabellianism. For this purpose, the psychological analogy is crucial, since the faculties of the mind illustrate immanent acts that remain within the subject. Gilles Emery, *The Trinitarian Theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 55.
- 45 Gilles Emery, *The Trinitarian Theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 55–57.
- 46 Emery, *Trinitarian Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 228; cf. Aquinas, *Summa* I, Q37, art. 1.
- 47 Aquinas, *Summa*. Q45, art. 7.

- 48 Muller, *PRRD*, 4:157–159.
- 49 Calvin formulated a more holistic concept of the image of humanity, avoiding its exclusive localization in the intellect: “And although the primary seat of the divine image was in the mind and heart, or the soul and its powers, yet there was no part of man, not even the body itself, in which some sparks did not glow.” Calvin, *Inst.* I, XV. 3.
- 50 Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses (Comm.)*, 93. However, his view was not necessarily uniform. Other figures like Pierre Viret, Moise Amyraut, and Richard Baxter offered a more positive interpretation of the Trinitarian image, aligning more closely with Augustine. Muller, *PRRD*, 4:157, 114–115; Dennis R. Klinck, in his detailed *the trinitatis* in man during the English Renaissance, notes that this concept “was a serious concern of many Christian writers of the English Renaissance and was frequently invoked to explain aspects of their experience.” He identifies four distinct areas where the notion of the Trinitarian image was applied: “(1) to psychology, the structure of the mind or soul of man; (2) to the analysis of sin; (3) to the creations or compositions of the human mind, indeed, to ‘knowledge’; and (4) as a reconciliatory principle, to the problem of opposites or division, as in Bostocke’s analysis.” Dennis R. Klinck, “Vestigia Trinitatis in Man and His Works in the English Renaissance,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 42, no. 1 (1981): 27
- 51 Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology (Inst.)* 5. 10. II.
- 52 Turretin, *Inst.* 5. 9. II; emphasis mine.
- 53 Friedman, *Medieval Trinitarian Thought from Aquinas to Ockham*, 59–60. In this view, the Son’s generation was not merely symbolic but an actual outflow of divine knowledge, while the Spirit’s procession was a real outflow of divine love. This view, as Steven Duby notes, blurs the Creator–creature distinction by implying a conceptual and ontological continuity between God and creation, as if divine perfections could be understood under a shared notion of being (univocity of being). Steven J. Duby, *God in Himself: Scripture, Metaphysics, and the Task of Christian Theology*, *Studies in Christian Doctrine and Scripture* (IVP Academic, 2019), 197–200.
- 54 Duby, *God in Himself*, 202; Richard Muller, “Not Scotist: Understandings of Being, Univocity, and Analogy in Early-Modern Reformed Thought,” *Reformation & Renaissance Review* 14 [2012]: 127–50.
- 55 Turretin, *Inst.* 5. 10. II.
- 56 Turretin, *Inst.* 5. 10. II. For Turretin, this participation occurs *per modum effectuum*—through the effects of the Spirit who conforms the believer to the image of God in an ectypal manner. The divine archetype, though incommunicable in its infinite plenitude, serves as the exemplar of the ectypal image: a finite, created, analogical gift through which humanity reflects God’s wisdom, righteousness, and love. In this sense, Turretin rather than negating a real participation in God, proposes that the gracious economy of divine condescension is the means by which this participation is secured. Turretin, *Inst.* 1:1. 2. VI; Duby, *God in Himself*, 39.
- 57 Turretin, *Inst.* 5. 10. VI.
- 58 Turretin, *Inst.* 5. 10. VI-VII.
- 59 Turretin, *Inst.* 5. 10. VI.
- 60 Turretin, *Inst.* 5. 10. VII.
- 61 Turretin, *Inst.* 5. 10. VII.
- 62 Turretin, *Inst.* 5. 10. VII.
- 63 Turretin, *Inst.* 5. 10. VIII-X.
- 64 Turretin, *Inst.* 1:5. 1. VI.
- 65 Turretin, *Inst.* 1:5. 1. VI. Mark J. Beach has noted that this conception was central to Turretin’s doctrine of the covenant of creation (or covenant works). Human beings, created in God’s image, are made dependent upon and for fellowship with God. They were capable of obeying the law and, as rational creatures, of being governed by legal prescriptions (promises and threats). Mark Beach J., *Christ and the Covenant: Francis Turretin’s Federal Theology as a Defense of the Doctrine of Grace*, *Reformed Historical Theology*, v. 1 (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 95–96.
- 66 Turretin, *Inst.* 1:5. 9. V.
- 67 Muller, *PRRD*, 4:164. For a more extended elaboration of Turretin’s rejection of the idea of pure nature, see Roberto A. Martinez, “Grace, Infused Habits, and Christ’s Humanity: A Comparison Between Thomas Aquinas and Francis Turretin,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 29, no. 2 (2025): 32–33.
- 68 Turretin, *Inst.* 5. 10. XXII.
- 69 Martinez, “Grace, Infused Habits, and Christ’s Humanity,” 33.
- 70 Turretin, *Inst.* 3. 27. I-II.
- 71 Turretin, *Inst.* 3. 27. XV.

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- 72 Turretin, *Inst.* 3. 27. II.
- 73 Turretin, *Inst.* 3. 27. II.
- 74 Turretin, *Inst.* 3. 27. III.
- 75 Turretin, *Inst.* 3. 27. IV.
- 76 Turretin, *Inst.* 3. 27. IV. Turretin employs the Aristotelian categories of potency and act to argue that composition cannot exist in God.
- 77 Turretin, *Inst.* 3. 27. IV; emphasis mine.
- 78 Turretin, *Inst.* 3. 27. V.
- 79 Turretin, *Inst.* 3. 27. V-VIII.
- 80 Regarding God's power and wisdom, these attributes are attributed to the divine essence. However, their manifestation is unique to each person of the Trinity, expressed according to their specific mode of subsistence: paternal, filial, or aspirational. Turretin, *Inst.* 3. 27. V-VII.
- 81 Turretin, *Inst.* 3. 27. XVII.
- 82 Turretin, *Inst.* 3. 29. III.
- 83 Ambrose states, "For here the voice is silent, the mind fails; not only mine, but even that of angels," and Gregory Nazianzus affirmed that "The begetting of God is to be honored by silence." Turretin, *Inst.* 3. 29. III; cf. Ambrose, *On Christian Faith* 1.10.64; Nazianzus, *Theological Orations*. On the Son 8. Additionally, he references Athanasius, who, in his defense against Arius, stated: "how the Word is from God, or how he is the brightness of God, or how God begets and what is the mode of his generation. For he is crazy who would attempt such things, since he would essay to interpret in words a thing ineffable and proper to the divine nature and known only to himself and his Son." Similarly, Hilary remarked: "As the Father is inexpressible in that he is unbegotten; so the Son in that he is the only begotten cannot be expressed because he who is begotten is the image of the unbegotten." Turretin, *Inst.* 3. 29. XXX; cf. Athanasius, *Four Discourses Against the Arians* 2.36; Hilary, *The Trinity* 3.18.
- 84 White, *The Trinity*, 375–382.
- 85 Turretin, *Inst.* 3. 29. XXX.
- 86 Turretin, *Inst.* 3. 29. III.
- 87 Turretin, *Inst.* 3. 8. X.
- 88 For a more detailed discussion of 17th-century heresies, see Muller, *PRRD*, 4:89–94, 99–102.
- 89 This is significant because it shows that Turretin is not developing his theology of the divine processions—or his use of the psychological analogy—along nominalist lines, which tended toward a more radical apophaticism regarding knowledge of the inner life of God. See White, *The Trinity*, 375–395.
- 90 Turretin, *Inst.* 3. 29. XXXI.
- 91 Turretin, *Inst.* 3. 29. XXXI.
- 92 Turretin, *Inst.* 3. 29. XXXI.
- 93 Turretin, *Inst.* 3. 31. I.
- 94 Turretin, *Inst.* 3. 31. I.
- 95 Turretin, *Inst.* 3. 31. III.
- 96 Muller observes, "The Reformed orthodox, however, typically take the path of the later fathers as opposed to that of the medieval scholastics: they recognize that there is a difference but refrain from speculation concerning the nature of the difference between the procession of the Spirit and the generation of the Son." Muller, *PRRD*, 4:372.
- 97 John Damascus declares, "that there is a difference between generation and procession, we have learned, but what the nature of the distinction is we by no means understand," and Augustine, similarly states, "there is a difference between generation and procession, but I know not how to distinguish them because they are both inexpressible." Turretin, *Inst.* 3.31.III; cf. John of Damascus, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* 1.8; Augustine, *Contra Maximinum* 2.14.
- 98 Turretin, *Inst.* 3. 31. III.
- 99 Turretin, *Inst.* 3. 31. III. See the analysis of Muller, *PRRD*, 4:377. See also Meijering, *Reformierte Scholastik und patristische Theologie*, 148–149.
- 100 Muller, *PRRD*, 4:164, 376, 410. This broader tendency is reflected in figures such as Gisbertus Voetius and Benedict Pictet, who regarded such analogies as speculative and unnecessary. At the same time, other theologians—including Philipp Melancthon, Pierre Viret, Amandus Polanus, and Richard Baxter—made use of mental analogies to varying degrees in their attempts to articulate the inner life of God. Muller, *PRRD*, 4:162, 376, 85–86, 115, 158–159, 162–164.

<sup>101</sup> White, *The Trinity*, 386–391.

<sup>102</sup> White, *The Trinity*, 375–382.

<sup>103</sup> Sebastian Rehnman has proved that Turretin integrated metaphysical categories along with his exegesis in his elaboration of the doctrine of God, see “Theistic Metaphysics and Biblical Exegesis: Francis Turretin on the Concept of God,” *Religious Studies* 38, no. 2 (June 2002): 167–186.

<sup>104</sup> For Turretin, philosophical sound reasoning is always ministerial—“organic, and subordinate to divine revelation.” Turretin, *Inst.*, 1.8. VI. Consequently, he sharply criticizes speculative theology that draws from what he describes as “stagnant pools” rather than the “limpid fountains of Scripture,” warning that such approaches produce “air-walkers” who venture into mysteries beyond their comprehension Turretin, *Inst.*, 3.25.VI.

<sup>105</sup> Turretin, *Inst.*, 3.24.XVI.

<sup>106</sup> Keith A. Johnson, “Augustine of Hippo: Will the Real Augustine Please Stand Up?” in *On Classical Trinitarianism: Retrieving the Nicene Doctrine of the Triune God*, ed. Matthew Barrett (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2024), 111.

<sup>107</sup> Muller further elaborates that, in general, the Reformed Orthodox: “Feel that dogmatic discussion of the Trinity is mandated by revelation even though the doctrine be an impenetrable mystery—and that, further, the revelation, insofar as it can be understood, must be illustrated or explicated with the tools of reason. The illustrations, however, cannot be considered any more than very limited aids to understanding: here the epistemological side of the Reformed *non capax* comes to the fore [...] These analogies do not serve as proofs, given the inability of the finite creature to rise by analogy from the finite to the infinite.” Muller, *PRRD*, 4:146.

<sup>108</sup> Turretin and the Reformers “could [not] simply reiterate the tradition—rather, they saw the need to explain the doctrine of the Trinity in biblical and exegetical terms and to rely on the terms and *formulae* of the fathers and the councils only as secondary supports of the doctrine.” Muller, *PRRD*, 4:19, 21.

<sup>109</sup> Turretin extensively interacts with Augustine, Hilary, Gregory of Nazianzus, Basil, and Athanasius, among others, and shows that his objective in using the traditional theological language is simply to defend the purity of the doctrine of the Trinity, as it has been revealed in Scripture. Muller, *PRRD*, 4:392.

<sup>110</sup> *PRRD*, 4:153, 158, 376. Muller affirms that we do not have to read this criticism as any angry polemic—easily recognized in Turretin’s description of his opponents. In contrast, perhaps we see a gentle critic from the recognition that “some of their Reformed predecessors had adopted the medieval solutions on this point.”

# Does Romans 1:18–21 Teach Natural Theology? Yes, and No!

JEFFREY BEAUPRE

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**Jeffrey Beaupre** is a Master of Divinity Student at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky. He has written for “Christ Over All” ([www.christoverall.com](http://www.christoverall.com)) and *Modern Reformation*. He also hosts the “Captured Imaginary” Podcast and writes regularly on his Substack, “Captured Imaginary.” He is married and has one daughter and lives in Northern California, where he is a member at Neighborhood Church in Anderson, California.

## INTRODUCTION

Among the reformed, “natural theology” is hotly contested. Debates rage over how Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, the post-reformation reformed divines, and Cornelius Van Til understand natural theology. However, Paul’s own understanding, detailed in Romans 1:18–21, cannot be lost. Modifying J. V. Fesko’s metaphor, this study takes up a shovel instead of sword or scalpel. With it, I will unearth misplaced exegetical and dogmatic stones and repack the dirt, reestablishing an exegetical foundation for future theological debates about natural theology.<sup>1</sup> In returning to the *locus classicus* of natural theology and surveying it anew, I hope to refocus a present discussion which seems to me as having listed away from exegesis into the realm of systematics and historical theology, and needs to find its textual footing anew. As such, my exegesis of Romans 1:18–21 will answer the question: does the unregenerate man have a natural theology? The answer will be *both* yes, and no!<sup>2</sup>

To prove this, I will first define important terms for this debate. Second, I will provide an exegesis of Romans 1:18–21. This exegesis will reveal

that the natural man lives in perpetual inward contradiction between two inflexible realities: his knowledge of God as Creator, and his failure to express himself toward God in honor and gratitude. In other words, “yes,” the natural man has a knowledge of God as Creator; “no,” man never uses this knowledge correctly. Only regeneration overturns this second inflexible failure in man. Third, from this conclusion, I will enlist several voices among the Reformed who’ve effectively captured this inward contradiction, before ending with suggestions for future research.

### DEFINING OUR TERMS

To lay our foundation, we must define two crucial terms and their relationship to each other: *revelation* and *knowledge* of God as Creator.

- Revelation of God as Creator: Revelation given by God testifying to *who* he is and *what* he does in creation. God reveals himself as Creator. Creation displays God’s divine majesty and greatness.<sup>3</sup> Besides Romans 1:18–21 (and 22–32), other texts detailing general revelation includes Romans 2:14–16; Acts 14:15–17; 17:22–31, and Psalm 19, 29, and 104.
- Knowledge of God as Creator: What I mean narrowly by “natural theology.” This knowledge is appropriated from revelation in creation into the understanding of the image bearer. It is, like revelation, granted by God.<sup>4</sup> Nature testifies to (and results in knowledge of) God as Creator. This knowledge concerns God’s eternal power and divine nature. Crucially, any deficiency in natural theology emerges because it is *our theology*, subject to our finitude, but more importantly, our depravity. God does not intend his creatures’ knowledge of him to be inert. Knowledge of God as Creator is only properly *knowing* when *resulting in* gratitude and honor toward God as Creator.

This knowledge, certainly apprehended among the unregenerate, is defective *only* because it is simultaneously suppressed and distorted from achieving its God-intended end: righteous honor and gratitude expressed toward God. This incongruence between knowledge and misuse of knowledge is unjust (unrighteous). This suits man for condemnation. *True* knowledge of God *must* result in honor and gratitude of God. The natural person does not accept the things of God’s Spirit. They are folly to him. He is unable to understand due to a lack of spiritual discernment (1 Cor 2:14). The revelation of God as Creator is one of those “things of the Spirit of God”

which the natural man, though he knows the truth, chronically subverts from its proper end, the glory of God.

Finally, in defining knowledge of God as Creator narrowly as “natural theology,” I presently leave aside the broader discussion of any formal or discursive “natural theological” method detailed in any scholastic system (be it medieval, reformational, or post-reformational). Biblically defining the boundaries of the knowledge of God as Creator must be settled *before* any “natural theological” method. As Steven Duby observes, in light of Scripture, “the knowledge of God the Creator given by the Creator himself in the marks of his wisdom and power in the grandeur and order of creation [...] is the first and most fundamental sense of the phrase ‘natural theology.’”<sup>5</sup> Any discursive, systematic, or formal attempt at “natural theology,” is a cart placed behind the horse of “natural theology” in this first sense.<sup>6</sup>

### EXEGESIS OF ROMANS 1:18–21

To understand Romans 1:18–21 we must detail its relationship to Romans 1:16–17. In Romans 1:15 Paul confesses his eagerness to preach the gospel in Rome. In 1:16 Paul gives the reason: because (γὰρ) he is unashamed of the gospel. Paul’s confidence in the gospel is because (γὰρ) it is God’s power for salvation for believers. In 17a Paul explains the warrant for the gospel’s power, because (γὰρ) God’s righteousness is revealed in it from faith to faith (ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν). This idea is proven through appeal to Habakuk 2:4 (καθὼς γέγραπται), where the righteous by his faith/faithfulness will live, contrasted with the “puffed up” and unrighteous person.<sup>7</sup>

Romans 1:18 and 1:17 are logically connected (γὰρ), though Paul doesn’t state how. How does the revelation of God’s saving righteousness in 1:16–17 relate his wrath revealed in 1:18? It is unlikely Paul employs γὰρ adversatively in 1:18, which is an unusual use of the particle.<sup>8</sup> It is better to understand 1:18–32 (and through 3:20) as an extended treatise detailing the need for God’s saving righteousness received by faith detailed in 1:16–17. This subordinates 1:18–3:20 as a unit in support of 1:16–17. As Harvey observes of 1:18, “Paul now explains (γὰρ) why the righteous person must live by faith: humankind’s actions earn God’s wrath rather than his righteousness[.]”<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Cranfield suggests Paul uses γὰρ to show “that the revelation of the wrath of God against men’s sin makes it abundantly

clear that there can be no question of men's having a status of righteousness before God in any other way than ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν."<sup>10</sup>

Thus, Romans 1:18 is both the doorway into the larger unit (1:18–3:20) where warrant for the revelation of the righteousness of God in the gospel (and in his righteous wrath) is shown, and more narrowly as a thesis statement for 1:19–32, where Paul unpacks the reason humanity is due condemnation.<sup>11</sup> If 1:16–17 is what *God has done* in light of the human condition, 1:18–32 are the opening strokes of Paul's sketch of the *bleak anthropological backdrop* upon which the glory of God's saving righteousness in the gospel is displayed (1:16–17).<sup>12</sup>

In Romans 1:18 Paul leads with the fact that God's wrath is revealed (ἀποκαλύπτεται) from heaven. As the gospel of Jesus reveals (ἀποκαλύπτεται) the righteousness of God (1:17), God's wrath is revealed (ἀποκαλύπτεται) because of humanity's ungodliness and unrighteousness. The verb ἀποκαλύπτεται means to “uncover” or “disclose,” actions performed by God. In 1:17 the “righteousness of God” (δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ) is a subjective genitive, ἀποκαλύπτεται a divine passive. This accords with 1:18, where the “wrath of God” (ὀργὴ θεοῦ) is likewise a subjective genitive, God being the subject and ἀποκαλύπτεται again a divine passive. There is symmetry here, God performing each revelation.

Both instances of ἀποκαλύπτεται are present tense, meaning any preconditions are satisfied for this revelation to occur. In 1:16–17 the precondition was God's timing in fulfilling his promise given through the prophets, the fullness of time achieved (Rom 1:2–3a; cf. Gal 4:4). In 1:18 the precondition is the ungodliness and unrighteousness of men suppressing the truth of God within them. However, though God's wrath is being revealed in Paul's time, the precondition (suppression of the truth) has been satisfied since the world's beginning.

God discloses his wrath against ungodly and unrighteous people. Ungodliness (ἀσέβειαν) means living contrary to fitting religious beliefs and practices.<sup>13</sup> It also means to act impiously, incongruent with what is considered normal or proper in relation to deity.<sup>14</sup> The emphasis falls on living in antithesis to what pleases God. God's wrath is revealed where righteousness and piety are absent. However, though piety is absent, knowledge isn't. Man's certain knowledge in fact serves to reveal this

incongruity between knowledge and righteous religious expression toward God.

In 1:18b Paul explains why man is considered ungodly and unrighteous: they unrighteously suppress the truth. More literally, “the truth in unrighteousness is suppressed.” These people occupy two conditions simultaneously, in contradiction: they possess the truth, but suppress it. The natural man fails to live in proper (righteous) congruence between truth known and *whatever is opposite of suppression* (unloosed honor and thanks of God). The truth is present and known (“yes”), but it is not celebrated. It is suppressed (“no!”). For Calvin, this contradiction between genuine knowledge and failure to employ this knowledge properly is the warrant for man’s condemnation, because “though the structure of the world, and the most beautiful arrangement of the elements, ought to have induced man to glorify God, yet no one discharged his proper duty: it hence appears that all were guilty of sacrilege, and of wicked and abominable ingratitude.”<sup>15</sup>

We must define what *suppression* means. Κατέχω is a present active participle, performed by man. The root ἔχω means to “possess or contain, *have, own*[.]”<sup>16</sup> But Κατέχω means to prevent something from happening, or to cause it to be ineffective. To “*prevent, hinder, restrain*” whatever would otherwise be liberated, unrestrained, and effective without the action of Κατέχω.<sup>17</sup> God exposes and vindicates his truth in righteous wrath against mankind who unrighteously cover God’s truth. God is saying “yes, you know me. *And* you should worship me. But you don’t, so I will achieve glory via my wrath.” Man, a self-contradicting fool, lies to himself that he doesn’t know God (Ps 14:1).

If man possesses the truth but restrains it, keeping it from achieving its God-intended end (detailed in 1:21), how does Paul describe this truth?

First, in 1:19 Paul describes it as knowledge about God not merely possible to know but plainly known: “For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.”<sup>18</sup> God’s revelation is effectively appropriated as “theology” or “knowledge” because God chose to reveal himself, and accomplishes his purposes. *Plain* (φανερών) and *shown* (ἐφάνηρωσεν) employ the same root (φανε-). φανερών adjectively modifies this knowledge of God (γνωστὸν τοῦ θεοῦ), *because* God has ἐφάνηρωσεν, or made it so.

Obtaining this knowledge depends on God, not man.<sup>19</sup> As knowledge of God as Redeemer depends “not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy” (Rom 9:16), so the knowledge of God in the dimensions of Romans 1:18–21 (as Creator) depends not on human effort, but on God’s sovereign revelatory act.<sup>20</sup> As Schreiner observes, “Paul does not refer to a long process of reasoning by which people come to a knowledge of God’s majesty is critical [...] God has stitched his greatness into the fabric of the human mind so that his majesty is instinctively recognized when one views the created world.”<sup>21</sup> Knowledge of God as Creator (i.e., “natural theology”) is established by God.

Should a discursive process of acquiring this knowledge be suggested, there would be some for whom God’s wrath due for suppressing the truth is deferred until *after* this condition is met. This would make God’s indictment falsifiable, as there are some (such as infants) who have not yet reasoned their way to this knowledge and simultaneously suppressed. Our text prohibits any postponement. God’s wrath *and* saving righteousness are clearly revealed, independent of human endeavors.

Moreover, God’s majesty in creation has been *understood clearly* (νοούμενα καθορᾶται), furthering undercutting a discursive process. νοούμενα and καθορᾶται are passive, distancing a discursive process from the text. Man would be *active* in a discursive process. Instead, Paul paints a precondition without exceptions that man *receives*. And, if without exception, “perceiving God” as a discursive process is unlikely as Paul exhaustively removes any excuse.

However, even if Paul *does* mean a knowledge of God acquired through discursive processes, the results remain: men are still without excuse. Natural theology in either case (a discursive species, or implanted knowledge) results invariably in knowledge truly held *and* simultaneously suppressed, warranting God’s wrath. Any species of natural theology only escapes suppression with regeneration.<sup>22</sup>

Next, observe how Paul describes this disclosure of revelation in 1:19. What is known about God is plain (φανερὸν) because God has revealed it (ἐφανέρωσεν). Silva notes Paul uses φανερώω and ἀποκαλύπτω virtually synonymously, especially where God’s righteousness in Christ is revealed, or the mystery of Christ and the gospel hidden in the past is now revealed (Rom 1:17; 3:21; Eph 3:5; Col 1:26).<sup>23</sup> The righteousness of God

revealed in the gospel (1:17), God’s wrath revealed against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth (1:18), and the revelation unto men the knowledge of God as Creator are each performed by God (1:19).

This comports with Doug Moo’s observations that “righteousness of God” in 1:17–18, 3:21, 3:25–26, and 10:3 emphasize first a divine activity, and secondarily human reception of righteousness as a status. In Romans 3:21 God’s righteousness is “manifested” apart from the Law. In 3:25–26 it is “shown.” In 10:3 Israel fails to submit to God’s righteousness, instead seeking to establish their own, implying a “contrast between their righteousness and the righteousness of God” which suggests a divine activity.<sup>24</sup> However, Moo notes the concept of “the righteousness of God” includes “both God’s activity and, more remotely, the status of those who experience God’s righteousness.”<sup>25</sup> God’s sovereign revelation and human appropriation of revelation stand together, secured by God’s power.<sup>26</sup>

In 1:20 Paul enumerates the content of this knowledge clearly known (1:19) and suppressed (1:18). It concerns knowledge of God’s eternal power and divine nature, God’s “invisible attributes.” God’s invisible attributes (ἀόρατα αὐτοῦ) being understood (or perceived/καθοράω) isn’t oxymoronic. Rather, God makes the visible world a symbol for disclosing his invisible majesty. Man is pervaded by God’s revelatory environment, unable to escape knowing him.<sup>27</sup> The final part of 1:20 confirms this, where from “the things that have been made” (τοῖς ποιήμασιν) man’s knowledge of God as Creator arises invariably. Creation, God’s revelational medium, births this knowledge into us.

These invisible attributes seen are God’s *eternal power* (ἄιδιος δύναμις) and *deity* (θειότης). Silva notes the adjective ἄιδιος describes “a distinct attribute of deity,” namely his *eternal* (ἄιδιος) power.<sup>28</sup> Cranfield considers θειότης (*divinitas*, “divinity”) as a reference to the divine nature and properties, whereas θεότης (*deitas*, “deity”) “denotes the divine personality[.]”<sup>29</sup> This is semantically possible, but a false dichotomy. The revelatory acts of God in 1:17–18 are personally unveiled by God upon unrighteous people. God *himself* has been sinned against, not his divine nature abstracted from his personality. Likewise, it is not an abstract divine nature known from creation, but God the Creator. As Schreiner notes, “The word deity (θειότης) doesn’t focus on God’s existence so much as it communicates his

majesty and greatness. Hence, Paul doesn't refer to two different attributes of God here but stresses God's power[.]”<sup>30</sup>

This knowledge has *only one* precondition, it has been mankind's possession ἀπὸ κτίσεως κόσμου/from the creation of the world. Cranfield observes that Paul stresses “the self-revelation of God here referred to has been continuous ever since the creation.”<sup>31</sup> Since this self-revelation is collocated with “what can be known about God” (1:19) and this revelation is “clearly perceived” (1:20) since creation, no one has ever been ignorant of God's revelation of himself as Creator.<sup>32</sup>

Not only has there never been a time when the revelation of God as Creator hasn't been understood, but there has *concurrently* (since the Fall) never been a time when this knowledge hasn't been suppressed from its proper end. Schreiner notes,

Paul is not exploring human consciousness so that people upon reading this text should try to detect precisely when they rejected this knowledge of God in their personal history. The rejection of God is concurrent with the knowledge of him, with the result that it is impossible to excavate one's past and find a point in which there was saving knowledge of the true God through natural revelation.<sup>33</sup>

Man's inexcusability and fittingness for condemnation at the end of 1:20 is warranted by a constellation of three things: (1) Man suppresses the truth (1:18b); (2) A truth about God that is plainly known (1:19a), because God has shown it to them (1:19b), telling them of his eternal power and divine nature (1:20a); (3) A truth that man has plainly known since the creation of the world (1:20b).

These factors warrant man's condemnation, removing any excuse (Romans 1:20c). Since the fall this has been God's legal case against mankind. There is no informational or temporal justification for man's unrighteous suppression of the truth. They have had a “natural theology” all along, *and* they have abused it. They have never used it aright, as the noetic foundation from which should spring honor and gratitude of God as Creator. This inward contradiction warrants his condemnation. The natural man knows God, but his ethical outworking from this knowledge is amiss. Man knows *unrighteously*, instead of righteously or truly.

Calvin observes the proper, righteous outworking of this knowledge, “The effect of our knowledge rather ought to be, *first*, to teach us reverence and fear; and, *secondly*, to induce us, under its guidance and teaching, to ask every good thing from him, and, when it is received, ascribe it to him.”<sup>34</sup> Man is inexcusable because he misuses God’s efficacious revelation, which has gifted him a certain knowledge of God.

In 1:21 Paul recapitulates his whole argument: “For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.” Man knowing God assumes God’s revelation is satisfactory. But man abuses God’s testimony of himself in creation. This positive reception of revelation as knowledge but negative outworking of ingratitude and dishonor of God are the dimensions for how man “suppresses the truth in unrighteousness.” Man *does* appropriate God’s revelation as knowledge, and *should* move from knowledge toward God in praise. But man *refuses to honor God or give him thanks*. True “natural theology” does two things. It first truly receives knowledge of God as Creator, and secondarily moves another step, to praise and gratitude God as Creator. This tandem, *if separated*, vitiates true “natural theology.”

For this reason, the natural man’s foolish heart is darkened, becoming futile (profitless) as he refuses to do what is profitable, praising God his Creator. Therefore, in this doxological register the natural man never speaks correctly about the God he knows. Standing before him in creation, pressing upon him via the *sensus divinitatis* is this God, and this God he refuses to worship.<sup>35</sup> The natural man is part of the choir, the sheet music before him. In fact, he knows the music by heart, but he won’t sing right. He sings *incongruent* with how the sheet music, and his heart, tell him to. The music he knows and the music he sings are discordant.

The natural man understands the revelation of God but twists it, making himself the author and creator in vain antithesis to God. In final analysis, “The Bible does not consider knowledge of God without acknowledgement of God to be true knowledge of God!”<sup>36</sup> Natural theology is only *true* where true knowledge of God as Creator (which all people have) *and* true worship of God as Creator (which only the regenerate have) coexist.

## THE RECEPTION-SUPPRESSION-EXCHANGE SYNDROME OF THE NATURAL MAN

Apart from the Spirit's regeneration, the natural man lives in inward contradiction between the truth he knows and his failure to express himself congruently. This "congruent expression" would be honor and gratitude of God as Creator. This contradiction is both the foundation and ceiling of any unregenerate natural theology. Unregenerate natural theology is, against Karl Barth, a "yes!" and "no!" affair.<sup>37</sup> Any general revelation of God as Creator is *both* known by man regarding the revelation itself and its testimony of God, *and* never arising to its proper doxological end, where is true "knowing."

Knowledge of God as Creator is the object of natural theology, which finds its rest in doxological expression. Among the unregenerate, this sabbath is never observed. The natural man has all the knowledge needed, but his interpretation is chronically askew. He *should* interpret the facts testifying within him constantly in a righteous, doxological response. But he doesn't.

This inward contradiction is the central concern of Romans 1:18–21, and has been observed by many among the Reformed. Francis Junius, commenting on the Fall and total depravity, notes how the inward light of nature is darkened: "As a consequence [...] *we see something of the truth* as though distantly through the gloom. *But* through these inborn shadows that surround us, *we do not see, except in a false fashion, that very truth of God which we do see.*" Natural theology, in the dimensions of Romans 1:18–21, is a "seeing" and a "not seeing," or, "yes" and "no." Man knows God but simultaneously fails to know him worshipfully.<sup>38</sup>

Unregenerate natural theology fails to apprehend the doxological atmosphere Joe Rigney shows as the proper congruence between knowledge and expression:

For the pleasure of God is revealed from heaven upon all godliness and righteousness of men, who by their righteousness celebrate the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. For because they know God, they honor him as God and give thanks to him, and they become fruitful in their thinking, and their humble hearts are enlightened.<sup>39</sup>

Calvin observes this incongruence among the unregenerate,

But herein appears the shameful ingratitude of men. Though they have in their own persons a factory where innumerable operations of God are carried on, and a magazine stored with treasures of inestimable value — instead of bursting forth in his praise, as they are bound to do, they, on the contrary, are the more inflated and swelled with pride.<sup>40</sup>

This factory testifying inwardly to God should result in a bursting forth of praise to the Creator. Instead, it leads to man's vanity and swollen pride. The truth of God exchanged for a lie is the premise of this inward contradiction. Noting earlier in his *Institutes*, knowledge married to piety is the proper congruence, where true knowledge rests, "For, properly speaking, we cannot say that God is known where there is no religion or piety."<sup>41</sup> Even the demons believe, and tremble (Jas 2:29). But though the demons have a theology, even a natural theology, they don't *know God*. So, any natural theology done by the unregenerate will be sinful and fall short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23). God's glory from the human creature, flowering from true knowledge, is only possible where a pious heart extends to God in worship. Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin (Rom 14:23).

The proper congruence between knowledge and piety is one where we don't cultivate knowledge that rests "satisfied with empty speculation, [and] only flutters in the brain[.]" Instead, as the Spirit enables we cultivate knowledge which "will prove substantial and fruitful wherever it is duly perceived, and rooted in the heart."<sup>42</sup> For Calvin, God's testimony in creation is his "witness" to man, whereby his "numberless varied acts of kindness" meet man and woo him to a knowledge of God. Yet, in contradiction, they "cease not to follow their own ways, in other words, deadly errors."<sup>43</sup> Calvin is saying that all the light necessary to lead to God is within and around man, but man goes his own way.

Immediately after this section, Calvin says the following,

But though we are deficient in natural powers which might enable us to rise to a pure and clear knowledge of God, still, as the dullness which prevents us is within, there is no room for excuse. We cannot plead ignorance, without being at the same time convicted by our own consciences both of sloth and ingratitude.<sup>44</sup>

The natural man is unable to “rise to a pure and clear knowledge of God” as Creator. This “rising up” finds itself in the dimensions of honor and gratitude. Man is neither ignorant nor deficient in general revelation. The problem is located *ethically* or *religiously* within the natural man’s heart. His very own natural theology, without regeneration, fails to rise to a pure and clear knowledge of God as Creator. Instead, he suppresses this ascent, forging an idol down below.

In this same section, Calvin summarizes man’s inward contradiction:

Wherefore, when we wander and go astray, we are justly shut out from every species of excuse, because all things point to the right path. But while man must bear the guilt of corrupting the seed of divine knowledge so wondrously deposited in his mind, and preventing it from bearing good and genuine fruit, it is still most true that we are not sufficiently instructed by that bare and simple, but magnificent testimony which the creatures bear to the glory of their Creator. For no sooner do we, from a survey of the world, obtain some slight knowledge of Deity, than we pass by the true God, and set up in his stead the dream and phantom of our own brain, drawing away the praise of justice, wisdom, and goodness, from the fountain-head, and transferring it to some other quarter.<sup>45</sup>

For Calvin — and Paul — *no sooner* is a knowledge of Deity obtained than we pass God by and set up phantoms, exchanging true knowledge of the Creator for a lie (Rom 1:23, 25). This exchange is achieved in our knowing subversion of glory due to God — warranted by nature’s testimony — to a lie. The natural man as theologian never speaks truly to the God who is there as Creator, for “speaking truly” exists only where man knows God as Creator *and* worships him. The natural man as a God-knower (a “natural theologian”) robs God of his glory.<sup>46</sup>

The greatness of man’s sin is the inexcusable absence of God-ward affection despite his knowledge of God. “Man ought, therefore, as Calvin puts it, to recognize God. There is no excuse for him if he does not. The reason for his failure to recognize God lies exclusively in him. It is due to his willful transgression of the very law of his being.”<sup>47</sup> To clarify, “recognizing God” refers to dimensions of gratitude and honor of God as Creator. But Van Til is correct to note the law of man’s being — which is, the knowledge of God — is simultaneously transgressed.<sup>48</sup>

As Van Til later observes, “The natural man is such a one as constantly throws water on a fire he cannot quench.”<sup>49</sup> Paul highlights this inward contradiction of knowing God and suppressing the truth in Romans 1:18–21. Common ground between the unregenerate and regenerate is *only part*, never whole. Regenerate man lives in *congruence* between his knowledge of God as Creator (“A”) and his pious affections for this God (“B”). The natural man lives in *incongruence* between points “A” and “B.” Thus, he lives in antithesis with regenerate man. Regenerate knowledge leads inexorably to God-ward piety. The natural man’s knowledge leads inexorably to an exchange of God-worship for creature-worship. Any truth (general revelation) marshalled around the natural man will be known by this man as pointing to God *and* simultaneously suppressed.

Any general revelation will pass through the natural man’s reception-suppression syndrome, his heart reinterpreting (exchanging) every fact as it points to God’s glory as instead pointing to the creature’s vain deification. This happens without the Spirit’s regeneration. Thus, common ground with the natural man must finally be realized as—though upheld partially by Common Grace—ground that is without the Spirit’s regeneration an absolute antithesis.

J. H. Bavinck has highlighted this inward contradiction in man as the source of his inexcusability. Commenting on Calvin’s understanding of man’s futile use of general revelation, “These shining lights have some effect on the human mind, but instead of arousing adoration of the true God, they cause humans to invent idols and create new religions.”<sup>50</sup> For Bavinck, fallen humanity are God-knowers who habitually, without notice, suppress and exchange the truth they know for lies. Bavinck draws our attention to this paradoxical fact,

Scripture clearly states that people do not know. ‘You sacrifice to one you do not know’; ‘You worship that which you do not know’; the pagans ‘that did not know God.’ An overwhelming flood of places in the Bible emphasize this not knowing. This forces the conclusion that the position of human beings is paradoxical. They know, and they do not know. Their legal position is that of knowing, but their actual position is that of not knowing. They proceed as unknowing knowers, as though they ‘might possibly find him.’<sup>51</sup>

This paradox is another way of describing the inward contradiction of the natural man. Bavinck locates this contradiction as pivoting around “suppressing” and “exchanging.” Bavinck suggests that suppression occurs “so directly, so spontaneously, so simultaneously with [alongside] the ‘understanding’ and ‘seeing clearly’ that at the precise moment that people see, they already no longer see; at the exact moment that they know, they already no longer know.” This why we must say “yes” and “no” to the prospect of natural theology.<sup>52</sup> God *does* reveal himself clearly to every person as Creator. However, simultaneous to this revelation of God—who is standing before us in Creation—people “push it away, repress it, suppress it. They are knowers who do not know, seers who do not see. Their juridical position is different from their actual reality.” There “juridical position” is that of God-knower; their actual reality is a God-denier. Man contradicts himself. Legally the natural man is a God-knower and *should be* a God-worshiper. But he *acts* illegally, breaking covenantal stipulations. Man is without excuse, because he *knows* his covenant *obligations* and breaks them.<sup>53</sup>

But, though repressed, Bavinck notes that “deep within the hidden recesses of people’s beings, that repressed and suppressed truth is still present. It has never simply disappeared but has always been alive and active.”<sup>54</sup> Man can try to suppress God, but — by God’s grace — “If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!” (Ps 139:8).

“Exchanging the truth for a lie” is intimately involved, and arises from, suppressing the truth. As Bavinck notes, “the cavity or empty space that occurs as a result of suppressing needs to be filled. It has to be the case that what replaces the [suppressed] truth and sweeps across the entire terrain must be manifest in something resembling eternal power and divinity.”<sup>55</sup> The natural man is an idol factory. God’s revelation as Creator “impinges on them and compels them to listen, but it is at the same time pushed down and repressed. And the only aspects of it that remain connected to human consciousness, even while torn from their original context, become the seeds of an entirely different sequence of ideas around which they crystallize.”<sup>56</sup>

This reception and suppression of knowledge of God as Creator keeps “natural theology” from being possible in the sense of knowing anything true about God as Creator, for knowing God truly as Creator is a knowledge which is not suppressed, but liberated to exuberant gratitude and honor.

This actually *strengthens* what the Reformed should say about natural theology. We shouldn't conclude that man may be appealed to and that ground *may be* secured from which to navigate toward the Christian faith. Rather, this ground of knowledge is already indelibly engraved upon the human as *imago Dei*. It only remains, as apologists empowered by the Spirit, to press the natural man precisely at this juncture within his heart of knowing God and denying God.

Van Til observes this very point,

It is therefore utterly impossible for any man not to know God and morality. The natural man has knowledge, true knowledge of God, in the sense that God through nature and man's own consciousness impresses his presence on man's attention. So and inescapably has he done this, that try as he may, man cannot escape knowing God. It is this point that Paul stresses in the first two chapters of Romans. Man has the sense of deity indelibly engraven upon him. He knows God and he knows himself and the world as God's creation. This is objective revelation to him. Even to the extent that this revelation is within man, i.e., in his own constitution, and as such may be called "subjective," it is none the less objective to him as an ethically responsive creature, and he is bound to react as an ethical person to this objective revelation.<sup>57</sup>

Every person knows God "naturally," but also simultaneously, if unregenerate, anxiously strives to "efface that knowledge of God." Moreover, the Spirit is, despite unregenerate man's inward contradiction, striving to call man back to God, and herein provides the place of common grace between believers and unbelievers, as man's inward contradiction hasn't been given full reign yet. An absolute antithesis is mercifully slowed, for now.

Van Til notes this, rightfully pointing out a necessary limitation of this "cooperation" without the Spirit's regeneration,

Men on both sides can, by virtue of the gifts of God that they enjoy, contribute to science. The question of ethical hostility does not enter in at this point. Not merely weighing and measuring, but the argument for the existence of God and for the truth of Christianity, can as readily be observed to be true by non-Christians as by Christians. Satan knows all too well that God exists and that Christ was victor over him on Calvary. But the actual situation in

history involves the other factors mentioned. Thus there is nowhere an area where the second factor, that of man's ethical hostility to God, does not also come into the picture. This factor is not so clearly in evidence when men deal with external things; it is more clearly in evidence when they deal with the directly religious question of the truth of Christianity. But it is none the less present everywhere. It is present in the field of weighing and measuring, in the field of externals as well as in the field of more directly religious import. It is present here in that the natural man attempts to impose his false philosophy of fact upon the things that he weighs and measures.<sup>58</sup>

Man's ethical hostility to God doesn't show itself when people agree that  $2+2=4$ . It occurs a level higher, in the religious realm, where we worshipfully delight in the *why* behind  $2+2=4$ : because God! The natural man, though he may know his math, won't exult in the *why* behind this fact with us. He will know the truth at face value, but he will not penetrate deeper to "knowing God" in the religious and doxological realm that every "fact" of the universe (such as mathematics or any other area of general revelation) testifies to. The natural man's imposition of a false philosophy of reality—the creature—is nothing more than "exchanging the truth of God for a lie," that is. Man strips general revelation of its doxological and God-centered end, putting man in this seat, where man becomes the *telos* of revelation.

## CONCLUSION

To summarize, Romans 1:18–21 shows that every unregenerate person since the Fall stands in two positions simultaneously: they know God as Creator *and* fail to worship him. This contradiction warrants their condemnation. There is no justification for man's robbery of God's glory. Further, only regeneration overturns this inward contradiction, whereby man may truly understand (doxologically or ethically) the things of God in creation (1 Cor 2:14).

This inward contradiction serves as the basis and ceiling of *all* of man's knowledge of God as Creator. Any discussion of natural theology must start with this biblical presupposition. This knowledge *and* its suppression is presupposed in any datum of natural revelation man encounters. Any revelation from the book of nature passes through this "yes and no" filter.

Only the Spirit — not in common grace, but in regeneration — overturns this, bringing congruence between man's knowledge and man's worship of God.

I want to remind the reader of my intent as I began this study. I aimed to exegetically reset the floor which has become convoluted, precluding reformed theologians from finding agreement. But much work remains, and I have obviously not settled this issue definitively.

To pursue consensus among the reformed regarding natural theology (either narrowly or broadly, in a more robust “natural theological method”), several future studies are needed.

First, triangulation of my exegesis with Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin's on Romans 1:18–21 is needed. Reformed theology is more than Calvin, but a reformed account of natural theology incongruent with Calvin is a divergence that must be seriously attended to. Do we really have a clear picture of how close Calvin and Aquinas are on the topic of natural theology? Comparing Calvin's understanding of “natural theology” with Aquinas' in their respective commentaries, and asking which is closer to the exegesis I have offered would be profitable. This would show where each thinker as an exegete stands, and would shed light upon if this area of Aquinas' thought should be retrieved among the reformed. In addition, more work is needed in explicating a fuller understanding of both Aquinas and Calvin's thought in each thinker's total corpus, to get an accurate picture of each thinker's account of natural theology.

Second, there is continued need for penetrating exegesis of Romans 1:18–21 itself, in addition to the other core texts about the “light of nature.” These texts include Psalm 19, 29, 104, Romans 2:12–16 Acts 14:15–17 and Acts 17:22–31, in order to give a full account of Scripture's allowance of “natural theology.”

Third, continued survey is needed into Calvin's concept of *sensus divinitatis*, the “sense of the divine.” Definitively establishing that Calvin's view of the *sensus* is not a capacity, but a covenantal epistemic reality, is needed. Consensus does not seem out of reach. Moreover, the importance of Calvin's *sensus* as the very center issue between those for and against “reformed presuppositionalism” merits attention. Knowledge of God and self are intimately related, foundational of all of man's knowledge of God.

Finally, we must explicate Aquinas' understanding of the natural knowledge of God. The account of the natural knowledge of God

offered in this study builds off Calvin. I have, through the glass of Calvin, examined Paul's understanding of the knowledge of God as Creator, observing that this knowledge is not merely *available*, but definitively grasped. Aquinas' commentary on Romans (in conjunction with his *Summa Theologica*) must be examined for determining whether he conceives of the natural knowledge of God as merely *available* or *irrefragably known*. Delineating this will establish whether Aquinas' view of the natural knowledge of God is robust enough, and does justice to Romans 1:18–21. Special attention must be paid to Aquinas' doctrine of man with this survey, so that the reformed pursuing this avenue of inquiry reckons with Aquinas' view of man's abilities, especially the noetic effects of the Fall, to determine if Aquinas' conception of man and his abilities is soluble with the reformed doctrine of total depravity.

There is much work to do, but it is my hypothesis that Aquinas' account will be shown as *less* robust in its offering of “natural theology” than Calvin's, or what I have offered here. Thus, in any “retrieval effort,” if it seeks to cohere with the spirit of reformed theology, this aspect of Aquinas' thought should be left aside.

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- <sup>1</sup> J. V. Fesko, “Editorial: On Scholarship, Swords, and Scalpels,” *Themelios* 50, no. 2 (2025), <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/editorial-on-scholarship-swords-and-scalpels/>.
  - <sup>2</sup> I leave aside — as Fesko correctly reproves — an “all or nothing” approach. In fact, regarding “natural theology,” I take an “all *and* nothing” approach. Yes, natural theology! And, *no* proper use of it!
  - <sup>3</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 93.
  - <sup>4</sup> God sovereignly reveals himself, which includes the reception of this revelation as “knowledge.” This is true in both Creation and Redemption. However, in the realm of Creation there is the subsequent invasion of sin, resulting in inward suppression of the truth (but not removal of the truth as known).
  - <sup>5</sup> Steven J. Duby, *God in Himself: Scripture, Metaphysics, and the Task of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2019), 71.
  - <sup>6</sup> Duby, *God in Himself*, 71.
  - <sup>7</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 80–81 observes that Paul follows the MT (הַיְהוָה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ) over the LXX (ὁ δὲ δίκαιος ἐκ πίστεώς μου ζήσεται). The MT includes the personal pronoun “his,” (the person's faith/faithfulness) over against the LXX which attributes the faithfulness to God by inserting the pronoun μου (my). Paul eliminates both pronouns. Schreiner notes the Qumran community interprets this text to connote law obedience *along-side* faith in the teacher of the community as the door to blessing, opposing Paul's meaning (and MT itself). Paul's wording in Romans 1:17 matches his wording Galatians 3:11 (ὁ δίκαιος ἐκ πίστεως ζήσεται) and comes close to Hebrews 10:38 (ὁ δὲ δίκαιός μου ἐκ πίστεως ζήσεται, “but *my* righteous one shall live by faith”). Paul (and Hebrews) emphasize the importance of personal faith, and “that faithfulness flows from faith” but that faith precedes and is the foundation for faithfulness (good works).

From faith to faith likely means the entire Christian life is subjectively bounded by faith. Human faith is the subjective doorway to participating in God's eschatological blessing (justification) powerfully revealed in the present. Rather than neutering God's sovereignty, this is so because, as Schreiner, *Romans*, 79 notes, "God's eschatological work is so powerful because it creates a new anthropological reality — faith." This has profound ramifications for the divide between the unregenerate and regenerate, divided by antithetical epistemological stances relative to this power of God: faith or unbelief. Back of this, each is a recipient of the sovereign revelatory work of God: wrath to those left to their epistemological unbelief, or saving righteousness for epistemological belief.

- <sup>8</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 83, who follows Hans Lietzmann, *Einführung in die Textgeschichte des Paulusbriefes an die Römer*, Handbuch zum Neuen Testament (Tübingen: Mohr, 1933), 33 and Longenecker, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 200–201, who see γὰρ not as adversative but a transitional particle, 1:18 developing a new — though related — thought to what precedes.
- <sup>9</sup> John D. Harvey, *Romans, Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament*, ed. Andreas J. Köstenberger and Robert W. Yarbrough (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2017), 35.
- <sup>10</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (ICC; London: T&T Clark, 2004), 108.
- <sup>11</sup> See Longenecker, *Romans*, 199, who lists 1:18 as the theme driving what is unpacked in 1:19–32. See also Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, ed. Eldon Jay Epp (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 148; David G. Peterson, *Romans* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2021), 110.
- <sup>12</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 84 suggests an implied proposition exists between verse 17 (God's saving righteousness) and 18 (the revelation of God's wrath) which clarifies the thought progression: "God's saving righteousness is being revealed in the gospel by faith (17) [;] and we really need God's saving righteousness (implicit proposition) [;] because God's wrath is being revealed against all people who have sinned against his glory (18)."
- <sup>13</sup> Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 532.
- <sup>14</sup> William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 141 (Hereafter BDAG).
- <sup>15</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, trans. Henry Beveridge (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 67.
- <sup>16</sup> BDAG, 420 (emphasis original).
- <sup>17</sup> BDAG, 532.
- <sup>18</sup> Thus, this knowledge of God is not waiting for us to go out and get it. It erupts into our lives from God's end, born into our understanding by him. His revelatory action secures this result, rather than our own action.
- <sup>19</sup> As Schreiner notes, Paul doesn't suggest "knowledge of God's lordship and power is the result of careful deduction and reasoning so that the text can be used to encourage sophisticated rational argumentation as an apologetic for God's existence[.]" *Romans*, 93.
- <sup>20</sup> If one objects that God's revelatory act does *not* accomplish what God intends, given man's suppression of the truth, we would simply refer this person back to the tension between the secret and revealed will of God.
- <sup>21</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 94.
- <sup>22</sup> The natural man will *always* plainly know, but simultaneously suppress, in any form of natural theology.
- <sup>23</sup> Moisés Silva, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014) 589. Hereafter NIDNTE.
- <sup>24</sup> Douglas J. Moo, "The Revelation of the Righteousness of God in Romans," in *Paul's Letter to the Romans: Theological Essays*, ed. Douglas J. Moo et al. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Academic, 2023), 28.
- <sup>25</sup> Moo, "The Revelation of the Righteousness of God in Romans," 29. Cf Peter Stuhlmacher, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, ed. and trans. Daniel P. Bailey and Jostein Ådna (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 369, "Δικαιοσύνη Θεοῦ in Paul denotes God's activity of creating salvation and well-being for people, such that with one and the same expression both God's own activity and the result of that activity can be designated."
- <sup>26</sup> Observe how the *power of God* secures the revelation of his righteousness in the gospel and his unveiled wrath (1:17–18). Power is an attribute the truth of which is suppressed by the unrighteous in 1:20. God's revelation in the gospel — and his wrath — is his decisive rectification of human disobedience. This disobedience is rooted in the noetic failure of humanity to acknowledge God (including his power). This failure is also rectified by the power of God in showing his righteousness to both the unrighteous and those he makes righteous.
- <sup>27</sup> Contra, Cranfield, *Romans*, 114.
- <sup>28</sup> NIDNTE, 165.

- 29 Cranfield, *Romans*, 11.5. Cf. Col. 2:9
- 30 Schreiner, *Romans*, 93.
- 31 Cranfield, *Romans*, 11.4.
- 32 This, again, undercuts a discursive process for acquiring this knowledge as being Paul's present concern.
- 33 Schreiner, *Romans*, 94.
- 34 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1.2.2. "Ought" implies a deficit between what is and what should be. Man has the knowledge required for a proper, righteous response toward God, but falls short.
- 35 My wording clarifies but affirms Van Til's meaning: "I think you will agree, then, that no form of natural theology has ever spoken properly of the God who is there. None of the great Greek philosophers, like Plato and Aristotle, and none the great modern philosophers, like Descartes, Kant, Hegel or Kierkegaard and others, have ever spoken of the God who is there. The systems of thought of these men represent a repression of the revelation of the God who is there." Cornelius Van Til, "A Letter from Cornelius Van Til to Francis Schaeffer," accessed April 1, 2026, [https://opc.org/OS/html/V6/4d.html?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://opc.org/OS/html/V6/4d.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com).
- 36 W. H. Velema and J. Van Genderen, *Concise Reformed Dogmatics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 76.
- 37 *Natural Theology: Comprising 'Nature and Grace' by Dr. Emile Brunner and the Reply 'No!' by Dr. Karl Barth* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002). Barth's "No!" incorrectly denies natural revelation and natural theology. I affirm a theology derived from nature, terming this "knowledge of God as Creator," but deny its proper attainment of "true" or "doxologically actualized" knowledge of God as Creator.
- 38 Franciscus Junius, *A Treatise on True Theology with the Life of Franciscus Junius* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2016).
- 39 Joe Rigney, *The Things of the Earth: Treasuring God by Enjoying His Gifts* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), 169.
- 40 Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.5.4.
- 41 Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.2.1.
- 42 Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.5.9. Emphasis mine. The context is knowledge of God as Creator, or the knowledge reflective of general revelation.
- 43 Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.5.14.
- 44 John Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.5.15. Or in is commentary on Rom 1:20, "The manifestation of God, by which he makes his glory known in his creatures, is, with regard to the light itself, sufficiently clear; but that on account of our blindness, it is not found to be sufficient" (Calvin on Rom. 1:20).
- 45 John Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.5.15.
- 46 Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 1992–1995), 1:176. "No one uses the natural knowledge of God rightly, for in reference to all who are in the state of nature it is written, 'There is none righteous, no not one: there is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one' (Rom 3:10–12). All the virtues of the heathen lack the true essence of virtue. They do not proceed from faith, are not in true harmony with the law, and are not performed to the honor of God. Rather, they are so beset with sinful qualities and circumstances that these virtues are nothing but glaring sins."
- 47 Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1955), 109.
- 48 Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 107.
- 49 Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 109, "For man self-consciousness presupposes God-consciousness. Calvin speaks of this as man's inescapable sense of deity." Following Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.1.1.
- 50 John Bolt, James D. Bratt, and Paul J. Visser, eds., *The J. H. Bavinck Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 97. Bavinck is summarizing Calvin's words in *Institutes*, 1.5.14, "It is therefore in vain that so many burning lamps shine for us in the workmanship of the universe to show forth the glory of its Author. Although they bathe us wholly in their radiance, yet they can of themselves in no way lead us into the right path [...] before their fuller light shines forth these are smothered."
- 51 Bolt, Bratt, and Visser, *J.H. Bavinck Reader*, 284.
- 52 Bolt, Bratt, and Visser, *J.H. Bavinck Reader*, 284.
- 53 Bolt, Bratt, and Visser, *J.H. Bavinck Reader*, 285.
- 54 Bolt, Bratt, and Visser, *J.H. Bavinck Reader*, 286.
- 55 Bolt, Bratt, and Visser, *J.H. Bavinck Reader*, 288.
- 56 Bolt, Bratt, and Visser, *J.H. Bavinck Reader*, 290.
- 57 Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 160–161.
- 58 Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 192.

# Extended Review Article: Seeing Christ in the Letter: A Review of Kevin J. Vanhoozer's *Mere Christian Hermeneutics*<sup>1</sup>

MICHAEL PEREIRA AND KNOX BROWN

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**Michael Pereira** is a PhD candidate in Systematic Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky, where he also earned his Master of Divinity. Michael has published a number of articles in such places as *JETS* and "Christ Over All" ([www.christoverall.com](http://www.christoverall.com)). He is married to Allison, and together they are members at Kenwood Baptist Church, Louisville, Kentucky, where they serve in youth and college ministry. Additionally, Michael serves as the Operations Assistant for the Kenwood Institute and the Managing Editor for the *Kenwood Bulletin*.

**Knox Brown** is a PhD candidate in Systematic Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky. He serves as an associate editor at "Christ Over All" ([www.christoverall.com](http://www.christoverall.com)), where he has published a number of articles. He is married to Esther, and they are at First Baptist Church of Fisherville, Fisherville, Kentucky.

## INTRODUCTION

Bridge-building or betrayal? Genuine unity or fundamental compromise? Throughout history, certain ideas and events have emerged with the rare power to unite previously opposing groups. When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, both East and West celebrated together because a concrete symbol of oppression had finally crumbled, reuniting families and restoring freedoms everyone recognized as good. This was unity worth celebrating. But history

also warns us of darker reconciliations. The Compromise of 1877 brought “peace” between northern Republicans and southern Democrats, yet this unity came at a devastating cost: the abandonment of formerly enslaved people to Jim Crow terror, as Republicans sacrificed their founding principles for political expediency. The agreement may have bridged a political divide, but in doing so it papered over a moral catastrophe.

So when Kevin Vanhoozer’s *Mere Christian Hermeneutics* appeared in 2024 to enthusiastic endorsements from Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Eastern Orthodox alike, we found ourselves asking: which kind of unity is this? Has Vanhoozer genuinely transcended our interpretive divisions with insights into basic truths all Christian interpreters embrace? We sincerely hoped so! This is a noble goal, and Kevin Vanhoozer is as qualified as anyone to pursue it. Yet we were still concerned that his “mere” hermeneutics might achieve consensus by evacuating the doctrinal convictions that give each tradition its distinct identity. Peace and Christian unity are worth pursuing—but at what cost?

### WHAT IS A MERE CHRISTIAN HERMENEUTIC?

Vanhoozer’s stated goal is “to do for biblical hermeneutics what C. S. Lewis did for Christian belief in his book *Mere Christianity*” (xxi). That is, to sketch the “hallway” of common agreement in which interpreters belonging to the various “rooms” of particular denominational or interpretive Christian traditions can and should mingle. *Mere Christian Hermeneutics*, then, is about “what all Spirit-illuminated readers have in common regardless of the differences in their particular exegetical methodologies” (17). What is it that all such readers share in common, if not a method? An orientation towards Scripture that sees it as the Word of God (divine discourse) addressed to *us*, in which Christ is revealed. Vanhoozer argues that despite all the disputes about *how* to read the Bible, all Christians agree on *why* to read the Bible—to hear God and to see Jesus (22).

What grounds the shared Christian perspective on why we read the Bible? Vanhoozer argues it is a forgotten element of hermeneutics: frame of reference. A frame of reference is “the interpretive assumptions that enable readers to identify what authors are speaking about” (67, emphasis original). In practice, “to read with a frame of reference is to examine the text from

a particular angle, put a certain set of questions to it, and filter the readers' perceptions of what the text is about" (68). The Christian frame of reference then, is one that sees Christ as the ultimate referent (subject of) of Scripture. How Christ is found to be Scripture's referent (method) varies: some use allegory to see Christ as mystically present in every rock and tree, others trace the authorially-intended typological structures across redemptive history. But all believers agree that the Bible is about Jesus and for us. Training Christian Bible-readers, then, requires forming Christian reading cultures that shape believers into people who come to God's word as humble listeners to divine speech, expectant to see the glory of Christ and be transformed into his image.

### **ASCENDING THE MOUNTAIN: A SUMMARY OF VANHOOZER'S ARGUMENT<sup>2</sup>**

Vanhoozer's argument proceeds in three movements which he illustrates as the ascent up a mountain. First, he lays groundwork for the project with the assertion that what the Bible is determines how it ought to be read (6). Since Scripture is the voice of the living God, used by God for the purpose of addressing, establishing, "and preserving his covenant people," (12), its readers are "answerable persons" (14) accountable to read rightly with humility and diligence, so that their affections might be converted to God's communicative intentions (21).

While at base camp, Vanhoozer also surveys the various reading cultures Christians have produced from the patristic era to the present day in order to convince readers that they are "answerable subjects, responsible for hearing, doing justice, and responding to the divine address of Scripture" (193) and that such answerability demands a certain exegetical posture, not merely a right method. Additionally, Scripture aims not only to call individuals to response, but to create a believing community sensitive to the divine address. The contemporary divide between biblical studies and theology has created two polarized reading cultures, each of which brings their own frames of reference to the text.<sup>3</sup> Neither of these frames line up exactly with the church's interpretive questions and interests, which both biblical scholars and theologians must recover. We must read Scripture with a theological frame of reference that "does not do away with the historical,

but, rather, views the historical as a field of ... divine communicative action,” (98) in the eschatological community of the church.

Having surveyed the area, Vanhoozer begins the first ascent up the mountain to determine what Scripture means. The starting point for this task is to determine the Bible’s “literal sense” and that sense’s relationship to Jesus. The Bible’s literal sense, Vanhoozer argues, is what the author(s) of Scripture are saying: the words they use, and the meaning of those words in the context of their discourse.<sup>4</sup> This is distinct from, but closely related to, the text’s *referent*—what or whom it is about. “The literal *sense* is the *way* words run; the literal *referent* is that *to which* the words run” (123, italics original).<sup>5</sup> Every text has both a sense and a referent: that is, every text both says something and is about something. Literal interpretation then involves rightly discerning both *what is said* and *what (or whom) it is said about*.

Because any given Scripture has two authors (human and divine), many interpreters have understood Scripture to have two different senses: literal and spiritual (or figural). But Vanhoozer argues that the text’s spiritual sense is not different in *sense* from its literal sense. Instead, he claims that the “spiritual sense” is simply the glory of the literal sense’s ultimate *referent*.

Whether or not one sees this referent, however, depends on one’s frame of reference. One’s frame of reference is the window through which one looks at a text and determines what the reader will pay attention to: “a frame of reference refers to all the things that influence how a reader attends to the letter of the text, and thus what the reader sees there” (124). To see what Scripture is really about (referent), we need a frame of reference that makes us attentive to what it is really about. Now that Christ has come and brought the end-time fulfillment of what the OT promised (i.e., the *eschaton*), rightly reading it requires an *eschatological* frame of reference. Using Vanhoozer’s terms, recognition of Scripture’s spiritual sense, that is, its glorified literal sense requires a grammatical-eschatological *frame of reference* (24, 106, 180, 182) in which readers approach the text expecting to see the glory of Christ in the subject matter of the text and desiring to be transformed into his image.

Vanhoozer contends that the literal sense ought to be understood from both historical and eschatological frames of reference, such that the literal meaning is understood to include both “the events in the

immediate present of the human author” and their “future fulfillment” or “eschatological realization” (358). Debates about the literal sense are largely issues of *which frame of reference* the literal sense belongs in (127). Against modernism, which would situate biblical discourse within an immanent frame of reference (that is, a closed naturalistic system), Vanhoozer argues for a transcendent-eschatological frame that situates biblical revelation squarely in God’s plan of revealing himself in the face of Christ.<sup>6</sup> Such an eschatological frame of reference is necessary to do justice to the letter of the text: “Literal interpretation ... requires thick description: a reading that takes account of all relevant contexts that have a bearing on what authors mean by their words,” and so, if the fulfillment of all God’s promises in Christ is a relevant context the eschatological frame will be absolutely necessary to properly interpret the literal sense (136). This frame does not change the *sense* of the OT’s human authors (*sensus plenior*); instead, it clarifies the referent of their discourse beyond what they could have known (*referens plenior*) (137).

Finally, Vanhoozer argues that what Scripture is ultimately about is “the knowledge of God in the face of Christ” (194, 358) and that the Spirit illumines believers to this eschatological Christological referent, so that they might behold him, believe him, and be transformed into his image (259, 336, 346). In this final section, Jesus’ transfiguration functions as a governing analogy: just as the transfiguration did not change Jesus’ nature but revealed the glory he always possessed, so the eschatological frame of reference that has come with the coming of Christ and the sending of the Spirit do not change the meaning of Scripture’s literal sense, but reveal the glory of that to which it always ultimately referred (266–270). In the end, Vanhoozer asks us to embrace “a transfiguration [i.e., a rethinking] ... of what is involved in reading theologically” as well as “an interpretive process that transfigures” (359). Only in so doing will we both establish properly Christian reading cultures that cut across epochal, institutional, and disciplinary divides and do justice to the literal sense of the divine discourse that addresses us.

## SINGING THE ROCK: POSITIVE CONTRIBUTIONS

Vanhoozer's book is a tour-de-force: perhaps one of its greatest strengths is its breadth. In addition to developing the book's main thesis, Vanhoozer deals with so many issues and current conversations in hermeneutics that it is difficult to catalogue all the contributions the book makes. However, there are a few that stand out to us. Due to the sheer volume of these, we have elected to list them as bullet points:

- Against critical and sterile readings of the text, Vanhoozer reminds us that a right reading of Scripture is *always spiritual*. The text is never simply an object to be scientifically analyzed, but the Word of God which addresses us and makes a claim on us.
- Vanhoozer helpfully recognizes that all believers seek the same thing in the Scriptures: we all want to see Jesus. Regardless of errors some may make in method, there is common ground in that we seek the same thing.
- Despite recognizing our common aim, Vanhoozer helpfully distinguishes between "good" and "bad" figuration. This book does *not* fall into the trap of blurring all distinctions between Christian readers, or of making all methods of reading equal.
- To distinguish good and bad figuration, Vanhoozer turns to Scripture's own self-presentation of the relationship between Christ and the literal sense, rather than a grid imposed on Scripture from the outside (whether by the church or anyone else).
- He therefore rightly identifies a biblical hermeneutic as one that traces *redemptive historical* developments across Scripture to find Christ, rather than one that adopts a Christian Platonist scheme in which Christ is mystically present in the text (130–133). In other words, the relationship between the OT and Christ is *horizontal* (movement towards fulfillment in history) rather than *vertical* (mystical sacramental presence).
- Along the same lines, Vanhoozer refuses to accept the cheap dismissals of the distinction between typology and allegory which are sadly all too prevalent today. Typology aims to be sensitive to redemptive history and Scripture's own development of its patterns, whereas allegory conforms Scripture to an outside interpretive grid.
- One reason Vanhoozer's work here is more helpful than other recent contributions is that Vanhoozer does not limit himself to gleaning from the patristic era. While he resources<sup>7</sup> much good from the church fathers,

Vanhoozer does not do so in such a way that eliminates the clarity and distinctions contributed by later eras of the church. He draws just as much from the Protestant Reformers and the Reformed Scholastics as he does from the fathers.

- As such, Vanhoozer does not retrieve a “lowest common denominator” hermeneutic, drawn only from points of universal agreement. Instead, he seeks to provide a “richest common denominator” that takes the best of what all Christians agree on and develops and clarifies it to its fullest extent. Vanhoozer identifies the hermeneutic of the Protestant Reformers and Reformed Scholastics as this “richest common denominator.”
- As Christians, we cannot ignore the fact that Jesus Christ really died, rose again, ascended, and poured out his Spirit on the church *in history*. The OT promises and covenants *really have been fulfilled*. Vanhoozer’s insight that this creates a new eschatological *frame of reference* (since we live in the *eschaton* the OT promised) is invaluable. We cannot read as though Christ has not come.
- Yet Vanhoozer also helpfully demonstrates that an eschatological frame of reference does not distort the literal sense of the OT, by reading back meanings that were never there, but rather *illuminates* what was always there (315).
- In general, we find the distinction between *sense* and *referent* (123) that Vanhoozer employs to be helpful. However, we will address this in more detail at the end of the review.

Finally, the greatest contribution of Vanhoozer’s approach is that it provides a sight of our Savior. We see Jesus in the text of Scripture, yet we see him as he was always there — in the meaning of the text. For Vanhoozer, this spiritual sight of Christ (the spiritual sense of Scripture) is not separate from the literal sense, but its glory, now illumined in light of the eschatological frame of reference in which Christ has come, accomplished his work, and poured out the Spirit upon his people.

Vanhoozer’s reading of Song of Songs (364–368) provides a clear payoff of the “mere Christian hermeneutic.” Vanhoozer resists both the temptation to read the Song “literalistically” as nothing more than an ode to erotic love *and* the temptation to read it allegorically, in which every detail maps onto Christ. Instead, Vanhoozer sees the Song as being “toward Christ” (368): the love of a husband and wife has always been meant to figuratively depict “Christ’s love for [his] church and the church’s desire for union with Christ,” both in creation and in the Song. The Song, even in its original context, is meant not only to idealize the love between husband and

wife but to present that love as an image of God's love for his people which was (in the OT) awaiting its consummation in redemption. Therefore, while Christ is not the "sense" of every detail in the image, the referent towards which the whole image runs is *Christ*.

### FISSURES IN THE EARTH: CONCERNS AND CRITIQUE

Despite all the benefits found in Vanhoozer's work, we both have significant concerns. One overarching concern is that the creativity of Vanhoozer's prose frequently obscures his point. *Mere Christian Hermeneutics* is full of evocative imagery, but that imagery is easy to backfill with the perspective one already holds. This is especially true of the illustration that governs the book: the transfiguration. When Vanhoozer gives his argument directly, we believe he is (mostly) clear. Yet we find a great deal of ambiguity in the imagery he employs, such that on our first passes through the book, it was easy to (mis)understand Vanhoozer in several contradictory ways. It took several re-readings of key sections to nail down the argument with precision, and even in those re-readings the best strategy was often to skim past several pages worth of powerful but easily misconstrued illustrations.

Additionally, Vanhoozer's claim that the transfiguration is *necessary* for biblical interpretation was not convincing. While it is a powerful (and biblical) illustration for interpretation, we believe that making the transfiguration episode the hinge of the biblical canon strains the text to its breaking point. The coming of Christ may certainly be the hinge of the canon, and the transfiguration may be a clear demonstration of Christ's identity, but it cannot bear the full weight Vanhoozer places on it.

As stated in the introduction, Vanhoozer's aim to provide a truly *mere* Christian hermeneutic is laudable, yet his positive proposal inevitably precludes other popular approaches. Certainly, given the scope of what Vanhoozer covers, there is merit enough in the work for interpreters of all stripes to glean value from it. Nonetheless, Vanhoozer's core argument is *not* one that all Christian interpreters can agree on—his so-called "richest common denominator" *requires* some sharp lines and *excludes* certain groups and certain methods. Apologists of allegory do not belong. Neither do those who make the church's experience the arbiter of the Scripture's meaning. In fact, there is one group that even Vanhoozer

singles out as the best practitioners of this hermeneutic: the Protestant Reformers and their scholastic heirs. Thus, while we agree that Vanhoozer demonstrates a common *aim* in all Christian interpretation, we also believe he shows that *not all Christian readers achieve that aim*. In other words, while we think that in many ways Vanhoozer succeeds in offering a rich Christian hermeneutic, we do not believe his work ultimately can survive as a “hallway” in which interpreters of all Christian traditions can gather. Instead, Vanhoozer offers us a richly furnished room (that of the reformed tradition) with a beautiful and attractive entryway. At some point, the interpreter must decide which tradition’s doctrines enable them to consistently read Scripture in the way Vanhoozer has proposed. We argue that only those traditions whose doctrine is in accordance with the Protestant Reformation fit the bill—to practice this hermeneutic consistently, one must reject the magisterial authority that Rome and the Eastern metropolitans claim for themselves.

Finally, and most significantly, we are concerned that *Mere Christian Hermeneutics* introduces confusion about the literal sense of Scripture and the relationship between divine and human authorial intent. Much of Vanhoozer’s career has been dedicated to defending and upholding reading Scripture both theologically and according to its literal sense. These are causes we celebrate and support. *Mere Christian Hermeneutics* does indeed seek to advance this cause and does succeed in various ways. Nevertheless, Vanhoozer’s work here also introduces confusion into the concepts of reading Scripture according to its literal sense.

The first way confusion regarding the literal sense is introduced is through definitional issues. In his helpful glossary, Vanhoozer provides his definition of “literal sense” which is worth quoting in full:

an oft-used term whose familiarity belies its complexity; in the history of biblical interpretation, the straightforward, surface, or nonfigural level of meaning of the textual letter; in this book, the meaning of the human-divine biblical discourse when read grammatically-eschatologically in canonical context, and the norm of theological interpretation (402).

This account presents the literal sense as the total meaning of the human-divine discourse in canonical context. For reference, the glossary definition

of discourse is “what someone says/writes about something to someone at some time, in some way for some purpose” (401). An apparently different definition of “literal sense” appears, however, in Vanhoozer’s definition of “grammatical-eschatological exegesis,” which reads as follows: “a way of reading for the trans-figural sense of Scripture combining a grammatical interest in the way the words go (*literal sense*) with an eschatological interest in that to which they ultimately refer (Christological subject matter)” (401, emphasis ours). On the one hand, “literal sense” is here restricted to “the way the words go,” in keeping with Vanhoozer’s emphasis in this volume on the distinction between sense and referent (see 123, 137). But on the other hand, “literal sense” is also referred to as “the meaning of the divine human discourse when read in *canonical context*” (402, emphasis ours). This latter definition goes beyond just “sense” and encompasses “referent” as well.

In the body of his book, these unresolved definitions present confusion. In chapter 5 under the heading “The Literal Sense as Grammatical-Eschatological,” Vanhoozer presents six things to avoid when seeking a proper definition of the literal sense. The fifth and sixth points are particularly pertinent. The fifth is “we should not define the literal sense apart from the canonical context, for it is one of the relevant contexts by which we determine what the divine author was doing with his divinely inspired human discourse.” As for the sixth, he states that “we must avoid defining the literal sense apart from the eschatological frame of reference that allows the final subject matter of biblical discourse to come into focus” (177). A page earlier Vanhoozer describes the “divinely intended literal sense as the *totus sensus*: the whole meaning of the divine author, including the figural and trans-figural intent” (176, cf. 180). These statements seem to situate the operating definition of “literal sense” in terms of the whole human and divine discourse of Scripture in canonical context (encompassing both what is said and what it is said about). Elsewhere, however, we see “literal sense” restricted to merely “what is said.” On p.123, Vanhoozer says,

While the *sense* is what someone says, “the *reference* is that about which that something is said. Literal meaning and interpretation involve both sense (what is said) and reference (that about which something is said).” The literal *sense* is the way words run; the literal *referent* is that to which the words run (*italics original*).

Here Vanhoozer makes literal sense only a part of “literal meaning.” The difficulty is that Vanhoozer never presents a clear, explanatory way of reconciling these apparent differences in terminology. This affects the clarity of his overall project on a trans-figural sense or “the glory of the literal sense” (25).

Vanhoozer is right to distinguish *what is said* from *that about which something is said*. He seeks to account for how *what is said* remains the same even as the referent is further illuminated in the light of Christ. Trans-figural interpretation is “reading that follows the way the biblical words run across or beyond (*trans-*) figures to the realities those figures foreshadow and anticipate” (402).

This perplexity on the meaning of the “literal sense” seen above can be resolved, however, if we attend to the Reformed Scholastic and great synthesizer of much of the Post-Reformed Orthodox tradition, Francis Turretin. Turretin in his *Institutes* explains that “only one true and genuine sense belongs to the Scriptures. That sense may be twofold: either simple or compound.”<sup>8</sup> He goes on to state that a simple or historical literal sense “contains the declaration of one thing without any other signification.” This sort of simple literal sense is seen in doctrinal Scriptures (i.e., epistles) and the non-typological histories of Scripture. This simple literal sense can be proper, when the words carry normal signification, or figurative, when the words are used figuratively or metaphorically. Turretin continues, “The composite or mixed sense is in prophecies as types, part of which is in the type, part in the antitype.” To avoid any confusion, Turretin explains “This does not establish two senses, but two parts of one and the same sense intended by the Holy Spirit, who with the letter considers the mystery.”<sup>9</sup>

When the true and genuine sense is compound or composite, the “literal sense is sometimes taken more widely for the whole compass of the sense intended by the Holy Spirit (whether in type or antitype) and so contains within it the mystical sense [i.e., the antitype fully revealed in Christ].” He then explains the terminology sometimes employed for this compound literal sense by stating that the term “literal sense” can be “taken more strictly for that which the words immediately and proximately afford and so is distinguished from the mystical (which is signified not so much by the words as by the things which the words signify), which arises only mediately from the intention of the speaker.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, when the sense or meaning

is compound, the full literal sense intended by the Holy Spirit is composed of both a more narrowly construed literal sense (the type the words immediately refer to; e.g., the paschal lamb of Exod 12:46) and the mystical sense (what the type refers to by virtue of “the intention of the speaker;” e.g., Christ the unblemished lamb).<sup>11</sup>

We believe that Turretin’s distinctions between simple and compound literal senses and his accompanying definitions clarify much of the definitional obscurity we’ve noted in Vanhoozer. First, Turretin is clear that *sense* is not limited *only* to *what is said*, but encompasses referent, and thus, *sense* can be synonymous with *meaning*. If clearly distinguished, the word *sense* can perhaps be used, as Vanhoozer does, to describe *what is said* in a very narrow way of speaking as a description of the bare content of the words taken together apart from what gives their words actual full intended meaning. Also, in the context of biblical typology or figuration, this more limited idea of the first signification of the words (whether they be proper or figurative/metaphorical) can be spoken of as the literal sense “more strictly taken.” Yet the antitype, the mystical sense, is entirely contained within the Spirit’s intended use of the words, and thus the whole meaning is a compound yet unified *literal sense*.

The second way we wish Vanhoozer’s work was a bit clearer in matters related to the literal sense and interpretation is on the relation of the *referent* of the human authors of Scripture to the *referent* of the divine author. For example, on p.137 in the context of discussing the frame of reference of the OT and its authors (particularly Isaiah), Vanhoozer states the following: “Christians believe that the prophets *said* more than they could consciously *know* about ‘what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ’ (1 Pet. 1:11)” (emphasis original). He rephrases this statement saying, “Better: the prophets knew *what they were saying*, but they did not know exactly what, or whom, they were speaking *about*. They understood the sense of their discourse but not its ultimate referent. This way of viewing the matter explains why we still need the hard work of philology to clarify the sense of the words, and other frames of reference than Isaiah’s to understand the *referent* of his discourse that his words ultimately indicate” (137, emphasis original). Here, Vanhoozer appears to limit the prophetic understanding to only *what they said* (his literal sense).

Many questions arise at this point. If we need frames of reference other than Isaiah's, what was Isaiah's frame of reference? And how does it cohere with the divine author's frame of reference to produce one unified meaning? Was Isaiah's frame of reference not Christological? It is indeed correct to say that they did not understand all that they referred to, but was their understanding only limited to *what is said* and not *what is spoken about* (referent)? If so, how could they produce through the leading of the Spirit discourses coherent in any way to themselves, because all discourse must have "sense" and "referent"?

Later in the book, however, Vanhoozer brings some clarifications on these questions. On p.274, Vanhoozer states, "The apostle Peter seems to take for granted that the prophets — and indeed the whole Old Testament — were speaking of the future messiah, even if they did not explicitly name him Jesus Christ." He also affirms that the prophets knew their prophecies were future in orientation (275), and that "the Old Testament authors did not know the full meaning of what they wrote, [but] they knew part of it" (276). We believe these statements are accurate and helpful. Yet these valuable statements are obscured by his continued affirmation, repeated on p.274, that the prophets "knew the sense of their words, but not their referent." What he apparently means by this is stated in the next sentence: "Their vision of how their words would become true in the future was blurry" (274). Yet if their vision was blurry and they knew part of the full meaning of their texts, then they must have understood not merely *what they said* but also *some of that which they were speaking about*, even if with a lack of clarity. We believe what Vanhoozer is trying to say would be best clarified if his way of relating the prophetic understanding to *what was said* be changed.

That the biblical authors had *some* even if not complete knowledge of their eschatological referent is essential for saying that the fullness seen in the text through the light of Christ's coming is not a different meaning than the prophet's communicated. Otherwise, we would not be practicing literal interpretation. We believe this reality can be well expressed in the following two-fold manner: "1) the communicative intent of the Old Testament human authors involved an expectation of greater, eschatological revelation of their referent and further illumination of their own inspired writings. 2) God's full intention in these prophetic writings which is unveiled only through the missions of the Son and the Spirit coheres

with this limited human intention to produce one literal sense normative for interpretation.”<sup>12</sup>

## CONCLUSION

*Mere Christian Hermeneutics* has much to commend it. Both of us have benefitted greatly from Vanhoozer’s numerous insights. Indeed, Vanhoozer provides some level of insight into nearly every ongoing conversation about biblical interpretation, and those already engaged in these discussions will glean much from his work. We would not, however, recommend this book for audiences beginning the complex trek into the world of biblical hermeneutics. The confusion about “literal sense” is a fault-line that runs through the entire book that can prevent it from being a solid starting point. Additionally, while Vanhoozer’s imagery and wordplay captivate the imagination and delight the senses, they can at times undermine the clarity of his argument, making *Mere Christian Hermeneutics* an even more difficult read for those not already familiar with the conversation. We recommend Vanhoozer’s earlier work, specifically *First Theology* and *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* for the more solid foundation they provide in understanding of textual meaning and the literal sense. Then we would commend *Mere Christian Hermeneutics* to those who already have that foundation in place but desire to dive deeper in specific aspects of hermeneutics, or to discover an even richer picture of how Christ is the *referent* of all of Scripture, already present in its literal sense, and now fully illumined by the Spirit in these last days brought about by the coming of Christ and the completion of his work.

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Mere Christian Hermeneutics: Transfiguring What it Means to Read the Bible Theologically* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2024). This review was originally published at “Christ Over All,” October 2025 at <https://christoverall.com/article/concise/seeing-christ-in-the-letter-a-review-of-kevin-j-vanhoozers-mere-christian-hermeneutics/>.

<sup>2</sup> *Mere Christian Hermeneutics* largely comes as a development of ideas Kevin Vanhoozer dealt with in the 2012 article “Ascending the Mountain, Singing the Rock: Biblical Interpretation Earthed, Typed, and Transfigured” *Modern Theology* 28.4 (2012): 781–803.

<sup>3</sup> Biblical scholars typically operate with a “historical frame of reference” which privileges “the world ‘behind’ the text” whereas theologians operate with frames of reference that privilege some “world ‘in front of’ the text,” whether “ecclesial tradition or . . . the prevailing philosophies and cultural currents of the day” (97). The world behind the text is “the sociocultural context of the authors and editors who produced it,” whereas the world in front of the text is “that of its readers, who bring the world of the text into their lives, if only for a moment.” Both of these are distinguished from the world of the text, which is “made up of words and has a coherence of its own, thanks to its literary structure and plot” (87).

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- <sup>4</sup> We recognize that this definition is vague. Concern over the confusing and contradictory ways Vanhoozer defines “literal sense” will feature later in this review.
- <sup>5</sup> More fully, “the sense of a word or text pertains to one’s mental concept of an object; the referent is the real-world object to which that sense or concept corresponds” (123).
- <sup>6</sup> Vanhoozer explicitly contrasts this eschatological frame with the “sacramental frame” (i.e., sacramental ontology) of Hans Boersma. Boersma makes the biblical text a “sacrament” which “participates” in the Word of God (that is, Christ). The exegete who approaches the text with a sacramental frame of reference “looks for the deeper, hidden meaning beneath the literal, or historical, meaning of the text,” that is the Christological *res* in which the *signum* of the text metaphysically participates. Vanhoozer, 131, citing Hans Boersma, *Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 140. The problems with the sacramental frame are 1) the spiritual sense of the text quickly becomes unmoored from the literal meaning via allegory and 2) that it fails to capture the dynamic development of redemptive history (creation, fall, redemption, consummation).
- <sup>7</sup> This word is an intentional reference to *Ressourcement*, the return to patristic sources that became popular in mid-twentieth century scholarship and continues to the present day. *Ressourcement* is a French word meaning “return to the sources,” and it became an anthem of the *nouvelle* theologians who influenced Vatican II. While the recovery of patristic sources has brought many benefits, they can be weaponized to undermine clarifications and contributions made by later eras of the tradition, reducing us to a lowest common denominator kind of Christianity.
- <sup>8</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992), 1:150.
- <sup>9</sup> Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:150.
- <sup>10</sup> Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:151.
- <sup>11</sup> Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:150.
- <sup>12</sup> Michael J. Pereira, “‘And Now The Lord God Has Sent Me and His Spirit’: The Divine Missions, the Literal Sense, and Reading the Old Testament,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 68.4 (Dec 2025): 639–61.

# Book Reviews

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*The Transfiguration of Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Reading.* By Patrick Schreiner. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2024, xi + 183 pp., \$28.

Patrick Schreiner's thesis in *The Transfiguration of Christ* is that "the transfiguration reveals Jesus's double sonship," by revealing "the future glory of the earthly and suffering messianic Son and the preexistent glory of the heavenly and eternally begotten Son" (4, emphasis removed). To this end, each of book's main chapters concludes with a reflection on how the aspect of the transfiguration under consideration serves to reveal *both* Jesus's messianic *and* eternal sonships. For example, Schreiner argues that in Scripture mountains are often places where the Bible's covenantal story advances and the location of major theophanies. Therefore, the transfiguration's mountaintop setting reveals both that Jesus is the human messiah who will inaugurate the new covenant (advancing the covenantal story), *and* that he is the very glory of God revealed—that is, God incarnate, the subject of a theophany (53). Each of these insights is summarized in convenient tables (53, 91, 128) which clearly advance Schreiner's thesis and provide the backbone of the book.

First, a word of praise for the book. Schreiner's thesis, as well as much of his exegetical work, is commendable. He clearly demonstrates that the transfiguration accounts in all three gospels identify Jesus not only as a human messiah who will be glorified by God, but as a preexistent divine figure—the Son of God (4–5, 7, 148). For example, Schreiner rightly notes that Jesus's brightness (his white clothes and shining face) symbolize both his divinity and his humanity: his garments radiate heavenly light because he is from heaven and his face shines because he is the radiance of the Father's glory, while at the same time these things symbolize that he is the new Moses, mediating a better covenant and the "light of the world" that has come to save us (63–69, 91).

Particularly notable is Schreiner's work connecting the transfiguration account to other texts in the gospels and demonstrating how those texts ought to inform our understanding of transfiguration. Among numerous texts, Schreiner connects the transfiguration accounts to Jesus's

baptism (Matt 3; Mark 1; Luke 3, pp. 133–135), the Garden of Gethsemane (135–137) and the cross (137–139) within the gospels, and to the sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 22, 106–109) and coming of the Son of Man (Dan. 7; pp. 31–37, 107–115)) in the OT. In doing so, Schreiner emphasizes that the definitive statement of Jesus's identity in the transfiguration is both *informed by* and *informs* these other texts. Jesus, the God-man who is gloriously revealed in the transfiguration is also the one who came to die, and the one who was crucified is both God himself and the glorious Messiah who shines like the sun. Readers will appreciate that the linguistic, thematic, and theological parallels between such passages are often summarized in convenient tables, making the most valuable content in the book its most accessible as well (105, 135, 137, 138, etc.). If one were to purchase this book for the tables and intra-biblical connections alone, they would not be disappointed.

Second, a word of critique. Despite a needed thesis and strong exegetical work, *The Transfiguration of Christ* raises substantive theological concerns. The central theological problem in the book is Schreiner's failure to distinguish between created effects and the divine realities symbolized by those effects. This issue threatens the Creator-creature distinction and the Chalcedonian separation of Christ's natures and is further compounded by Schreiner's adoption of Eastern Orthodox theological categories, especially the Palamite distinction between God's essence and energies. The problem is methodological as much as theological: Schreiner's retrieval of Palamite sources is overly sympathetic and lacks the critical audit such retrieval requires. As a result, Schreiner imports a theological framework that undercuts the Chalcedonian doctrine he means to secure.

Schreiner repeatedly states that the light the disciples saw on the mount of transfiguration was "uncreated light" (57–64). This term is drawn from Gregory Palamas, who famously introduced the doctrine of uncreated divine energies. For Palamas, the energies of God are emanations from the essence, which were less than the essence of God but still God. Following Palamas, Schreiner asserts that the disciples truly saw "God" on the mount of transfiguration, but they did not see the divine essence, since God in himself is invisible (1 Tim 6:16). Instead, they saw the divine energy (or energies) of uncreated light (153–158). However, this has the disastrous

effect of blurring the Creator-creature distinction by positing a middle term between Creator and created. Although Schreiner recognizes this concern, he does not find it significant (pp. 155–56). Rather than the Creator God, in all that he is on one side of the divide and created things on the other, the doctrine of uncreated energies introduces a third term, the energies, which are not created and are “God” and yet not fully God. These errors are not mere abstractions but affect Schreiner’s exegesis. Thus, Schreiner argues that it was not Jesus but the disciples were transfigured, as they passed “from flesh to spirit” such that they could see the invisible uncreated light of God (53n5). This is a direct appropriation of Palamas, who argues that the disciples became uncreated light—that is, they became God (in energy)—such that they could see God. Schreiner reproduces this view, perhaps not realizing the implication that if creatures can transcend createdness, we no longer have a Creator-creature *distinction* only a Creator-creature continuum. It is all the more surprising to see Schreiner adopt this view, given that his own exegesis militates against it—even while seeing the vision, the disciples missed the point and distorted Jesus’s identity and mission (e.g., 100–103).

Similarly, Schreiner argues that though God is invisible, the disciples saw his uncreated light. It is of course true that the disciples saw God, because they saw a divine person according to his human nature (cf. John 1:14). But Schreiner makes this claim not in reference to the divine person revealed in the transfiguration, but in reference to the divine nature. The disciples not only saw a divine person, but something akin to the divine essence (the energies). Schreiner’s aim in defining the light of the transfiguration as uncreated and embracing the essence-energies distinction is simply to affirm that the transfiguration reveals Jesus’s divinity as well as his messianic office (62). Yet in doing so, he imports categories that, on inspection, distort the nature of God and threaten the Chalcedonian distinction between Christ’s two natures when applied to the transfiguration.

The light of the transfiguration was no doubt ineffably glorious, far beyond the natural light of the sun, which revealed Christ’s divinity. Yet even so, it must be a *sign* of Christ’s divinity rather than the divinity itself (or an emanation/energy of that divinity) or the distinction between Christ’s natures would be blurred. Both the Chalcedonian and Athanasian creeds clearly state that the divine and human natures of Christ do not mingle with one another—though Christ has both divine and human attributes,

according to his divine and human nature, these attributes do not bleed over from one nature to the other. Yet on Schreiner's reading, Christ's flesh and clothes shone with an *uncreated* light—a predicate that, on Chalcedonian terms, belongs properly to the divine nature. Locating it in the humanity strains the distinction the creeds are at pains to preserve. When Schreiner reads the transfiguration in light of the essence-energies distinction, he ends up endangering the very Chalcedonian doctrine he set out to prove. Schreiner's exegesis would be better served by a Reformed doctrine of the *communicatio idiomatum*, in which both divine and human attributes are predicated of one person without transferring between natures. It would also benefit from an Augustinian account of theophany (see *De Trinitate*, bks. 2–3). The person revealed at the Transfiguration is of course more than a theophany—he is the incarnate Son—but the light itself is theophanic: a created effect that discloses the glory of God the Son, just as the voice from heaven does.

Schreiner's retrieval effort also leads him to identify the disciples' ascent up the mountain to see Jesus with progress in virtue. Peter, James, and John ascend the mountain not because of Jesus's undeserved favor bestowed on them, but because they were the most virtuous of the twelve disciples (46). So we also, Schreiner claims, must first purge ourselves of sin in order to see God and finally be united with him (50–52, 88–90, 124–128). Yet such conclusions are difficult to sustain, even in light of Schreiner's own theological insights (e.g., the blindness of these three disciples to both the glory they are witnessing and the mission of Jesus, and their later arguments about their own greatness). I should clarify that I do not believe that Schreiner is adopting a false gospel of works-righteousness, and there is an element of truth to this presentation of sanctification—it is the pure in heart that will see God (Matt. 5:8). Yet the spiritual interpretation Schreiner provides of the disciples' ascent, rooted as it is in Eastern conviction that the disciples were divinized, undercuts two critical aspects of the text's teaching: 1) Jesus Christ reveals his glory to unworthy and undeserving sinners, and 2) the full revelation of his glory (and its transformative effect) requires his death as a substitutionary sacrifice and his resurrection, both of which are yet to come in the transfiguration accounts. A preacher relying on this book for their understanding of the transfiguration might too quickly turn to moralism (the requirement of virtue for the ascent to the vision of God)

rather than the vision of Christ itself, which God bestows on his unworthy people *in order to transform them*.

Overall, Patrick Schreiner's *The Transfiguration of Christ* is a dynamic work. On the one hand, his thesis is spot on — the transfiguration reveals Jesus as both the glorious divine Son and the exalted human messiah, one person with two natures, and Schreiner substantiates this with rigorous exegesis and wonderful insights both from Schreiner's own work and the tradition, all in an extremely accessible format. On the other, there are serious theological problems that run through the book and even warp some of Schreiner's exegetical conclusions due to his adoption of medieval Eastern Orthodox theology. It seems to me that Schreiner's adoption of these categories is more an issue of uncritical retrieval and failure to recognize their theological implications than a deeply held conviction or a sign of more issues to come. And so, while I would be happy to draw from parts of this book for my own study of the transfiguration texts, I would be wary of recommending it to those without enough training in systematic theology to untangle Schreiner's Reformed and baptistic theology from the Eastern Orthodox sources on which he relies.

Knox Brown, PhD Candidate  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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*Preparing Sermons from the Page to the Pulpit: Exegesis to Exposition in Seven Steps.* By Wayne Baxter. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2023, 184 pp., \$15.99 paper.

Wayne Baxter's *Preparing Sermons from the Page to the Pulpit* is a helpful tool to add to the preacher's toolbox. Baxter is the professor of New Testament and Greek at Heritage College and Seminary in Ontario, Canada. His work is an attempt to help preachers bring exegesis and exposition together with the hope of making it easier to do so in the study. The author begins with identifying the problem he sees with contemporary expository preaching. This problem is threefold. Many sermons preached today contain truths not derived from the passage in question and thus lead to preaching the right doctrine from the wrong text. Moralistic preaching continues to plague many pulpits. As such, many sermons have the main point of "be like Joseph"

or “slay your own giants like David.” Spiritualized messages also continue to abound. Spiritualizing occurs when the preacher bypasses the historical and theological significance of the text in favor of teaching some general spiritual reality or moral. Baxter’s solution is a call back to a kind of expository preaching that weds exegesis and exposition together again.

Baxter admits that doing so is often difficult. This is because writing a sermon can often be like a giant jigsaw puzzle. He writes, “Everything is there before the task begins: all the pieces required to assemble it, as well as the box cover that gives the picture and final goal to work toward. But the task is rarely easy. It is sometimes confusing and often frustrating” (10). Yet, those who are committed to expository preaching will persevere if only through trial. Baxter’s hope is to make this process easier. His intended audience is a very specific kind of preacher since he addresses those who are already committed to expository preaching, those who have already graduated from some type of seminary study in the original languages, who are already dedicated to interpreting a passage along its sociohistorical background, and who have some preaching experience.

What follows are seven essential steps from exegesis to exposition. Each chapter focuses on the process of moving from exegesis to exposition, using genre analysis, and working from the Greek or Hebrew. His seven steps include determining the outer limits and boundaries of the text, analyzing the co-text or immediate context, outlining the passage using independent and dependent clauses, taking the passage outline to exegetical summary outline to homiletical outline, engaging in word studies and nuance, making theological connections to the rest of Scripture, and applying the text appropriately.

Baxter’s primary strength is his helpful suggestions on the exegetical level. The first five steps are Baxter’s strongest points in the book. For example, whereas most preachers might move from a passage outline (sometimes called an exegetical outline) to their homiletical outline, Baxter inserts a middle step that he calls the “exegetical summary outline.” Whereas the passage outline points out the independent and dependent clauses in the text, the exegetical summary outline functions as a pre-homiletical outline that serves both the clarity and accuracy of interpretation. This involves writing a summary (he puts emphasis on summary) of the independent clauses in a list of points. The key is to summarize the independent clauses only, since

they drive the action of the text. Only once this middle step is complete can the preacher move to the homiletical outline. Whereas the exegetical summary outline is descriptive and essentially repeats the words of the text in summary form, the homiletical outline places the audience themselves into the text. Taking each point and transforming it into a rhetorical or exhortative statement brings shape to the sermon, but also does justice to the authorial intent. Baxter's middle step could be a very useful tool for helping preachers faithfully exposit a text without making the passage seem merely remote to the audience. Also, this middle step will aid in the clarity of sermons. Baxter writes, "Without this intermediate step, the preacher is more likely to offer a confusing homily, that pulls in many, sometimes competing, directions, all the while lacking a central thread. Or you might fall into the trap of delivering an overly complicated twelve-point, hard-to-follow message" (102–03).

Despite this strength, there is one potential weakness with the book. Baxter culminates his first six steps with biblical theology (i.e. making theological connections). He argues that the penultimate stage of preparing a sermon is taking a look at how the preacher's text fits within the canonical storyline of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. This can be helpful, but readers might wonder what place other theological disciplines might have in the preparation of sermons as well. For example, what role does systematic or historical theology play in sermon preparation? Should preachers isolate a particular doctrine for explanation in the sermon? At what point should the preacher use commentaries and engage in the conversation of the Great Tradition? Answering these questions does not negate the book's work but would have made for an even stronger book on preaching. The same could be *applied* to his chapter on application (pun intended). Although Baxter gives a few pointers as to how a preacher should approach application, his most helpful suggestion is relegated to making specific applications rather than general applications. Preachers will have to go to other resources listed at the end of the chapter for further help in this area.

Overall, Baxter's work is short, practical, encouraging, and packed with insight and further suggested resources. Preachers who love expository preaching and want to get better at it will not only profit from this work

but will be thankful they read it. And I am sure many congregations will be thankful their pastors read this book as well.

Taylor Mendoza, PhD Candidate  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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*How to Study the Bible's Use of the Bible: Seven Hermeneutical Choices for the Old and New Testaments.* By Gary Edward Schnittjer and Matthew S. Harmon. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2024, 260 pp., \$39.99.

Gary Schnittjer and Matthew Harmon have collaborated to write a book providing a methodology for interpreting uses of Scripture throughout Scripture. By “use of Scripture,” Schnittjer and Harmon refer to “some kind of relationship” between two Scripture texts “while purposely avoiding issues of (in)direct dependence, authorial intention, and distinctions between echo, allusion, paraphrase, and quotation” (212). The intentionally broad term “use” allows Schnittjer and Harmon to bridge the divide between diverse camps of biblical scholars. Debates over whether a use of Scripture is authorially intended sometimes result in biblical scholars talking past each other. The authors’ term “use” facilitates bringing these disparate perspectives into dialogue with one another. The breadth of this book makes it invaluable for scholars, pastors, and students alike who seek to interpret how evocations of Scripture function throughout the Bible. In the authors’ words, *How to Study the Bible's Use of the Bible* “takes the next step” from introductory hermeneutical principles “and narrowly focuses on the special issues of interpreting the Bible’s use of the Bible,” framed as seven choices that interpreters must make as they conduct these studies (xxvi). The seven choices comprise the first seven chapters of the book.

First, one must choose whether to interpret uses of Scripture in a “sequestered” or “connected” manner (1). Against scholars who separate the study of how earlier Scripture functions in the Old and New Testaments, Schnittjer and Harmon advocate connecting uses of Scripture in both Testaments, since New Testament authors use Old Testament Scriptures in similar ways to Old Testament authors. The second choice overlaps with the first: one chooses whether later texts “adjust meaning and/or adjust context” of previous texts or whether later Scriptural

uses of earlier Scripture are “a subset of the progressive revelation of God’s redemptive will” (24). Schnittjer and Harmon note that, in the Law of Moses alone, God Himself amends five of His own laws that He gave Israel (44n85). These examples illustrate “Yahweh’s commitment to advancing revelation by means of scriptural exegesis” (44). Therefore, rather than interpreting later uses of Scripture as changing the meaning (as theologically liberal scholars) or context (as other theologically conservative scholars), one should interpret later uses of Scripture as examples of progressive revelation.

Third, one must investigate allusions not only as science but also as art. A citation formula undoubtedly marks a later author’s use of earlier Scripture, and lexical similarity can also indicate intentional reuse. However, even thematic similarities belong on the spectrum of ways an earlier text can influence a later text (60). Fourth, the donor text’s horizontal and vertical contexts alike should be investigated when interpreting the receptor text’s use of the donor text. While many scholars consider how “the surrounding verses, paragraphs and chapters,” the entire book, or “even all of Israel’s scriptures” (horizontal context) affects the use of a donor text by a receptor text, Schnittjer and Harmon also advocate examining “the relationship between the earlier donor and later receptor texts” prior to the final receptor text (vertical context) when interpreting the reuse of Scripture (85). Such a vertical context enriches one’s understanding of how earlier Scripture texts function in later passages. Fifth, Schnittjer and Harmon instruct readers to prioritize biblical texts in relation to one another over extrabiblical texts’ uses of Scripture: “The starting point must be how other *biblical* authors interact with the same or related donor text(s). Then and only then should one consult extrabiblical literature for insight into the larger exegetical and hermeneutical context in which the biblical author lived” (109).

Penultimately, Schnittjer and Harmon consider the function of typology within the study of later biblical authors’ use of earlier biblical texts. They define typology as “intentional scriptural shaping to draw selective expectational analogies between persons, events, institutions, procedures, oracles, or a combination of these, within the historical framework of progressive revelation” (132). The authors thus consider both prospective predictive typology and retrospective prefigural typology to be valid. Finally, they endorse prosopological exegesis as a valid subset of typology.

They consider “a biblical author *reading an earlier biblical speech in the light of a new character*” as a valid use of that earlier Scripture (160). Based on later revelation, earlier nonexpectational passages may be read in light of a new person. Luke, Acts, and Hebrews especially feature prosopological exegesis applied to one of the Persons of the Triune God. In their concluding chapter, Schnittjer and Harmon treat two case studies at length, illustrating their process for using this book’s principles to study the use of Scripture in a later scriptural text (180, Table 8-B).

Given the diverse methods for studying how later biblical authors use earlier biblical texts, readers may find individual points with which to disagree with Schnittjer and Harmon. For example, this reviewer is not persuaded by the authors’ argument that Psalm superscriptions are “an important precursor” to the prosopological exegesis of later biblical authors (167). Indeed, their proposal of prosopological exegesis as a subset of typology seems unnecessary. Nevertheless, much commends this handbook to a wide audience. The readability of this text commends it, as does the incorporation of the decade’s worth of scholarship since G. K. Beale’s *Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (2012, Baker). Numerous tables portray Schnittjer and Harmon’s argument in an accurate but simple way. Each chapter concludes with at least one case study illustrating the choice presented in that chapter. The concluding chapter is a practical guide for putting the principles of this book into practice. The second through fourth chapters of this book especially advance evangelical study of intertextuality within the Bible and of biblical theology more broadly. Scholars, pastors, and students alike should welcome this resource and use it regularly.

Jordan Atkinson, PhD Candidate  
Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

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*The Communion of the Book: Milton and the Humanist Revolution in Reading.*  
By David Williams. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press,  
2022, 528 pp., \$133.00.

Even among congregants and pastors relatively well studied and well informed regarding the period, the Protestant Reformation can easily

become a two-dimensional narrative centered on a handful of important individuals and key events. In truth, despite the monumental achievements of Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, and their contemporaries, their work and the movement which they led did not develop within a historical, cultural, and intellectual vacuum. The approach and habits of mind by which they and their theological descendants read and applied Scripture had been formed and developed before them over the proceeding decades and centuries by humanist scholars and antiquarians who renewed studies of the ancient texts and fundamentally altered how the reader approached the written word. *The Communion of the Book* is a historical, literary, and sociological study of the impact new humanist approaches to reading had on historiography, textual criticism, theology, neurocircuitry, and the conception of the individual from the fourteenth through seventeenth centuries. In his meticulously researched volume, David Williams strives to fill a gap he perceives in scholarship concerning the transition of society from a manuscript-based one to one based on the printed word. He sets about this task by tracing the impact of humanist scholarship and the printed word in and through the works of Francesco Petrarch, Desiderius Erasmus, John Foxe, and John Milton. Williams is professor emeritus in the University of Manitoba Department of English, Theatre, Film, and Media. He earned his PhD in English at the University of Massachusetts, and his research specialties incorporate medium theory, John Milton, and Renaissance humanism. Williams has written several academic works on these topics in addition to three novels.

Williams sets about a difficult, nuanced, and multifaceted task in *The Communion of the Book*, and thus his major thesis for the work can be difficult to articulate. One may summarize the primary thrust of the volume's central argument as follows: The humanist view of reading as a communion with the author's mind resulted in a conception of Bible reading as a means of partaking in the real presence of Christ. This undermined ecclesiastical authority in much of Europe and — through the manifestation and example of this new form of reading found in Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* — brought about both religious and political change in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England as reflected in the works of Milton. Beginning with Petrarch's efforts to reassemble the scattered scraps of Livy's history of Rome and to verify an authentic text from the multiple variants,

humanists brought attention and concern back to the words and historical contexts of ancient texts. These methods required, as Williams explains, “a reader to share the mental processes of the author” (18). Within the text, humanists—particularly Erasmus and his intellectual heirs—found a communion between the mind of the reader and the mind of the author, one deeper and more intimate than that between two men in years of familiar discourse. Williams draws deeply from Erasmus’s writings to demonstrate his application of this concept when reading Scripture as not merely a communion with the mind of the biblical author but with the real presence of Christ.

Williams makes the point that this method of reading began to replace the role of the bread and wine of the Mass with the printed words of Scripture as the primary means by which Christians could engage with the substance of Christ. This change was further propelled by the emergence of a growing literary culture brought on by the increasing availability of printed books which enabled, for the first time, large numbers of people to have access to identical texts without them being largely mediated by church hierarchy. Although Erasmus and many of his fellow humanists would remain loyal to the church in Rome throughout the Protestant Reformation, the changes to reading habits which they promoted removed the necessity of the church hierarchy as the dispenser of the real presence of Christ and opened the way for questioning the legitimacy of the established institutions of church and state.

Williams’s volume proves to be a highly interdisciplinary study of his subject. The presentation of his argument relies heavily on historical and literary analysis of primary source texts. These are primarily used in revealing Erasmus’s own views of reading, demonstrating how his views were later rearticulated by Milton and showing written portrayals of humanist readers in Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments* and in Milton’s *Paradise Regained*. Williams also deals frequently with secondary sources and at several points seeks to mediate between conflicting positions within the existing scholarship. Williams makes a strong case for his thesis by drawing extensively from primary sources and principally utilizing secondary sources to support conclusions made from the period texts. The research provided in the book concerning the substance and significance of humanist reading practices is a significant contribution to the fields of

intellectual and church history, and the first three chapters are indispensable to anyone who wishes to understand the development of biblicism in Protestant Christianity.

Despite the work's noted virtues, there are a couple of perceived shortfalls which may be mentioned. The scope of Williams's thesis can make his argument seem unwieldy and unnecessarily complicated at times, particularly in the earlier chapters when parts of his argument are not fully fleshed out. The argument is split in half between the third and fourth chapters with the first three chapters being devoted to the cultural, theological, and metaphysical aspects of the Renaissance humanist reshaping of the act of reading in Europe and the last five chapters being focused on the more political and literary impact of humanist reading in England (with particular attention paid to William's theory regarding the literary composition of Milton's *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes* within their broader historical and political context). Many pastors and lay Christians may find Williams's account in the first section fascinating and profitable. However, the content of the second section, although valuable, is unlikely to interest a broad audience outside of those particularly interested in Milton's works or in the culture of seventeenth century England.

Overall, Williams has produced an impressive and enlightening work of scholarship regarding the role of humanist reading in enabling the Protestant Reformation and in initiating the psychological, religious, and political changes that were to follow. Without the view of reading Scripture as a kind of holy communion engaging the reader with a real presence of Christ, Williams contends, the Protestant Reformation and the religious and political changes which followed may have never occurred.

Daniel Hubin, MDiv Student  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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*Now and Not Yet: Theology and Mission in Ezra – Nehemiah.* New Studies in Biblical Theology 57. By Dean R. Ulrich. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021. 184 pp., \$29.99 paper.

Dean R. Ulrich served at Trinity School for Ministry, China Reformed Theological Seminary, and Belhaven University. He has written *From Famine*

to Fullness: *The Gospel According to Ruth* (2007, P&R), *The Antiochene Crisis and Jubilee Theology in Daniel's Seventy Sevens* (2015, Brill). *Now and Not Yet: Theology and Mission in Ezra-Nehemiah* is his entry in InterVarsity Press's New Studies in Biblical Theology, and the book consists of eight chapters. The introduction laments the neglect of Ezra–Nehemiah (EN) in the twentieth century (1), discusses reasons for that neglect (1–6), and sets forth Ulrich's hermeneutic (6–7). The author treats EN as a unified work and states that he will not approach EN moralistically (5–6). Instead, he reads the book as “the record of the beginning of a new work of God among his people after the exile” (6–7), a work which culminates in Jesus's first coming (7).

Chapter 2 briefly compares systematic and biblical theology (9–17) before setting EN in its historical and literary context (17–24). According to Ulrich, the lists of names in Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7:4–73a serve to set apart three sections that cover the balance of the rest of the book: Ezra 1, Ezra 3:1–Nehemiah 7:3, and Nehemiah 7:73b–13:31 (17). In chapter 3, Ulrich demonstrates that the exile did not thwart God's redemptive plan (47). In fact, their return is a second exodus (33). Chapters 4–6 discuss the rebuilding of the temple (Ezra 3–6), the people (Ezra 7–10), and the wall (Neh 1–7), respectively. Chapter 7 addresses both the commitment and failure of the returned community. Chapter 8's conclusion reminds readers that EN anticipates its fulfillment in the NT.

Four features of the book stand out. First, it is clearly written with helpful summaries at the end of each chapter. The author is concise and to the point. Second, Ulrich consistently shows the relevance of EN, as well as its NT parallels. This proves helpful for those who plan to preach the book as they contemplate potential applications and gospel connections. Third, Ulrich rejects the xenophobic interpretation of how EN handles the intermarriage problem (Ezra 9–10; Neh 13:23–27). He clarifies that “the issue was not so much racial or consanguineous (mixing blood through marriage) as religious or theological (mixing ideas through marriage)” (84). Fourth, Ulrich brings a fresh look at EN using an NT “already/not yet” framework. The return from exile, the completion of the temple and the wall, and the teaching of Ezra display many “already” aspects in God's redemptive plan. At the same time, the people's sin points to the “not yet” aspects. As Ulrich puts it, “Those who lived in Ezra–Nehemiah's Jerusalem might have sampled a preview of the city of God (the

‘now’) but fell short of the eventual perfection of the inhabitants of the New Jerusalem (the ‘not yet’)” (160).

Meanwhile, the book has two weaknesses. First, it sometimes reads like a survey of the narrative in EN. To be sure, Ulrich tackles theological cruxes, but in general, he does not add much to the conversation. Second, Ulrich posits that mission is a key message in EN and defines mission as “participating in God’s purpose for his world” (5). Granted, the concept of mission is present in both the OT and NT, albeit with different emphases. In the OT, the emphasis is *come and see*, while in the NT, the focus is *go and tell* (Matt 28:18–20). Ulrich’s understanding of mission thus flattens the unique modes of mission in the biblical narrative. For those reasons, I do not see mission as a key concern in EN.

Overall, these weaknesses do not detract from the book’s value. Ulrich’s keen attention to EN’s relevance and its relationship to the NT may rescue the corpus from contemporary neglect. Those wanting to study and preach EN will benefit from this helpful volume. *Now and Not Yet* is a welcome contribution to this neglected area of OT scholarship.

Giang Tran, PhD Student  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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*Antioch, Nicaea, and the Synthesis of Constantinople: Revisiting Trajectories in the Fourth-Century Christological Debates.* By Andrei-Dragoş Giulea. Leiden: Brill, 2024, 324 pp., \$167.00.

Giulea has published widely on Early Christianity and Patristics, culminating in *Pre-Nicene Christology in Paschal Contexts*. Additionally, he lectures on Patristics at St. Maximus the Confessor Theological Centre, Montreal. He breaks the current work into two major parts: “Reassessing the Map of the Main Trajectories” and “Reassessing the Pro-Nicene Trajectory as a Synthesis of Antioch and Nicaea.” The goal across these two parts is to “generate a new map of the theological trajectories involved in the debate and unveil their logical articulation and historical evolution” (12). This new map would include not just the theological cultures of Antioch and Nicaea but also those of the pro-Nicene synthesis and even the Arian movement.

Part one of this work focuses on the lead-up to the work of Basil of Caesarea. Beginning with the Council of Antioch in 268, Giulea attempts to outline a theological grammar coming from the Council of Antioch. In his view, a theological grammar consists of a “*metaphysical component* and a *traditional tenets of the faith component*” (30, italics original). His main contention is that the use of οὐσία and ὑπόστασις as synonyms meaning individual substance shows that Antioch’s grammar “is a widely conveyed language” (32). By tying this use of language to Origen, Giulea attempts to present the Antiochene trajectory as a “third theoretical pole” (69) in the conversation between Nicaea and Arianism. Through the next two chapters, Giulea attempts to differentiate this Homoian Antiochene theological trajectory from the Arian theological trajectory. Finally, he closes part one by identifying the pro-Nicene synthesis as a fourth theological trajectory differentiated not only from Arianism and Antiochenism but also from the Nicene theological trajectory.

Before part two, Giulea gives a short excursus that serves as a bridge between the two parts. In it, he argues that the pro-Nicene trajectory is fundamentally centered around “a new type of language able to generate a new grammar with more explanatory capacities” (181). In part two, he focuses on the work of Basil and how he evolved as a thinker over time. He begins by looking at how the early Basil interacted with both Homoians and Nicenes, even arguing that he has “an obvious leaning to the Homoiousian solution” (196). It is the conflict between these two positions that Giulea argues accounts for the discrepancies in Basil’s language in *Contra Eunomius* (206–07). Ultimately, this results in a “dual Trinitarian discourse” (243). It is this discourse that secures the victory of the pro-Nicene solution by assimilating the grammars of Antioch and Nicaea into a single metaphysical system.

This work is quite helpful for understanding some of the Trinitarian conversations going on in the fourth century. Overall, I found part one to be more beneficial than part two. While there are still questions to be answered about the map of the theological trajectories that Giulea gives, the breadth of thinkers that he overviews, mixed with its focus on the grammar and metaphysics behind the conversations, is very helpful for anyone attempting to understand what is going on in the time period around Nicaea. Additionally, part two provides the English-reading world with one of its most comprehensive studies into the Trinitarian theology of

Basil of Caesarea. The combination of these two strengths makes this book a vital resource for anyone attempting to do work on the fourth-century Trinitarian debates.

With that said, there are two primary questions that I have from this work. First, why do the pro-Nicenes never talk about Antioch if it is a foundational part of their grammatical and theological synthesis? While the author makes a compelling case that there was some crosspollination between the Antiochenes and the Nicenes, leaders of the synthesis such as Gregory the Theologian harken back to Nicaea but not Antioch. This is certainly not a death blow to Giulea's argument, but it is a place that I would like to see expanded in the future. Second, why does Giulea present Basil as the primary innovator of the pro-Nicene synthesis? By the author's own admission, Basil's *Contra Eunomius* is a book in which Basil's understanding of words like *οὐσία* is highly contested and inconsistent (206). Add to this Basil's well-known reluctance to call the Holy Spirit God and his position as theological ringleader becomes highly suspect. Again, this does not kill his argument. However, the relationship between the Cappadocians and the development of the pro-Nicene community's grammar needs expansion. Particular attention on this point should be given to the work of Gregory the Theologian prior to his time in Constantinople.

Overall, this work is highly useful for any scholar or student of the Nicene period or who is interested in the development of theological grammar. While there are places that need more research, Giulea provides a solid basis for more critical engagement. Hopefully, scholars will see this as an invitation and a tentative roadmap into one of the most complex time periods in Christian history. This work deserves its place next to the studies of thinkers such as Lewis Ayers, John Behr, R.P.C. Hanson, and John Henry Newman.

Brian Wagers, PhD Candidate  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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*Mere Christian Hermeneutics: Transfiguring What It Means to Read the Bible Theologically.* By Kevin J. Vanhoozer. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2024, 448 pp., \$39.99 hardback.

Kevin Vanhoozer is one of the greatest scholars of theology hermeneutics in contemporary Evangelicalism, as is evidenced by his numerous books, including *Is There a Meaning in this Text?* (1998, Zondervan), *The Drama of Doctrine* (2005, Westminster John Knox), and *Biblical Authority After Babel* (2016, Baker). In his latest volume, Vanhoozer returns to the issue of theological interpretation of Scripture, arguing that “we need all the theological disciplines, and several kinds of biblical criticism, to read the Bible rightly, in ways that do justice to both its human and divine authorship” (xxii). His goal is to establish “mere hermeneutics”—a system of basic principles that all Christians believe when reading Scripture.

Let’s first give a summary of the book. Vanhoozer sets out his paradigm for hermeneutics with scriptural terms. He employs the language of an “economy of light” to refer to what Scripture does, as illustrated by the transfiguration. By using Scripture to guide theological interpretation, Vanhoozer intends to overcome the historic divide between biblical studies and systematic theology. The result would be (1) agreed upon by the historic Church, (2) privileging no particular critical method, (3) preferring no specific theological community, and (4) shaping its readers’ hearts and minds.

Vanhoozer begins his trek up “the mountain of God” of biblical interpretation by first mapping the terrain of divergent schools that have made paths up the mountain. These originate from different reading cultures, communities with shared values, practices, and habits. Two cultures have marked the history of the church. What was sown as the Antiochene-Alexandrian divide has blossomed into biblical studies versus systematic theology. Vanhoozer proposes that all Christians belong to the same *eschatological* reading culture, scanning the canon closely for its Christological fulfillment, and both exegetes and systematicians are a necessary rope team for a successful climb.

At base camp is the formal principle of his hermeneutics: the letter. Believing Scripture to be divine discourse, Vanhoozer argues that the literal sense finds its fullness in Christ. The task begins with proper philology which he divides into verbal, authorial, historical, literary, and “ruled” sense. However, all readers impose their frame of reference, either immanent or transcendent. The latter is the “Christian” in “mere Christian hermeneutics.” The reader must read the text as unified divine discourse, God speaking

to his people for covenantal communion. Is this intended by the human authors? While the prophets knew what they were saying, they did not know the referent about whom they spoke, a *referens plenior*. Thus, a literal reading of Scripture within a transcendental frame of reference demands a theological reading. This is the plain, canonical, transfigural literal sense. These figures are not imposed by readers but intended by the divine author, a figural realism. His shift in terminology bridges the ravine in the allegory-typology debates. Transfigural readings follow the literal sense to the figures it anticipates. The divine Author's intent extends further than the human's to its ultimate referent. This provides consensus beyond the debate over literality in that the literal sense has been in the writing and events of the human authors *and* their fulfillment. Vanhoozer explains that "*the literal meaning of Scripture is the meaning of the letter, viewed as human-divine authorial discourse, when read in canonical context with an eschatological frame of reference*" (179). The former is the grammatical-historical, the latter eschatological. Both are legitimate. They differ in frames of reference but can be united: the grammatical-eschatological.

The summit of the climb provides the material principle — the knowledge of God through the light of Christ. God as Light brings understanding to the text. As the Father is the Originator of light (Gen 1:3), so he is the Author of Scripture; as the Son is himself Light (John 8:12), so he is the Word of God; as the Spirit is the Illuminator, so he guides the reader to comprehend the richness of the text. Rather than abandoning or adding to the text, the theological reading should display the glory latent within the literal sense as Christ's transfiguration displays his glory without distorting his identity outside the event. The Old Testament is a room dimly lit, but the reader sees more clearly when the veil is taken away, and Christ is on full display. By beholding him, the reader is transformed as one who wrestles with God to become a sanctified servant of the Word. The Church needs all the saints together to read well, and the only way to honor the literal sense is *to read it spiritually*.

In his conclusion, Vanhoozer anticipates the objection that reading theologically will be arbitrary, taking Song of Solomon as a test case. On the one hand, to say that the two breasts are the two Testaments is farfetched since it could also refer to sacraments, the church offices, or any number of things. On the other hand, interpreting it with *only* an immanent frame of

reference does not do justice to the text since there are clues that the author has more in mind. The Song finds its fulfillment when read as a poem of union with Christ.

Let's now turn to an evaluation of the book. Without a doubt, Vanhoozer's work can only be described as monumental. He interacts with seemingly every major voice on the topic of hermeneutics from the early church to the present day. Moreover, he gives them all a fair hearing. This alone makes the volume a rich resource for research to gain a lay of the land. I hope that this book will be a staple for courses on hermeneutics for years to come. His desire to reunite factions that have been warring since the Church's inception is laudable. Perhaps it is better to move to "figural" over "typological" or "allegorical," since such a term does not come with the same historical baggage. Although interpreters will debate specific texts and methodologies, Vanhoozer provides a common ground by reminding the saints of their shared transcendent frame of reference, eschatological reading culture, and scriptural social imaginary (these terms and more he defines in a necessary glossary).

Where can improvements be made for a second edition? The reader would be helped with further definitions of key terms appearing throughout. Examples include not defining "formal/material principle," waiting to explain what "the way the words run" means (first mentioned, 107; defined, 171), or defining words improperly, such as "allegory." Additionally, Vanhoozer could clarify whether meaning can be singular or plural. It seems he would say frames of reference are numerous, so we need methods of all the disciplines brought to bear on the text, but does this mean that the text means something different for different readers? Finally, I find his example of bad spiritual reading confusing. Could a transfigural reading not say that the breasts in the Song are, for example, the offices of the church? This does not impose a foreign frame of reference; it looks to the literal meaning of the text canonically considered with Christ's church. My concern is more than this case study: I wonder whether many "allegorical" readings that Vanhoozer would dismiss would fit under his umbrella of transfigural readings.

The ultimate question, however, is this: does Vanhoozer succeed in his purpose to lay out a mere hermeneutics upon which all Christians agree? He says, "The notion of a 'mere' hermeneutics alternately made me laugh, then gasp, at the sheer folly and magnitude of the task: achieving interpretive

peace after centuries of interpretive conflict” (xxi). Time will best tell whether he has succeeded. For further study, an excellent companion to this volume is Stephen O. Presley’s *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Early Church*, which likewise goes behind methodology and focuses on principles for theological interpretation.

Logan M. Prettyman, PhD Student  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary





**THE  
SOUTHERN BAPTIST  
THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY**

2825 Lexington Road, Louisville, KY 40206  
(502) 897-4200 | [admissions@sbts.edu](mailto:admissions@sbts.edu)  
[sbts.edu/admissions](https://sbts.edu/admissions)