The Word of God for the people of God: an entryway to the theological interpretation of scripture

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The Word of God for the People of God

An Entryway to the Theological Interpretation of Scripture

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We are parched for a word from God. As Westerners in the twenty-first century, many of us will look under any rock, search any trail, or explore any website in pursuit of promises of a transcendent word. We yearn for a word that will break into our lives, which are often comfortable, yet leave us in stress and fear. We hunger for a word that would bring a personal touch from someone other than the almighty market or the ever-just meritocracy around us. We crave something larger than what is offered by a world in which good things have become ultimate things, in which our own interests and desires shape what comes into our minds and what goes out. We are thirsty and hungry, hoping for more. We long for a word from God.

However, when we are honest with ourselves, we also long for a word from God that conforms to our own plans and wishes. We want a word from God that endorses our own decisions and priorities. We want to be affirmed by God in what we are already doing, not confronted and called to repentance. We want God’s word, but on our own terms.

For those who bear the name of Christ, the broad contours of this cultural situation should give us reason to pause. We do not live in countries in which the Bible, as the written word of God, must be acquired secretly via the black market. We do not live in countries in which preaching, as the proclaimed word of God, must be done in clandestine meetings in basements after dark. The word of God is available...
— present around us, so it seems. It is on the shelf at home or available at the click of a mouse. Yet, if the word of God is so widely available, why is our longing for it so often unsatisfied? Why does it seem so elusive? Why is it that, in our efforts to receive God’s word, we often end up speaking a word that does not seem to be from God, but a word from and controlled by us?

The word of God is commonly spoken about in the New Testament in terms of seed imagery: the seed is spread, takes root, grows, and bears fruit. There is something in the word of God that is larger than ourselves; we are correct in longing for a taste — a touch — from a reality outside of ourselves. The encounter with God’s word leads to a kind of flourishing, such that “faith and love” spring up from the “hope” that comes from “the word of the gospel” bearing fruit (Col. 1:3-5). The word of God is “alive and active,” a reality that saves us from our delusions and self-deceptions by penetrating “even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Heb. 4:12). The word of God takes root, grows, and flourishes in a way that gives life. Just as God spoke to give physical life to creation, so also God’s word brings life through a second birth by the Spirit to those who believe (Gen. 1:11-12, 20-26; John 3:3-15).

A seed has potential to grow, flourish, and bring new life. But why doesn’t it always do so? In our context, how could it be that Scripture and preaching could be ever present, but they are not always accompanied by new growth and transformation?

To address this, we will find it helpful to take a closer look at how New Testament writers use the image of seed for the word. In all three Synoptic Gospel accounts of Jesus’ parable of the sower, the seed falls on different kinds of soil (cf. Matt. 13:1-23; Mark 4:1-20; Luke 8:4-15). Some falls on the path, and it is snatched by Satan. Some falls on rocky ground: it is received with joy, but it takes no root because it is not received for growth and flourishing. Other seed falls among the thorns, which choke its growth: the thorns are “the cares and riches and pleasures of this life” (Luke 8:14; the language is very similar in Mark 4:19 and Matt. 13:22). Again, the seed bears no fruit. Finally, some hear the word and accept it. For these, the word bears abundant fruit in their life (fruit that is thirtyfold, sixtyfold, or a hundredfold in the Matthew and Mark accounts).

Why does the seed of the kingdom, which the parables call the word
of God, not always bear fruit? These parables suggest a few reasons. In these accounts, Jesus himself is the sower. He seems to be sowing seeds indiscriminately: throwing seed all over the place, not simply targeting the soil that appears most likely to be responsive. The word of God is proclaimed to all who can hear, but it does not always bear fruit. When asked to explain the parable of the sower, Jesus responds that some will simply “hear” the parables of the Kingdom, but “not understand.” Some will “see,” but “will not perceive.” The word of God could be right in front of their eyes, but they would not see it, accept it, cling to it (Matt. 13:13; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10; and parallels in John 12:37-40).

This is a stark lesson for today’s Christians who want God’s word to reverberate over the airwaves. The word of God does not always produce results. People may know the language, the idiom, and have high academic degrees; but they don’t necessarily comprehend the word that is proclaimed. The parable does not tell us why; but it does imply that there is something more going on than simply a cognitive understanding of written or spoken words. As a theme taken up in John, we are told, “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above” (John 3:3). After healing a blind man who then professes faith in Christ as the Son of Man, Jesus says, “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind” (John 9:39). Something much bigger is going on in receiving, understanding, and believing the word of God than human linguistic understanding. Making the word available on the Internet or in a mailbox is no guarantee that someone will have a transforming encounter with God’s word.

Since there is nothing automatic about receiving the word of God, this event is in many ways a mystery. Yet it is not a mystery that leaves us gawking on the sidelines; rather, it is one that invites us to participate in what God is doing. Paul adapts the seed imagery in this text: “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth” (1 Cor. 3:6). Does Paul want credit for his passionate and strategic preaching of the gospel? In a word, no. “So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth” (1 Cor. 3:7). We should not be discouraged by the fact that hearing the word of God involves much more than our own talents and strategies. We should be encouraged. God’s transforming word is not so neat and tidy that we can package and market it, expecting it to sell. Its potency and fruitful-
ness has more to do with God’s hand than our own. We live in a world with a living God who is beyond both our hopes and our attempts to control. We need not be burdened with the task of constructing and marketing the word of God; instead, we find ourselves in the exciting yet dangerous place of being addressed by the living God, who will not leave us to ourselves. Yet the Bible must be read, the gospel must be preached, the word must be taught. All of this happens in and through human beings like you and me. God does not bypass our human capacities, simply speaking to us by the Spirit without regard for Scripture or the work of our human faculties. Augustine says that God’s voice to us “could certainly have been [given] through an angel, but the human condition would be wretched indeed if God appeared unwilling to minister his word to human beings through human agency.” 1 Augustine points to an incarnational view of divine and human agency, such that attributing a work to God does not mean that human faculties are bypassed or subverted. On the other hand, we should not think that the word of God is a word under our control in such a way that if we were persuasive and savvy enough, it would always be effective. This flies in the face of how the Gospels speak about this word, which is a seed that Jesus flings freely and recklessly, knowing that not all of it will bear fruit. We receive the word of God that brings growth and life only when the Spirit enables us to see, hear, and perceive (John 3:3). Our reception of the word of God is enabled by the work of God.

Neither Building Blocks nor Smorgasbord: Scripture and the Journey of Faith

How exactly does the Bible as a book fit in with the image of the word of God as that which brings fruit to our parched and aching lives? I have suggested two aspects of a response to that question. Although Christians speak about the Bible as the “word of God” written — the inspired word of God — exposure to the contents of Scripture does not necessarily lead to a transforming encounter with God’s word. Second, more pos-

ivamente, the contents of the Bible need the work of God the Spirit for the
word to bear fruit. Although God does not bypass our human capacities,
the reception of God's word is not simply a matter of human persuasion.

But these reasons do not fully answer our question. The Bible is a
book; it is not the fourth member of the Trinity. It is not God. If we were
to draw on a classical list of divine attributes — eternal, all-knowing, all-
powerful — these words would not apply to the Bible in its capacity as a
book. Yet the terms would apply to the one whom Christians have tra­di­
tionally considered to be the primary author of Scripture, God himself.
The book itself is not God, but it is God's instrument for transforma-
tion. How does this happen?

First, let's narrow the field by considering several examples of how
the Bible is used in Christian ministry. The first two tend to resist God's
transforming work through Scripture, while the third sees reading
Scripture as part of a journey of transformation.

The first is the blueprint and building-block approach: people read
particular passages of Scripture as if they were the concrete blocks of a
building. They translate each Scripture passage into a set of propositions
that can then be fit as blocks into our building's blueprint. The propo­si-
tions in Scripture are facts that need organization, and the system of the-
ology provides that organization. In a sense, we already know the ex­ten­
sive meaning of Scripture; our system of theology tells us that. There is
thus no need to look into history, or other cultures, to see how others
"hear" Scripture. Instead, the task of interpreting Scripture is to discover
where in our theological system this particular Scripture passage goes.
This approach to scriptural interpretation has a long history in American
Christianity, and it still shows up in many Christian environments to­day.2
Indeed, when topical sermons or topical Bible studies do not wrestle with the particularities of the biblical witness, biblical texts can easily
become building blocks to fit into a preestablished blueprint.

The temptation with these practices is to read Scripture impressionistically. Pastor Larry needs a message on how to face temptation.
The idea he would like to portray is that the key to overcoming tempta-

2. For a historical portrait about how this view of Scripture developed in the history
of American religion such that the Bible was viewed as "a compendium of facts" that
simply need classification, see George Marsden, Fundamentalism and American Culture, 2nd
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tion is taking away the source of temptation. Larry does a Scripture search until he finds a passage that fits his original idea, such as Jesus' admonition in Matthew 5:29 to “pluck out” your eye if it causes you to sin. In the sermon Larry uses this Scripture text, along with some compelling illustrations, to fit his predetermined goal for the sermon: to recommend removing the source of temptation. Notice that Larry did not go to the Scripture passage to find out how to think about temptation. He did not approach Scripture as a learner who was ready to be reshaped by God in the process of struggling with the text. Larry thought that he already had a detailed blueprint of the building. What he needed from Scripture was a tool, a block in the building to fit his original idea. Blueprint sermons often end up being like after-dinner speeches that champion a particular cultural virtue (such as “try hard to make good decisions”), peppered with biblical illustrations.

Scriptural interpretation should not be like fitting concrete blocks into a building's blueprint; but neither should it be like eating at a smorgasbord, which is a second common approach. Imagine a huge cafeteria loaded with food of many kinds for many tastes — from fried chicken to falafel, vegetable wraps to sushi. Now imagine that you are at this smorgasbord with the members of a small Bible-study group from your church. Can you imagine what some of the other members of the group would choose to eat? Would there be patterns of food on the plates that you could describe according to the age, gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status of the eater? I suspect that there would be certain patterns. And in the filling of these appetites at the smorgasbord, there is a direct correspondence between the identity and desires of the eaters and what they load up on their plates.

The smorgasbord approach to the Bible is, in some ways, the opposite of the blueprint approach. The smorgasbord approach dispenses with the idea that we have a detailed blueprint of what the word of God means by translating Scripture into propositions that can serve as building blocks. In contrast, the smorgasbord approach says that we don’t have a “map” at all. Each of us brings something different to the Bible, and each of us gets something different out of it. Instead of trying to develop a map of Scripture, we should just keep helping ourselves to the smorgasbord of Scripture to feed our various longings.

The smorgasbord approach to the Bible takes on several different forms. It has a popular and pietistic form that scours the content of
Scripture without a map and then identifies whatever it finds there as “the word of God.” Thus, the dietary laws in the Old Testament are God’s key to a healthy and happy lifestyle. Examples of this approach abound in Christian publishing, as is demonstrated by titles such as *The Bible’s Diet*, *The Bible’s Seven Secrets to Healthy Eating*, and *The Maker’s Diet*. Another example would be those who read the creation narrative in the first chapter of Genesis as a descriptive geological history giving us the answers to our many questions about the history of the earth. For these teachers of Scripture, the word of God is not about building a structure of systematic theology but about finding God’s answers to our own particular human queries and conundrums, from how to lose weight to how to manage personal finances. There is no map, just discoveries that meet our appetites, questions, and needs.

The smorgasbord approach also has a less pietistic, more rationalist version. This approach valorizes moments like Martin Luther’s stand against the tradition of the Roman Catholic church, “Here I stand.” Luther is seen as the solitary individual who takes what he finds in Scripture and throws it against the map of the Catholic church’s theology. Tradition — and systems of theology — hide the true meaning of Scripture from us, this view declares. What we need to do is to search beneath the layers of tradition to find the true meaning of Scripture. Underneath the church’s attempt to rationalize and repress the meaning of Scripture, we will find the word of God. Examples of this approach are widespread, as the number of recent titles on Jesus attests: *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* by Amy Jill Levine; *The Secret Message of Jesus: Uncovering the Truth that Could Change Everything* by Brian McLaren; *The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say? The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* by Robert Funk. What do these very diverse authors have in common? They think that the real message of the Bible has somehow been “hidden” by church tradition. Thus do they see tradition as something that ob-

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3. This common portrait of Luther as the Reformer standing with “the Bible alone” over against the traditions of the church falls flat in the face of historical inquiry. See, e.g., the contextually sensitive portrait of Luther in Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

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scures God's word from us rather than a Spirit-filled means of imparting the word.

In this book I wish to articulate a middle way between these two extreme approaches. I agree, along with the first approach, that Christians always bring a basic theological map to their reading of Scripture. It is impossible to leave a map behind; but the map is not a detailed blueprint. It does not tell us every stop we will make on the journey of reading Scripture; rather, it gives us the broad outline for our journey. It does not give all of the answers into which each particular text will fit. To put it differently, Scripture passages are not wholly determinative on their own, fitting seamlessly as propositions into a preestablished system of theology. The word of God in Scripture is something that encounters us again and again; it surprises, confuses, and enlightens us because through Scripture we encounter the triune God himself. Scripture interpretation is not just putting together pieces of a puzzle. Instead, it is a joyful journey of struggling with Scripture and its author, God, who calls our lives, our priorities, and our preconceptions into question. Like Jacob wrestling with the angel, we struggle with Scripture until God blesses us with it.

When we read Scripture along a path in this middle way, we enter into what some authors have called a "drama."5 God's word is not simply an abstract set of propositions about God: God does not simply say things about God, but God "promises, commands, warns, guides," and in this way God reveals himself.6 Through these speech-actions of God, we see how God has acted in creation, in covenant with Israel, and in Jesus Christ, incorporating us into this divine drama by the Spirit's power. As ones who are in Christ and empowered by the Spirit, we become participants in God's drama and performers of the script of Scripture. The new world into which God brings us via Scripture is wide and spacious, but it also has a specified character as a journey on the path of Jesus Christ by the power of the Spirit in anticipation of a transforming vision of the triune God.

This middle way seeks to avoid certain reductionist tendencies in

5. Chap. 6 will further explore the image of drama and the usefulness of speech-act theory in the interpretation of Scripture.
the smorgasbord and building-block approaches. On the other side, it does not agree with the smorgasbord approach that any kind of map or preconception for Scripture will distort our reception of God's word. There are two temptations to avoid here. The first is the failure to reflect on the theological preconceptions we bring to Scripture. Without clarifying how and why we come to Scripture, we can easily turn the Bible as the word of God into the divine answer book: it gives us answers to our own questions about diets, management techniques, financial happiness, and geology. Rather than being an instrument of divine revelation and fellowship, the Bible is thus reduced to a predictable list of answers to our felt needs and questions. The other temptation is to use the denial of our theological map as a rhetorical strategy to dismiss other interpretations of Scripture: "While other Christians are stuck in tradition, I have found the secret/hidden/real message of Jesus." This individualistic approach, which became prominent in the Enlightenment, is a way of denying the influence of communal practices and preconceptions on our reading of the Bible. This view says, "Maps distort and obscure, so let's get rid of them." But such a commitment is itself a map.

Rather than seeing biblical passages as building blocks or the entries at a smorgasbord, I believe that we should see our encounters with Scripture texts as a journey along a path. Whatever our own personal stories are, we find a larger story of journey in the Christian faith. We do not embark on this journey of reading Scripture as an unbiased, blank slate; we embark on it with expectations about its purpose and its end. We expect and hope that God will use our reading of Scripture to bring us further down the path of knowing God in Christ. We enter as a community of Christians with shared practices, such as worshiping the triune God and celebrating baptism and the Lord's Supper. These practices and commitments will — and should — influence our interpretation of Scripture. They will make us "biased," but in a good way — a way by which the Spirit brings the word of God to fruition in our lives. 7

Where does this journey lead us? The final end of the path is a transforming "face-to-face" encounter with our triune God, a joyful state of "knowing fully" and being "fully known" as children of God in

7. I will explore the dynamics of a "good bias," or preconception, toward Scripture in some depth in chap. 2.
Christ (1 Cor. 13:12; Rom. 8:15-21). Each step along the path gives us a foretaste of that final end. The path itself is Jesus Christ: it is in and through Jesus Christ that we interpret all of Scripture. Hence, the path and the journey are not completely undefined. The basic map of this path is what the church fathers call “the rule of faith.” It is not a detailed map that knows all of the stops along the way. But this map is a sketch of our story, our journey: through it we know our path (Jesus Christ), our source of Illumination and empowerment (the Holy Spirit), and have a foretaste of our final destination (a transforming vision of the triune God, which involves the restoration of creation and communion with God). On this path we grow in the love of God and neighbor as we grow into our identity in Christ, and we grow in the knowledge of and fellowship with God. Knowing our path means that what Scripture points to is not, first and foremost, a successful diet plan or a geological history. It is Jesus Christ, and the reading of Scripture is part of our journey, through the Spirit, to be transformed more and more into the image of Christ.8

This may sound like the building-block approach to some readers, but it is actually quite different. While I believe we have a sketch of what the journey is like, it does not mean that Scripture passages themselves are blocks of concrete, wholly determinate and reducible to propositional content.9 If so, there would be no need for a transforming jour-

8. I make no claims for originality in this portrait of the rule of faith; indeed, a completely “original” rule of faith would be suspect. I draw my portrait largely from Augustine in *On Christian Teaching*, though Augustine himself is synthesizing a great deal of earlier Christian reflection in this work. As I will argue in a few pages, some key features of this rule were functioning for the New Testament writers themselves in the way in which they interpret the Old Testament in light of Jesus Christ. A theological account of Scripture like this one was operative for most Roman Catholic interpreters before the Enlightenment, and it continued in much Protestant thought into the eighteenth century. For an account of Protestant interpretation continuing in this line of thought, see Jens Zimmerman, *Recovering Theological Hermeneutics: An Incarnational-Trinitarian Theory of Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), esp. chaps. 2 and 3.

9. Kevin Vanhoozer describes the role of propositions in what I am calling the blueprint/building-block approach to scriptural interpretation. “On this view, the task of theology is to systematize the information conveyed through biblical propositions.” Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), p. 45. However, Vanhoozer correctly points out that it is unwise to fall into an opposite extreme, which sees Scripture as merely “feeling-expressing symbols” rather than “fact-stating propositions” (p. 83). In revelation
The journey of faith seeking understanding. We start with faith in the triune God, a trust in Jesus Christ and the Spirit's transforming power through Scripture. In reading Scripture, we seek to know and have fellowship with God in a deeper way. Therefore, when we read Scripture in this way, we encounter a mystery. We do not know how God will speak to us and lead us into deeper love of God and neighbor until we struggle with the passage itself. It is only when we struggle with Scripture — asking hard questions, always aware of the divine address — that we lose control over it. If we treat the Bible as the bricks for a building or the food at a smorgasbord, we are in control of the process. But to enter the journey of faith seeking understanding, we need to relinquish the position of being masters over the biblical text. We are parched for a reality outside of ourselves, a word from God. To encounter this word via our reading of a book — the Bible — we need to learn how to lose our grasping and clinging control over the text.

Theology as an Inescapable Task

At this point, let me consider what some may offer as an objection to my proposal of reading Scripture on the path of Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, growing in love of God and neighbor on a journey of faith seeking understanding.

If we are really parched for the word of God as a reality outside of ourselves, how can we begin with these theological claims when we read Scripture? Shouldn't we just begin with Scripture itself, rather than bringing theological presuppositions to Scripture? Isn't it solipsistic to take refuge in our own theology rather than encountering the text itself, the word of God as it really is? Isn't this just a strategy to keep us from hearing the words of the Bible that we don't want to hear? Isn't this a way to close ourselves off to Scripture's power to unseat our presuppositions?

These questions and objections express suspicions that are healthy
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for us to think through. My claim is that Christians should not seek to come to Scripture as a blank slate, but they should be both open and self-aware about the theological lens they bring to Scripture, the assumptions that make up our theological hermeneutic. Is this, deep down, a strategy to avoid the words of Scripture? A more penetrating question underneath these questions is this: Shouldn't we just be biblical? Why do we need to do theology?

When objections like this are raised, we may find it helpful to consider the language in which the question is posed. The questioner contrasts the affirming of a theological vision with encountering “the text in itself,” or the “word of God as it really is.” Behind this is an assumption that a nontheological approach is, fundamentally, a more adequate approach to Scripture than one that has theological presuppositions. But is there really such a nontheological place where we can stand? What would it mean to stand in a theologically neutral place?

In my own life, I came to understand the inescapability of theology when I spent several years immersed in the writings of the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, an atheist. Nietzsche lived at a time when many Europeans had abandoned the Christian theology of earlier eras, and late Enlightenment thinkers were seeking a nontheological foundation for a roughly Christian morality and ethic. Nietzsche believed that that was an exercise in self-deception:

After Buddha was dead, his shadow was still shown for centuries in a cave — a tremendous, gruesome shadow. God is dead; but given the way of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown. And we — we still have to vanquish his shadow, too.\(^{10}\)

In some ways Nietzsche expresses ambivalence about the “death of God,” a phrase by which he means that the traditional Christian God, in his view, can no longer be believed in. Given that, Nietzsche seeks to boldly vanquish the shadow of Christian belief. Nietzsche does this not only in his reflections on the history of philosophy, but first and foremost in his reflections on human action. For human action always has

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ontological implications: human action always points to our functional conception of the way the world is.

In his late writings, Nietzsche focuses on what it would mean to affirm and say "yes" to life in one's action. The results of his reflections are quite surprising to some: to truly affirm life, Nietzsche suggests, we must never feel guilt or remorse. Most importantly, we should never feel pity for the suffering of others. Why? Because to feel pity for a sufferer implies that this present world, with its suffering and violence, is not the way things are supposed to be. It implies that the present world is not Eden. But Nietzsche wants to affirm the "innocence" of life as we actually encounter it — thus affirming the world with all of its suffering and violence. If God is truly dead, and there is no "world of peace" that we should compare this world to, then we should not be protesting the presence of violence in the world through actions such as pity. The action of pitying a sufferer implicitly postulates a world of peace as normative (the way things should be). But such a world has never existed, Nietzsche suggests. To suggest that it does is to capitulate to a wishful-thinking world. Having pity for a sufferer, according to Nietzsche, is nihilistic rather than life-affirming: it is a world-hating activity.

What Nietzsche's analysis shows with clarity is that it is impossible to set ontological and theological issues on the shelf. For anyone who acts, there is no theology- or ontology-free space. If an atheist has pity on a sufferer, Nietzsche claims, the atheist is postulating a world of peace as normative even if the person does not officially believe in such a world. Likewise, if a Christian follows Nietzsche's advice, which is to "pass by" sufferers without engaging in any activity of pity, then this Christian is functionally denying a world of peace as a possibility. The Christian may claim to believe in Eden — a creational world of peace — as well as the world of ultimate redemption, in which there will be no more tears and suffering. But a choice to pass by rather than to protest suffering by an act of pity is a choice for functional atheism.

In light of Nietzsche's analysis, an assessment of the functional theologies and ontologies around us can never be content to hear a person's self-identification. A self-identified atheist could quite possibly be living a life that is unintelligible apart from the faith-based assumptions borrowed from one religious tradition or another. Self-identified Christians could make claims about the centrality of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit in their confession of faith; but functionally they would
deny the centrality of Christ and the Spirit in their action. Indeed, according to the analysis of the religious lives of American teenagers by Smith and Denton in their book *Soul Searching*, a form of Deism is frequently the functional theology of American youths who self-identify as Christians. In this view, humans are basically good, and God leaves them to live their own lives except in times of crisis. If you avoid doing terrible things, you go to heaven. While these teenagers may speak about Jesus Christ at times, their functional theology has no need for a mediator, no need for a sacrifice for sin, no need for the empowerment of the Holy Spirit to live the Christian life.

The fact that our functional theology can differ dramatically from our stated theology shouldn't be a surprise to the readers of the Gospels. For example, Matthew 6:24 suggests that one cannot serve both God and Mammon as "masters." Jesus is not particularly concerned here with self-identified beliefs but with functional beliefs that show up in action. As William Cavanaugh says, "If a person claims to believe in the Christian God but never gets off the couch on Sunday morning and spends the rest of the week in obsessive pursuit of profit in the bond market," then the functional master in this person's life is "probably not the Christian God." Jesus' warning has potency precisely because those who consider themselves to be faithful servants of God may have a functional theology that contradicts their stated belief.

Does this mean that action is all that matters, and that our stated beliefs don't matter? No. If we are to take our cues from Scripture, what we confess is of vital importance. Positively, Paul says, "[C]onfess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, and you will be saved" (Rom. 10:9). Negatively, we are told to "test the spirits" in 1 John with the following criteria: "[E]very spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God" (1 John 4:3). The Pastoral Epistles tell us again and again that beliefs matter, and doctrine matters. "Watch your life and doctrine closely," Paul encourages Timothy (1 Tim. 4:16). Right teaching does not come naturally, and it is not


always popular. "For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths" (2 Tim. 4:3-4 [TNIV]).

What we teach and believe matters. But our professed belief does not always sink in. Sometimes instructors teach one thing in the classroom and another thing with the rest of their lives. Moreover, as sinful human beings, our learning in Christ needs to be a transformative participation in Christ's own life by the Spirit. This involves information, but it is more than simply a body of information that we can master. We do not always absorb the messages from our worship and from Christian teaching, but we are always acting. This is where our functional beliefs are usually revealed.

Everything the church does and does not do points to its functional theology, the theology that is exposed by the actions (and omissions) in the lives of its members. When church members decide where they will invest their energies, whether into a service project, a series of potluck dinners, or a Bible study — all of these are theological decisions. How a church designs its worship service is also a theological decision. What are the elements of worship? Who, exactly, is being worshiped? What instruments, if any, do we use in worship? Where do we place announcements in a worship service? All of these decisions reflect their functional theology of who God is, what the world is like, and who they are as the church. That does not mean that there is only one theologically correct answer for how things should be done. But it does mean that all of these decisions arise from theological maps that are functioning in the community of faith. Theological reasoning and theological presuppositions are inescapable for Christians.

Note that, with all of these decisions of the church, there may be ways in which the Bible informs our theological map, but it does not do so apart from our own theological reasoning. One can find biblical support for the decision to have a Bible study, or a service project, or even a fellowship gathering at a potluck dinner. But why does one get involved in one activity rather than another? While churches as institutions may have all of these activities and more (as in the program-heavy mega-churches), the church as the gathered people has to prioritize a list of biblically ordained activities. There is no way to bridge the gap between
hearing these particular biblical admonitions and deciding on a course of action other than thinking about how God is active in your community, what God wants from your community, and so on. In other words, the only way for us to appropriate the Bible's teaching is through a process of letting our own theological map make some connections.

Theological reasoning is inescapable because action is inescapable. As Nietzsche points out, even atheists imply something—in their actions—about the way the world is (ontology). For Christians, the key to this form of analysis is a willingness to be self-aware of one's own functional theology. I sometimes meet people who are convinced that they have no definable theological positions: to have such, they reason, would be to limit Scripture, to limit God. While there is something that is correct about this respect for mystery (which we will return to later in this chapter), the overall posture is one of denial—a denial of one's own particularity and finitude. Yet anyone who acts has a theology or an ontology. Anyone who prays has a theology. Anyone who participates in worship has a theology. One of the concrete skills of theological hermeneutics is learning how to discern the specificity of one's own theological hermeneutic.

In my personal interaction with students, this denial usually becomes obvious with a bit of annoying, yet revealing, Socratic questioning.

A: "I think Christians get too caught up in theological differences rather than just relying on the Bible. The Bible is what we can all agree on. Theology is human reasoning that divides."
B: "That's interesting. I'm curious, what makes you think that Christians should just rely on the Bible?"
A: "Second Timothy 3:16 says 'All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.'"
B: "Yes, that is a powerful passage of Scripture. But it does not address the question I asked: Why should Christians rely only on the Bible? I'm also curious as to why you chose that particular Scripture passage to quote. Was there a theological logic behind that decision?"
A: "Well, the Bible gives God's instructions for salvation—all that we need for our life and faith."
B: "I agree. But isn't that a theological claim?"
A: "It's supported by the Bible."
Reading Scripture on the Journey of Faith Seeking Understanding

B: “I’m glad. That’s how it should be. But why do you decide to make these Scripture passages central? Didn’t you have to make a theological decision to frame the authority and scope of the Bible in that way? Aren’t you sharing the theological tradition of others who have formulated a way to think about what the Bible is and does?”
A: “I would only agree with traditions if they were biblical ones.”
B: “Good. But it sounds like you do have functional beliefs that give you the context for appropriating and making sense of what the Bible has to say. Right?”

Such Socratic questioning could go on and on, and sometimes it does. The goal is not to deconstruct the theological position of person “A” but to help her see that Scripture never simply comes to us in a flally biblical way. It always comes to us within a community of shared faith and mediated by certain theological presuppositions and assumptions. We can hope that these assumptions will themselves be biblical, and that they will be open to being reshaped by the Bible — as it is read in light of Christ, by the Spirit’s power. But until we admit that we always bring a map of faith to the biblical text, we cannot make progress in even assessing whether that map is biblical.

Reading by the Rule of Faith: A Scriptural Practice

What is the rule of faith? On the most basic level, it is a summary of the received teachings of the Christian church. It is not a subjective response to the gospel, such as a testimony of how one became a Christian. It is a summary of the church’s confession about the basic story of the Christian faith, as informed by the Bible.13 In early Christianity it was often used in catechesis to explain the meaning of one’s baptism. Why am I baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit? The answer frequently took the form of a threefold creed that summarized scriptural teachings about the action of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in salvation. Sometimes it was an oral tradition, some-

times a fixed form such as the Nicene Creed, that made its way into the weekly worship services in some regions. While there is some variation in content, a rough summary of the content of much of the rule of faith for the early centuries of Christianity would be the Apostles' Creed:

I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
the Creator of heaven and earth,
and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord:

Who was conceived of the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried.

He descended into hell.

The third day He arose again from the dead.

He ascended into heaven
and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty,
whence He shall come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and life everlasting. Amen.14

The term “rule of faith” becomes significant in the early centuries of Christianity. It was important in distinguishing Christian interpretations of Scripture from heretical alternatives. Like the word “Trinity” itself, the phrase “rule of faith” does not appear in the Bible. Yet there are good reasons to believe that something like a “rule” was functioning for the New Testament writers.

14. Since the Apostles' Creed was originally part of the oral tradition, a variety of versions existed in early Christianity until the creed versions congealed into the textus receptus in the late sixth century. As such, the fixed creed gives an indication of what was contained in a baptismal creed in early Christianity; but the rule of faith was not a completely fixed form.
Theological Presuppositions about the Event of Jesus Christ: The Old Testament in Relationship to the New

On the most basic level, all of the New Testament writers bring theological presuppositions to their interpretation of the event of Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection. A central presupposition is that God was active in Jesus Christ, whose ministry must be viewed in light of God's historic activity with Israel and God's vindication of Jesus' ministry and death through the resurrection. This is a key overt message in the New Testament writings; but it is also a presupposition for how they narrate the life of Christ in the Gospels, and how they interpret the Old Testament as bearing witness to Jesus Christ.

The New Testament writers interpret the Old Testament in light of the event of Jesus Christ. In a sense, the whole of the Old Testament becomes a book of prophecy to New Testament writers. The New Testament does not merely indicate that passages that were clearly messianic at the time they were written point to Christ. Rather, the New Testament appropriation of the Old Testament liberally applies nearly anything about the proper ends of Israel, even the proper ends of humanity itself, to the life of Christ. In appropriating the Hebrew Scriptures christologically, the New Testament writers did not restrict the meaning of the Old Testament to something like the author's original intentions, or to how the Old Testament text would have originally been heard. Rather, they saw the event of Jesus Christ as itself shedding light on the Old Testament, revealing the "substance" of what were "shadows" in anticipation.

Does this sound illogical? It is illogical if one expects to approach the Old Testament with a blank slate and develop from this a portrait of Jesus. That is not what New Testament writers ever did — or claimed to.

15. For an exposition of the way in which Jesus Christ was seen by the New Testament writers as embodying Israel, and by extension humanity itself, see N. T. Wright, The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), pp. 198, 202-3; see also Wright, What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity? (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 54.

16. I will explore this issue in more depth in chap. 5. For the language of "shadow and substance," see Col. 2:17; for "shadow," cf. Heb. 8:5; 10:1.
do. Rather, their claim was that, in light of the event of Jesus Christ, the Old Testament takes on new, unforeseen significance.\(^{17}\) This depends on a very particular conviction about the identity of Jesus Christ. In the second century, Irenaeus had a nonbiblical term for it that nonetheless gets to the center of New Testament claims about Jesus: recapitulation. Jesus was not just a great teacher, nor was he just God with limbs and a mouth. In Jesus, the whole history of Israel — and through Israel, humanity — was recapitulated, or lived again. But this time the one who was true Israel and true human being did not take the path of the first Adam. As the second Adam, Christ was the righteous one, the perfect human covenant partner. But this perfect covenant partner was also the Word incarnate, the one in whom the fullness of deity dwelt. If the New Testament writers really believe claims like this about Jesus, then it is logical to apply any Old Testament passage related to the true end of Israel, humanity, and the new work of God that is hoped for in the future to one person: Jesus Christ.

If the New Testament writers saw Christ as the key to Scripture, should we as followers of Christ do any different? The idea that Jesus is the road we travel on the journey of biblical interpretation has very deep biblical and christological roots.

\section*{Traditions of Teaching Handed Down in the Church}

Paul makes several references to the teaching he “received” and has “passed on to” the churches to whom he is writing (1 Cor. 11:23; 15:1-3; 2 Thess. 2:15). Some of these appear to be written, others oral. “Stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter” (2 Thess. 2:15). References to oral and written traditions that are received continue to occur from the second to the fourth century, developing into the oral and fixed forms of a rule of faith noted above (such as the Apostles’ Creed). Confessions, or rules of faith, were used at times in public worship (liturgically), at times in catechesis. The

\(^{17}\) For example, when Jesus makes appeals in John’s Gospel that Scripture “testifies” to him, it is not simply a matter of textual response on its own terms, but responding to the Old Testament in light of Jesus himself. “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life” (John 5:39).
rules became crucial for differentiating false teaching from true teaching. Why? Because a rule was not just a law; it was a measuring stick, a narrative that provided orientation about where the center of the Christian faith is.

Why was a rule necessary to maintain true teaching? An analogy from Irenaeus illustrates it well. Scripture is a complicated book: it can be interpreted in many different ways. It's like a mosaic that has many tiny pieces of different colors. If one properly discerns the patterns in Scripture, then the pieces of the mosaic will fit together to form a beautiful portrait of a king (Christ). But it is possible to sever the proper connections between the pieces of the mosaic, leaving one with a portrait of a dog or a fox. By distorting the inherent pattern (the rule of faith) that holds Scripture together, false (Gnostic) interpretations of Scripture miss what Scripture itself points to: Jesus Christ, as witnessed to by the Old and New Testaments. “They disregard the order and connection of the Scriptures, destroying the truth.”

Irenaeus realizes that Scripture is simply too large and complicated a book for one to proceed in without a sense of the narrative pattern that one will find within it.

For Protestant readers, this may bring worries. Does the rule of faith threaten the idea of sola Scriptura (the affirmation of “scripture alone” as the final authority in theology)? It depends, of course, on how one conceives of the rule of faith. At times in early Christianity, there was an emphasis on the idea of the rule as distinct from Scripture, a pattern for organizing the narrative of Scripture even though the rule also emerges from Scripture. At other times, the primary emphasis was on the rule as derivative from Scripture itself.

For Reformers such as Luther and Calvin, sola Scriptura was not an


19. Irenaeus sometimes emphasizes the need for a tradition outside of Scripture itself (though still emerging from it) in order to refute the interpretations of Scripture by the Gnostics. See Williams, Tradition, Scripture, and Interpretation, pp. 68-69.

20. Consider Cyril of Jerusalem’s exhortation to those preparing for baptism (ca. 350). After encouraging new converts to memorize the words of the Jerusalem Creed, he reassures them that “these articles of our faith were not composed out of human opinion, but are the principal points collected out of the whole of Scripture to complete a single doctrinal formulation of the faith.” Catechetical Lectures 5.12, quoted in Williams, Tradition, Scripture, and Interpretation, p. 63.
appeal to the neutrality of readers, as if we should read the Bible without theological preunderstandings. Rather, it was an appeal to the Bible as the primary source and final authority for one's theological affirmations. Extending this trajectory, Reformation traditions consider the Bible alone to be the only infallible rule of faith. With this point, the Reformational emphasis is on the biblical character of the rule itself: in terms of its final authority, Scripture is sui ipsius interpres, that is, its own interpreter.

Yet this is a far cry from claiming that one should have "no creed but Christ," or that theological confessions per se should be abandoned. The Reformation and post-Reformation periods were times of prolific creed- and confession-writing for the majority of Protestants. These confessions were seen as an important aid for interpreting Scripture, yet they were subordinate to Scripture itself. They sought to give summations of the church's biblical teaching at key points, and on scriptural issues that could be easily misconstrued.

Ultimately, the rule of faith provides guidance for our functional theology: it provides a general theological framework in which the Bible is read. Yet the fact that it is functional should not lead us to think that it should be derived from experience. In the Pauline Epistles and also the patristic contexts, there is an external character to the rule: it is "received" and "passed on"; it is not an "expression" of one's own subjective response to the faith. The Apostles' Creed is not meant to be an expression of "how I came to Jesus." Rather, it is a distillation of core Christian teaching that can help unveil the inherent patterns of Scripture. This is a crucial distinction, for Paul and the patristic writers did not see themselves as the ones who developed the rule. They received it and passed it on.

Where Is the Center? Naming the Scope and Limits of Scripture

The notion of "rule" in the rule of faith may be a stumbling block to some readers. Doesn't that sound like a narrow, even arbitrary, law that tells us how to interpret Scripture?

Concerning the term "rule," it is probably best understood as rule in the sense of a rule of thumb, or in the sense of a measurement that points to the center and boundaries of a Christian interpretation of
Scripture. It points to the functional mode of operating. When we interpret Scripture, there is the possibility of many, many interpretations that can emerge within the rule of faith. But as a functional mode of operating, it points to the scope and the limits of interpretation. To interpret the Old Testament as being about a God other than the God of Jesus Christ, for example, would be a violation of the scope of Scripture as defined by a rule of faith such as the Apostles' Creed.

Indeed, rather than being narrow and authoritarian, many of the early creedal developments of the rule are actually wide and expansive guidelines for interpretation that seek to keep the practice of biblical interpretation itself intelligible. For example, consider a key section of the Nicene Creed, where the Son is said to be "eternally begotten" of the Father. Why does the creed use this nonbiblical language? Is it seeking to speculate about the nature of God beyond what the Bible can tell us, to give a theory of how it is possible both to be "born" as a son and "not be born" as the eternal one? The creed goes into no such speculations. Nor do the fourth-century church fathers develop speculative metaphysical theories that solve the problem of how it is possible to be "born" or "begotten" eternally. Rather, the Nicene Creed's phrase respects and retains the integrity of biblical language itself. What is it to be "eternally begotten"? Positively, I don't know; but negatively, it means that I can uphold the biblical affirmations that Christ is the Son begotten of the Father (John 3), yet the Son did not have a beginning in time, since the Son is the eternal Word who is made flesh in Jesus (John 1). The phrase "eternally begotten" does not solve the biblical paradox; it retains the paradox over against fourth-century heresies, which tended to have more of a penchant for a rationalist resolution. Phrases such as "eternally begotten" do not vanquish the mystery of God; they preserve it, and they set limits on rationalist approaches that would lead to the premature closure of biblical paradoxes.21

In addition to clarifying what the scope and limits of the Bible's message are, the rule of faith points to what is central in the interpretation of biblical passages. What is central when we read the Bible? The rule of faith is not the sum total of all that a particular Christian be-

lieves about God; rather, it is an ecumenical teaching and practice that points us to the center. Following Augustine’s general approach, I am suggesting that what is central is that we find salvation in Jesus Christ, and that we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to walk the transforming road of life in Christ, which leads to a vision of the triune God. Along the way, we are rediscovering our true selves, who we were created to be: persons who love God and neighbor. If this is our sketch of what is central, then certain things are going to come into (and out of) focus when we interpret Scripture.

For example, think for a moment about the well-known story in 1 Samuel 17 in which David faces and defeats the giant Goliath with his sling and stone. There are many possible ways that Christians preach this text, but I would suggest that they generally fall into two categories. The first sees Goliath as a metaphor for the challenges that a person of God faces in day-to-day life; David is a model of the underdog who dares to take a risk against his own inner “giants” and challenges. The sermon notes David’s confidence in running “towards the battle line to meet the Philistine,” even though David was being mocked and belittled by Goliath (1 Sam. 17:48). The preacher can encourage the congregation to think about the “giants” in their own lives, and then he can exhort the congregation to be like David and take risks in the face of danger. The Bible has the key to facing challenges in our personal lives. Visualize a positive outcome like David’s (17:36), act with confidence in the face of challenge (17:37), and take risks (17:48-9). Who is the hero of the story? David, and more specifically, his courageous human will that we should model. The living God is not a major character in this rendering of the text.

But there is another trajectory to the preaching of 1 Samuel 17, and a wide range of historical Scripture interpreters have followed this second trajectory — from Origen to Augustine to Luther. For these thinkers, the central character in the story is God: they cannot view the David-Goliath encounter apart from God’s revelation in Christ. Patristic writers usually interpret the encounter as a spiritual battle, because the New Testament teaches us that our enemies are not flesh and blood (Eph. 6:14-17). Therefore, the power displayed in the story is

22. For brief selections of this interpretation, see John Franke, ed., *Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1-2 Samuel*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), pp. 266-76.
the power of Christ. So the defeat of Goliath comes to be about “sinners who have been converted to the faith” and hence “condemn Satan” and “renounce all his works” (Bede). David’s life, which is noted in the story to be one of protecting his sheep against attacking lions, is interpreted in light of Christ. Like Christ, David acts as a representative of the people of God to defeat God’s enemy (Satan) on behalf of God’s people (1 Sam. 17:9-10, 31, 50-51).

Other interpretations in this second trajectory also see God as the central actor, but they put more emphasis on the historical level of narrative in the Old Testament account. Here the emphasis is on God’s saving action, in tandem with the faith of David, though David’s faith does not deserve credit for the deliverance. The text repeatedly notes that it was not a “sword” of David that brings deliverance from the Philistines, for “the Lord does not save by sword and spear; for the battle is the Lord’s and he will give you into our hand” (1 Sam. 17:47; cf. vv. 37, 50). God alone delivers Israel, and the extent to which David is ill prepared for the battle simply reinforces God’s sole triumph. God does not work through David because of the latter’s valiant human effort, but because of his covenantal trust that “the Lord ... will save me from the hand of this Philistine” (17:37). For David’s attempt “would have been preposterous on any other supposition than his being upheld by secret divine support.”

Note that the second-trajectory interpretations of 1 Samuel 17 do not simply interpret the narrative as an ancient story of battle and war. They do not dispute the historical embeddedness of this narrative; but they perceive that, for the story to be proclaimed — for the story to be treated as Scripture — one must go beyond seeing this story as simply a record of national border skirmishes in the ancient world. If Scripture is to be taught and preached in the church, a rule of faith will come into play whether we like it or not. There is no escaping a map with at least broad outlines of who God is and who we as human beings are.

This example should also help us reflect on the fact that not all

24. John Calvin, “Commentary on Psalm 144:1,” Calvin Translation Society (hereafter CTS) (reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1999). While I quote Calvin here, my portrait of this stream of biblical interpretation is a more general one to supplement the patristic approaches noted earlier. In chap. 5, I develop further specificity about the various historical approaches to interpreting the Old Testament canonically.
maps to Scripture are equally valid. The first map is what we might roughly call a “self-help” map. It has basically Deistic assumptions about God: God created humans, and God wants humans to take risks and try hard to fulfill their potential in the face of challenges. The second map, which has a wide range of variations (I explore them further in chap. 5), is distinctly covenantal and canonical. God has given covenant promises to his people, to which the proper response is trust. God is the chief actor in the drama of saving his people. Moreover, since Christ is the fulfillment of the covenant, we should understand the story of David and Goliath in light of the overall canon of Scripture that bears witness to Christ, rather than providing instructions on self-defense or guidance for self-actualization.

“This Ain’t Mapquest”: Knowledge and Mystery in the Journey of Reading Scripture

So, what kind of map should we bring to the Bible? If it is not a detailed blueprint for the building blocks of a building, or a turn-by-turn guide as in computer-generated directions, or a blank agenda on which we write our own felt needs — what is it? So far I have been using the metaphor of a journey: we know the road and destination for the journey, but there are many surprises along the way. To sharpen the image of what kind of knowledge this gives us of God, let me add another biblical image for speaking about our relational knowledge of God, that of a marriage.\(^{25}\) A marriage relationship involves knowledge. But, rather than being the kind of knowledge that enables mastery, it is knowledge that plays a role in continued growth and journey. I could do research on my spouse: I could memorize all the names and birthdays of her friends, the relationships and important events in her life. That might help a little in getting to know her. But the most significant knowledge of my spouse would come by living out my relationship of commitment to her in time.

\(^{25}\) In addition to OT imagery of Israel as God’s spouse, the books of Ephesians and Revelation use the images of betrothal and marriage in speaking about the church’s relationship to Christ, and a long tradition of interpretation of Song of Songs develops this theme as well.
I don’t know what the future will hold, but for me, as a married person, the future is not a blank slate. By entering into my marriage vows, I have eliminated a wide range of possibilities: the possibility of moving around without considering my spouse’s needs and interests, the possibility of dating other people — the list could go on and on. There is no way to know my spouse better apart from considering that path, and my faithfulness to that path. The knowledge of my spouse, then, is a knowledge in the context of our shared life, our shared commitment to the shape of the relationship in the marriage vows. No matter how well I get to know my spouse, even in this relationship of close fellowship, she will still be mysterious to me in many ways. If I am paying attention, I will continue to be surprised and mystified by this person whom I know so well. I have real knowledge of my spouse, but it is not the knowledge of mastery, but of fellowship. This is something like our knowledge of God: it is a knowledge tied to fellowship as we journey in faith.

Now, I could conclude that the map of my journey with my spouse is actually keeping me from real knowledge of my spouse. Perhaps I need to approach my spouse in an “unbiased” way. It is certainly true that, as her spouse, I do not know her in the same way that some of her friends or relatives know her. But to follow this path, I would simply be fooling myself by buying wholesale into an Enlightenment suspicion: the suspicion that prior commitments are incompatible with knowledge, and that maps merely bias and distort rather than enable knowledge. Trying to be unbiased in my approach to knowing my spouse would not lead me to more reliable knowledge — just a broken marriage. I should not try to escape my map of commitments and preunderstandings as I get to know my spouse better; rather, I should live into these in a way that remains open to anomaly and surprise.

Likewise, in the journey of faith, there are many routes that we could follow in pursuing and interpreting a Scripture text apart from the map of the rule of faith. We can worry that the rule of faith will bias us, but it is actually what makes knowledge in the sense of fellowship with God possible. Living in the rule of faith means that we know where the center of Scripture is, and where the limits for our journey are. As Christians, our map for the journey is that Jesus Christ is the road, the Spirit is the one who illuminates and empowers, and we are on the way to a transforming vision of the triune God. This is our journey and our story: it is the shape of our identity as the bride of Christ (Rev. 19:7-9).
is a journey that will cut off certain possibilities, such as interpretations of Scripture that do not see Christ as the center or do not draw on the Spirit as the enabler. Most importantly, just as in a marriage, the shape of this journey opens up new, exciting, and surprising possibilities in Scripture interpretation that we never could have predicted in advance. We will not see the Bible as the divine answer book for the world’s perfect diet; nor will we see it simply as a literary masterpiece from the ancient world. But in the light of Christ, the Spirit uses the Bible to give us gifts of grace from the Father that evoke gratitude, thanksgiving, and service. We should not come to the Bible uncommitted. The Bible is the word of God to us precisely because we have been claimed by God in our baptism and united to Christ in his death and resurrection by the power of the Holy Spirit. As a people who have been claimed by God, we read Scripture in light of Christ, the center, by the power of the Spirit, as a gift sent from the Father to nourish our parched souls.

Conclusion: Reading Scripture as Part of the Economy of Salvation

I will develop many of the ideas in this chapter further in later chapters. But before going on, we should review where we have been. We do not access the word of God simply by understanding words on a page, words that can be reproduced, repackaged, and distributed according to our liking. We cannot access the word of God apart from the work of God: God plants the seed and nourishes it by the Spirit’s power in the Christian community. Scripture is the instrument God uses for his own purposes in the redemption of creation.

In the account of the theological interpretation of Scripture that I propose, Christian readers need to come to terms with the fact that their own theological location is inescapable, and that they bring theological presuppositions to Scripture. Anyone who acts has, operative within those actions, claims about the way the world is (ontological). All actions of Christians betray their own assumptions about whether, and in what way, God is active in the world (theological). Christians need to become aware of their own functional theology and see how it influences the interpretation of Scripture.

The rule of faith is a communal, received account of the central
story of Scripture that helps identify the center and the boundaries of a Christian interpretation of Scripture. It emerges from Scripture itself, but it is also a lens through which Christians receive Scripture. This is not a legalistic rule, but it is the map of a dynamic journey of transformation in Jesus Christ, by the Spirit, growing ever deeper into the knowledge and fellowship of the triune God. As Christians, we come to know the shape of this rule of faith in the community of the church: in its worship, its sacraments, its service in the world. The rule of faith points to the expansive context for the Christian interpretation of Scripture: the economy of salvation itself, in which the Spirit unites God's people to Christ and his body (the church), empowered for a surprising, dynamic journey of dying to sin and coming to life in the Spirit's new creation.26

As a result, the kind of knowledge of God we receive through the reading of Scripture is a Spirit-enabled, Christ-centered apprehension of a mystery. We gain real knowledge of God on this journey, but that knowledge is not reducible to propositions; it is knowledge always connected to fellowship with God, always connected with a growth of love for God and the neighbor. Becoming a better interpreter of Scripture is not about mastering the blueprint into which the propositional building blocks of Scripture fit. It is not about picking and choosing a divine answer to our own felt concerns. It is about unlearning our mastery over the biblical text and releasing it to be an instrument used by God for our transformation on the path of Jesus Christ.

For Further Reading


A classic patristic exposition of a theological hermeneutic of Scripture in which reading Scripture is a journey toward a vision of the triune God, on the path of Jesus Christ.

26. The term “economy,” when joined with a prepositional phrase referring to God’s work (e.g., “of salvation”) refers to God’s “provision,” or “plan,” for salvation. It is taken from the Greek word οἰκονομία, meaning literally “management of a household,” or “stewardship.”
Is theology really inescapable? Is the idea of "secular" or theologically "neutral" space a dangerous myth that needs to be exposed? A recent theological movement called Radical Orthodoxy thinks so. Smith’s book is an accessible introduction to this theological sensibility. The original edition of Milbank’s book predates the naming of Radical Orthodoxy as a movement, but it presents a sustained interrogation of the “secular,” a questioning that undergirds much later thought in Radical Orthodoxy.


These two books are significant collections of essays from some of the leading contemporary advocates of the theological interpretation of Scripture.


The dictionary is a one-volume treasure chest of articles for Christians seeking to recover the theological interpretation of Scripture. Treier’s book gives a helpful map of recent secondary literature in the theological interpretation of Scripture discourse.

D. H. Williams, Tradition, Scripture, and Interpretation: A Sourcebook of the Ancient Church (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).

This is a sourcebook of helpful resources from the early church on the rule of faith, the interplay of Scripture and tradition, and the canon of Scripture.