

After Inerrancy: *Evangelicals and the Bible in a Postmodern Age*

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“We must read this book of books with all human methods. But through the fragile and broken Bible, God meets us in the voice of the Risen One.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Reflections on the Bible

I write for Evangelicals who either believe or suspect that our tradition has painted itself into an intellectual corner. The Church has been down this road before. In the 16th and 17th centuries it mistakenly criticized Copernicus and Galileo because their scientific views were deemed “unbiblical.” And just as the evidence finally came crashing down on Church dogma in those days, so in ours, the facts are stacking up quickly against fundamentalist beliefs in “creation science” and in the kind of “biblical inerrancy” that supports it.

While there was perhaps a period in history when Evangelicals could deny the substance of these new theories because the available evidence seemed thin, it seems to me that we’ve now crossed an evidential threshold that makes it intellectually unsuitable to defend some of the standard dogmas of the conservative Evangelical tradition. Holding fast to these old dogmas merely perpetuates the “intellectual disaster of Fundamentalism” and the “scandal of Evangelical Mind.”¹

The intellectual cul-de-sac in which Evangelicalism finds itself can be traced back to many causes. But it seems clear, at least to me, that a fundamental cause of the scandal is its doctrine of Scripture. Often this doctrine involves a strict adherence to “Biblicism” ... to a belief that the Bible provides inerrant access to the truth about everything it touches on ... from biology, physics and astronomy to psychology, history and theology. In more progressive Evangelical circles, inerrancy is sometimes defined more delicately, in a way that allows the non-biblical evidence to carry more weight in our reflection, but even here the subtle influence of inerrancy sometimes engenders poor, or at least inferior, judgments about science, history, human beings and theology. In the pages that follow I will briefly explain why conventional Evangelical understandings of Scripture simply cannot be right. I will also survey some of the important resources that can help the Church get its bearings in a world without Biblicistic inerrancy.

1. Dogmatic Assumptions

In the pages that follow I will assume the basic legitimacy and cogency of the traditional Christian orthodoxy. That God exists and is good ... that Jesus Christ is God incarnate, both divine and human ... that the Bible is the word of God and hence authoritative for Christians ... that there are such things as orthodoxy (right religious beliefs) and heresy (wrong religious beliefs) ... all of these are matters of dogmatic theology that I will treat as finally settled.

Many Evangelicals would like to include Biblicist inerrancy in any list of dogmatic assumptions, but this dogma is neither a standard view among Christians at-large nor is it theologically sensible in light of the strong evidence against it.

2. The Problem of Scripture

Evangelical tradition commonly holds that God, in giving us Scripture, shielded it from the errant influences of its finite, fallen human authors. While this commitment to Scripture’s divinity and veracity is laudable and in many respects traditional, it does not come without an apparent intellectual price. The evidence against this view either is or appears to be very strong. Let me begin with one brief, clear and fairly innocuous example of the problem that confronts Evangelicals. My example comes from the life of Judas, the man who betrayed Jesus. Consider the two accounts of his death provided below:

Matthew 27:3-8

When Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. He said, “I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.” But they said, “What is that to us? See to it yourself.” Throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself. But the chief priests, taking the pieces of silver, said, “It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since they are blood money.” After conferring together, they used them to buy the potter’s field as a place to bury foreigners. For this reason that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day.

Acts 1:18-19

Now this man [Judas] acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness; and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out. This became known to all the residents of Jerusalem, so that the field was called in their language Hakedama, that is, Field of Blood.

It is easy to see the differences in the two accounts. In the first Judas dies by hanging, in the second by a violent fall; in the first Judas returns the money, in the second he keeps it; in first the priests bought the field, in the second Judas bought it; in the first the field is named for its function as a burial plot, in the second its name commemorates Judas’s death. While it’s quite possible that one of these stories is right, or that both are partly right, I don’t see how they can both be historically right in every respect.

The difficulty that I have just cited involves a tension *within* the Bible between two different texts. Another sort of tension appears when the Biblical text does not square with evidence outside of the Bible, as is the case when the biblical and scientific evidence do not cohere. A long-known example appears in Genesis ch. 1, where God is said to create a “firmament” or “expanse” in the sky to hold back the waters above it (see Genesis 1:6-8). As the great Christian exegete John Calvin said long ago, “it seems impossible and opposed to common sense that there are waters above the heavens.”² Calvin admitted, nevertheless, that this is what the text says. He further concluded that this was not correct and probably reflected how ancient, uneducated Israelites understood the structure of the cosmos. His surmise has turned out to be right, since ancient texts and pictures discovered by modern scholars confirm that all of Israel’s neighbors—even the advanced societies of Egypt and Mesopotamia—believed that there were waters above the heavens ... The sky is blue because there is water up there.³

The list of similar “tensions” and “contradictions” in Scripture is very long. To give just a few examples: Some texts depict God changing his mind and others claim God never changes (cf. Genesis 6:6-7; James 1:17). Some texts describe God as having a physical body and others strongly assert he does not have a body (cf. Isaiah 6:1; Amos 9:1; John 4:24). Some texts say that Israel’s forefathers knew God’s name, Yahweh, and others explicitly claim that they did not know his name (cf. Genesis 28:16; Exodus 6:2-3). One text says that God’s people should boil the Passover meal and another forbids boiling (cf. Deuteronomy 16:7; Exodus 12:9).⁴ Some texts permitted Israel to sacrifice at many places before Solomon’s temple was built while others didn’t permit this (cf. Deuteronomy 12:8-14; Leviticus 17:8-9). There are texts that promise judgment on the children of sinners, and those that say God certainly doesn’t harm children for the sins of their parents (cf. Exodus 20:5; Deuteronomy 24:16).⁵ Some texts aver that God’s people should divorce unbelieving spouses, and others say that we certainly shouldn’t divorce them (cf. Ezra 9-10; 1 Corinthians 7:10-16). We have a text that says Jesus’s family was originally from Nazareth, and another that says they were from Bethlehem (cf. Luke 2:1-4; Matthew chs. 1-2); in a related matter, we have a text that says Jesus moved to Nazareth soon after his birth and also a text that says this happened years later (cf. Luke 2:39-40; Matthew ch. 1-2). We have a text that says idolaters are without excuse for their sinful idolatry, but also one that claims God has overlooked their ignorant worship of idols (cf. Romans 1:18-23; Acts 17:29-31). One text says that David was an adulterer and murderer, and another portrays him as wholly righteous and innocent (cf. 2 Samuel 11-12; 1 Chronicles). One text says King David paid 50 shekels of silver for Israel’s temple site, and another that he paid 600 shekels *of gold* (cf. 2 Samuel 24:24; 1 Chronicles 21:25). We have a text that says the world will inevitably hate Christians, and another that encourages Christians to pursue peace with all people (John 15:18-21; Hebrews 12:14). We have a text that claims God is not willing for anyone to perish, and another that seems to say he predestines human beings to eternal judgment (2 Peter 3:9; Romans 9:1-24). On the scientific front, the Bible ostensibly suggests the earth is a few thousand years old, yet science that tells us it is billions of years old. The Bible says human beings were created on day 6 of a six-day creation process, and science that tells us human beings were created through a complex evolutionary process that took millions of years. The Bible claims that there was a worldwide flood, and geological and biological evidence proves that this never happened.

In some cases the apparent contradictions and problems that I have just outlined can perhaps be “harmonized” in some way or other. For instance, some scholars have suggested that one of the conflicting accounts of Judas’ death (the account in Matthew) was written according to the fictional conventions of Jewish midrash rather than the conventions of biography or history.⁶ If this is right, then there is no real historical conflict between the two biblical stories. But it’s very doubtful—in fact, I would say quite impossible—that all of these problems ... and many others that I have not mentioned ... would have workable, convincing solutions. If we take the Bible’s explicit content with any seriousness, then it is as clear as it can possibly be that its authors were not wholly consistent with each other, nor does it appear that they were wholly right about all matters of science and history. So like any other book, the Bible appears to be a historically and culturally contingent text and, because of that, it reflects the diverse viewpoints of different people who lived in different times and places. In other words, Scripture *is* tradition. Perhaps authoritative tradition ... but tradition, nonetheless. I realize that for some Christians these observations make the Bible, as the word of God, look all too human.

Yet the problems just cited are not, in my view, the most serious difficulties that Christians face in the Bible. More troublesome are those cases where a biblical text espouses ethical values that not only contradict other biblical texts but also strike us as downright sinister or evil. Consider this example:

Matthew 5:43-45

You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

Deuteronomy 20:16-18

But as for the towns of these peoples that Yahweh your God is giving you as an inheritance, you must not let anything that breathes remain alive. You shall annihilate them—the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites—just as Yahweh your God has commanded, so that they may not teach you to do all the abhorrent things that they do for their gods, and you thus sin against Yahweh your God.

These words from the lips of Jesus and the Law of Moses are profoundly different. How can one biblical text admonish us to love our enemies and another command Israel to commit genocide against ethnic groups because they have a different religion?

The problem and its scope are suggested, I think, by the Bible’s account of the destruction of the Canaanite city of Jericho:

So the people [of Israel] shouted, and the trumpets were blown. As soon as the people heard the sound of the trumpets, they raised a great shout, and the wall fell down flat; so the people charged straight ahead into the city and captured it. Then they “devoted to destruction” (*herem*) by the edge of the sword all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys (Joshua 6:20-21).

Here Israel is rewarded by military success because, in the book of Joshua, righteousness amounted to obediently exterminating Canaanite men, women, children and animals. In fact, in the theology of Deuteronomy and Joshua this was a ritual act of *herem* ... a ritual of complete devotion that sacrificed the Canaanites and their belongings to God.⁷ In this ritual act, God demands that any natural tendency to “show mercy” in light of the enemy’s humanity must be squelched out (see Deuteronomy 7:2).

There is a tendency among more conservative Christians to imagine that the ethical problem referred to here is really an illusion created by misplaced, modern sensibilities ... that this is just another case in which “contemporary human ethics” arrogantly presume to be better than “God’s biblical ethics.”⁸ While I do not doubt that modern ethics run amuck in many ways and means, I don’t think that in this case the objection carries much weight. Those familiar with early Christian theology know how much it struggled with the Bible’s ethical diversity. Consider these comments from the pen of the great Cappadocian Father, Gregory of Nyssa (c. AD 335-395), who was deeply troubled by God’s execution of Egyptian children in the Passover story of Exodus:

The Egyptian [Pharaoh] is unjust, and instead of him, his punishment falls upon his newborn child, who on account of his infant age is unable to discern what is good and what is not good ... If such a one now pays the penalty of his father’s evil, where is justice? Where is piety? Where is holiness? Where is Ezekiel, who cries ... “The son should not suffer for the sin of the father?” How can history so contradict reason?

Gregory concluded that, ethically speaking, the Passover story simply could not pass as literal history ... it was an allegory about sin, that directed us to quickly destroy evil before it grew too troublesome for us.⁹ Now my point is not whether Gregory handled the difficulty as we would, for it seems very doubtful to me, and perhaps to most of my readers, that the author of Exodus intended an allegory. But Gregory's method aside, his 4th century comment shows that the ethical problems in Scripture are *not* the result of modern imagination run amuck.

Scripture exhibits all of the telltale signs of having been written by finite, fallen human beings who erred in the ways that human beings usually err. If this is the case, in what sense can we say with a straight face that Scripture is God's word? Are there any solutions for these problems that are true to the Christian faith and intellectually honest respecting the problems we face? While I don't believe that humanity can answer all of our questions on this side of heaven, I do believe that we have access to theological resources that are useful for confronting the challenge at hand.

But before we move ahead, it seems to me that one point must be made. Even though conservative Evangelicals can create ad hoc scenarios that seem to preserve the doctrine of inerrancy, the cognitive dissonance created is considerable. In fact, I would argue that straightforward evidence against this doctrine is demonstrable, and so it should not be granted any kind of fundamental status in the Christian faith. I agree with our venerable Evangelical forefather, James Orr. Although he was a contributor to the classic expression of Evangelical theology in *The Fundamentals*, he clearly saw the intellectual and theological dangers in inerrancy: "One may plead, indeed, for 'a supernatural providential guidance' which has for its aim to exclude all, even the least, error or discrepancy in statement ... But this is a violent assumption which there is nothing in the Bible really to support. It is perilous, therefore, to seek to pin down faith to it as a matter of vital importance."¹⁰ Even more in our day than his, it is clear that inerrancy is an intellectual disaster.

3. Some Ancient Solutions

I do not want to give the impression that the kinds of problems I have outlined above have gone unaddressed among orthodox Christians. Christian interpreters have long recognized that the Bible presents us with interpretive challenges and apparent contradictions. How did men like Augustine, Gregory the Great, Aquinas, Calvin and Wesley handle these kinds of difficulties?

First, I wish to point out that our forefathers were generally sensitive to the way that their interpretations of Scripture would play before non-Christian audiences, especially when it came to matters of science. In his comments on the cosmology in Genesis, Aquinas said that "one should adhere to a particular explanation [of Scripture] only in such measure as to be ready to abandon it, if it be proved with certainty to be false; lest Holy Scripture be exposed to the ridicule of unbelievers, and obstacles be placed to their believing."¹¹ Father Augustine expressed a similar concern in his commentary on Genesis: "it is a disgraceful and dangerous thing for an infidel to hear a Christian, presumably giving the meaning of Holy Scripture, talking nonsense on these [cosmological] topics, and we should take all means to prevent such an embarrassing situation, in which people show up vast ignorance in a Christian and laugh it to scorn."¹² Augustine and Aquinas believed that Christians were responsible for the interpretations that they paraded before unbelievers. They also believed that where the scientific evidence seemed clear and convincing, our interpretations of Scripture would have to be adjusted accordingly.

Christian interpreters of the past generally used one of two different strategies to “adjust” Scripture’s meaning when it appeared to be wrong. One of these strategies was allegory. As Gregory the Great once said, “Undoubtedly the words of the literal text, when they do not agree with each other, show that something else is to be sought in them.”¹³ About a thousand years later John Wesley similarly wrote, “if the literal sense of these Scriptures are absurd, and apparently contrary to reason, then we should be obliged not to interpret them according to the letter, but to look out for a looser meaning.”¹⁴ Christians have long maintained that the Bible includes several mysterious levels of meaning and have turned to these when the so-called literal meaning seemed wrong.

The other common strategy for “adjusting” the Bible’s discourse actually admitted the errors but pinned the blame on the human audience of Scripture. John Calvin provides a good example. I have mentioned already that he understood the Genesis cosmology, with its heavenly waters, as an ancient and errant cosmology. In this case God and Moses merely “accommodated” their writings to the confused viewpoints of the ancient audience.¹⁵ Wesley allowed for something similar in his cosmology, and also admitted the possibility that the two genealogies of Jesus—in Luke and Matthew—were contradictory because the biblical authors consulted errant Jewish genealogies.¹⁶ Many other uses of “accommodation” appear in the biblical interpretation of the early Fathers of the Church.¹⁷

But patristic uses of accommodation go beyond this. The Fathers realized that Scripture was not only influenced by human finiteness but also by human fallenness. This, they thought, was an obvious implication of the significant differences between the Old and New Testament views of God, theology and religious practice. Why, for instance, would God allow animal sacrifices in the Old Testament if these were really pagan in background and would be done away with in the New Testament? Here is the answer given by Gregory of Nazianzus, which I quote at length because it is particularly instructive:

And therefore like a Tutor or Physician [God] partly removes and partly condones ancestral habits, conceding some little of what tended to pleasure, just as medical men do with their patients, that their medicine may be taken, being artfully blended with what is nice ... For instance, in the first [dispensation] he cut off the idol, but left the sacrifices; the second, while it destroyed sacrifices did not forbid circumcision. Then, when once men had submitted to the curtailment, they also yielded that which had been conceded to them: in the first instance the sacrifices, in the second circumcision, and became instead of Gentiles, Jews, and instead of Jews, Christians, being beguiled into the Gospel by gradual changes.¹⁸

Like some of the other early Christian fathers, Gregory argues that God allowed inferior and errant practices in Scripture because humanity was not prepared to manage their sudden elimination. Gregory only hints but does not explicitly say that the eliminated practices were actually bad or evil, but Father Justin was quite willing to say it:

We also would observe the fleshly circumcision, and the Sabbaths, and in short all of your festivals, if we did not know why they were ordained, namely, because of your sins and hardness of your hearts ... God enjoined you to keep the Sabbath and imposed on you other precepts for a sign, as I have already said, on account of your unrighteousness and that of your fathers.

Justin found confirmation of his view in Ezekiel’s prophecy that God gave the Jews “laws that were not good” (Ezekiel 20:25).¹⁹ That is, Justin was willing to say (following Ezekiel) that God gave his people laws that were not good precisely because his people had fallen, hardened hearts (see Jesus’ comments in Matthew ch. 19). Taken together, Gregory and Justin can easily be understood as saying this: Scripture’s discourse is adapted to and reflects human sinfulness, and these fallen elements of biblical religion are gradually eliminated in the course of the redemptive process.

In sum, our Christian forebears generally resolved the problems in Scripture by appeals to allegory and accommodation. Hermeneutical flexibility was of utmost importance because the problems were many and serious, and because the witness of the Church was at stake. For reasons that will become clear, I don’t believe that this two-pronged approach resolves all of the difficulties we face in Scripture. But I do believe that these earlier interpreters were on the right track.

4. The Chalcedonian or Incarnation Principle

Christian orthodoxy embraces the “Chalcedonian Definition,” a formal 5th century creed that maintains that Jesus Christ was (and is) both divine and human and that his two natures did not “mix” but were joined together in a mysterious, hypostatic union. This means that Jesus was in all respects like us, “sin excepted” (Hebrews 4:15). Christians long ago realized that in some form or fashion this meant Jesus lived out his human life as a finite person.²⁰ Athanasius (c. AD 296-373) provides a good example. In his debate with the Arians, Athanasius had occasion not only to defend the divinity of Jesus but also to explain those texts that indicate he was subject to human limitations. Two relevant texts were Luke 2:52 and Mark 13:32, which respectively said that the young Jesus “grew in wisdom and stature” and that he didn’t know when the end would come ... “Only the Father knows,” he said. Athanasius argued that in his divine nature Jesus knew these things, but “as a man He is ignorant of it, for ignorance is proper to man, and especially ignorance of these things.”²¹ One implication of this observation (though not fully appreciated by Athanasius) is that, humanly speaking, Jesus was a finite person who grew up in Palestine, learned Hebrew and Aramaic, and *became* Jewish.

Though theologians seldom point this out, the fact that Jesus operated mainly within the horizon of his finite human horizon has other implications. If we assume for the sake of discussion that he was a carpenter like his father, did he ever miss the nail with his hammer? Hit his thumb? Did he think that he left his saw on the bench when, because he was distracted, he actually leaned it against the wall? Did Jesus ever look across a crowded town square and think that he saw his brother James only to discover that it was someone else? And did he estimate that the crowd was about 300 when it was really 200? To confess that Jesus was fully human is to admit that the answer to these questions must be yes. And if yes, then this observation surely has implications for how we think about Scripture. If Jesus as a finite human being erred from time to time, there is no reason at all to suppose that Moses, Paul, John wrote Scripture without error. Rather, we are wise to assume that the biblical authors expressed themselves *as* human beings writing from the perspectives of their own finite, broken horizons.

5. Postmodern Practical Realism: What Should We Expect from Human Authors?

“Postmodernism” has a poor reputation in Evangelical circles, but there are in fact two wings of postmodern thought, only one of which might be considered “hostile” to the Christian faith. The other wing of postmodern tradition is not only amenable to the faith but actually provides valuable resources for our

theological reflection on Scripture. I will explain these theological benefits through a brief survey of the history of epistemology and hermeneutics.

We could begin our survey at many points in history, but for our purposes the French philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650) provides a good starting point. His “Cartesian” project was to determine how human beings could gain indubitable, incorrigible knowledge of the world ... true understandings that simply can’t be wrong. Descartes began with the assumption that all human beings share in the same “universal reason.” Why, then, do human beings ever disagree with each other and get things wrong? Descartes surmised that the problem was human tradition; our rational capacities are unduly clouded and warped by the traditions of our respective families and societies. Hence, fundamental to any search for “the truth” is an effort to “escape” or “rise above” these traditions that blind us to the facts. Scholars commonly refer to this view of epistemology as *Modern Realism*.

Though Modern Realism developed over a lengthy stretch of history, philosophy’s love affair with it was rather short-lived. Philosophers living in the last days of philosophical Modernism—Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Heidegger—gradually revealed that the epistemic project of Modern Realism was doomed all along to fail, for it aspired to the impossible goal of “escaping” tradition. All of us grow up in and are formed by culture and, because of this, we inevitably begin our pursuit of the truth from *within* a cultural tradition. In our search for the truth, we simply cannot “start from scratch.” We may swim with the current of tradition or against it, but tradition is always the water that we swim in ... we are always wet and always pushed here and there by the current in ways that we do not realize. There is no such thing as a “universal reason” that leads to incorrigible truth.

Broadly speaking, this correct observation about the role of tradition in human life has yielded two schools of postmodern epistemic thought. One of these begins by agreeing with Modernism on this basic point: tradition *does* blind us to the truth. And if tradition inevitably shapes us, and if it also blinds us to the truth, it follows that human beings simply do not know the truth ... we do not know reality as it is. What we mistakenly embrace as “reality” is nothing other than *invention* ... and this invention is a product of our tradition. This approach to epistemology is usually called *Antirealism* or *Non-Realism* in that it denies any connection between what we think about reality and reality itself.²² Human beings *create* “the truth”.

The other school of postmodern thought is called *Practical Realism*.²³ Unlike Antirealism, it holds that tradition does not blind us to the truth but rather turns out to be the practical, adequate and useful way that human beings grasp it. But this grasp is not on a toggle switch that is either right or wrong ... it lies on a continuum between better and poorer ... it can be very good or very bad, but never perfect. In the best cases, human knowledge is *wholly adequate* for the needs of our situation. But what, precisely, is the nature of this “adequate” correlation between interpretation and fact?

Unlike Modern Realism, which posits an actual one-for-one correspondence between interpretation and fact, Practical Realism accounts for interpretive success in terms of analogy. Our understanding of reality is “right” when our model or concept of reality is “close enough” to the facts to give us success in what we trying to do. The result is never “the brute truth.” It is at best partial and useful, though always warped in some way or other.

Practical Realism dovetails nicely with the Christian tradition, for Christian orthodoxy likewise holds that human beings are finite, fallen creatures who never see the world from a perfect, god’s-eye viewpoint. One thinks here of the biblical story of Job, which teaches that Job saw the truth better than his friends and yet neither he, nor they, saw the world as God sees it. So, though Job was “right” in a comparative sense, even he finally repents because he got it wrong. All human perceptions, even the best, are partial and warped.

This is true for you and for me, but also—and this is a very important point—for the human authors of Scripture. We will tease out some of the implications as we move along, but a fairly obvious implication is that good theology will not be content with any single text of Scripture. It will realize that all of Scripture’s voices, taken together, give us the fullest understanding of God and his voice.

6. Speech Act and Generic Theory: A Partial Solution

Some scholars believe that the problems in Scripture are more perceived than real.²⁴ Given the postmodern turn, they are savvy enough to admit that Scripture seems “wrong” at points, but in these cases they argue that Scripture’s true substance is not really about whatever appears to be in error. As an example, let us assume that the cosmology of Genesis ch. 1 is wrong when it says that there are “waters above the heavens.” A Speech Act theorist (like Vanhoozer or Ward) will admit that this is wrong by modern scientific standards but will also point out that the “Speech Act” of the biblical author—the thing he was trying to accomplish in Genesis—had nothing to do with science.²⁵ Hence the author’s errant cosmology was not an error in his discourse. Variations on this theme focus on the genre of the Bible, suggesting, for instance, that Genesis is not a book of “bad science” so much as a book of myth or saga that teaches good theology. In essence, if Scripture appears to be wrong, we’ve simply misunderstood the kind of discourse that it is.

In certain respects this solution is not so different from the older use of allegory by the Church Fathers. But this newer embodiment of the genre solution is more sophisticated and, to my mind, truer to the Chalcedonian Principle. It not only allays the impression that God errs in Scripture but also maintains that Scripture is expressed through ordinary human discourse rather than through mysterious allegories. The result is a very flexible approach to Scripture that can theologically assimilate many of the so-called “assured results” of modern biblical scholarship and modern science.

While attending to the genre of Scripture certainly helps us understand it better and often reveals that many of Scripture’s ostensible “problems” are not problems at all, this generic approach does not resolve all of the difficulties. Foremost, it does not explain why Scripture’s authors seem to *teach* that God demands the slaughter of Canaanites and commands us, through Christ, to love our enemies. This obvious theological tension demands a more robust solution.

7. Theological Hermeneutics: Another Step Forward

“Theological Interpretation” or “Theological Hermeneutics” refers to a contemporary movement in biblical interpretation characterized by its *creedal*, *ecumenical*, *biblical* and *theological* character.²⁶ It is *creedal* in that its participants embrace the Christian tradition and its great statements of theological orthodoxy, such as the Nicene Creed and Definition of Chalcedon. It is *ecumenical* because it acknowledges that those creedal boundaries leave room for a wide variety of legitimate faith expressions and commitments. Scholars from Catholic, Protestant, and Eastern Orthodox communities, some more conservative and others more liberal, are all welcomed to the table of discussion and debate. It is *biblical* because its participants take Scripture seriously and believe that a thoughtful, informed engagement with the Bible is essential for the health of the Church. Many players in the movement come from traditions where this has not always been the case. Finally, the movement is *theological*. It is committed to the Chalcedonian Principle that Scripture is both divine and human and that, because of this, it presents theology through the limited perspectives of the human horizon. As a result, one cannot simply read

theology off of the Bible's pages; one must read the text and then reflect theologically on how it relates to other biblical texts and to God's voice as it speaks through tradition, cosmos and Spirit.

One common feature in the Theological Interpretation movement is that it is often uninterested in what Scripture's human authors had to say and prefers instead to search out the "divine discourse" in Scripture. What is *God* saying through this text? This is deemed to be the really important question. Stephen Fowl has lucidly pointed out why theological interpreters tend to keep the Bible's human authors at arm's length: "If there can only be one literal sense to each passage of Scripture then it will become difficult if not impossible to avoid the charge that Scripture teaches something demonstrably false."²⁷ In other words, theological interpreters are as troubled as anyone else by the errors and problems in Scripture's ordinary human discourse. Essentially, their solution is to ignore these human meanings in favor of better and more useful "divine meanings" that are provided via allegories and the "spiritual sense" of Scripture.

While I fully agree that our ultimate goal in biblical interpretation should be to hear God's voice, I would argue that we pursue this best by listening carefully to those chosen by God to speak for him: the human authors of Scripture. But to move in this direction fruitfully, we will need to discern an approach to Scripture that accomplishes at least two things. First, it must maintain that the human beings who wrote Scripture spoke for God without implicating God in their errors. And secondly, it should explain how the diverse human voices in Scripture, sometimes in tension and on occasion in open contradiction, can be integrated into a coherent understanding of theology and of God's word for the Church.

8. A Key Analogy: The Problem of Creation and the Problem of Scripture

The accommodation theology of the Church Fathers and Calvin comes tolerably close to meeting the two challenges I have just laid out. It holds that Scripture is God's word expressed by human beings and that, where errors exist, these are not God's but rather his accommodation or condescension to the finite, fallen human condition. If we then set to one side these instances of accommodation, we can embrace the rest of Scripture as truth that leads to a coherent understanding of God and God's voice. This is the accommodationist approach, in a nutshell.

Two problems persist in this hermeneutical tactic. First, accommodation does not adequately address the so-called "dark side" of Scripture. In the case of biblical genocide, for example, it would have to argue that God "accommodated" himself to the ancient view that enemies should be slaughtered wholesale. I don't think that this solution is much more satisfying than a solution that simply says God *teaches* us to slaughter our enemies. The second problem is that accommodation errantly imagines that the problems in Scripture arise only in discrete circumstances. But if the insights of Practical Realism and traditional orthodoxy are right, then it follows that all human viewpoints in Scripture (not merely a few here and there) are miss-shaped in some ways or others by the broken human condition. So, though the patristic use of accommodation provides an important clue for our theological work, respecting the problem of Scripture it is not a solution that wholly suits our postmodern situation. We will have to move in the patristic direction but travel the path farther than they did.

Let us begin with God's creation. It is beautiful ... in fact, unbelievable beautiful. Yet it also includes terrors and evils that are unspeakable ... rapes, murders and wars ... famine, disease and disaster ... pain indescribable. Given that God has created everything that exists, how do Christians avoid the possible (some skeptics would say inevitable) implication that the blame for creation's evils and horrors can be

pinned on God? Following Paul's lead in Romans 8:20-22, Christians dogmatically assert that the cosmos is broken because of human sin.²⁸ So it is not God, but human beings, who are finally culpable for the messy side of creation. Creation is good and beautiful because it is God's creation, but warped and broken because of human influence.

To make the point clearer, imagine with me a beautiful painting by Renoir or Monet. And then imagine that someone seizes the painting, rips it from its frame, crumples it up and stomps on it for about ten minutes. What does one end up with? One ends up with a beautiful painting that is everywhere warped and twisted. In some places the former beauty of the unmolested painting is more visible than in others, but there is no quarter of the painting that has escaped the damage. This, I would say, suitably describes God's creation. It is beautiful but also broken, and in such a way that one cannot really separate what's beautiful from what's not. Because it is the good thing itself that is warped and damaged.

And now my main point in this part of the paper. Just as we can maintain that the created order is God's good creation warped by the fall, in a similar way we can maintain that Scripture—given through and to a fallen world through fallen men—is both beautiful and broken. No less than the creation, Scripture's human authors, and the book that they wrote, stand in need of redemption.

9. The Redemption of Scripture: Biblical Examples

Scripture is a casualty of the fallen cosmos. I have adduced evidence for this assertion by highlighting numerous tensions and contradictions in the Bible, including ethical tensions, and also by demonstrating that some of the best-known Church leaders in history have admitted that Scripture indeed reflects divine accommodations to humanity's fallen condition. But if these assertions are theologically valid, then we should be able to adduce direct and explicit biblical evidence that Scripture is in need of redemption and that God is working to redeem it. I believe that this evidence is readily available in Scripture. There are numerous examples that I could cite, but here I will refer to only two, one from the Old Testament and one from the New.

It is commonly imagined in popular thought and, even in some scholarly circles, that if there is any redeeming to be done within Scripture it would be the New Testament that redeems the Old ... that "the letter kills, but the spirit gives life," so to speak (see 2 Corinthians 3:6). But one can easily find instances of redemption within the Old Testament itself. Consider the parallel Old Testament texts below:

Deuteronomy 5:9

I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me

Ezekiel 18:2-4

"The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" ... As I live, says the Lord God, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul that sins shall die.

While these texts undoubtedly refer to the same basic theological issue (whether children suffer for the sins of their parents), the respective authors oppose each other on the fundamental principle. The earlier author of Deuteronomy believed that God is a jealous sort who punishes children in such cases, whereas the later author, Ezekiel, could not countenance this view of God. He explained at length why this intergenerational approach to punishment is an injustice unbecoming of true divinity. In making this move, Ezekiel sought to redeem an earlier portrait that mistakenly painted God in unflattering colors.

From the New Testament we have an example from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew chs. 5-7). I have in mind the way that Jesus casts his teachings in contrast to the Old Testament law. Here are some examples:

It was also said [by Moses], "Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce." But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery (Matthew 5:31-32).

You have heard that it was said [by Moses], "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also (Matthew 5:38-39).

You have heard that it was said [by Moses], "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you (Matthew 5:43-44).

In all three of these instances, Jesus quotes the law of Moses and then offers, as his own teaching, something that negates it or even amounts to its opposite. He takes a particularly strong stand against the Law's violent streak, such as its legal demand that Israel return evil for evil by killing its Canaanite enemies. The sermon appeared so contrary to the Law that Jesus had to add a word of clarification: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill" (Matthew 5:17). Though we are Christians and of course believe him on this point, we cannot help but ask: How can it be that Jesus fulfills the Law by *reversing* its teachings?

We are able to get an answer to this question by attending closely to other texts in the same gospel, the gospel of Matthew. We are particularly fortunate that, in one of his confrontations with Jewish leaders, Jesus repeats and expands on his teaching that divorce should not be permitted as the Law of Moses suggests. We have at our disposal both the challenge of Jewish leaders and Jesus' thoughtful response to them:

They said to him, "Why then did Moses command us to give a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her?" He said to them, "It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so."

According to Jesus, in this case, at least, the Law of Moses did not offer the Jews a proper path for healthy living. It offered instead a regulation designed and suited for hard-hearted, unspiritual persons. So it follows that the fulfillment of this law amounted to what Keith Ward has called sublation ... to its reversal or negation.²⁹ For unlike Moses, Jesus did not permit divorce for any and every reason.

I would add as well that even the New Testament, in spite of its special position and redemptive role in the canon, is by no means fully redeemed. It still envisions slavery as an acceptable social practice, maintains a very low view of women at points (“I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent”), throws ethnic slurs at Cretans (“Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons”), and includes Paul’s angry wish that his opponents at Galatia would “go the whole way and emasculate themselves.”³⁰

The Bible, with its two Testaments, plays a vital role in God’s redemptive work. Taken as a whole, it is a steady and valuable guide for God’s people as they seek to know him and to love their neighbors. But ultimately, the redemption of both Testaments, and of the cosmos and humanity, is accomplished by the death, burial, resurrection, ascension and return of our savior, Jesus Christ. Until that final day comes, we shall continue to struggle with the problems of pain and suffering, and with the problems in Scripture. These are *our* problems that Christ has graciously taken upon himself.

10. Reading Scripture After Inerrancy

How shall we read Scripture? And how shall we organize its diverse witnesses into a theological whole? These are questions that naturally come to mind once we have rejected inerrancy and the hermeneutical approach that it seems to imply. In this part of my discussion I will try to formulate some key elements in a theological agenda that takes Scripture seriously without entailing a docetic-like rejection of Scripture’s genuine humanity.

a. Scripture as Ancient Human Discourse

God gave us Scripture in words written by many ancient authors in diverse social and historical contexts, so it seems to me that we best honor this design by treating the Bible as the ancient text that it is. If we wish to read the Epistle to Romans well, we will *try* to receive it as Paul’s words and, in doing so, to receive it by informing ourselves about the historical situation and context of Paul’s day insofar as this is feasible.³¹ In a sense, God speaks to us in Romans as we “listen in” on what he once said through Paul to first century Christians in Rome. So, as Augustine pointed out long ago, a healthy approach to Scripture takes seriously the significant historical and cultural gap that separates the original discourse from its later readers.³² Reading the Bible in this way requires that, insofar as possible, we should inform ourselves about the ancient context of Scripture ... about the historical and cultural situation, the use of the original languages, and the kinds of literature and genres used in antiquity. Others have ably written on these matters, so there is no need to advance a full-fledged interpretive agenda at this point.³³ But I will offer a few basic observations.

First, our attempt to discern the aims, intentions and ideas of a biblical author will not provide a “determinate meaning” that guarantees we will get Scripture right. Just as my serious attempt to understand what someone else has said in a conversation can fail, so my attempt to understand Scripture can fail. So our pursuit of the biblical author’s aims and intentions is *one important goal* for reading Scripture; it does not provide a target that we can actually see and strike with our arrows of certainty. We simply don’t know if we’ve actually understood the text well. Nevertheless, we can achieve a sufficient sense of confidence in our understanding of Scripture, even a sense of certainty, that allows us to “run with it” in our attempt to understand God and the human situation.

Second, our attempts to read and understand Scripture should never be reduced to a singular pursuit of the author's aims and intentions. Authors also convey unintended meanings (which careful readers might sense), and there are any number of other things that might interest readers. Good interpretation will ask questions like: What was the author thinking and feeling? Why did the author write? What does the author wish for readers to do, feel or believe? Is the author right or wrong? Wise or unwise? And then there are other questions, still quite legitimate, that have little or nothing to do with the author *per se*. What does the text tell us about the social world of ancient Jews and Christians, or about the history of Israel and the Church? How does the theology in this text compare with the theology in another text? What can we learn about the Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek languages from the text? Did this author get his history right? And even further afield, we could ask what modern sociology, anthropology, psychology and theology tell us about a given book of the Bible, respecting both its author and implied audience. Though these kinds of historical, linguistic, sociological and theological questions may be quite foreign to the intentions of the particular biblical authors, there is no reason that readers should not put these queries to the biblical text and benefit from the answers.

b. Discerning Unity from Biblical Diversity

When we read the Bible with historical and contextual sensitivity, we discover fairly quickly that Scripture does not speak consistently on all matters. It is a diverse book written by numerous authors and editors who addressed a variety of differing situations. Sometimes their discourses are contradictory and, in extreme cases, on the verge of what we would in other situations call vice. But in many other cases we find Scripture's undeniable beauty, as it encourages us to love God and neighbor with a spirit of abandon and self-sacrifice. If this is right ... if Scripture speaks the truth through often perceptive yet warped human horizons ... then how can we piece together a useful and coherent understanding of God and of his relationship with us? How can the Bible, as a diverse and broken book, serve as a primary source of our theological insight? Here I will sketch out the contours of an approach that addresses these concerns.

First, if we keep in mind that every text in Scripture provides an "angle" or perspective on the truth, then we are reminded thereby that *all of Scripture*, even its most broken elements, speak a word from God. There is no need to resort to some kind of "canon within a canon" that excludes parts of the Bible from the theological conversation.

Second, in spite of Scripture's obvious diversity, the overall impression is one of unity. The Bible was assembled by editors and theologians who sought to present a portrait of the human situation and of God's redemptive plan to put it right; they were "systematic" in some respects. One result is that Scripture as a whole creates the impression of a coherent story ... of what one scholar has called a "theodrama."³⁴ It begins with God's creation of the cosmos and humanity, describes the fall of humanity and its damaging effects, testifies to God's redemptive work to put his fallen world aright, and ends with predictions of Christ's return and a final reckoning of all things. I don't believe that this narrative should be construed as a "story world" alternative to the world we live in now.³⁵ Rather, as Lesslie Newbigin has pointed out, the Bible seeks to explain what is actually going on in *this* world, whether we realize it or not, and invites us to see *this* world in a certain way.³⁶ To be sure, the story's unity is "broken" and is neither complete nor perfect; after all, an early and important element in the story is Israel's slaughter of the Canaanites and its reward for doing so. But again, on the whole, the coherence and shape of the biblical story gives us important clues about how to organize our theology.

In particular, the shape of the biblical story explicitly points us to a third principle for organizing our theology. Namely, our theology should grant priority to Jesus Christ ... to knowing him, his teachings, and the redemptive significance of his resurrection, ascension and eventual return.³⁷ The entire canon of Scripture, with its first testament leading up to Jesus and the second reflecting back on his life, is oriented around the revelation of God in Christ. John's gospel, in particular, warns us not to seek life in Scripture itself but rather by embracing it as a testimony that points us to Jesus (5:39-40). As Augustine pointed out, a "Christocentric" reading of Scripture will naturally emphasize Jesus' programmatic statement that the whole law is summed up in the words, "Love God, and love your neighbor" (taken from Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18). This will mean that we should not embrace as healthy those elements in the biblical text that do not conform to the litmus test of love. These dark elements attest instead to the brokenness of humanity and its need for love and redemption.

Fourth, my previous comment accentuates the fact that God speaks both explicitly and implicitly in Scripture. For example, he speaks explicitly in Deuteronomy 6 when he invites us to love God with all of our heart, and in Matthew 5 when he tells us to love our enemies. In these cases the human author's ordinary meaning stands very close to God's meaning. God speaks implicitly in other texts, where there might be a very great distance between the human author's meaning and God's. Such is the case when the human author of Deuteronomy portrays God as demanding the slaughter of Canaanites. We know from elsewhere in Scripture that this portrait of God is warped and implicitly attests to the broken condition of the biblical author and of our world.

The practical implication of a "dark text" is *not* that we, as modern Christians, have better insight and ethical fiber than the biblical author. Rather, the implication is that all of us are like him ... all of us have "Canaanites" that we hate. So we stand together with the author of Deuteronomy as broken human beings in need of Christ.

The task of rightly relating the Bible's diverse texts is fostered by a fifth element in our theological reading of Scripture, which usually goes by names like "progressive revelation," "redemptive history" or, more recently, "trajectory theology." All of these approaches reflect a belief that, in the nature of things, God's continuing conversation with humanity gradually unfolds within the emerging contours of history. God speaks first through creation, then through the Old Testament, then in Christ, then in the New Testament, and then through the ever-present and continuing voice of his Spirit (including its activity in and through the Church). It is fairly easy to see that there must be *something* right about this progressive understanding of divine discourse, both logically and substantively.³⁸ Logically, whenever God speaks to us, it goes with the territory that there is some measure of "progress" in our understanding of God. Substantively, the different portraits of God and religion provided in the Old and New Testaments also suggest progress. As the Hebrew writer expressed it, the Old Testament law is "only a shadow of the good things to come and not the true form of these realities (Hebrews 10:1). John's gospel similarly declared that "the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17). If this is right, then good theology should try to discern the direction or trajectory of God's voice and take its stand at the end of that trajectory.

Will trajectory theology not lead us "wherever the winds of culture blow?" This is an understandable and very reasonable concern, and we should make every effort to insure that our theological work does not simply mime the latest social fashions. At the same time, we really must admit, I think, that trajectory theology has always been far-reaching and surprising to those on the conservative side of theology. Trajectory theology led the early (largely Jewish) Church to embrace uncircumcised Gentiles and led the

later Church to renounce slavery and polygamy, two social institutions that were permitted in both Testaments. And in the case of slavery, it was indeed the “wind of culture” ... especially the Enlightenment critics of Christianity ... that contributed to our understanding of human freedom.³⁹ So we cannot easily say beforehand where (or how) the Spirit might lead us as it guides us in reading Scripture.

Though I’ve not spelled it out up to this point, the foregoing discussion of trajectory theology implies another (sixth) principle that should be at work in our reading of Scripture. Namely, a healthy use of Scripture should recognize that theology can by no means depend on Scripture only. In the case of slavery, for instance, the Church’s eventual rejection of this evil institution did not depend only on the biblical witness, which allowed for slavery in both testaments and never pronounced full emancipation. Rather, it depended on the confluence of a few biblical texts (such as “Do unto others” and Paul’s letter to Philemon) and the practical observation that things were simply going terribly for slaves. So Christian theology, as it reads and seeks to follow Scripture, must be ready to move beyond Scripture in some cases.⁴⁰ And when it does so, this theological move is not foreign to the Bible but rather invited by it. That is, paradoxical as it might sound, it’s quite biblical to go beyond the Bible. The goal of biblically informed theology is not merely to go where the Scripture goes ... we must also be ready to go where God, through Scripture, is pointing.

12. Theology Beyond the Bible: Cosmos, Tradition and Spirit

If Christian theology should move beyond the Bible in some form or fashion, to what other “voices” must we attend? Space does not allow me to provide a full-orbed answer to this question, but I would like to offer three important *biblical* answers to the question.

a. The Voice of Creation

First, the Bible explicitly says in Psalm 19 that the cosmos speaks for God: “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard (Psalm 19:1-3).” This principle is pressed into service most vividly in the Book of Proverbs, where basic observations about the created order—especially about the behaviors of people and society—reveal truths that should be written down and even canonized in Scripture. The Apostle Paul expands the valence of creation’s “word” to include not only words of wisdom but also a witness to God’s existence and his divine nature (Romans 1:20).

When the voice of creation is taken this seriously, and when we add to the mix that Scripture is written by inspired but finite and fallen human beings, then it becomes clear that Christian approaches to theology and scholarly inquiry should never pit “God’s word in Scripture” against “human science.” Rather, we must listen carefully to what God has said through the sacred but broken Bible and to what he is saying through his beautiful but broken world.

b. The Voice of Tradition

The postmodern turn has revealed that tradition is our human way of grasping and perpetuating the truth. This is certainly right, and it suits Luke’s belief that Christian history is important (see Acts) and Paul’s admonition that we should “stand firm and hold fast to the *traditions* that you were taught ... by word of mouth or by our letter” (2 Thessalonians 2:15). So the Christian tradition should count in our theological reflection.⁴¹ And this is how it actually plays out even for Christians who supposedly reject “tradition.” The

doctrine of the Trinity, for instance, is not clearly expressed in Scripture. Rather, the doctrine was deduced from Scripture (and Greek philosophy!) and enshrined as creedal orthodoxy in the 4th century Nicene Creed. Similarly, the dogma that Jesus' two natures (divine and human) were not "mixed" to create some third kind of nature was authorized in the 5th century Definition of Chalcedon. Even the canon itself is a product of tradition. Early Christians debated for several centuries what books should be included and excluded. This debate, which has never quite ended respecting the Old Testament, reached a state of practical closure only toward the end of the 4th century at the Council of Carthage.

My main point is that nowadays everyone in the Theological Interpretation movement—Evangelicals included—believes that traditional creedal orthodoxy provides a fundamental touchstone for our interpretation of Scripture. We cannot read the Bible without tradition.

c. The Voice of the Spirit

In addition to Scripture, cosmos, and tradition, the Church must "listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches" (Revelation 2:7 et al.). The voice of the Holy Spirit is repeatedly accentuated in the New Testament. It convinces the world "concerning sin and righteousness and judgment" (John 16:17-18). It bears witness "with our spirit" that we are children of God (Romans 8:16). The Spirit "leads us" (Romans 8:14) and "helps us in our weakness" (Rom 8:26), and by it we have and exercise spiritual gifts for the encouragement of the Church (cf. Romans 12; 1 Corinthians 12). In the book of Acts the Spirit speaks directly to human beings, not only to apostles (Acts 10:19) but also to Christians who are not apostles and to non-Christians (Acts 8:29; 10:1-3; 22:9-10). So if we take the Bible with any seriousness we will recognize that the voice of the Spirit is a crucial voice in the Church's theological reflection.

One of the more interesting biblical examples of the Spirit's witness appear in Acts ch. 15, as pro-Gentile and pro-Jewish factions sorted out their theological differences about the Jewish law.⁴² The Jewish party believed that all Gentile converts should convert to Jewish Christianity by receiving circumcision; for very obvious reasons, the Gentile party disagreed. Both sides could cite Scripture in support of their view, but it must have seemed that the Jewish party's position was much stronger. According to the Hebrew Bible, circumcision was an "eternal covenant" (Genesis 17:13) and was required not only of Jews but also of any foreigners joining them (Genesis 17:27; Exodus 12:48). So the council's decision must have surprised the Jewish party. But based on the Holy Spirit's activity among the uncircumcised Gentiles, the council decided that the Gentiles could be Christians without circumcision and without observing the Jewish law. Clearly, the Holy Spirit's "voice" (its supernatural activity) tilted the theological scale in the direction of the pro-Gentile party. The weaker position from Scripture supported by the Spirit bested the stronger position opposed by the Spirit.

If the Spirit's activity is a dependable theological compass, why not simply dispense with Scripture and tradition and "let the Spirit lead?" This is an approach that has been advocated in some theological circles,⁴³ but it has at least one obvious strike against it. Scripture presents the Spirit's activity as closely related to God's written word and to those who teach it. God sent Philip, not an angel or his Spirit, to help the Ethiopian understand the book of Isaiah (Acts 8:26-40). And in Paul's theological appeals to the Spirit's witness in Galatians, and in the similar appeals made at the council in Acts 15, we should notice how prominently Scripture figured in those discussions. That the Spirit might speak to the Church wholly apart from Scripture is not entertained in these cases. While I have no desire to say what God can and cannot do in this or other matters, it seems to me that the Spirit's activity in God's self-disclosure, and in his guidance of the Church, is closely tied to Scripture and to other sources that mediate God's word to us, such as the

cosmos and tradition. I freely admit that the situation *might* be different in the interior of Mongolia, where the Spirit speaks to men and women who have never seen a Bible. But for those of us who have God’s written word at our disposal, that word is sanctified by the Spirit as a primary source of divine discourse. The objective nature of Scripture—as tangible words written in a book—provides an additional point of stability for the Church’s theological reflection. This is precisely why the canon was assembled and embraced by the Church.

In the end, I suspect that it is not really possible to say with much precision what the Spirit does, and how the Spirit works, as he assists us in our theological reflection. Scripture just does not say enough on this matter to yield any systematic conclusions. But perhaps the important point is neither deeply cognitive nor theoretical; perhaps it is only that God, having given us the gift of the Holy Spirit, has promised to help us live a life that is fruitful for him. So we can have confidence that, as we pray for the Spirit’s help and guidance, we shall receive it.

So this is our situation: we derive our theology from the broken voices of Scripture, tradition and cosmos, and with the mysterious help of the Spirit. Good theology pursues the truth by listening to and coherently ordering all of these important voices. May God help us to do this well.

Conclusions

God sanctifies and uses broken human beings to extend his grace to broken human beings. He uses me, and he uses you. And in doing so, though he in some sense cleanses us from sin, and though his Spirit is at work in us, he does not render us sinless nor does he protect us from the foibles of errant judgment and the consequences of living in a fallen world. That he uses these “vessels of clay” for his purposes is remarkable but not wholly mysterious, for Paul tells us that he does so “that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us” (2 Corinthians 4:7). In other words, there is a theological purpose behind God’s choice to use us *as we are* ... namely, that the glory for redemption would truly be his. “Our competence is not our own doing; our competence is from God” (2 Corinthians 3:5).

The approach to Scripture that I have sketched out here, and the doctrine of Scripture implicit in it, assumes that the same pattern holding for humanity in general holds as well for the biblical authors. God sanctified broken human beings, fallen and finite though they were, and used them to convey his message of redemption in writing. The men involved (and perhaps a few women) included countless authors and editors, as well as those who were involved in the canonical processes that created Scripture. Insofar as they were human beings, they were no more perfect than we are, and in some cases—having lived even before the appearance of Christ—they probably knew less about theology and God’s character than we know. But each contributed in ways conscious and unconscious to God’s redemptive work, offered a vantage point or angle on things divine, and was selected by God’s wisdom as a distinctive voice that contributes in some way to our understanding of God’s unfolding redemptive plan and, hence, to our spiritual nourishment.

The problem supposedly precipitated by this untidy situation is not as serious as it first appears. We might at first suppose that, as a result, there will be error and vice in Scripture and that this will render it useless as a vehicle of grace and, in the process, impugn God’s character by association. While it’s quite true that human error and vice do thereby insinuate themselves into Scripture, these human properties of Scripture, and of humanity and the cosmos generally, have no bearing on God’s goodness. Everything that is truly terrible in our world, and in us, can be traced back to human culpability, and all that is good and

true—and all that is good and true in Scripture—are his doing. “Who will rescue me from this body of death?... Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”⁴⁴

Notes

1. My language is taken from the classic discussion of Evangelical intellectual history by Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).
2. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses, called Genesis* (trans. John King; 2 vols.; Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847-1850), 1.79-80.
3. See Kenton L. Sparks, *Ancient Texts for the Study of the Hebrew Bible: A Guide to the Background Literature* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2005), 321, 325, 337.
4. Note that some translations (such as the NIV) attempt to “fix” this problem by translating the two texts in a compatible way. But the Hebrew text of Deuteronomy clearly says that the Israelites should boil the Passover, and with equal clarity Exodus commands that that they should roast it and should not boil it.
5. For related texts, see Exodus 34:7, Joshua 7:1-26, Jeremiah 31:29-30, and especially Ezekiel 18:1-29.
6. Michael D. Goulder, *Midrash and Lection in Matthew* (London: SPCK, 1974); Robert Gundry, *Matthew, a Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982).
7. See Norbert Lohfink, “*הֶאֱרָם*,” *TDOT* 5.180-99.
8. For a short catalogue of conservative interpretive strategies, see Eric A. Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 69-88; cf. S. N. Gundry, ed. *Show Them No Mercy: 4 Views on God and Canaanite Genocide* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003).
9. Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, 2.91-93, in Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson, *Gregory of Nyssa: The Life of Moses* (New York: Paulist, 1978), 75-76.
10. James Orr, *Revelation and Inspiration* (New York: Scribners, 1910), 213-14.
11. Aquinas, pt. 1, q. 68, in *Summa Theologica* (5 vols.; Allen, TX: Christian Classics, 1981), 1:338.
12. Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* (2 vols.; trans. J. H. Taylor; New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 1.42-43.
13. Gregory the Great, “*Moralia in Job*,” in William Yarchin, *History of Biblical Interpretation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 89.
14. John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley* (12 vols.; London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872), 4:337.
15. For a good introduction to accommodation, see Stephen D. Benin, *The Footprints of God: Divine Accommodation in Jewish and Christian Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).
16. Scott J. Jones, *John Wesley’s Conception and Use of Scripture* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 39-40, 79-80, 147-48.
17. See Kenton L. Sparks, *God’s Word in Human Words* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 229-59.
18. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orations* 5.25 (*NPNF* 2, 7:325-26).
19. Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 18.21 (*ANF* 1:203-4).
20. For a good theological discussion of the humanity of Jesus, see Thomas G. Weinandy, *In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh: An Essay on the Humanity of Christ* (London ; New York : T & T Clark, 2006).
21. See *Against the Arians*, 3.43 (= *NPNF* 2.4: 417).
22. The best-known advocates of this view, alongside Nietzsche, would be Jacques Derrida, Michael Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard and Richard Rorty (among others). For representative articles by each, see Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman, and Thomas McCarthy, eds. *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1987).
23. Advocates include the likes of Donald Davidson, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jürgen Habermas, Alisdair MacIntyre, Michael Polanyi, Paul Ricoeur, Charles Taylor, Merold Westphal, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, among others. For representative essays by most of these scholars, see Baynes, Bohman and McCarthy, *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?* For Polanyi, Westphal and Wittgenstein, see Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1998); Merold Westphal, *Whose Community? Which Interpretation?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009); Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (trans. G.E.M. Anscombe; Oxford: Blackwell. 1953).

24. For the use of Speech Act theory in biblical interpretation, see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005); Timothy Ward, *Words of Life: Scripture as the Living and Active Word of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2009).
25. Vanhoozer and Ward do not provide concrete examples in their work, so this is my example that, I hope, does illustrative justice to their approaches.
26. For an introduction to the theological interpretation movement, see Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008); A.K.M. Adam, Stephen E. Fowl, Kevin J. Vanhoozer and Francis Watson, *Reading Scripture with the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).
27. Stephen E. Fowl, "The Importance of a Multivoiced Literal Sense of Scripture: The Example of Thomas Aquinas," in A.K.M. Adam, Stephen E. Fowl, Kevin J. Vanhoozer and Francis Watson, *Reading Scripture with the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 47.
28. Santmire has argued that two early Christian theologians, Irenaeus and Augustine, denied that the created order was fallen. This would not be a surprise given that both were engaged in heated debate with Gnostics who held that the creation was actually evil, but in the end I don't find Santmire's argument wholly persuasive. And, even if he is right, the views of Irenaeus and Augustine have not substantially influenced traditional Christian thinking on the creation. See H. Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 31-73. For the standard view, see article III.400 in *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1994), 101
29. Keith Ward, *What the Bible Really Teaches: A Challenge for Fundamentalists* (London: SPCK, 2004), 23.
30. The relevant texts are Eph 6:5; 1 Ti 2:12; Tit 1:12; Gal 5:12.
31. For several arguments in favor of the Bible's human authors, see John Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007); Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Interpretation of Scripture: In Defense of the Historical-Critical Method* (New York: Paulist Press, 2008); Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is there a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, The Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998); Francis Watson, *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997).
32. *On Christian Doctrine*, 2.42 (NPNF 1 2:549).
33. One of my favorite introductory texts is Michael J. Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis* (Rev. and enl. Ed.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009).
34. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).
35. A conceptual suggestion of "Narrative Theology," as espoused by Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1974).
36. Lesslie Newbigin, "The Bible as Universal History," in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 89-102.
37. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (4 vols. in 12; ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrence; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936-77), 1.2:1-202; Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 154-59; Ray S. Anderson, "The Resurrection of Jesus as Hermeneutical Criterion (Part I)," *TSF Bulletin Jan-Feb* (1986): 9-15; idem, "The Resurrection of Jesus as Hermeneutical Criterion (Part II)," *TSF Bulletin Mar-Apr* (1986): 15-22; Richard B. Hays, "Reading Scripture in Light of the Resurrection," in *The Art of Reading Scripture* (ed. E. F. Davis and R. B. Hayes; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 216-38.
38. Here I and others part ways with Edgar V. McKnight, who argues that "progressive revelation" depends conceptually upon Enlightenment notions of "progress." See Edgar V. McKnight, *Postmodern Use of the Bible: The Emergence of Reader-Oriented Criticism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988), 67-69.
39. Claudine Hunting, "The Philosophes and Black Slavery," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 39 (1978): 405-418.
40. As even evangelical Christians increasingly admit. See I. Howard Marshall, *Beyond the Bible: Moving from Scripture to Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004); William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001).
41. For an Evangelical discussion, see Daniel H. Williams, *Evangelicals and Tradition: The Formative Influence of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).
42. The example is from Stephen E. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), 97-113.

43. Schwenkfeldian theology being a good example. See John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: University Press, 2003), 109. See also Casper Schwenkfeld, "Verantwortung und gegenbericht" [1554], in *Corpus Schewenkfeldianorum* (ed. D. Hartranft, et al.; v. 1- ; Leipzig: Breitkopf and Härtel, 1907-61), 13.987.
44. Rom 7:24-25.