'Biblical reasoning" in Anglican Theological Review, volume 90, 2008

Webster, J.

Webster, J. Biblical Reasoning, Anglican Theological Review 90 (2008), p. 733 - 51
https://myrrh.library.moore.edu.au:443/handle/10248/10210
Downloaded from Myrrh, the Moore College Institutional Repository
Christian theology is biblical reasoning, in which human intelligence responds to the intelligible divine Word spoken through the prophets and apostles. This conception of theology rests upon an ontology and teleology of Scripture and reason, shaped by an understanding of their place in the divine economy in which God establishes fellowship with human creatures, including the rational fellowship of which Christian theology is an instance. The divine economy, grounded in God’s immanent life, unfolds as a history in which human creatures are summoned to know and love God. This history is redemptive and revelatory. The revelation takes form in the embassy of the prophets and apostles, superintended by the Spirit. Reason, corrupted by sin, is renewed by divine grace and participates in redeemed existence. Christian theology is the redeemed intellect’s apprehension of God’s address through his scriptural ambassadors, and takes the form of exegetical and dogmatic reasoning.

I

This paper makes two related claims. First, Christian theology is biblical reasoning. It is an activity of the created intellect, judged, reconciled, redeemed, and sanctified through the redemptive works of the Son and the Spirit. More closely, Christian theology is part of reason’s answer to the divine Word which addresses creatures through the intelligible service of the prophets and apostles. It has its origin in the Spirit-sustained hearing of the divine Word; it is rational contemplation and articulation of God’s communicative presence.

Second, elucidating this conception of theology requires well-judged theological characterizations of Scripture and reason, their natures and ends. An ontology and a teleology of Scripture and reason

* John Webster is Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Aberdeen. The author of many books and articles, he is the founding editor of the International Journal of Systematic Theology. Professor Webster was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 2005.
are needed; the ontology and teleology should derive from the material content of the Christian confession and, accordingly, should demonstrate a free relation to other considerations of the nature of texts and rationality. We need to ask what Scripture and reason are and what they are for. Theological answers to those questions are taken from an understanding of the place of Scripture and reason in the divine economy. As I am using it here, the term “divine economy” bears two closely related senses: it is both the work of the triune God, in which he administers the temporal order of creaturely being and activity in accordance with his eternal purpose, and also the sphere of creaturely reality so administered by him: both God's act of dispensatio and that which he disposes. This order of reality encloses and forms the nature and activity of creatures. To be and to act as a creature is to be and to act within this ordered realm of being; and, moreover, it is to be in the communicative presence of God. God establishes and maintains fellowship with his creatures by addressing them through his Word, thereby summoning them to address themselves to his address. Fellowship with God includes rational fellowship; and of this rational fellowship, Christian theology is an instance.

Most of what follows is given over to describing more closely the divine economy in terms of which we can understand Scripture, reason, and their relation. This line of approach appears remote from familiar debates about the relation of the Bible and theology, and those debates are commonly predicated on significantly different understandings of texts and their rational reception, or are less direct in invoking theological doctrine. We need, I suggest, to move away from pressing concerns about the proper use of Scripture, the nature of biblical authority, or the practice of theological interpretation. Widespread confusion and impatient and incoherent debate about these matters should alert us to the need to push back, and to question the adequacy of the terms in which the debates have been conducted and the concepts through which matters have been framed.

With respect to Scripture, for example, lack of clarity about the tasks of biblical interpretation (in which the tug-of-war between “historical” and “theological” interpretation is but one episode) is symptomatic of the absence of shared conceptions of the nature of Scripture and of the tasks which it undertakes in the divine economy. The absence of bibliology, and the widespread assumption that a doctrine of Scripture is exegetically and hermeneutically otiose, cannot be compensated for by further refinement of strategies of interpretation.
We need to figure out what the text is in order to figure out what to do with it; and we determine what Scripture is by understanding its role in God's self-communication to creatures.

Similarly, discussion of the place of reason in theology is frequently underdetermined by a wider theological conception of God's purposes for creatures (though there are important recent attempts to correct this). This underdetermination is part of the disorientation of reason. For Christian theology, an account of rational acts rests on an account of creaturely nature, which in turn rests upon an account of God's purposes for creatures manifest in his works. Neglect of this rule on the part of Christian theology is an aspect of the self-alienation of the Christian religion and its theology from their proper subject-matter, which in turn has undermined confidence that the resources of the Christian religion are adequate to describe the nature and context of reason's work. Extracted from its place in the divine economy, reason is exposed to inflammation and distortion. A clear-sighted interpretation of the modern defection of reason is only possible, therefore, on the basis of an understanding of reason's proper nature and ends within the divine economy. It is, indeed, imperative not to frame a theological account of reason simply in reaction to a perceived crisis; corrections made on such a basis are likely to be haphazard and disproportionate.

The argument of this essay proceeds in three stages: some initial reflections on the divine economy as the setting in which we can determine the nature of reason and of Scripture; two sections which characterize Scripture and reason respectively; and a final section which expands the notion of theology as biblical reasoning. Much is lacking: a full account would need an anthropology of reason (including an ascetical theology, an account of rational virtue) and an ecclesiology (for both Scripture and reason are bound up with the common life of faith). Lest any fear that these lacunae signal dogmatic choices, I simply plead limits of space.

II

Scripture and reason are elements in the economy of God's communication with creatures, aspects of the cognitive fellowship between creatures and their loving creator. Scripture and reason are not only elements of a religious-cultural economy. The order of reality in which they belong and which shapes their operations is not only that
of human exchange; they are not only a field of human communicative agency. Nor are they without residue to be folded into tradition, that is, an assemblage of cultural forms in its passage through time. Certainly Scripture and reason are creaturely realities, participating in the dynamics of cultural production. They are not "pure"; they do not wholly transcend the processes by which human beings express themselves and acquire cognitive purchase on the world. But such descriptions of Scripture and reason, however necessary, are not sufficient. The social and historical dynamic of tradition is penultimate, pointing back to the divine economy, which is the historical form of God's presence to and action upon creatures. Scripture and reason are not only contingent activities of speech and intelligence; they are to be understood in relation to the divine Word and its intelligible and saving address of God's human creatures. In short, Scripture and reason function within the economy of divine revelation. How may this economy be described more closely?

(1) The divine economy is grounded in the immanent perfection of the Holy Trinity. God's dealings with human creatures, in which he makes it possible for them to know and love him, are a second, derivative reality. In more directly dogmatic language, the economy is the field of the divine missions: the Father's sending of the Son and the Spirit to gather human creatures into fellowship with himself and to uphold them on their way to completion. But this outpouring of love in the divine missions is the external face of the inner divine processions, that is, of the perfect internal relations of the triune persons as the fountain from which the external works of God flow. The opera Dei externae are suspended from the opera Dei ad intra. The importance of this is not simply that it highlights the divine aseity and safeguards the distinction of uncreated and created being. It is also that, by grounding the economy in the inner life of God, it indicates that the creation has depth. Creation is not simply contingent temporal surface, arbitrary action. It has a willed shape; it is the form assumed by the divine intention. And so human creatures and their acts—including textual and intellectual acts—are referred to the anterior reality of God, a reference in which alone their substance and function is secured.

(2) The divine economy unfolds as the history of fellowship in which human creatures are summoned to know and love God. God loves creatures. To love is to will another's good, and God's love of creatures is such that he wills and effects their being, bestowing life upon them. Human life is of a particular kind, not simple animal life but life
characterized by knowledge and love. Knowledge and love are essential to fellowship, whether with other creatures or, supremely, with the creator himself. Knowledge and love are a transcendent motion, a thirst for that which is other than the creature; more than anything, they involve intelligence, a more than instinctual relation to the world and God. Further, human life is not a condition but a history; knowledge and love are enacted or exercised, and their enactment is constitutive of the creaturely side of fellowship with God. The divine side, to which the creature responds, is God’s communicative self-gift, his “Word,” in which he addresses creatures. Because this Word is the address of the creator, it is always a divine initiative, and it quickens creatures, summoning and enabling knowledge and love. The creator speaks, bestows life, and makes himself known and loved above all things.

(3) The divine economy includes the history of redemption. The temporal course of creation is not a steady unfolding of the human creature’s embrace of the creator’s purpose of fellowship, knowledge, and love. Rather, fellowship is breached by the wicked and self-destructive refusal of human creatures to enact their nature by following their vocation. Human creatures repudiate the life-giving Word, defying its summons, choosing instead to instruct themselves in their own good, and so betraying themselves into futility, senselessness, and darkness (Rom. 1:21). Faced with this treachery, God acts to maintain his own glory and his purpose for the creature. Creaturely defiance is overcome, and the creature’s fulfillment is secured, in the history of redemption. At the Father’s behest the Son and the Spirit interpose themselves into the history of creation so as to counter the calamity of the fall; through their works, creatures are reconciled to God, sanctified, and directed to perfection. Human nature is preserved because remade by the redemptive work of the Word made flesh and the life-giving Spirit.

(4) In all this, the divine economy is revelatory. God is made known in the economy of his creative and redemptive acts. In the history of fellowship, God is present and bestows the knowledge of himself. This is the most basic meaning of “revelation”: the eloquence of God’s presence and activity, God so acting in relation to human creatures that his actions constitute his address of them. In his presence and activity among creatures, God’s relation to them is not simply one which produces an effect; it also communicates to them a measure of God’s own knowledge of himself. We may speak of the economy as the theater in which God’s Word is heard, in
which God is communicatively and intelligibly present. Word and intellect are basic to the economy and the way in which creatures participate in it.

The divine economy—founded in God’s own life, fellowship-creating, redemptive, and revelatory—is fundamental to creaturely being and acts. It is the atmosphere or sustaining context of what creatures are and do. Human communicative activity takes place against this deep metaphysical (ontotheological) background, in the situation brought about by the active presence of the triune God and under the impulse of his summons. In this light, what is to be said of Scripture and reason?

III

God’s work in the economy is eloquent, speaking out of itself. Its relation to human creatures is not only causal but self-expressive, producing a cognitive relation. The possibility of this cognitive relation resides with God alone. Knowledge of God, understanding God’s work rather than simply feeling its force, does not lie within creaturely capacity. God intends that the relation between himself and his human creatures should not be silent and opaque but a history of intercourse, in which God utters, and creatures live by, his Word, promise, law, ordinances, statutes, precepts, and testimonies. Such a history is wholly a matter of the divine initiative, precisely because it is rooted in the inner divine life which turns to creatures in the missions of Son and Spirit.

God is in himself the antecedent, majestic divine Word. In its address of human creatures, God’s Word is the enunciation of his eternal purpose to make himself an object of their knowledge. God expresses himself. Commenting on the opening phrase of the Fourth Gospel, Calvin says: “I think he calls the Son of God ‘the Word’ (sermo) simply because, first, he is the eternal wisdom and will of God, and secondly, because he is the express image of his purpose. For just as in men speech is called the expression of the thoughts, so it is not inappropriate to apply this to God and say that he expresses himself to us by his Speech or Word.”

Human knowledge of God is made possible by the operation of the *verbum externum*, that is, by the presence and action of the eternal Word. To this external Word there corresponds the *verbum internum*, that is, the presence and action of the Holy Spirit by whom cognitive fellowship between God and human creatures is consummated. Like its objective presence, the subjective intelligibility of the divine Word is not achieved by a coordination of divine and created agencies. God is sovereignly at work in the full course of his revelation; he is not one who merely furnishes the occasion or raw material for creaturely work. If human creatures hear and know, it is because God the Holy Spirit makes them hear and know. This hearing and knowing are genuine creaturely acts—were they not, there would be no fellowship between God and creatures but simply a divine utterance into a void. But the hearing and knowing of human creatures are spiritual acts, that is, acts for whose description we must employ language about the Holy Spirit.

The work of Word and Spirit, through which God gives human creatures a share in his knowledge of himself, is mediated through creaturely auxiliaries. Of these, Holy Scripture is the chief; through its ministry of the divine Word in the Spirit’s power, God makes himself known and loved. What is to be said of the nature and service of Scripture?

If we are consistent at this point in drawing an understanding of the nature and function of Scripture from theological doctrine about the divine economy, we may find ourselves led to think some unfamiliar thoughts (unfamiliar, that is, in the commonplace narrations of theological progress). But as a consequence we may also discover a measure of freedom from the deism or historical naturalism which in various guises continues to trouble mainstream biblical scholarship. We may be led to say something like this: Scripture is not simply one of a set of immanently-conceived communicative practices, a “historical” or “natural” entity of which a sufficient description can be given by identifying the natural properties of texts and their agents (whether authorial or interpretative). Nor is Scripture a historical or natural entity upon which we superimpose “religious” evaluations that

---

encourage "spiritual use" or "theological interpretation." Rather, without in any way denying the natural properties of scriptural texts, we may say that Scripture's place in the divine economy of redemption and revelation is determinative of its nature. This nature, in turn, directs its reception.

This might be spelled out further by speaking of Scripture as prophetic and apostolic testimony. "Prophetic" and "apostolic" pick out the canon of biblical writings as a unified set of human communicative acts having their origin in God's calling and authorizing certain persons in the communion of the saints. In the assembly which is brought into being by the divine summons and promise there have been those whose words are caused to bear a distinctive relation to the divine Word. Their words are not wholly identical with the divine Word, but they are the subject of a special mission, they are "sent from God." This sending is definitive of its subjects: the prophets and apostles are those sent by God, and therefore those whose speech is for the sake of the divine Word. "Prophetic" and "apostolic" are ontological, not evaluative, qualifiers, indicating what these persons and their acts most basically are. (This is shown by the call narratives of the prophets and apostles, which record drastic separation for a task in relation to God's self-utterance.)

The particular relation of prophetic and apostolic words to God's own Word is ambassadorial; they are an embassy of God's eloquence. Not by embodiment or continuation but by authorized representation and testimony, the prophets and apostles are instrumental in the communication of the one who commissions them for their task. So commissioned, they bear authority. They do not do so by virtue of innate capacity; but their commissioning and the providential ordering of their course makes them fitting, drawing them into the movement of God's self-revelation. As God does this, raising up prophets and apostles in the history of the covenant, he makes his people into the community of the Word of God, one in which his Word can be heard in the ministry of his ambassadors.

Holy Scripture is the textual settlement of this embassy. In it, prophetic and apostolic speech is extended into the church's present. Scripture is the availability of prophetic and apostolic ministry beyond its originating occasion. We should note at once that this account of the nature of Scripture does not obliterate its human qualities, but sets them in relation to what Bullinger in a lovely phrase called "the
history of the proceeding of the Word of God."3 Scripture is a human reality ordered to divine communication. There is a parallel here with the elements in the Lord's Supper. Bread and wine are signs in the economy of salvation: by them the ascended Christ distributes the benefits of his saving achievement, comforting and nourishing his people by his presence. These functions do not detract from the created materiality of the elements, but indicate, rather, that such created realities are taken up into the divine service. So also Holy Scripture: prophetic and apostolic words are no less creaturely for being servants of the divine Word; indeed, their creaturely nature is therein fulfilled. It is a bad dualist habit which assumes that scriptural texts are most basically products of a religious-cultural world to be investigated as such, and only secondarily describable as prophetic and apostolic testimony. The astonishingly simple and revisionary rule for understanding Scripture (on which the pre-critical exegesis of the church is predicated) is this: "those moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Pet. 1:21).

Scripture's being and function are in this movement of the Spirit. Scripture is "inspired" in the sense that its entire course (from pre-textual tradition to canonization, including supremely the work of textual production) is superintended by the Spirit. The movement, of which Scripture is part, is a shedding abroad of the knowledge of God. As an element within this divine movement, therefore, Scripture is not a closed reality, a hermetically sealed oracle. It runs its course, and as it does so it commands hearing. The necessity for the reception of Scripture ought not to be conceived in such a way that reception becomes the point at which an inert textual deposit acquires vitality by virtue of being used or drawn into an interpretative project: reading is not writing. Yet abusus non tollit usum; there is a legitimacy to speaking of the field of the reception of the divine Word in the prophets and apostles. The end of their embassy is that creatures should know and love God, and knowing and loving are creaturely acts. Scripture engenders such acts; it is their occasion and regent. God's Word does not stun creatures into immobility; it moves them, it is a path (Psalm

119:35), a divine movement summoning and ruling a corresponding creaturely movement.

This anticipates what will be said shortly about reason in relation to the Word's intelligibility. Here we simply note the bearing of this principle on how the authority of Scripture might be conceived. The authority of Scripture ought not to be treated in isolation from the wider redemptive economy. If it is so isolated, we may easily fall into the distortions of an abstract conception of authority developed apart from the ends which God has for creatures. The authority of Scripture is its power to command thought, speech, and action by virtue of the fact that it brings to bear upon its hearers the purpose of the one who presents himself through its service. Scripture's authority is neither arbitrary nor merely statutory; it heralds the commanding presence of the loving creator. Scripture's authority is retrospective, in that it looks back to God as Scripture's primary auctor, the one who wills the good of human creatures and shares with them his knowledge of that good. And it is also prospective, an authority which engenders or "authors" creaturely acts. Scripture's authority is a creative, not a sublimating, power. It is fontalitas: it creates a situation for the proper exercise of creaturely powers, including the powers of reason. This is not to say that Scripture is merely a stimulus for limitless debate; against such indeterminacy the Reformed scholastics properly insisted that sacra scriptura locuta, res decisa est. But that locuta and decisa do not eliminate the intelligence, the will, or the affections but direct them, putting them to work by freeing them from the pretence that they are at liberty to command themselves.

IV

Reason is "a grace, and gift of love," and continues to be such despite our descent into depravity, because God has contradicted reason's contradiction of itself and God. The rehabilitation of reason is among the benefits that accrue to human creatures from the Word's redeeming work which the Spirit is now realizing in the creaturely realm. By this unified saving action and presence of Word and Spirit, reason's vocation is retrieved from the ruins: its sterile attempt at self-direction is set aside; its dynamism is annexed to God's

---

self-manifesting presence; it regains its function in the ordered friendship between God and human creatures.

Explicating such statements about reason requires deft use of the material content of the Christian faith, in order that reason can be seen in its proper setting in creation, redemption, and revelation. Within the order of reality established by these works of God, reason undertakes its task. This order of reality is reason's "law," by which it is formed and brought to life and activity. In this order, constituted by divine acts and rendered intelligible through divinely-appointed signs, reason is a primary instrument of fellowship with God. By reason we are brought to apprehend, cleave to, and obey God—to "contemplation" in the sense of intelligent adoration. But this is possible only as reason is first humbled into the realization that it is neither author nor magistrate. The sanctifying Spirit must reorient reason to the divine Word, and only after that reorientation is reason authorized and empowered to judge and direct. Yet, as it is reoriented, reason really is authorized and empowered. And Christian theology is an instance of this redeemed intellectual judgment.

Though such affirmations are still not common in contemporary theology, of late they have become less rare, and there is greater willingness to consider a concept of reason beyond that which has held sway in, for example, some varieties of philosophy of religion. Promptings in this direction sometimes have come from post-critical, pragmatic epistemology which links knowledge to (for example) the inhabitation of tradition or the cultivation of virtue. From a dogmatic standpoint, these approaches can suffer from a certain immanence or relativism; and, even when they are associated with a theology of creation, incarnation, or church, language about God rather quickly can become secondary to language about human creatures and their common lives. More far-reaching revisions of conventional critical-instrumental understandings of reason have been generated by historical work. Genealogies of the fate of reason in the post-medieval (and especially post-Enlightenment) period have sought to identify the increasing isolation of reason from its setting in human relations to God, and the inhibition, even sterility, which attends reason's elevation to presidency over a realm of pure nature. For dogmatics, however, the

---

5 For some representative accounts, see: I. U. Dalferth, Die Wirklichkeit des Möglichen. Hermeneutische Religionsphilosophie (Tübingen: MohrSiebeck, 2003), 209–256; Oliver Davies, The Creativity of God: World, Eucharist, Reason (Cam-
most illuminating historical work is probably not that which traces rea­son's modern decay but that which explores conceptions of the intel­lect operative in the earlier Christian tradition, of which Anna Williams’s exquisite essay on the intellect in patristic theology is a su­perb recent example. By attentive return to the sources, we may re­cover much that has been lost—above all, the function of the intellect in creaturely redemption—but without recourse to a tragic reading of modernity which can discourage theology from calm deployment of its own resources in making sense of where it is and how it might best proceed.

Reason is created, fallen, and redeemed.

(1) The creator endows human creatures with reason in order that, hearing his intelligible word of promise and command, they may know him, and so love and obey him. This means, first, that because human creatures are creatures, they have reason because they have God. To talk of reason, therefore, we have to talk of God (for example, by a doctrine of the divine image). Creaturely reason is contingent. It is not original or self-founding after the manner of the uncreated divine reason. “Reason,” says Turretin, “cannot and should not draw mysteries from its own treasury. The Word of God alone has this right.” Second, reason gives creatures a capacity to transcend the im­mediate. Reason is reflective awareness, through which we entertain intentional relations to situations rather than simply registering them. But to act with intention is quite other than to take up a stance of total critique. The movement of critical transcendence is not itself the fulfillment of reason’s nature, for that movement drives ahead, to reason’s ultimate end, which lies wholly beyond itself in apprehension of God and of all things in God. The fulfillment of created intellect occurs in this movement; reason shares in the dependence, finality, and therefore the goodness of all created things.

---

7 Francis Turretin, Institutes of Elenctic Theology (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyter­ian and Reformed, 1992), lxi.6 (vol. 1, 30).
(2) By speaking of reason as a created reality, theology is committed to giving a metaphysical rather than a voluntaristic account: reason acts within an order of being grounded in God himself, and is not simply a tool of the will. But reason's nature is defiled. In the regime of sin, the structure of human desire collapses, because creatures do not give active consent to their creaturely vocation. And, in the general collapse, reason also falls into futility and darkness. Alienated from the life of God, it is overwhelmed by the callousness and squalor into which we betray ourselves (Eph. 4:17–19). This is Augustine's description of the breakdown of reason:

[Reason] does many things through vicious desire, as though in forgetfulness of itself. For it sees some things intrinsically excellent ... and whereas it ought to remain steadfast that it may enjoy them, it is turned away from [God] by wishing to appropriate those things to itself, and not to be like to him by his gift, but to be what he is by its own, and it begins to move and slip down gradually into less and less, which it thinks to be more and more; for it is neither sufficient for itself, nor is anything at all sufficient for it, if it withdraw from him who is alone sufficient; and so through want and distress it becomes too intent upon its own actions and upon the unquiet delights which it obtains through them; and thus ... it loses its security.¹⁰

Augustine sees how fallen reason debases itself by spurning its divine vocation. Its anxious acquisitiveness, its urgency in rational appropriation of the world, is not only pride but loss, a move from security into self-securing. Embroiled in the creature's bid for freedom from the creator, reason loses its orientation or finality, and so compromises its goodness. It becomes "pure" reason, reason on its own; and precisely this is its corruption.

Yet reason's corruption is a perversion of its given nature, and so not a ground for repudiating reason tout court. Interpretations of the

---


¹⁰ Augustine, On the Trinity, ed. M. Dods (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1873), X.vii.7 (250).
modern history of reason as hubris sometimes stumble at this point. Trapped by the history which they narrate, they can make reason synonymous with the aggressive empirical intellect, and so promote either despair about reason or a kind of voluntaristic view of reason as just the intellectual vanguard of the will. But fallen reason is not the triumphant fulfillment of rational powers; it is their contradiction, substituting a spacious sense of reason's calling with a cramped and anxious desire for certainty without trustful attention to the divine Word and promise. Any talk of reason's depravity and need for renovation must be set under the sign of that Word and promise, that is, under the sign of redemption.

(3) Like all other aspects of created being, weakened and rendered dark and futile by sin, reason is encountered by the assurance and creative power of the forgiveness of sins. Divine judgment renews; it slays in order to make alive. There is not only declension; there is a renewal in the spirit of the mind, a new creaturely nature created after the likeness of God. The gracious, sovereign movement of Word and Spirit outbids the fall.

Reason participates in the dying and rising which are the foundation and pattern of redeemed existence. Reason dies as part of the comprehensive destruction of the wisdom of the world. For Paul in 1 Corinthians, unredeemed reason is one of the "things that are" which are brought to nothing at the cross (1 Cor. 1:28). But the shaming and bringing to nothing of corrupt reason is the negative condition for the gospel's claim that, in the economy of grace, God remakes human creatures precisely by taking from them the evil self-existence which devastates creaturely flourishing. "God," Paul tells the Corinthian elite, "is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom" (1 Cor. 1:30). If God in Christ is indeed reason's source of life, this restores to reason its orientation to the divine Word and enables it to perform its ministerial role. The depravity of reason means that we may "err in excess," attributing to it powers which it has forfeited. But the redemption of reason means that we may also "err in defect" by underrating it. Because of the fall, reason cannot be, as

---


Turretin has it, "a principle and rule in whose scale the greatest mysteries of reason should be weighed." But, he goes on, "a ministerial and organic relation is quite different from a principal and despotic. Reason holds the former relation to theology, not the latter." If Turretin is instructive here, it is because he stands at the latter end of a long tradition in which the anthropology and teleology of the intellect were derived from its place in the unfolding course of God's creative and saving works.

In short: reason is renewed after its self-alienation and treachery against God, because God loves human creatures and desires to fulfill their natures, including their rational natures. This is why reason is a grace and a gift of love.

V

Christian theology is biblical reasoning. It is the redeemed intellect's reflective apprehension of God's gospel address through the embassy of Scripture, enabled and corrected by God's presence and having fellowship with him as its end.

Classical Reformed theology spoke of Scripture as the cognitive principle of theology, and of God as its ontological principle. Such talk is no doubt vulnerable to epistemological or metaphysical formalization. But we need not fear that it will always succumb. Worries about foundations or ontotheology can be compulsive, and to alleviate them we only need to recall that theology's cognition of its objects is an episode in the unfolding fellowship between God and the creatures to whom he makes himself known. Bearing this in mind, we can say three things. First, Scripture is the cognitive principle of theology in the sense that Scripture is the place to which theology is directed to find its subject-matter and the norm by which its representations are evaluated. God himself is this subject-matter and norm in his royal address of the human intellect. Because of this, second, the ontological principle of theology is God himself—not some proposed entity but the Lord who out of the unfathomable plenitude of his triune being lovingly extends toward creatures in Word and Spirit. Third, therefore, the cognitive principle is grounded in the ontological principle.

---

14 Turretin, *Institutes* I.viii.6 (vol. 1, 25).
Holy Scripture is a function of God; its cognitive and revelatory force is not that of a textual deposit but of a loving voice and act of rule. 

Christian theological reason is not an indeterminate intellectual activity, reason in search of an object, but reason to which an approach has already been made with unassailable might, to which an object has been given. This object represents itself in textual form. The form does not exhaust its object—how could a mere text fathom the untold depths of God's life? But the form is fitting, and through it theology does encounter the divine summons. And so theology is not a free science, but bound to (and therefore liberated by) the one in whose company it finds itself placed.

Through Scripture God commands human reason, and this command quickens. Even in the economy of redemption, reason is not adequate to do the bidding of its creator and redeemer. Turretin speaks of reason as "sound and healed by grace."¹⁵ This ought not to be pressed into an anticipation of the eschatological knowledge of the blessed; in its pilgrim state, theological reason remains subject to lingering corruption. Yet reason is within the sphere of God's sanctifying and ruling grace, its inadequacies compensated for by a divine promise. The promise is the promise of baptism, the effective announcement of regeneration and participation in a new history under the divine rule.

How does reason respond to this rule? There is a temptation to magnify grace by eliminating the work of reason as if reason were by nature an aggressor. But, in the realm of the redeemed creation, reason is neither master nor slave. It is, rather, made ready for lively embrace of the Word, received not in pure passivity but actively, under the Word's direction. Reducing reason to passivity misses the real character of the Word's address and of the reason which it addresses. For, on the one hand, the Word is creative, communicative, and intelligible. It does not have its term merely in being uttered, but in being received, in becoming a matter for the intelligence of faith. And, on the other hand, reason is redeemed not for slothful compliance but for a work of knowledge. There is, of course, a disorderly work of reason which considers itself competent to summon the Word into its presence or to take upon itself the Spirit's work of furthering the communicative effectiveness of the Word. But disorder is overcome by order, and in good theological order reason is restored to its proper task of

¹⁵ Turretin, Institutes I.ix.14 (vol. 1, 31).
biblical reasoning. For the purposes of exposition, this task can be broken down as exegetical reasoning and dogmatic reasoning.

(1) Exegetical reasoning is, most simply, reading the Bible, the intelligent (and therefore spiritual) act of following the words of the text. Scripture is not an oracular utterance but an instrument through which divine speech evokes the unselfish, loving, and obedient tracing of the text’s movement which is the work of exegesis. This is the theologically primary act; the principal task of theological reason is figuring out the literal sense, that is, what the text says. This would be an absurdly naive claim if the literal sense were thought of merely as information to be retrieved from an inert source in which it had been deposited. But the prophets and apostles are alive, their texts are their voices which herald the vita vox Dei. “Following” these texts is, as it were, a movement of intellectual repetition, a “cursive” re-presentation of the text, running alongside it or, perhaps better, running in its wake. To be taken into this movement is the commentator’s delight, tempered by the knowledge that we cannot hope to keep pace, because the prophets and apostles always stride ahead of us. This is why following these texts involves the most strenuous application of the powers of the intellect, demanding the utmost concentration to resist habit and to ensure that the text’s movement is not arrested in our re-presentation.

One extension of the primacy of exegetical reason is the importance of commentary as a theological genre, more specifically, of commentary as contemplative paraphrase rather than as repository of textual-historical information. Commentarial reason operates naturally in a theological culture in which the text is a determinate, authoritative, and, in an important way, resistant element, rather than something which is plastic in the hands of the present agents of the culture. Commentary flourishes in a positive rather than a critical theological and spiritual culture, one which regards its essential matter as a given to be received afresh rather than generated. Of course, the very need for commentary indicates that the text upon which the commentary is made is not the end of discourse; the text is a gift which evokes the works of reason. But commentarial reason always points

---

back to the text from which alone it draws its substance; and this reference back is itself both a necessary limitation (even, indeed, mortification) of reason and the occasion of reason's aliveness.

(2) Dogmatic reasoning produces a conceptual representation of what reason has learned from its exegetical following of the scriptural text. In dogmatics, the "matter" of prophetic and apostolic speech is set out in a different idiom, anatomized. Cursive representation leads to conceptual representation, which abstracts from the textual surface by creating generalized or summary concepts and ordering them topically. This makes easier swift, non-laborious, and non-repetitive access to the text's matter. But, in doing this, it does not dispense with Scripture, kicking it away as a temporary scaffold; it simply uses a conceptual and topical form to undertake certain tasks with respect to Scripture. These include seeing Scripture in its full scope as an unfolding of the one divine economy; seeing its interrelations and canonical unity; and seeing its proportions. These larger apprehensions of Scripture then inform exegetical reason as it goes about its work on particular parts of Scripture. Dogmatics is the schematic and analytical presentation of the matter of the gospel. It is "systematic," not in the sense that it offers a rigidly formalized set of deductions from a master concept, but in the low-level sense of gathering together what is dispersed through the temporal economy to which the prophets and apostles direct reason's gaze. What dogmatic reason may not do is pretend to a firmer grasp of the object of theological reason than can be achieved by following the text. The prophets and apostles are appointed by God; dogmaticians are not. Prophetic and apostolic speech is irreducible. The sufficiency of Scripture includes its rhetorical sufficiency.

VI

Exegesis and dogmatics are indirectly ascetical disciplines. That is, they are intellectual activities in which the church participates in the mortification of reason which is inescapable if the children of Adam are to become the friends of God. As theological reason goes about its exegetical and dogmatic tasks, the intellect is drawn away from idols.17 Mortification, however, is ordered to vivification, which

is, indeed, its inner power and the ground for theological confidence. Christian theology cannot remain content with the contemporary commonplace that reason is not much more than a play of power—a commonplace as lazy as it is hopeless. Oriented by and to the divine Word in the testimonies of the prophets and apostles, reason is a sphere of grace, a sign of the overcoming of the disorder of sin in its forms of ignorance and unbridled invention.

May it not be that what afflicts some of the church in its present hermeneutical gridlock is a disorder of the passions, a destructive instability which will not allow itself to be drawn into the self-abandonment (intellectual, moral, political) which is the only way in which redemption will have its way with us? One of the deepest fault lines in the church at the present time runs between those who do their theological reasoning on the basis of a conviction that in Scripture the breath of the divine Word quickens reason to knowledge and love of God, and those who fear (or hope?) that neither Scripture nor reason takes us any further than human poetics. The latter choice generates irony and squabbling, and both of these are sicknesses of the soul. The former is more persuasively present than it has been for some long while, and we should seize the day.
Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)’ express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.