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Introduction

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What crucial issues arise in interpreting texts? What crucial issues arise with regard to the fundamental assumptions that people make about texts, communication, and interpretation? Many people engaged in the analysis of texts are asking such questions. And for most of my career at Westminster Theological Seminary I have taught a course entitled "Hermeneutical Foundations" (listed in the catalog as NT 993) that considers these issues.

Why are such questions important? The principles that people have for interpreting texts affect how they treat the Bible. And so they also affect the interpretive results--that is, what the interpreters claim that the Bible says. If the principles are corrupt, the product of interpretation gets corrupted. If the principles are healthy, the product is much more likely to be healthy.

Moreover, philosophers, literary theorists, theologians, and biblical scholars have devoted increasing attention to hermeneutics in the twentieth and twenty-first century. Serious debates and serious differences have opened up. These debates have affected the whole field of biblical interpretation.

In the course of discussion, it is not uncommon for the scholarly community to adopt ideas from leading thinkers and leading schools of thought in the secular world, whether in philosophy, literary studies, historical studies, sociology, or other social sciences. But most of the academic world leaves God out. People attempt to understand texts and communication in the light of the assumption that God is absent or irrelevant to a disciplined, "scientific" study of texts.

But God is not in fact absent. The assumption of absence is a byproduct of suppressing the truth. Therefore, we need to explore how to read texts in the real world that God made and that he sustains. We should be reading texts as people

who are responsible before God. What kind of differences does our knowledge of God generate in our understanding of interpretation?

The course "Hermeneutical Foundations" considers this topic by studying issues like hermeneutical circularity, the nature of meaning, the interaction of part and whole, and the nature of progressive revelation. Over the years, I have also written a number of articles that address the nature of interpretation from a God-centered point of view. I am grateful that the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* and the *Westminster Theological Journal*, in which the articles were originally published, have given permission to have them collected here and reprinted, as an introduction to some of the issues in the foundations of hermeneutics.

In order of original publication, the articles are as follows:

1986. "Divine Meaning of Scripture," *Westminster Theological Journal* 48: 241-279.

1988. "God's Lordship in Interpretation," *Westminster Theological Journal* 50/1: 27-64.

1988. "Christ the Only Savior of Interpretation," *Westminster Theological Journal* 50/2: 305-321.

2007. "The Presence of God Qualifying Our Notions of Grammatical-Historical Interpretation: Genesis 3:15 as a Test Case," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50/1: 87-103.

2014. "Dispensing with Merely Human Meaning: Gains and Losses from Focusing on the Human Author, Illustrated by Zephaniah 1:2-3," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 57/3: 481-499.

Beyond these, the website www.frame-poythress.org offers other articles on biblical interpretation, and also the book *God-Centered Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1999).

DIVINE MEANING OF SCRIPTURE

VERN SHERIDAN POYTHRESS

WHAT is the relation between God and human authors of the Bible? Does God's meaning at every point coincide with the intention of the human author? Can we use the same procedures of interpretation as we would with a noninspired book?

Even if we hold an orthodox, "high" view of inspiration, the answer to these questions is not easy. Many, of course, would deny that God is the author of the Bible in any straightforward way. They argue that the books of the Bible are to be interpreted as so many human writings, subject to the errors, distortions, and moral failures of human beings everywhere else.¹

If, however, we believe in the testimony of Jesus Christ, the apostles, and the OT, we know that books of the Bible are both God's word and the word of the human authors. The exact historical, psychological, and spiritual processes in-

¹ E.g., James Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World* (London: SCM, 1973); id., *The Scope and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980); id., *Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983); may be taken as representative of one form of this view. Barr along with many interpreters in the historical-critical tradition wants to retain a diffuse authority for the Bible. Theologians are still called upon to reflect upon the Bible, and say what they think the implications are for our doctrine. But this is not to say that they treat the Bible as what God says.

A more conservative Barthian view, or a "canonical" approach like that of Brevard Childs (*Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979]), would leave more room for a distinctively "theological" interpretation based on historical-critical interpretation or alongside of it. But such approaches, in my opinion, still compromise divine authorship and authority by allowing errors in the propositional content of Scripture. See, e.g., John M. Frame, "God and Biblical Language: Transcendence and Immanence," in *God's Inerrant Word* (ed. John Warwick Montgomery; Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1974) 159-77.

volved in the production of individual books of the Bible may, of course, have varied from book to book. In many cases we simply do not have much firm information about these processes. In all cases, however, the result was that the literary product (specifically, the autograph) was *both* what God says *and* what the human author says (see e.g., Deut 5:22–33, Acts 1:16, 2 Pet 1:21).²

Suppose, then, that we confine ourselves to people who hold to this classic doctrine of inspiration. We still do not have agreement about the relation of God's meaning to the meaning of the human author. A recent article by Darrell Bock³ delineates no less than four distinct approaches among evangelicals. The specific issue which Bock discusses is the question of NT interpretation of the OT. Does NT use of OT texts sometimes imply that God meant more than what the human author thought of? Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., says no, while S. Lewis Johnson, James I. Packer, and Elliott Johnson say yes.⁴ Bruce K. Waltke introduces still a third approach emphasizing the canon as the final context for interpretation. A fourth approach, represented by E. Earle Ellis, Richard Longenecker, and Walter Dunnett, emphasizes the close relation between apostolic hermeneutics and Jewish hermeneutics of the first century.⁵

Admittedly the NT use of the OT has some complexities of its own. We cannot here look at all of the ways in which the NT makes use of the OT. Instead, we will concentrate on the problem of dual authorship, a problem touching on our understanding of the entire Bible, rather than on the NT or OT specifically.

² I am aware that almost any biblical passage one could cite concerning inspiration has been disputed by deniers of inerrancy. Moreover, with few exceptions the direct statements about inspiration refer primarily to the OT (or parts of it) rather than to the NT. Hence some additional arguments are needed. But it is outside the scope of this article to deal with such disputations.

³ D. Bock, "Evangelicals and the Use of the Old Testament in the New," *BSac* 142 (1985) 209–23.

⁴ Elliott Johnson, however, wishes to express this "more" as more references ("references plenior"), not more sense ("sensus plenior").

⁵ Bock, "Evangelicals and the Use of the OT."

1. *Divine Meaning and Human Meaning*

Disagreements in interpretation arise from differing views of the relation of divine and human authorship. The chief question is this: what is the relationship between what God says to us through the text and what the human author says? Let us consider two simple alternatives. First, we could take the view that the meaning of the divine author has little or nothing to do with the meaning of the human author. For instance, according to an allegorical approach, commonly associated with Origen,⁶ whenever the "literal" meaning is unworthy of God, it is to be rejected. And even when the "literal" meaning is unobjectionable, the heart of the matter is often to be found in another level of meaning, a "spiritual" or allegorical meaning. If we were to take such a view, we could argue that the spiritual or allegorical meaning is part of the *divine* meaning in the text. But the human author was not aware of it.

The difficulties with this view are obvious. When we detach the divine meaning from the human author, the text itself no longer exercises effective control over what meanings we derive from it. The decisive factor in what we find God to be saying is derived from our allegorical scheme and our preconceptions about what is "worthy" of God. We can read in what we afterwards read out. God's Lordship over us through his word is in practice denied.

When we see the dangers of this view, we naturally become sympathetic with the opposite alternative. In this case, we say that what God says is simply what the human author says: no more, no less.⁷ Sometimes, of course, there may be difficulties

⁶ Frederic W. Farrar, *History of Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1961) 191-98. But see R. P. C. Hanson, *Allegory and Event: A Study of the Sources and Significance of Origen's Interpretation of Scripture* (London: SCM, 1959), for a more balanced presentation of Origen. Note also the article by Dan G. McCartney in the present issue of this journal.

⁷ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. might seem to be a representative of this "single-meaning" approach, by virtue of his strong statements in favor of the single meaning of biblical texts ("Legitimate Hermeneutics," in *Inerrancy* [ed. Norman L. Geisler; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980] 125, 127; id., *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981] 47). But Kaiser's position contains much more besides this. He provides detailed instructions for treating the question of applying the Bible

in determining what a particular human author says at a particular point. Moreover, sometimes what authors say may be not perfectly precise. Sometimes they may choose to be ambiguous or to hint at implications without blurting them out. But the difficulties here are the same difficulties that confront us with all interpretation of human language. Such difficulties have never prevented us from understanding one another sufficiently to carry on. The divine authorship of the Bible does not alter our procedure at all.

I am sympathetic with this view. With some qualifications it can serve us well: much better, certainly, than the procedure of unbridled allegorization. However, there are several nuances and complexities about interpretation that this view does not handle well.

First of all, and perhaps most obviously, this view, at least as described so far, does not tell us enough about how the Bible speaks to our situation and applies to ourselves.⁸ Some of the human authors of the Bible were, perhaps, consciously "writing for posterity," but most, at least, were writing primarily to their contemporaries. They did not write with us directly in view. Nor did they foresee all our circumstances and needs. We can still *overhear* what they said to people in their own time, but that is not the same as hearing them speak *to us*. How do we know what they want us to do with their words, if they did not have us in mind?

to the present day (ibid. 34, 149–63). And he advises us, when interpreting a passage, to take into account "antecedent Scripture": books of the Bible composed before the composition of the passage in question (ibid. 131–47). This is not *merely* a way of saying that we should understand general historical and literary backgrounds of the passage. We must do that with any kind of text whatsoever. But, in addition, in the case of Scripture we should also devote particular attention to those texts which have the same divine author (ibid. 133–34). Finally, Kaiser acknowledges the need for systematic theology, integrating the teaching of the whole Bible (ibid. 161). This presupposes the value of viewing the whole of Scripture as the product of a single divine author. Hence Kaiser is concerned to protect the value of historical backgrounds and progressive revelation, rather than to deny the value of looking at the whole of the canon at some later stage of synthesis.

⁸ Kaiser sees the deficiency here and presents a remedy (*Exegetical Theology* 149–63).

A popular solution to this difficulty is to invoke E. D. Hirsch's distinction between "meaning" and "significance."⁹ "Meaning," in Hirsch's view, is what the human author expressed, including what is expressed tacitly, allusively, or indirectly. It includes what can legitimately be inferred. "Significance" is a relation that we as readers draw between what is said and our own (or others') situation. Interpretation of a biblical passage, narrowly speaking, determines the meaning of the human author. Application involves the exploration of the significance *for us* of that one meaning, and action in accordance with it.

Let us take as an example Mal 3:8–12. Malachi here instructs his readers that they have robbed God in tithes and offerings, and that they are to bring the tithes to the temple storehouse, as Moses commanded. Both the general principle of not robbing God and the specific application to keep the law of tithes are part of the "meaning." Malachi did not have our modern situations immediately in view. Nevertheless, modern readers are to apply Malachi's meaning to themselves. In a comprehensive way, they are to devote all their lives and substance to the Lord, and specifically they are liberally to give a portion (some would say, at least one tenth) of their gains to the church and Christian causes. These applications are "significances," based on a relation between Malachi's meaning and the modern situation.

So far this is reasonable. But there is a difficulty. "Significance" is here understood as any kind of relation that readers perceive between their own situations and the passage. There are many possible "significances," even for a single reader. There are many possible applications. What then distinguishes a good from a bad application of a passage of the Bible? Is it up to the reader's whim? In cases when we read Shakespeare, Camus, or some other human writer, we may derive "lessons" from what we read, and apply things to

⁹ Eric D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven/London: Yale University, 1967); id., *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1976); cf. Emilio Betti, *Die Hermeneutik als allgemeine Methodik der Geisteswissenschaften* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1962); Charles Altieri, *Act & Quality: A Theory of Literary Meaning and Humanistic Understanding* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1981) 97–159; Kaiser, *Exegetical Theology*, 32.

ourselves. But, as Hirsch and other theorists in his camp assert, it is we as readers who decide how to do this, based on our own framework or values.¹⁰ To be sure, even a human writer may want to challenge our values. But we treat that challenge as simply a challenge from another human being, fallible like ourselves.

In the case of the Bible it is different. Precisely because it has divine authority, and for no other reason, we must allow it to challenge and reform even our most cherished assumptions and values. But how do we do this? We listen to the human author of, say, *Malachi*. But he speaks to the Jewish audience of his day, not to us. Hypothetically, therefore, modern readers might evade applying Mal 3:8–12 to themselves by any of several strategies. (1) God's intention is simply *Malachi's* intention: that *Malachi's* Jewish readers repent concerning their attitude and practice in tithing. There is no implication for us. (2) God intends us to understand that we ought not to rob God, but this applies simply to our general attitude toward possessions, since there is no longer a temple in the OT sense. (3) God intends us to understand that if we are remiss in our financial obligations in our day, he will send a prophet to let us know about it.

Note that these construals do not dispute the "meaning" of Mal 3:8–12 in a Hirschian sense. They dispute only the applications ("significances"). There are several possible replies. For one thing, we could argue that the rest of Scripture, and the NT in particular, shows that we are to give proportionally (1 Cor 16:1–4), and that in various other ways we are to be good stewards of God's gifts. That is not disputed. The question is whether *Malachi* shows us such applications.

Second, we may say that, in the light of the rest of the Bible, we know that God intends us to apply *Malachi* to our proportional giving. But if we say that God intends(!) each valid application of *Malachi*, then in an ordinary sense each valid application is part of God's meaning (=intention), even if it was not immediately in the view of the human author of *Malachi*. This seems to break down the idea that there is an *absolute, pure* equation between divine intention and human

¹⁰ Hirsch, *Aims*, 95–158.

author's meaning. Divine intention includes more, inasmuch as God is aware of the all the future applications.

Third, we may say that even though the human author did not have all the applications in mind, they are part of his "unconscious intention."¹¹ That is, the (valid) applications are the "kind of thing he had in mind." Once Malachi saw our circumstances, he would acknowledge the legitimacy of our applications. This is quite reasonable. But there are still some complexities. (1) Some people, with a very narrow conception of "meaning," might object that this breaks down the initial distinction between meaning and significance. I do not think that this is so, but it is sometimes hard to know where the exact line is drawn between "meaning" and "significance." (2) We still need to discuss what guidelines to use in drawing applications. How do we go about determining what Malachi would say were he confronted by a situation very different from any that he confronted in his own lifetime? We have only his text to go by. Or do we have also the rest of the biblical canon, which expresses thoughts consonant with Malachi's? But appealing to the rest of the canon as revealing the mind of God takes us beyond the mind of Malachi, unless we say that all this is in his "unconscious intention." (3) Even if Malachi were acquainted with our situation, he would never be as well acquainted with it as God is. Moreover, there is an undeniable difference between God's understanding of the text and Malachi's, since God is conscious of those aspects of Malachi's intention which are unconscious to Malachi himself.

What are we to do with these difficulties? I think it indicates that when we come to the point of application, we must somewhere along the way appeal directly to God's knowledge, authority, and presence. Otherwise, we are simply "overhearing" a human voice from long ago, a voice to which we may respond in whatever way suits our own value system. To be sure, the idea of simply equating divine and human meaning in the Bible is a useful one. It directs us away from the arbitrariness of an allegorical system. But when we use this idea in order simply to stick to human meaning, arbitrariness can still exist in the area of the application. No technical

¹¹ Hirsch, *Validity*, 51-57.

rigidity in our theory of meaning will, by itself, allow us to escape this easily, because there are an indefinite number of applications, and many of them are not *directly* anticipated in the text of Scripture.

I propose, then, to deal with this area of application. I count as "applications" both effects in the cognitive field (e.g., concluding mentally, "I ought to have a practice of giving to my church") and effects in the field of overt action (e.g., putting money in the collection plate). "Application" in this sense *includes* all inferences about the meaning of a biblical text. Such inferences are always applications in the cognitive field. For example, to conclude that Malachi teaches tithing (inference about meaning) is simultaneously to come to *believe* that "Malachi teaches tithing" (a cognitive effect in the reasoner).

With this in mind, the central question confronting us is, "What applications of a biblical passage does God approve?" To answer this, we have to look at some characteristics of communication through language.

2. *Interpreting Human Discourse*

Let us first consider communication from one human being to another. Person A speaks discourse D to person B. Now, given almost any fixed sequence of words (D), we can plausibly interpret them in several different conflicting ways. We can do this by imagining different contexts in which they are spoken or written. "The door is open" can easily be intended to imply, "Please shut it," or "Get out," or "That is the cause of the draft," or "Someone was careless." Or it may simply convey a bit of information. To understand what another human being A is saying, in the discourse D, is not simply to explore the range of all possible interpretations of a sequence of words. Rather, it is to understand what the *speaker as a person* is saying. We do this using clues given by the situation and by what we know of the person. We must pay attention to the author and to the situation as well as to the exact choice of words.

Moreover, many different things are happening in an act of communication. For one thing, speakers make assertions about the world. They formulate hypotheses, they express

assumptions, and otherwise make reference to the world. Let us call this the "referential" aspect of communication. But referring to the world is not all that speakers do. They may also be trying to bring about actions or changes of attitude on the part of their hearers. They are trying to achieve some practical result. Let us call this the "conative" aspect of communication. Next, whether they want to or not, speakers inevitably tell their hearers something about themselves and their own attitudes. Let us call this the "expressive" aspect of communication. In fact, Roman Jakobson, in analyzing communicative acts, defines no less than six planes or aspects of communication.¹² For our purposes, we may restrict ourselves to three prominent aspects: referential, conative, and expressive.

Note that most of the time a speaker is not doing only one of these. In fact, any of the three indirectly implies the others. Facts about the speaker's attitudes (expressive) are also one kind of fact about the world (referential). And facts about the speaker's goals or attempts to change the hearer (conative) are also one kind of fact about the world (referential). Conversely, any of statements about the world (referential) simultaneously give information about what a speaker believes (expressive) and what the speaker wants others to believe (conative).

3. *Interpreting Divine Speech*

Now consider what is involved in interpreting speech from God to a human being. I have in mind instances such as God's speeches to Abraham (e.g., Gen 12:1-3, 15:1-21, 17:1-21) and God's pronouncements from Mt. Sinai to the people of Israel (Exod 20:2-17). Of course, these speeches (or portions or condensations of them) are later on recorded in written form by human authors writing the books of the Bible. But for the moment let us concentrate on the original oral com-

¹² Roman Jakobson, "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," *Style in Language* (ed. Thomas A. Sebeok; Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1960) 350-77. Cf. Vern S. Poythress, "A Framework for Discourse Analysis: The Components of a Discourse, from a Tagmemic Viewpoint," *Semiotica* 38-3/4 (1982) 277-98.

munication. This is useful, because no human being mediates these original acts of communication. In these cases, does interpretation proceed in the same way as with human speech? In a fundamental sense it does. For one thing, the speeches come in a human language (in this case Hebrew). They are sometimes directly compared with speech from one human being to another (Exod 20:19). The audiences are expected to proceed in a way similar to what they do with speech from a human being. They interpret what God says in terms of the situation in which he speaks (Exod 20:2, 20:18,22), and in terms of what they already know about God and his purposes (Exod 20:2, 20:11). But here lies the decisive difference, of course. The people are listening to *God*. Using the “same” interpretive process that we use with human speech is precisely what causes us to acknowledge the profound difference and uniqueness of divine speech—for God is unique.

Now consider what it means to know that God is speaking. We earlier observed that a discourse detached from any author and any situation could mean any number of things. Moreover, if we attribute a discourse to a different author or a different situation than the real one, we will often find that we interpret the same sequence of words in a different fashion. For example, if we think that the wording of Col 1:15 is a writing of Arius, we will interpret it differently than if we think it is a writing of the Apostle Paul.

Likewise, if we think that the wording of God’s speech at Mt. Sinai is spoken by someone else, or if we have mistaken conceptions about God, this will more or less seriously affect our interpretation of the speech. What is authoritative about God’s speech at Mt. Sinai? Divine authority does not attach to whatever meaning other people may attach to the words. They may even choose to speak the same sequence of words as in Exod 20:2–17, yet mean something different. In this sense, we may freely admit that many “meanings” can be attached to these same words. But that is not the issue. Rather, divine authority belongs to what *God* is saying. What is crucial is what *God* means. To find this out, we must interpret the words in accordance with what we know about God, just as we would take into account what we know of human authors when we interpret what they say.

But, someone may say, this is circular. How can we know God except by what he says and does? And how can we properly understand what he says and does unless we already know him? Well, how do we come to know another human being? In both cases there is a certain "theoretical" circularity. But in fact, it is more like a spiral, because earlier incorrect impressions may be corrected in the process of seeing and hearing more from a person.

In addition, we may say something about the application of God's words. God expects his words to be applied in many situations throughout history. He binds us to obey, not only what he says in the most direct way ("meaning"), but what he implies ("application"). Each valid application is something that God intended from the beginning, and as such has his sanction. Divine authority attaches not only to what he says most directly, but to what he implies. It attaches to the applications.

Of course, we must be careful. We may be wrong when we extend our inferences too far. We must respect the fact that our inferences are not infallible. Where we are not sure, or where good reasons exist on the other side, we must beware of insisting that our interpretation must be obeyed. But if it turns out that we did understand the implications and applications correctly, then we know that those applications also had divine sanction and authority.

This means, then, that we do not need a rigid, precise distinction between meaning and application, in the case of God's speech. To be sure, some things are said directly ("meaning"), and some things are left to be inferred in the light of seeing a relation between what is said and our situation ("significance", "application"). But the distinction, as far as I can see, is a relative one. It is a distinction between what is said *more or less directly*, and between what needs *more or less* reckoning with a larger situation in order to be inferred.

The usual way of distinguishing between meaning and application is to say that meaning has to do with what the text itself says (in itself), whereas application has to do with a *relation* between the text and the reader's situation. But we have already seen that, in general, we cannot properly assess "meaning" even in the narrowest possible sense apart from

attention to the author's situation. This situation includes the hearers. *All* assessment of an author's expressed meaning must reckon with the intended hearers and their situation. In the case of divine speech, all future hearers are included, hence all their situations are included. Therefore, focus on what the text says most directly and obviously, and focus on what it is seen to say in the light of relation to a situation, are both a matter of degree.

Next, we may observe that God's speeches include referential, expressive, and conative aspects. God's speeches make assertions about the world and about ethical standards for our lives (the referential aspect). Secondly, we meet *God* when we hear him speaking (the expressive aspect). And thirdly, we are affected and transformed by what we hear (the conative aspect). God's word may empower us to do good, but it may also harden our hearts when we are rebellious.

These three aspects of God's communication are not so many isolated pieces. Rather, they are involved in one another. In fact, each one can serve as a perspective on the whole of God's communication.

First of all, all of God's speech is referential in character. In all of what God says, he is bringing us to *know* him and his world. For knowledge includes not just information (knowing that), but skills in living (knowing how) and personal communion with God (knowing a person).

Second, in all of what God says, we meet him: he "expresses" himself. God is present with his word.

Third, in all of what God says, he affects us ("conatively") for good or ill, for blessing or for cursing (e.g., 2 Cor 2:15-16).

These three aspects of God's speech are expressions of his knowledge (referential), his presence (expressive), and his active power (conative). These are nothing less than attributes of God. It is no wonder that we find these features in all that God says.

4. *Divine Speech as Propositional and Personal*

We may already draw some conclusions with respect to modern views of revelation. Neo-orthodoxy and other modernist views of divine revelation typically argue that revelation

is personal encounter and therefore not propositional. But these are not exclusive alternatives. Human communication in general is simultaneously both. That is, it simultaneously possesses a referential and an expressive aspect. To be sure, one or other aspect may be more prominent and more utilized at one time, but each tacitly implies the other. Moreover, to know a person always involves knowing true statements about the person, though it means also more than this. If the supposed "encounter" with the divine is indeed "personal," it will inevitably be propositional as well. When I say that communication is "propositional," I do not of course mean that it must be a logical treatise. I mean only that communication conveys information about states of affairs in the world. One may infer from it that certain statements about the world are true.

In our claims about divine speech we do not rely only on general arguments based on the nature of human communication. The reader of Scripture over and over again finds accounts of divine communication that involve both propositional statements and personal presence of God. (Exodus 20 may serve as well as many other examples.)

But there are lessons here also for evangelicals. Evangelicals have sometimes rebounded against modernist views into an opposite extreme. In describing biblical interpretation, they have sometimes minimized the aspect of personal encounter and divine power to transform us. There is no need to do this. The issue with modernism is rather what *sort* of divine encounter and personal transformation we are talking about: is it contentless, or does it accompany what is being said (referentially and propositionally) about the world?

Moreover, there may be a tiny grain of truth in the slanders from modernists about evangelicals "idolizing" the pages of the Bible. We say that divine speech is "propositional." To begin with, we mean only that God makes true statements referring to the world. That is correct. But then, later on, we may come to mean something else. We think that we can isolate that referential and assertive character of what God is saying into gem-like, precise, syllogistic nuggets which can be manipulated and controlled by us, from then on, without further reflection on God's presence and power at work in

what we originally heard. The “proposition,” now isolated from the presence of God, can become the excuse for evading God and trying to lord it over and rationally master the truth which we have isolated. And then we have become subtly idolatrous, because we aspire to be lords over God’s word.

I do not mean to bar us from reasoning from Scripture. We *must* do this in order to struggle responsibly to apply the Bible to ourselves. We must take seriously its implications as well as what is said most directly. What I have in mind is this. Even with the discourses from human beings, it would be unfair not to take into account what we know of their character, their views and their aspirations when we draw out the implications of an individual sentence. A statement with no explicit qualifications, and with no explicit directions as to the way in which we are to draw implications, may nevertheless not be completely universal. It may not have all the implications that we think. A larger knowledge of the author forms one kind of guide to the drawing of implications. At least this much is true with respect to the situation where God is the author.

5. *Speech with Two Authors*

So far we have discussed speech with a single author. But of course the Bible as we have it is a product of both the divine author and various human authors. How do we deal with this situation?

Well, the Bible makes it very clear that what God says does not cease to be what God says just because a human intermediary is introduced (Deut 5:22–33). After all, it is God who chose the human intermediary and who fashioned his personality (Ps 139:13–16). Hence everything that we have said about divine speech, such as God’s speeches to Abraham, applies also to God’s speeches through human spokesmen. In particular, it applies to all of the Bible, as the written word of God.

Conversely, what human beings say to us does not cease to be what they say when they become spokesmen of God. Hence, it would appear, everything that we have said about

human communication applies to all of the Bible, as the writings of men.

But now we have a complex situation. For we have just argued that interpretation of a piece of writing interprets the words in the light of what is known of the author and his situation. If the same words happen to be said by two authors, there are two separate interpretations. The interpretations may have very similar results, or they may not, depending on the differences between the two authors and the way in which those differences mesh with the wording of the text. But, in principle, there may be differences, even if only very subtle differences of nuances.

Hence it would seem to be the case that we have two separate interpretations of any particular biblical text. The first interpretation sees the words entirely in the light of the human author, his characteristics, his knowledge, his social status. The second sees the same words entirely in the light of the divine author, his characteristics, his knowledge, his status. In general, the results of these two interpretations will differ.

But couldn't we still stick to a single interpretation? Couldn't we say that interpretation in the light of the human author is all that we need? Then, after we complete the interpretation, we assert that the product is, pure and simple, what God says.

Well, that still leaves us with the earlier problems about applications. But in addition to this, there are now several further objections. First, the strongest starting point of the "single interpretation" approach is its insistence on the importance of grammatical-historical exegesis. But it has now ended by hedging on one of the principles of grammatical-historical exegesis, namely the principle of taking into account the person of the author. When we come to interpreting the Bible, we must pay attention to who God is.

Secondly, this view seems dangerously akin to the neo-orthodox view that when God speaks, his attributes of majesty are somehow wholly hidden under human words. That is why the neo-orthodox think that they need not reckon with the divine attributes when they subject Scripture to the historical-critical method. As evangelicals, we do not want to use the antisupernaturalist assumptions of historical-critical method.

We will not do that when it comes to miracles described in the Bible. But are we going to do it when we deal with the actual reading of the Bible?

Third, we must remember that God's speech involves his presence and power as well as propositional affirmations. At the beginning of interpretation we cannot arbitrarily eliminate the power and presence of God in his word, in order to tack them on only at the end. That automatically distorts what is happening in biblical communication from God. Hence it is asking for skewed results at the end.

Fourth, this procedure virtually demands that, at the first stage, we *not* reckon with the fact that God is who he is in his speaking to us. We must put wholly into the background that he is speaking to us. We must simply and *exclusively* concentrate on the human author. But how can we *not* reckon with all that we know of God as we hear what he says? This seems to be at odds with the innate impulse of biblical piety.

But there may still be a way to save this "single interpretation" approach. Namely, we can claim that God in his freedom decided to "limit" what he said to the human side. Namely, God decided to say simply what we arrive at through the interpretation of biblical passages when treated as though simply human.

This is a valiant effort. It is close to the truth. But, myself, I think that it will not work. First, it is difficult to see how one can justify this from Scripture. Deut 5:22-33 is a natural passage with which to begin. It describes the nature of God's communication through Moses. Since later Scripture builds on Moses, Deut 5:22-33 indirectly illuminates the nature of all God's later communication through human beings. Now Deut 5:22-33 starts first with divine communication. The human instrument is taken up into the divine message, rather than the divine message being "trimmed down" to suit the human instrument. If we were willing to use the analogy with the person and natures of Christ, we could say that Deut 5:22-33 is analogous to the Chalcedonian view (human nature taken up into the divine person), whereas the "single interpretation" approach is analogous to a kenotic view (divine person "losing" some attributes for the sake of assuming human nature).

Second, I find it psychologically impossible to maintain the experience of God's power and presence on the one hand, and on the other to exclude all reckoning with them when we come to assessing the referential aspect of biblical communication. It is not so easy thus to separate the referential from the expressive and the conative aspects of communication. God speaks to us as whole people. Moreover, if one could separate them, one would have arrived back at an essentially neo-orthodox dichotomy between propositional content and personal encounter.

Third, I think that scholarly hesitation about emphasizing God's role in authorship, though understandable, is groundless. Perhaps some scholars are influenced by the modernist atmosphere. Since modernists disbelieve in divine authorship, naturally their hermeneutical approach will demand its exclusion. We may unknowingly have absorbed some of this atmosphere.

But scholars have another cause for hesitation. Mention of God's role easily leads to dehistoricizing the message of the Bible. Readers reason to themselves that since God wrote the book, and since God is not subject to the limitations of knowledge of any historical period, he can be expected to write to all historical periods equally. Hence the historical circumstances in which the Bible appeared are irrelevant. The Bible is just like a book dropped directly from heaven.

Against this argument we may point to Exodus 20. There God speaks without a human intermediary. But this speech is not simply a speech "for posterity." It is a speech directly to specific people in specific circumstances (Exod 20:2,12), people subject to specific temptations (Exod 20:17). The most important factor leading to a historically rooted message is not the human intermediary (though this further emphasizes it), but the fact that God chooses to speak to people where they are. He can do so fluently because he is competent in Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic, and is master of all the customs of each culture into which he chooses to speak. Over against this, the dehistoricizing approach not only neglects human intermediaries. It unwittingly denies *God's* linguistic and cultural competence!

Hence, I conclude, the confinement to purely human meaning is not correct. But if this is not the answer, what is? If we do not collapse the two interpretations into one, do they simply exist side by side, with no necessary relation to one another? This would result in reproducing the problems of the old allegorical approach.

6. *Personal Communion of Authors*

The Bible itself shows the way to a more satisfactory resolution of the difficulty. In the Bible itself, the two authors, human and divine, do not simply stand side by side. Rather, each points to the other and affirms the presence and operation of the other.

First, God himself points out the importance of the human authors. For example, when God establishes Moses as the regular channel for conveying his word to the people of Israel, he makes it clear that Moses, not merely God, is to be active in teaching the people (Deut 5:31; 6:1). Similarly, the commissioning of prophets in the OT often includes a mention of their own active role, not only in speaking God's word to the people, but in actively absorbing it (Ezek 2:8-3:3; Dan 10:1-21; Jer 23:18). This is still more clear in the case of Paul's writings, where his own personality is so actively involved. Now, what happens when we pay careful attention to God as the divine author? We find that we must pay attention to what he says about the role of the human authors. Sometimes he directly affirms the significance of their involvement; sometimes this is only implied. But whichever is the case, it means that God himself requires us to interpret the words of Scripture against the background of what we know about the human author. We cannot simply ignore the human author, when we concentrate on what *God* is saying.

Conversely, the human authors of the Bible indicate that they intend us to interpret their words as not merely words that they speak as ordinary persons. For example, here and there Isaiah says, "Thus says the Lord." What is the effect of such phrases? Would the inhabitants of Jerusalem in Isaiah's time say, "Now we must interpret what our friend Isaiah is saying simply in terms of everything we know about him: his

relations with his family, his opinions about agriculture and politics, and so on." Certainly not! When Isaiah says, "Thus says the Lord," it is no doubt still Isaiah who is speaking. But Isaiah himself, by using these words, has told people to create a certain distance between himself, merely viewed as a private individual, and what the Lord has commissioned him to convey. In addition to this, consider what happens when Isaiah makes detailed predictions about the distant future. If the hearers treat him simply as a private human being, they would say, "Well, we know Isaiah, and we know the limits of his knowledge of the future. So, because of what we know about him, it is obvious that he is simply expressing his dreams or making artistically interesting guesses." Again, such a reaction misunderstands Isaiah's claims.

We may try to focus as much as possible on Isaiah as a human author. The more carefully we do our job, the more we will realize that he is not just any human author. He is one through whom God speaks. His own intentions are that we should reckon with this. It is not a denial of human authorship, but an affirmation of it, when we pay attention to God speaking. In particular, in the case of predictions, we pay attention to all that we know of God, God's knowledge of the future, the wisdom of his plan, and the righteousness of his intentions. This is in accord with Isaiah's intention, not contrary to it. In fact, we might say that Isaiah's intention was that we should understand whatever God intended by his words.¹⁵ Hence there is a unity of meaning and a unity of application here. We do not have two diverse meanings, Isaiah's and God's, simply placed side by side with no relation to one another.

But the matter is complex. What we have here is a situation of personal communion between God and prophet. Each person affirms the significance of the other's presence for proper interpretation. On the one hand, God has formed the personality of the prophet, has spoken to him in the heavenly counsel (Jer 23:18), has brought him into inner sympathy with

¹⁵ See, e.g., Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1979) 246: "In prophecy what the symbol intends is identical with what God, for whom the prophet speaks, intends. This may enter the prophet's own horizon only partially and imperfectly."

the thrust of his message. What the prophet says using his own particular idiom fits exactly what God decided to say. On the other hand, the prophet affirms that what God is saying is true even where the prophet cannot see all its implications.

This situation therefore leaves open the question of how far a prophet understood God's words at any particular point. The Bible affirms the prophets' inner participation in the message. In addition extraordinary psychological experiences were sometimes involved. Because of this, it would be presumptuous to limit dogmatically a prophet's understanding to what is "ordinarily" possible. On the other hand, it seems to me equally presumptuous to insist that at every point there must be complete understanding on the part of the prophet. Particularly this is so for cases of visionary material (Daniel 7,10; Zechariah 1-6; Rev 4:1-22:5) or historical records of divine speech (e.g. the Gospel records of Jesus' parables). Why should we have to say, in the face of Dan 7:16; Zech 4:4-5; Rev 7:14, and the like, that the prophets came to understand everything that there was to understand, by the time that they wrote their visions down? Isn't it enough to stick with what is clear? It is clear that the prophet faithfully recorded what he saw and heard. He intended that we should understand from it whatever there is to understand when we treat it as a vision from God. Similarly, there is no need to insist that Luke understood all the ramifications of each of Jesus' parables. He may have, but then again he may not have. The results for our interpretation of the parables in the Gospel of Luke will be the same.

I have spoken primarily about the role of prophets in speaking the word of God. But, of course, prophecy is not the only form in which the Bible is written. The different genres of biblical writings, prophecy, law, history, wisdom, song, each call for different nuances in our approach. The relation between divine and human participation in the writing is not always exactly the same.¹⁴

¹⁴ Abraham Kuyper notices some of these differences and argues for a division into the categories of lyric, chokmatic, prophetic, and apostolic inspiration (*Principles of Sacred Theology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968] 520-44, the section on "The Forms of Inspiration").

For instance, consider the case of Mosaic law. The background of the meeting at Mt. Sinai forms a framework for Moses's later writings, and leads us to reckon more directly with the divine source of the law. On the other hand, Moses's close communion with God (Num 12:6-8) hints at his inner understanding of the law.

In the case of prophecy, narrowly speaking, the prophet's pronouncement, "Thus says the Lord," and the predictive elements in his message frequently have the effect of highlighting the distinction between the prophet as mere human being and the prophet as channel for the Lord's message. The prophet himself steps into the background, as it were, in order to put all the emphasis on God's speaking. In visionary experiences this may be all the more the case, inasmuch as it is often not clear how much the prophet understands.

With the psalms and the NT epistles, on the other hand, the human author and his understanding come much more to the front. The Apostle Paul does not continually say, "Thus says the Lord." That is not because he has no divine message. Rather, it is (largely) because he has so thoroughly absorbed the message into his own person. He has "the mind of Christ" (1 Cor 2:16,13), as a man indwelt by the Spirit.¹⁵

Here we confront still another complexity. What is human nature, and what does it mean to analyze a passage as the expression of a human author? If the human author is Paul, that means Paul filled with the Holy Spirit. We are not dealing with "bare" human nature (as if human beings ever existed outside of a relationship to God of one kind or another). We are already dealing with the divine, namely the Holy Spirit. Paul as a human being may not be immediately, analytically self-conscious of all the implications of what he is saying. But people always know more and imply more than what they are perfectly self-conscious of. How far does this "more" extend?

¹⁵ See Peter R. Jones, "The Apostle Paul: A Second Moses according to II Corinthians 2:14-4:7" (Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University; Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1974); id., "The Apostle Paul: Second Moses to the New Covenant Community: A Study in Pauline Apostolic Authority," in *God's Inerrant Word* (ed. John Warwick Montgomery; Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1974) 219-44.

We are dealing with a person restored in the image of Christ, filled with the Holy Spirit, having the mind of Christ. There are incalculable depths here. We cannot calculate the limits of the Holy Spirit and the wisdom of Christ. Neither can we perform a perfect analytical separation of our knowledge from our union with Christ through the Holy Spirit.

7. *Christological Fulness in Interpretation*

The complexities that we meet here are only a shadow of the greatest complexity of all: the speeches of the incarnate Christ. Here God is speaking, not through a mere human being distinct from God, but in his own person. The eternal Word of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, speaks. Hence we must interpret what he says in the light of all that we know of God the author. At the same time a man speaks, Jesus of Nazareth. With respect to his human nature, he has limited knowledge (Luke 2:52). Hence we must interpret what he says in the light of all that we know of Jesus of Nazareth in his humanity.

This is a permanent mystery! Yet we know that we do not have two antithetical interpretations, one for the human nature speaking and one for the divine nature speaking. We know that there is a unity, based on the unity of the one person of Christ. However, it is possible, with respect to his *human nature*, that Jesus Christ is not exhaustively self-conscious of all the ramifications, nuances, and implications of what he says. He nevertheless does take responsibility for those ramifications, as does any other human speaker. As the *divine* Son, Jesus Christ does know all things, including all ramifications, applications, etc., of his speech. There is a distinction here, but nevertheless no disharmony.

In addition to this, we may say that Jesus in his human nature was especially endowed with the Spirit to perform his prophetic work, as planned by God the Father (Luke 4:18–19, 3:22). When we interpret his speech, we should take into account that the Holy Spirit speaks through him. Thus, we are saying that we must take into account the ultimately Trinitarian character of revelation, as well as the unique fulness of the Spirit's endowment in Christ's Messianic calling.

In short, when we interpret Christ's speech, we interpret it (as we do all speech) in the light of the author. That is, we interpret it as the speech of the divine Son. But Christ says that the Father speaks through him (John 14:10; 12:48-50). Hence it is the speech of the Father. Since the Holy Spirit comes upon Jesus to equip him for his Messianic work, we also conclude that it is the speech of the Spirit. And of course it is the speech of the man Jesus of Nazareth. Each of these aspects of interpretation is distinct, at least in nuance!

What we meet in Christ is verbal communication undergirded by a communion and fellowship of understanding. In Christ's being there is no pure mathematical identity of divine persons or identity of two natures, but harmony. The result is that there is no pure mathematical identity in the interpretive product. That is, we cannot in a pure way analyze simply what the words mean as (for instance) proceeding from the human nature of Christ, and then say that precisely that, no more, no less, is the exhaustive interpretation of his words.

The case of divine speech through apostles and prophets is, of course, secondary, but none the less analogous. The revelation of Jesus Christ is the pinnacle (Heb 1:1-3). All other revelations through prophets and apostles are secondary to this supreme revelation. There is ultimately no other way to gain deeper insight into the secondary than through the pinnacle. Hence we cannot expect to collapse the richness of divine presence into a mathematical point, when we are dealing with the words of the Bible.

8. *Progressive Understanding*

A further complexity arises because the many human authors of the Bible write over a long period of time. None of the human authors except the very last can survey the entire product in order to arrive at an interpretation of the whole.

Once again, we may throw light on the situation by starting with a simpler case. Suppose that we have a single uninspired human author speaking or writing to a single audience over a period of time. Even if we are dealing with only a single long oral discourse, the discourse is spread out in time. Individual statements and individual paragraphs near the be-

ginning of the discourse are understood first, then those near the end. Moreover, an audience is in a better position to draw more inferences from earlier parts of a discourse once they have reached the end. Typically, all the parts of a discourse qualify and color each other. We understand more by reading the whole than we do from reading any one part, or even from all the parts separately. The effect is somewhat like the effect of different parts of an artist's picture. If we just attend to small bits of paint within the picture, one by one, we may miss many implications of the whole. The "meaning" of the picture does not reside merely in a mechanical, mathematical sum of the blobs of paint. Rather, it arises from the joint effect of the individual pieces. Their joint effect arises from the relations between the pieces. Likewise, the import of author's discourse arises partly from the reinforcements, qualifications, tensions, complementations, and other relations between the individual words and sentences, as well as from the effects of each sentence "in itself."

The over-all effect of this is that an audience may understand what the first part of a discourse means, and then have that understanding modified and deepened by the last of the discourse.

Now consider a particular example of two people in communication over a long period of time. Suppose a father teaches his young son to sing "Jesus Loves Me." Later on, he tells the story of the life of Christ from a children's Bible story book. Still later, he explains how the OT sacrificial system depicted aspects of Christ's purpose in dying for us. Finally, the son becomes an adult and does extended Bible study for himself. Suppose then that the son remembers how his father taught him "Jesus Loves Me." He asks, "What was my father saying in telling me the words of the song?" At the time, did I understand what he was saying? The answer may well be yes. The son understood what the father expected that he would have capacity to understand at that point. But the father knew as well that the child's initial understanding was not the end point. The father intended that the earlier words should be recalled later. He intended that the son should understand his father's mind better and better by com-

paring those earlier words with later words that the father would share.

Now, suppose that there was no misunderstanding, no misjudgement at any point. There is still more than one level of understanding of the father's words. There is what one may understand on the basis of those words more or less by themselves, when not supplemented by further words, and when seen as words adapted to the capacity of the young child. And there is what one may understand on the basis of comparing and relating those words to many later words (and actions) of the father. The first of these understandings is a legitimate one, an understanding not to be underestimated. As long as the child has only those words of the father, and not all the later history, it would be unfair of him to build up an exact, elaborate analysis of all the ramified implications of the statements. But once the father has said a lot more, it throws more light on what the father intended all along that those words should do: they should contribute along with many other words to form and engender an enormously rich understanding of Christ's love, an understanding capable of being evoked and alluded to by the words of the song.

The complexity arises, as before, from the dynamic and relational character of communicative meaning. The understanding we achieve from listening arises not only from individual words or sentences in the discourse but from the complex relations that they have to one another and to the larger situation, including what we know of the author himself. In particular, the song, "Jesus Loves Me," conveys meaning not simply in virtue of the internal arrangement of the words, but also in virtue of the context of who is saying it, what else is being said by way of explanation, and so on. True, there is something like a "common core" of meaning shared by all or nearly all uses of the song. But the implications that we may see around that common core may differ. (Imagine the song being used by a liberal who believes that in fact Jesus is merely human, and therefore still dead. In his mouth, the song is only a metaphorical expression of an ideal of human love.)

9. *Progressive Revelation*

Now we are ready to raise the crucial question: does something analogous to this happen with God's communication to his people over the period of time from Adam onwards? Is God like a human father speaking to his child?

The basic answer is obviously yes. But, for those who do not think it is so obvious, we can supply reasons.

(1) Israel is called God's son (Exod 4:22; Deut 8:5), and Paul explicitly likens the OT period to the time of a child's minority (Gal 4:3-4). These passages are not directly discussing the question of biblical interpretation, but they are nevertheless suggestive.

(2) From very early in the history of the human race God indicates in his speeches to us that more is to come. History and the promises of God are forward-looking. The story is yet to be completed. It is altogether natural to construe this as implying that earlier promissory statements of God may be more deeply understood once the promises begin to be fulfilled, and especially when they are completely fulfilled. Similar reflections evidently apply even to the hope we now have as Christians (1 Cor 13:12).

(3) In at least a few cases, within the pages of the OT, we find prophecies whose fulfillments take unexpected form. One of the most striking is Jacob's prophecy about the dispersion of Simeon and Levi (Gen 49:7b).¹⁶ If we attend *only* to the immediate context (49:7a), we are bound to conclude that God undertakes to disgrace both tribes by giving them no connected spot of settlement. The actual fulfillment is therefore quite surprising in the case of Levi. But it is not out of accord with God's character of turning cursings into blessings. What we know about him includes his right to exceed our expectations. This whole affair is more easily understood when we take into account the fact that Gen 49:7 is not an isolated word of God, but part of a long history of God's communications, yet to be completed. We are not supposed to make dogmatically precise judgements without hearing the whole.

¹⁶ Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1945) 30.

In short, God's actual ways of bringing fulfillments may vary. Some of them may be straightforward, others may be surprising. This is true just as it is true that an author may continue a discourse in a straightforward way, or in a surprising way that causes us to reassess the exact point of the first part of what he says.

(4) The symbolic aspect of OT institutions proclaim their own inadequacy (Heb 10:1, 4). They are not only *analogous* to the final revelation of God, but at some points *disanalogous* (Heb 10:4). Suppose that people stand in the OT situation, trying to understand what is symbolized. They will inevitably continue with *some* questions unanswered until they are able to *relate* what is said and done earlier to what God does at the coming of Christ. Until the point of completion, the interpretation must remain open-ended (but not contentless).

(5) Likewise, the speech of God is not complete until the coming of Christ (Heb 1:1-3). We must, as it were, hear the end of the discourse before we are in a position to weigh the total context in terms of which we may achieve the most profound understanding of each part of the discourse.

I conclude, then, that any particular passage of the Bible is to be read in three progressively larger contexts, as follows.

- (a) Any passage is to be read in the context of the particular book of the Bible in which it appears, and in the context of the human author and historical circumstances of the book. God speaks truly to the people in particular times and circumstances.
- (b) Any passage is to be read in the context of the total canon of Scripture available up to that point in time.¹⁷ The people originally addressed by God must take into account that God's speech does not start with them, but presupposes and builds on previous utterances of God.
- (c) Any passage is to be read in the context of the entire Bible (the completed canon). God intended from the beginning that his later words should build on and enrich earlier words, so that in some sense the whole of

¹⁷ This point is rightly emphasized by Kaiser, *Exegetical Theology*, 79-83.

the Bible represents one long, complex process of communication from one author.

For example, Ezekiel 34 is to be understood (a) in terms of the immediate context of the book of Ezekiel and the historical circumstances in which the book first appeared; (b) in terms of its continuation of the word of God recorded in the law of Moses and the preexilic prophets; (c) in terms of what we can understand in the light of the whole completed Bible, including the NT.¹⁸

In addition to these three analyses of the passage we may, in more fine-grained reflection, distinguish still other possibilities. In principle, we may ask what the passage contributes at any point during the progressive additions to canon through further revelation. For example, Bruce K. Waltke argues that in the case of the Psalms (and presumably many other OT books), it is illuminating to ask about their meaning at the time when the OT canon was complete but before the dawn of the NT era.¹⁹ For simplicity we confine the subsequent discussion to the approaches (a), (b), and (c).

As we have said again and again, what we understand from a passage depends not only on the sequence of words of the passage, but the context in which it occurs. Hence the three readings (a), (b), and (c) can, in principle, lead to three different results. Some people might want to speak of three meanings. Meaning (a) would be the meaning obtained from focusing most on the human author and his circumstances. Meaning (c) would be the meaning obtained from focusing most on the divine author and all that we know about him from the whole of the Bible.

¹⁸ My approach is virtually identical with that of Bruce K. Waltke, "A Canonical Process Approach to the Psalms," in *Tradition and Testament: Essays in Honor of Charles Lee Feinberg* (ed. John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg; Chicago: Moody, 1981) 3-18. My arguments rest more on the general features of communication, whereas Waltke's arguments rely more on the concrete texture of OT revelation. Hence the two articles should be seen as complementary. See also William Sanford LaSor, "The *Sensus Plenior* and Biblical Interpretation," in *Scripture, Tradition, and Interpretation* (ed. W. Ward Gasque and William Sanford LaSor; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 260-77; Douglas Moo, "The Problem of *Sensus Plenior*," in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986).

¹⁹ Waltke, "A Canonical Process Approach," 9.

However, for most purposes I myself would prefer to avoid calling these three results three "meanings." To do that suggests that three unrelated and perhaps even contradictory things are being said. But these three approaches are complementary, not contradictory. The difference between these three approaches is quite like the difference between reading one chapter of a book and reading the whole of the book. After taking into account the whole book, we understand the one chapter as well as the whole book more deeply. But it does not mean that our understanding of the one chapter by itself was incorrect. Remember again the example of "Jesus Loves Me."

10. *Psalm 22:12-18 as an Example*

To see how this works, let us consider Ps 22:12-18. Let us begin with approach (a), focusing on the human author. The passage speaks of the distress of a person who trusts in God (22:2-5,8-10), but is nevertheless abandoned to his enemies. In a series of shifting metaphors the psalmist compares his suffering to being surrounded by bulls (22:12-13), to being sick or weak in body through emotional distress (22:14-15), to being caught by ravening dogs (22:16), to being treated virtually like a carcass (22:17-18).²⁰ The psalmist's words evidently spring from his own experience of a situation of abandonment.

We encounter a special complexity in the case of psalms. The actual author (David, according to the title of Psalm 22)²¹ and the collector or collectors who under inspiration included

²⁰ See Charles A. Briggs and Emilie G. Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1906) 1.196-97; A. A. Anderson, *The Book of Psalms* (NCB; 2 vols; London: Oliphants, 1972) 1. 190-91; Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* (London: InterVarsity, 1973) 107-8; Joseph A. Alexander, *The Psalms* (reprinted from 1864 ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1955) 101-3. Commentators have some disagreements over the details of the picture, particularly over the interpretation of v 16, "they have pierced my hands and feet." But it is clear that in the original context the speech is dominated by metaphorical comparisons between the psalmist's enemies and fierce animals.

²¹ We need not at this point discuss whether the superscriptions are inspired.

Psalms 22 in the larger collection both have a role. The psalm receives a new setting when it is included in the Book of Psalms. This provides a new context for interpretation. In my opinion, it means that the collector invites us to see Psalm 22 not simply as the experience of an individual at one time, but a typical or model experience with which the whole congregation of Israel is to identify as they sing and meditate on the psalm.²² Hence, in the context of the Book of Psalms (the context with divine authority), we compare this psalm of lament and praise (22:25–31) with other psalms. We understand that there is a general pattern of suffering, trust, vindication, and praise that is to characterize the people of Israel.

Now we move to approach (b). We consider Psalm 22 in the light of the entire canon of Scripture given up until the time when the Book of Psalms was compiled. But there is some problem with this. The Book of Psalms may have been compiled in stages (e.g., many scholars think that Book 1, Pss 1–41, may have been gathered into a single collection before some of the other psalms had been written). Whatever the details, we do not know exactly when the compilation of the book took place. Hence we do not know exactly what other canonical books had already been written.

We may still proceed in a general way. We read Psalm 22 in the light of the promise to David (2 Sam 7:8–16) and its relation to the earlier promises through Abraham and Moses. Then we understand that the people of Israel are represented preeminently by a king in the line of David. The deficiencies and failures of David's immediate descendents also point to the need for a perfect, righteous king who will truly establish David's line forever. OT prophecies make it progressively clear that the hopes centered in David's line will ultimately be fulfilled in a single great descendent, the Branch (Isa 11:1ff.; Zech 6:12; Isa 9:6–7). The experiences of suffering, trust, and vindication expressed in Psalm 22 and other psalms we expect to be fulfilled in a climactic way in a messianic figure, the Branch who is kingly Davidic representative of all Israel.²³

²² See, e.g., Anderson, *Psalms* 1. 30.

²³ See Waltke, "A Canonical Process Approach," 10–14.

What the messianic mediator will be like becomes progressively revealed in the course of the OT. Yet it is never made very clear just how the experience of the Messiah ties in with Psalm 22 in detail. We know that Psalm 22 is related to the prophetic passages, but just how is not so clear.

Finally, let us proceed to approach (c). Let us consider Psalm 22 in the light of the completed canon. In this light, we know that Christ has come to fulfill all righteousness (Matt 3:15), to fulfill all God's promises (2 Cor 1:20; Rom 15:8; Luke 24:45–48). We know too that Christ used the opening words of Psalm 22 when he was on the cross (Matt 27:46). This already suggests that he is in a brief way indicating the relevance of the *whole* psalm to himself. If we remain in doubt, other NT passages assure us that that is indeed the case (Matt 27:35, John 19:24, Heb 2:12).

We proceed, then, to read through Psalm 22 afresh. We compare it with the accounts of the crucifixion in the NT, and with NT theology explaining the significance of Christ's death. We see that in 22:12–18 Christ describes his own distress, and in 22:25–31 he expresses the “fruit of the travail of his soul” (Isa 53:11), the benefits that will follow. In particular, certain details in the psalm which appeared to be *simply* metaphorical in the original OT context strike home with particular vividness (22:16,18).²⁴

11. *What Is “in” a Verse*

Now let us ask, “What is the *correct* understanding of what God is saying in a verse like Ps 22:16, 22:18, or 22:1?” Is it the understanding that we gain from approach (a), or the understanding that we gain from approach (c)? The answer, I think, is both. If we simply confine ourselves to approach

²⁴ See Kidner, *Psalms 1–71*, 107: “While verses 14, 15, taken alone, could describe merely a desperate illness, the context is of collective animosity and the symptoms could be those of Christ's scourging and crucifixion; in fact verses 16–18 had to wait for that event to unfold their meaning with any clarity.” Many commentators in the classical historical-critical tradition, by contrast, refuse in principle to let the NT cast further light on the implications of the verses, because they do not allow the principle of unified divine authorship to exercise an influence on interpretation.

(a), or even to approach (b), we neglect what can be learned by reading the whole of the Bible as the word of the single divine author. On the other hand, if we simply confine ourselves to approach (c), we neglect the fact that God's revelation was progressive. We need to remember that God was interested in edifying people in OT times. Moreover, what he made clear and what he did not make so clear are both of interest to us, because they show us the ways in which our own understanding agrees with and sometimes exceeds previous understanding, due to the progress in revelation and the progress in the execution of God's redemptive program.

Moreover, certain dangers arise if we simply confine ourselves to approach (a) or to approach (c). If we neglect approach (a), we miss the advantage of having the control of a rigorous attention to the historical particulars associated with each text of the Bible. Then we run the danger that our systematic understanding of the Bible as a whole, or our subjective hunches, will simply dictate what any particular text means.

On the other hand, if we neglect approach (c), we miss the advantage of having the rest of the Bible to control the inferences that we may draw in the direction of applications. Perhaps we may refuse to apply the text at all, saying to ourselves, "It was just written for those people back there." Or we may apply it woodenly, not reckoning with the way in which it is qualified by the larger purposes of God. We miss the Christocentric character of the Bible, proclaimed in Luke 24:45-48. We refuse to see the particulars in the light of the whole, and so we may repeat an error of the Pharisees, who meticulously attended to detail, but neglected "justice and the love of God" (Luke 11:42).

But how can these approaches be combined? They combine in a way analogous to the way in which a human son combined earlier and later understandings of "Jesus Loves Me." There is a complex interplay.

But I think that we can be more precise. In scholarly research, we may begin with approach (a) as a control. For Psalm 22, we focus narrowly on the original historical context, and what is known within that context. We do grammatical-historical exegesis as the foundation for all later systematizing

reflection. We try to avoid simply "reading in" our total knowledge of Scripture, or else we lose the opportunity for the Bible to criticize our views. As a second, later step, we relate Psalm 22 to earlier canonical books and finally to the NT. Whatever we find at this stage must harmonize with the results of approach (a). But we come to "extra" insights and deeper understanding as we relate Psalm 22 to the NT. These extra things are not "in" Psalm 22 in itself. They are not somehow mystically hidden in the psalm, so that someone with some esoteric key to interpretation could have come up with them just by reading the psalm in isolation from the rest of the Bible. Psalm 22 in itself gives us only what we get from approach (a). The extra things arise from the *relations* that Psalm 22 has with earlier canonical books (approach (b)), with the NT, and with the events of Christ's death. These relations, established by God, provide the basis for our proceeding another stage forward in understanding.

Hence, we are not talking about some purely subjective process of letting one's imagination run wild. Nor are we talking about a traditional Roman Catholic view of authority, where church tradition provides extra input with divine authority to enrich biblical understanding.²⁵ Rather, the "extra" understanding comes from the biblical canon itself, taken as a whole.

²⁵ My views have certain affinities with the idea of *sensus plenior*. See Raymond E. Brown, *The Sensus Plenior of Sacred Scripture* (Baltimore, MD: St. Mary's University, 1955). But Roman Catholic discussions of *sensus plenior* sometimes appear to be interested in including church tradition, not simply the biblical canon, in their reckoning. For instance, Brown mentions that *sensus plenior* may be needed to account for the dogmas of the immaculate conception and the assumption of Mary (*ibid.*, 74; see also Raymond E. Brown, "The *Sensus Plenior* in the Last Ten Years," *CBQ* 25 [1963] 272). And his full definition of *sensus plenior* seems to leave an opening for the entrance of later church tradition. He speaks of studying biblical texts "in the light of further revelation [later canonical books] or development in the understanding of revelation" (Brown, *The Sensus Plenior of Sacred Scripture*, 92). The last phrase, "development in the understanding of revelation," might mean only that we should pay attention to the achievements and opinions of previous generations. But that is true of any scholarly investigation of any subject. Hence the phrase seems superfluous unless it implies a greater role for tradition than what Protestants would grant.

But now suppose we consider the case of nonscholars, of ordinary people. Suppose that we are not scholars ourselves, but that we have been Christians for many years. Suppose that through the aid of the Holy Spirit we have been growing spiritually and studying the Bible diligently for the whole time. From our pastors and from other scholarly sources we have gained some knowledge of OT and NT times, but not elaborate knowledge. But we have gained a thorough knowledge of the Bible as a whole. Much of this knowledge might be called unconscious or subconscious knowledge. Especially when it is a matter of large themes of the Bible, we might not be able to say clearly what we knew, and exactly what texts of the Bible had given us our knowledge.

When we read Psalm 22, we read it against the background of all that unconscious knowledge of biblical truths. When we see the opening words of 22:1, we naturally assume that the psalm speaks of Christ's suffering. We read the rest of the psalm as a psalm about Christ. In each verse we see Christ's love, his suffering, his rejection by his enemies.

The results we gain may be very similar to the results gained by the scholar who goes through all the distinct "steps." But the scholar knows that his understanding arises from the relations of Psalm 22 to the rest of the Bible. He self-consciously distinguishes what arises from the psalm viewed more or less in itself, and what arises from other passages of the Bible as they illumine the significance of the psalm. Laypeople may have the same "results," but without being able to say exactly what all the stages were by which they could logically come to those results.

The psychological perception of what is "in" the text of Psalm 22 may also be different. Lay readers are not *consciously* aware of the immense and important role played by our general knowledge of the rest of the Bible. Hence it seems that all the depth of insight that laypeople receive as they read Psalm 22 comes from Psalm 22. It is all "in" the psalm. By contrast, the scholar knows where things come from, and prefers to speak of the depth of insight as arising from the relations between many, many individual texts of the whole Bible, as these are brought into relation to Psalm 22 in a systematizing process.

But now consider once more the central question: what is *God* saying in Psalm 22? Well, he is saying what he said to the original OT readers of the psalm. He speaks the truth to them. Hence, scholars are correct in taking care to distinguish what comes from the psalm itself and what comes from the psalm seen in the light of the whole Bible.

But God also intends that we should read Psalm 22 in the light of the rest of what he says. Scholars are correct in going on to a second stage in which they relate the psalm to the whole Bible. And laypeople are correct when they do the same thing. Of course, we must suppose that the laypeople are sober, godly readers, well versed in the Scripture. Then, as they read Psalm 22, all the depth that they receive is a depth that God intends them to receive. God is saying all that richness to them as they read. But that means that their psychological perception is correct. All that richness is "in" the psalm as a speech that God is speaking to them now.

Hence, I believe that we are confronted with an extremely complex and rich process of communication from God. The scholarly psychological process of making the distinctions is important as a check and refinement of laypeople's understanding. But that lay understanding, at its best, is not to be despised. We are not to be elitists who insist that everyone become a self-conscious scholar in reading the Bible. Laypeople have a correct perception, even psychologically, of what God intends a passage like Psalm 22 to say. God does say more, now, through that passage, than he said to the OT readers. The "more" arises from the stage of fuller revelation, and consequent fuller illumination of the Holy Spirit, in which we live.

All this is true without any need to postulate an extra, "mystical" sense. That is, we do not postulate an extra meaning which requires some esoteric hermeneutical method to uncover. Rather, our understanding is analogous to the way that a son's understanding of "Jesus Loves Me" arises and grows. At the end of a long period of reading and digesting a rich communication, we see each particular part of the communication through eyes of knowledge that have been enlightened by the whole. Through that enlightenment, each part of the whole is rich.

What relation does all this have to the discussions of *sensus plenior*?²⁶ Raymond E. Brown's dissertation defines *sensus plenior* as follows:

The *sensus plenior* is that additional, deeper meaning, intended by God but not clearly intended by the human author, which is seen to exist in the words of a biblical text (or group of texts, or even a whole book) when they are studied in the light of further revelation or development in the understanding of revelation.²⁷

My distinction between the intention of the human author and divine intention, as well as my discussion of the role of later revelation, shows affinities with this definition. But I am also concerned to distinguish, from a scholarly point of view, between what is "in" the passage and what arises from comparison of the passage with later revelation. This shows affinities with the rejection of *sensus plenior* by John P. Weisengoff.²⁸ Weisengoff rejects *sensus plenior* precisely in order to protect the idea that the added knowledge comes from the new revelation.²⁹ In fact, the situation is complex enough to include the major concerns of both points of view.³⁰

12. *NT Interpretation of the OT*

Our reflections up to this point also throw light on some of the problems arising from NT interpretation of the OT.³¹ I would claim that the NT authors characteristically do *not* aim merely at grammatical-historical exegesis of the OT. If we expect this of them, we expect something too narrow and

²⁶ Brown, *The Sensus Plenior of Sacred Scripture*; id., "The History and Development of the Theory of a *Sensus Plenior*," *CBQ* 15 (1953) 141-62; id., "The *Sensus Plenior* in the Last Ten Years," 262-85; James M. Robinson, "Scripture and Theological Method: A Protestant Study in *Sensus Plenior*," *CBQ* 27 (1965) 6-27; LaSor, "The *Sensus Plenior* and Biblical Interpretation."

²⁷ Brown, *The Sensus Plenior of Sacred Scripture*, 92.

²⁸ Weisengoff, Review of *Problèmes et méthode d'exégèse théologique* by Cerfaux, Coppens, Gribomont, *CBQ* 14 (1952) 83-85.

²⁹ *Ibid.* See the reply in Brown, *The Sensus Plenior of Sacred Scripture*, 123-26.

³⁰ This synthesis may be anticipated in Waltke, "A Canonical Process Approach," 8-9.

³¹ Cf. similar concerns in the discussion of *sensus plenior* in Brown, *The Sensus Plenior of Sacred Scripture*, 68-71; Moo, "The Problem of *Sensus Plenior*."

with too exclusively a scholarly interest. The NT authors are not scholars but church leaders. They are interested in showing how OT passages apply to the church and to the NT situation. Hence, when they discuss an OT text, they consider it in the light of the rest of the OT, in the light of the events of salvation that God has accomplished in Christ, and in the light of the teaching of the Jesus himself during his earthly life. They bring all this knowledge to bear on their situation, in the light of all that they know about that situation. In this process they are not concerned, as scholars would be, to distinguish with nicety all the various sources that contribute to their understanding. Both they and their readers typically presuppose the context of later revelation. Hence, what they say using an OT passage may not always be based on the OT text *alone*, but on relations that the text has with this greater context. There is nothing wrong or odd about this process, any more than there is anything wrong with laypeople who read Psalm 22 in the light of their knowledge of the whole of Scripture.

13. *Scholarly Use of Grammatical-Historical Exegesis*

In conclusion, let us ask what implications we may draw concerning scholarly grammatical-historical exegesis. By grammatical-historical exegesis I mean an approach like approach (a), which self-consciously focuses on each biblical book as a product of a human author, in a particular historical setting. On the positive side, we have seen that grammatical-historical exegesis has an important illumining role. Several points can be mentioned.

(1) In writing the Bible God spoke to people in human language, in human situations, through human authors. God himself in the Bible indicates that we should pay attention to these human factors in order to understand what he is saying and doing.

(2) On a practical level, grammatical-historical exegesis serves to warn the church against being swallowed up by traditionalism, in which people merely read in the system of understanding which afterwards is read out. It alerts us to

nuances in meaning that we otherwise overlook or even misread.

(3) It serves to sensitize us to the genuinely progressive character of revelation. God did not say everything all at once. We understand him better the more we appreciate the wisdom involved in the partial and preliminary character of what came earlier (Heb 1:1).

On the other hand, grammatical-historical exegesis is not all that there is to responsible biblical interpretation. Again, we can summarize the results in several points.

(1) If grammatical-historical exegesis pretends to pay attention to the human author *alone*, it distorts the nature of the human author's intention. Whether or not they were perfectly self-conscious about it, the human authors intend that their words should be received as words of the Spirit.

(2) God's meets us and speaks to us in power as we read the Bible. God's power and presence must be taken into account from the beginning, just as we take into account all that characterizes a human author of any human text. We cannot, with perfect precision, analytically isolate God's propositional content from his personal communion. To attempt to perform grammatical-historical exegesis by such an isolating procedure is impious.

(3) It is legitimate to explore the relations between what God says in all the parts of the Bible. When we perform such a synthesis, what we conclude may go beyond what we could derive from any one text in isolation. Yet it should not be in tension with the results of a narrow grammatical-historical exegesis. (Of course, sometimes because of the limitations of our knowledge we may find no way to resolve all tensions.)

(4) We are not to despise laypeople's understanding of the Bible. We are not to reject it just because on the surface it appears to "read in" too much. Of course, laypeople may sometimes have overworked imaginations. But sometimes their conclusions may be the result of a synthesis of Bible knowledge due to the work of the Holy Spirit. Scholars cannot reject such a possibility without having achieved a profound synthetic and even practical knowledge of the Bible for themselves.

(5) When later human writers of Scripture interpret earlier parts of Scripture, they typically do so without making fine scholarly distinctions concerning the basis of their knowledge. Hence we ought not to require them to confine themselves to a narrow grammatical-historical exegesis. In many respects their interpretations may be similar to valid uses of Scripture by nonscholars today.

(6) God intends that the Bible's words should be applied in people's lives today. In complex personal, social and political situations, we may not always be sure what the correct applications are. But applications genuinely in accord with God's word are part of God's intention. Hence, in a broad sense, they are part of what God is saying to us through the Bible as a whole. God continues to speak today. When we read the Bible aware that it is God's word, we understand that he is speaking to us now. We are constrained to obey, to rejoice in him, and to worship.

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GOD'S LORDSHIP IN INTERPRETATION*

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SINCE philosophical and theological circles are increasingly dominated by concerns for hermeneutics, it is important to work out explicitly the implications of God's Lordship for hermeneutics. Because of the vastness of the implications, I can only begin the task in this article.

1. *The Enlightenment desire for religiously neutral exegesis*

In our time, subtle pressures tempt us to say that God is irrelevant to exegesis. Biblical scholars are justifiably concerned to interpret the Bible with discipline and intellectual rigor. But in an academic atmosphere dominated by the Enlightenment idea of autonomous human reason, rigor gets confused with scientific "neutrality." To be neutral supposedly implies that religious viewpoints are set aside. Scholars therefore aspire to conduct the central steps of biblical exegesis in a manner independent of their relationship to God. For example, early proponents of the historical-critical method wanted to free biblical interpretation from "dogmatic prejudice" by providing an objective method of investigation that was in principle open to historians belonging to any

*An expanded form of an address delivered by the author on the occasion of his inauguration as Professor of New Testament Interpretation at Westminster Theological Seminary on October 15, 1987.

religion, just as the results of natural science were open to all.¹

In contrast with this idea of neutrality, Christian believers through the ages have always acknowledged the necessity of piety and spiritual discernment in appropriating the Bible's message (1 Cor 2:10–16).² Superficially it might appear that these contrary views can be reconciled by assigning them to distinct stages in the process of interpretation. The stage of exegesis itself becomes scientifically neutral, while the subsequent stage of application is conditioned by presuppositions.³ For example, if we are evangelicals we acknowledge at the beginning that God is the origin of the biblical text. After the exegesis of a text is complete, we deduce from God's truthfulness that the assertions of the text are to be believed. We also acknowledge that God may help us to accept the implications of the text for our lives. But what happens in between these endpoints? The basic issues of interpretive objects, methods, goals, validity, and evaluation we seem to explain without reference to God. Such explanation can be misleading. For one thing, a perfect chronological separation of exegesis and application into distinct stages is an ideali-

¹ In fact, natural sciences are themselves far from presuppositionless, but other academic disciplines are only now beginning to take into account this new view of science. See Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (2d ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago, 1970); Vern S. Poythress, *Science and Hermeneutics: Implications of Scientific Method for Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988).

² See, e.g., Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 2.6; John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.4, 1.9; John Owen, *Sunesis Pneumatikē: or, The Causes, Ways, and Means of Understanding the Mind of God as Revealed in His Word, with Assurance Therein; . . . in Works* 4/2 (Philadelphia: Leighton Publications, 1862).

³ Such a separation seems to be implied by, e.g., Daniel P. Fuller, "The Holy Spirit's Role in Biblical Interpretation," in *Scripture, Tradition, and Interpretation* (ed. W. W. Gasque and W. S. LaSor; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 189–98. A similar tendency may be at work among many evangelicals who hold to Eric D. Hirsch's distinction between "meaning" and "significance" (Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* [New Haven: Yale University, 1967]). John Owen distinguishes between what we can know by natural reason and what we can know only by supernatural aid (*Works* 4/2.124–27). But he also asserts that all understanding "is the work and effect of the Holy Ghost" (*ibid.*, 172). All of these views are dealing with the fact that some people possess a large amount of knowledge of the contents of the Bible without being saved. But there is more than one way of explaining the situation.

zation that oversimplifies the actual practice of interpretation. But more important, exegesis even in the narrowest sense can never be self-sufficient; it has its basis in God.

2. *God's Lordship*

The Bible's teaching about God's Lordship clearly overthrows self-sufficiency. Acts 17:28 proclaims, "In him we live and move and have our being." God is inescapably present in all our living, including our acts of interpretation. If we do not recognize his presence, it is because our eyes have been blinded and our hearts hardened by our own sin and the sinful influences of the culture around us. Explicit reflection on God's Lordship can help to overcome our sinful blindness.

John Frame has usefully summarized biblical teaching on the Lordship of God in terms of three categories or attributes: authority, control, and presence.⁴ The attribute of presence we have already seen in Acts 17:28. God is inescapably present in all human interpretation. As people engage in interpretation, whether interpretation of the Bible or interpretation of secular literature, they continually stand before the face of God, they are sustained by God, and their thoughts are reflections of God's thoughts either obediently or disobediently. The structure of human thought, the structure of the world, the structure of human language, the structure of the text, and the structure of meaning and communication are all ordained by God. In all these facts God exposes us to his gaze

⁴ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987). See also Frame's unpublished classroom syllabi on "The Doctrine of the Word of God" and "The Doctrine of God." I am in complete agreement with Frame, but I cannot in this article set forth the full framework that he develops. Readers who wish to understand the implications of this article more fully will be well advised to become familiar with Frame's writings. In addition both Frame and I have a large debt to the work of Cornelius Van Til. See, e.g., Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (2d ed.; Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1963); id., *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974); id., *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969); id., *Christian Theistic Ethics* (Philadelphia: den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1971); id., *The Protestant Doctrine of Scripture* (Philadelphia: den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1967); id., *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (Philadelphia: den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1969).

(Heb 4:13), he confronts us (Psalm 139), he exhibits his eternal power and deity (Rom 1:20), he displays his goodness, and he manifests his anger at sin (Jas 1:17; Rom 1:18).

The attribute of authority describes God's claim to our allegiance and obedience. All of our lives are to be devoted to his service (Deut 6:5-9; Exod 20:3; Luke 16:13; 4:8; Matt 6:33). We ought to have God as the standard in judging all rules in interpretation, all right and wrong in interpretation, all claims to truth or falsehood, all use of language to change other people, and all claims about the meaning of words. In fact, there is no valid claim to obedience or to obligation anywhere in the world, except those claims that rest on God's command.

Do God's standards really have this pervasiveness? Often our culture sees ethics quite narrowly, as pertaining only to certain traditionally debated areas of economic, familial, and personal life. But all of life is thoroughly saturated with implicit "oughts." All judgments about truth and falsehood are simultaneously judgments about what *ought* to be believed. They involve decisions about what standards *ought* to be followed in weighing claims to truth. All human choices about action involve judgments about what *ought* to be done. Though secularists wish to deny it, all such "oughts" derive from God. Of course we have responsibilities to other human beings as well as directly to God. But our responsibilities to human beings derive ultimately from God's plans for creation, from God's commandment to love our neighbor, and from more particular commands requiring us to care for the weak, to honor parents, spouses, and those in authority, and so on. These standards seem to be our own, and not merely God's standards, because God impresses the standards on our minds. As image bearers of God we inescapably know something about what is right (Rom 1:32).

The same things that can be said concerning human action in general can be said concerning human interpretation in particular. Without reference to God, interpretation is unintelligible from beginning to end, because intelligibility presupposes criteria—it presupposes a standard. We cannot make one move except by reference to "oughts" that reflect standards ordained by God.

Next, the attribute of control describes the fact that God rules all things (e.g., Ps 103:19; Dan 4:34–35; Eph 1:11; Lam 3:37–38). All facts are facts ordained by God. Each text exists because God, using created means, has brought the text into existence. Moreover, God controls the actions and thoughts of each human being who engages in interpretation, whether the interpretation is good or bad when measured by God's standards.⁵ Interpretation is intelligible only because we exist, texts exist, languages exist, words exist, things to talk about exist, activities of interpretation exist. All these exist only by virtue of the sustaining activity of God (Heb 1:3).

As John Frame has shown, the three attributes of authority, control, and presence imply one another. Each can be used as a perspective on the others and on the whole world.⁶ Authority implies presence, because God's authority is universal. His standards of truth are present to us in every fact. Authority implies control, because God is the standard even for what happens, and thereby controls it. God must, moreover, be able to enforce standards if the standards are to be truly absolute. Control implies authority, because God controls even the standards for all our evaluation. Control implies presence, because God manifests himself and his attributes in every event precisely in controlling it. Presence implies authority, because God's demands cannot be escaped. Presence implies control, because God must be able to prevent anything from separating him from us.

3. *The purpose of interpretation*

Within this framework, what do we say about how we properly engage in interpretation? Hermeneutical theorists have vigorously debated the purpose of interpretation. Is our purpose to understand the intention of the author, to experience an existential self-transformation, to become open to other people's ideas and worldviews, to increase our skills in living,

⁵ I maintain a Calvinistic, not fatalistic view of God's sovereignty. An extended discussion of the compatibility of God's sovereignty with robust human responsibility and the genuine significance of human choice is beyond the scope of this article.

⁶ Frame, *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 17–18.

to master the world, to use communicative opportunities to advance critically toward an ideal social order, to destroy the author's pretensions to set forth a univocal thesis, or to engage in free play? ⁷ Obviously it is possible to create quite a variety of modes of interpretation, each with its own purpose. But in each case the proposed purpose implies "oughts" and value judgments. All interpreters implicitly believe that their goal is worthwhile and that it ought to be followed. There is no motive for any human action except by reference to standards. What could those standards be, except divine standards? Of course, the standards could be autonomously chosen human ideas. But even then, to present something as a standard is to present it as possessing virtual divine authority. The alternative to God is an idol. Hence, to the degree that one deviates from God's purpose, one tacitly sets up an idol. This idol may take the form of scientific rationality, self-realization, communion with the best minds of the ages, an ideal society, technical domination of the world, or destruction of meaning.

From a biblical point of view, the purpose of interpretation must be to receive and respond properly to the word of God. Let us first of all consider our interpretation of the Bible. The Bible is the written word of God. God intends for it to play a unique role in remedying our sin, in giving us true knowledge of God, in giving us knowledge of ourselves, and remedying the corruptions in our understanding of the world (Ps 119:105). But in addition to speaking in the Bible, God speaks in all created things (Psalm 19) and through our own human constitution (e.g., Rom 1:32). His word is truly inescapable.⁸ God's communication to us always displays his Lordship. That is, it displays his authority, his control, and his presence.

First, God expresses his authority by putting us under obligation. His commands are to be obeyed, his assertions to be believed, his questions to be answered, his exhortations to be digested. God confronts us with his meanings in the form of specifications of God's will for us. In the covenants

⁷ With some oversimplification, this list corresponds to some major hermeneutical trends.

⁸ See the more elaborate explorations of this point in Cornelius Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 62-145; Frame, "The Doctrine of the Word of God."

that God makes with human beings, his authority expresses itself most obviously in the stipulations of the covenant, that is, the specifications of the commandments and obligations binding human beings (for example, the Ten Commandments of Exod 20:3–17).⁹

Second, God expresses his control by changing us. God never leaves us the same. Even if we decide to ignore what he says, we are judged and cursed for it. When we receive what he says in faith, we are transformed into his image (2 Cor 3:18; Col 3:10). When we respond in ignorance or unbelief, we suffer for it (Rom 1:24; 2 Thess 2:11–12). In the covenants in the Bible, the blessings and cursings are the most obvious form of assertion of control (e.g., Exod 20:5; 21:12; Deuteronomy 27–28).

Third, God expresses his presence by meeting us and fellowshiping with us. He makes us his friends (John 15:15). In the covenants of the Bible, God's self-identification (Exod 20:2a), the historical prologue (Exod 20:2b; Deuteronomy 1–3), and the promise of God to be God to his people express this emphasis (Exod 20:2; 29:45; etc.).

Hence we might speak of a triad of purposes here, namely expressing meaning, exerting control, and approaching in friendship.¹⁰ But these three are perspectives on one another. Each can be seen as encompassing the other two.

Let us begin by using meaning as a perspective on everything else. All control changes us into something or other: a way of life, perhaps, that itself has meaning. God's control is not brute power, but power expressing the meaning of his righteousness, truth, and love. It is power with the purpose of meaningfully expressing God's glory and beauty. Thus, exerting control is an action that has meaning arising from God's purposes and standards. It is a form of God's expressing

⁹ On the covenantal form of Scripture, see Meredith G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972).

¹⁰ This triad corresponds to formative, conative, and emotive impact in Vern S. Poythress, "A Framework for Discourse Analysis: The Components of a Discourse, from a Tagmemic Viewpoint," *Semiotica* 38–3/4 (1982) 285–87; and to referential, conative, and emotive aspects in Roman Jakobson, "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," in *Style in Language* (ed. Thomas A. Sebeok; Cambridge: M.I.T., 1960) 350–77.

his meaningful purpose. Moreover, when God approaches, we confront God, and therefore all the meaningfulness of his will and purpose. God's presence is thus a form of meaning.

Next, let us use control as a perspective. All God's exposure of meaning confronts us with God's will, and this confrontation changes us noetically: it is simultaneously an exertion of control. Moreover, God's fellowship with us transforms us: we cannot remain the same when we stand in the presence of the Holy One. We are either destroyed or made holy. Thus God's presence is always a form of control.

Finally, consider God's presence and fellowship as a perspective. In revealing his will, God reveals himself. In knowing the content of the Bible, we know what God thinks on many subjects. He reveals his mind to us. Friendship and fellowship occurs precisely as God shares his thoughts with us (John 15:15)—not, as in modern theology, by a bare “personal encounter” stripped of propositional content. All of God's articulate speech, all his meanings, are an exposure and display of his character, and thus a mode of his presence. Moreover, God's exerting control is always a form of his coming near: even in condemning someone, God draws near in judgment. Thus, control involves personal approach.

4. *The objects of interpretation*

We may see further interdependence of various aspects of interpretation by asking about what we are interpreting. If we are thinking of biblical interpretation, we are interpreting a text that is the standard or law for our lives. But, as John Frame has shown in an analysis of the knowledge of God, knowledge is simultaneously knowledge of the law, knowledge of the world, and knowledge of oneself.¹¹ We may translate that same insight into the area of interpretation. Interpretation of the Bible is simultaneously interpretation of God's standard, interpretation of the world, and interpretation of ourselves.

First, the Bible speaks directly about God's demands, his standards for us. Those demands are always demands that

¹¹ Frame, *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 62–100.

bear on us and on our conduct in the world. They make sense only as we are able to relate them to ourselves and the world. In the second place, the Bible speaks directly about facts in the world, both events that take place and constant states of affairs. Each fact contains implicitly a demand that we acknowledge it, take it into account, believe that it is so, live by it, and see it as exhibiting God's power and deity. Thus any particular fact implies law (standard) and is a fact-for-our-consciousness, something that *I* must acknowledge.

Thirdly, the Bible speaks about people, including me. When it does, the people spoken of are themselves to be judged by the Bible's standards. They are to be imitated or seen as bad examples (sometimes, of course, a mixture). In short, people embody standards negatively or positively. Moreover, the actions and constitutions of people are, from one point of view, among the important facts about the world. Thus whether the Bible speaks focally about law, world, or self, we must interpret its teaching as simultaneously involving all three.

In fact, we must interpret law, world, and self at every stage of interaction with the Bible, not merely at the end when we are thinking about the implications of a finished analysis of its content.

First, we interpret the world. The message of the Bible comes to us through created media: through our eyes, light waves, and paper and ink. Interpreting the Bible is interpretation of a piece of the world, namely a particular book. We cannot begin interpretation without making use of many assumptions about the world and its stability. We must have a trust in our senses. We must assume that we can obtain knowledge through a process that includes book-making and reproduction, manuscript copying, the learning of language, and so on. Moreover, understanding the Bible must involve thinking through what it is saying about the world.

Second, we interpret the self at every stage. At every stage, *I* must do the interpreting. *I* must weigh, remember, compare, and consult with other interpreters. No one else can do it for me. In a sense, *I* never get outside my own brain. Every stage of interpretation will be affected by the background of my skills, my assumptions, my limitations, my memory, and my religious predispositions or prejudices.

Third, we interpret the law at every stage. Every decision I make to do one thing rather than another in interpreting is a decision governed by standards (law). Every decision is a decision that this way, not that way, is a proper embodiment of standards of interpretation. At every step I make judgments about how the standards of interpretation apply to my case.

In sum, the law, the world, and the self are intimately involved at every point. Every word, every nuance, every stylistic variation is intelligible only as a fact of the world that impinges on me in a way that is regulated by law.

There is still another way of using this triple of perspectives. Discourses in human language are suitably designed to express the law, to be embedded in the world, and to address a person (a self). A particular utterance has a fixity that reflects the fixity of law. It says what it says and not other things that might be said. Second, it says what it says within a surrounding worldly context (speaker, addressee, subject-matter, context of situation) that colors its function. Third, it says what it says to someone, in a process of communication.¹²

5. *Interpreting human communication*

So far we have focused only on communication from God. What happens when we are interpreting communication from other human beings? God speaks to us in every created thing, and especially in human beings who are made in God's image. So here also we must be engaged in interpreting God's word. But we are simultaneously interpreting human words. Since human beings are made in God's likeness, their communications display the marks of authority, control, and presence. But these attributes occur at the level of an image rather than the original. First, the meanings and intentions of human beings have a right to be attended to; but they are not the ultimate standard for truth. Second, through communication human beings command us, control us, influence us, persuade us, manipulate us; but their control is never absolute, and may sometimes have to be resisted in the name of loyalty to

¹² This triple aspect of discourse is further defined as unital, contextual, and hierarchical meaning in Poythress, "A Framework for Discourse Analysis," 287-89.

God. Third, human beings draw near to us to establish friendship, to greet, to bless, or sometimes to blame and show hostility to us; but their intimacy never extends to every area of our lives.

6. *Rationalism, empiricism, and subjectivism*

Within a Christian framework, the law, the world, and the self go together. God has authority over all, God controls all, God is present in all. But within non-Christian systems, there is no way to hold them together. The non-Christian, needing an ultimate source of law, fact, and self, must deify some aspect of the world. In the area of knowledge, the deification of law leads to rationalism, the deification of fact to empiricism, and the deification of self to subjectivism. But each must fail because none can exist without the others.¹⁵

Similar tensions can arise also in the area of hermeneutics (which, of course, is closely related to knowledge). Thus, rationalism in hermeneutics takes the form of attempts to reduce interpretation to rules. But (1) an interpreter must still interpret the rules themselves, resulting in a potentially endless regress. (2) Interpreters must be able to assess whether they are following the rules; they must be capable of self-assessment, we might say self-interpretation. (3) Pure objective rationality appears to be possible only if interpreters are not influenced by the unique texture of their past experiences. But rules isolated from the texture of individual experiences are empty. Precisely these experiences of the world are necessary in order for interpreters to make sense of what a text says about the world. We understand another person talking about a chair partly because we are familiar with chairs. We understand another person's anger partly by relating it to experiences when we have been angry. We understand another person's marriage partly through experiences of our own marriage and—particularly for those who have not been married—through observations of other married people that we know personally, as we attempt to synthesize an under-

¹⁵ Once again, I must refer readers to Frame, *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 109–22, for a full exposition.

standing of an unknown experience by piecing together parts that we already understand.

Next, empiricism in hermeneutics takes the form of reducing interpretation to understanding the effects of language on the world. In different ways, behaviorist, Wittgensteinian, and Marxist theories of interpretation move in this direction. But (1) much of our interpretation of the world takes place by means of language; hence we seem again to be in an endless regress. (2) We as interpreters must still choose what we are going to pay attention to, among the effects in the world. Do we pay attention to the socio-economic effects like the Marxist? To the immediate animal-like correlations of stimulus-response patterns like a behaviorist? To dream-like symbolism and sexual overtones like a Freudian? The interpreters and their personal presuppositions are indispensable. (3) We need standards to assess what the effects are, and which effects are correlated with which aspects of a communication. Whose standards will these be?

Finally, subjectivist approaches to interpretation attempt to reduce interpretation to the experiences of the interpreter. But (1) relativistic subjectivism cannot explain the measure of agreement that exists between different interpreters of the same text, and the intuitions that interpreters have that they have come to a "better" interpretation after rejecting an initial impression that seemed to them to be right at the time. Standards concerning good and bad interpretations crop up not only when two people argue concerning a correct interpretation, but when a single individual struggles between competing interpretations. The absence of standards means not freedom for interpretation but madness, the absence of anything resembling interpretation. (2) If interpreters grant that someone else, another subject, is communicating with them, they cannot plausibly maintain that they are sovereign in relation to the other subject. On the other hand, if they do not grant that there is another subject, then the marks on the page or the sounds in their ears are no better than random hen scratches or a cloud that happens to have the shape of the letter *A*. One cannot interpret pure accident, pure chance.

Thus rationalism, empiricism, and subjectivism can sustain themselves only by borrowing from one another. The text

and the subject need standards to guide judgment, while the standards need text, subject, and world to have anything to operate on. But how do we get standards, text, world, and subject together? Making one the source of the others exalts the source into an idol and leads to a collapse. All of them stand in harmony only if we acknowledge God as simultaneously source of standards, controller of the world and of texts, and personal subject who is present to us, in whose image we are made.

7. *Debating the primacy of intention, use, and personal transformation*

The major approaches to hermeneutics in the secular world can be categorized by whether they see the primary goal of interpretation in (1) unlocking the expressed meaning of the text, (2) setting in motion the personal transformation of the interpreter, or (3) weighing the impact of language on the world. There is some borrowing and overlap among these categories. But roughly speaking we find in the first category E. D. Hirsch and Emilio Betti, as well as those who focus more on the text than on the author (e.g., William K. Wimsatt and John Ellis).¹⁴ In the second category, emphasizing personal transformation, are Hans-Georg Gadamer, Stanley Fish, and reader-response critics.¹⁵ In the third category, emphasizing

¹⁴ Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*; id., *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: Chicago University, 1976); Emilio Betti, *Teoria generale della interpretazione* (2 vols.; Milan: Giuffrè, 1955); William K. Wimsatt, Jr., and M. C. Beardsley, *The Verbal Icon* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky, 1954); John M. Ellis, *The Theory of Literary Criticism: A Logical Analysis* (Berkeley: University of California, 1974).

¹⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury, 1975); Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1980). Though I later talk about subjectivism, it is wiser to see Gadamer and Fish as primarily making a negative point about the implications of human finiteness for interpretive methodology. See Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (2d print.; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1980) 315–89; David Couzens Hoy, *The Critical Circle: Literature, History, and Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Berkeley: University of California, 1978) 101–7.

use in the world, are Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Marxists such as Jürgen Habermas.¹⁶

These three categories are simply a reflection within hermeneutical theory of the themes of law, world, and self. Rationalism, in giving priority to the law, results in hermeneutics with a rule-based explication of fixed meaning. Subjectivism, giving priority to the self, results in hermeneutics of self-transformation. Empiricism, giving priority to the world, results in hermeneutics that analyzes effects of language on the world. In a biblical worldview, these are perspectives on one another; there is no innate priority, hence no need to champion one over against the other. God's authority, expressed in exhaustive knowledge and unchangeable law, guarantees the fixed and definite character of meaning; God's presence guarantees that communication meets us as persons and changes us; and God's control over the world guarantees indefinite insights obtainable as we think through applications in the world. At the very heart of any one of these approaches we necessarily find the others. For example, at the heart of our affirmation of a fixed meaning and a fixed text we affirm God's inexhaustible knowledge of truth. Precisely because of the nature of God, our finite interpretation remains partial. We necessarily grasp truth by way of historical growth, as we experience personal communion with God and apply his law to the world.

Evangelicals desiring to protect the objectivity of propositional revelation in Scripture have usually gravitated toward E. D. Hirsch's view, since it promises an objectively fixed, textually expressed authorial intention. But in a biblical worldview we need not choose between Hirsch and his competitors. In one sense, cleansed of their non-Christian presuppositions, all three approaches provide a useful perspective on the whole of interpretation. In another sense each falls into an idolatrous absolutism by granting epistemological ultimacy to something in the world instead of God.

For Hirsch, that absolute seems to be the human author. Hirsch needs an author whose human nature is perfectly

¹⁶ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: Macmillan, 1968); Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (2d ed.; London: Heinemann, 1978); id., *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1 (Boston: Beacon, 1984).

clearly defined, whose language is perfectly defined, who somehow knows perfectly what he means, who expresses it perfectly without manipulation or conniving, and whose intentions can therefore be read off from the text more or less unproblematically. To be sure, Hirsch knows that he must adjust away from the ideal in actual cases. But the ideal must nevertheless be invoked. For example, with the category of "unconscious intention" Hirsch acknowledges that in fact authors are not perfectly self-conscious. But within his interpretive framework the authorial intention is a "type," still perfectly fixed in principle. Thus even though authors are not conscious of it, they apparently achieve perfection of intention on an unconscious level. By postulating such fixity Hirsch appears also to assume that a discourse is a seamless whole and that authors do not grow or change in intention through the course of composing a work. Moreover, Hirsch assumes that the author's intention can be learned by questioning the author. Hirsch thus still presupposes that authors *potentially* achieve perfect self-consciousness when questioned. And he supposes that under questioning they *potentially* express themselves perfectly.¹⁷

If one substitutes God for the human author in Hirsch's model, or even if one has God as the all-knowing interpreter above, behind, and through all human communication, many of Hirsch's claims do become true. When evangelicals come to Hirsch, they read him in terms of their own concerns. In particular, they presuppose that God is the primary author of Scripture. So they may perhaps be forgiven for not noticing that Hirsch's general theory of *human* meaning virtually requires a divine author, not merely a human one.

But evangelicals have often failed to notice that Hirsch's competitors are neither better nor worse off than he is. For example, consider first the approach of new criticism, which focuses on the supposed autonomous text. Such a focus may or may not include study of the environment in which the

¹⁷ There is a further difficulty here, in that Hirsch distinguishes the author from the speaking subject (Hirsch, *Validity*, 242–44; Hoy, *The Critical Circle*, 31–32). Unlike Hoy, I assume that Hirsch is holding fast to the author's consciousness, but excluding aspects of the author's knowledge that the author himself does not intend to reveal.

text and its linguistic forms were originally produced. This approach will work if the text to be interpreted is the entire word of God, the canon of Scripture against the background of the speech of God in general revelation. General revelation always completely fills in the historical and grammatical context of the verbal texts of Scripture. Hence, contrary to some of the exaggerations spawned from new criticism, the text does not hang in air without a context.

Next, consider Gadamer's approach to interpretation, in which self-transformation is highlighted. Personal transformation arises from a "fusion of horizons" between the author and the interpreter. The interpreter's own precommitments and worldview are transformed in interaction with increasing understanding of the views of the author. If the author is God himself, "fusion of horizons" becomes equivalent to a transformation to "have the mind of Christ" (1 Cor 2:16), to know "the truth that is in Jesus" (Eph 4:21), "to be made new in the attitude of your minds" (Eph 4:23), to be "transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord" (2 Cor 3:18), to "be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will" (Rom 12:2). Evangelicals fear that such a "fusion" would imply picking and choosing among the ideas that we find, and never abandoning but merely enriching the presuppositions that we already have. This result is not what Gadamer has in mind even in the case of our interpretation of human writings. But when we interpret divine writings, the authoritative claim of those writings is part of the authorial horizon. We do not "fuse" with that horizon at all unless we acknowledge its authority, and therefore submit all our ideas and precommitments to the judgment of Scripture.¹⁸

¹⁸ Gadamer concentrates on describing what does take place rather than prescribing what should take place. Hence in Gadamer's terminology "fusion" does not necessarily imply acceptance of a text's point of view and its theses, but does imply a necessary openness and an understanding of the text. In the case of Scripture, "understanding" would at least involve seeing the Bible's authoritative claims and responding in obedience or disobedience. But in the deepest sense, one could not have understood God without being captivated by him and obeying him.

Finally, in Habermas's approach to interpretation, a decisive role is given to an ideal interpretive community, an ideal situation of dialog in an ideal society. In our own acts of interpretation, we should critically evaluate communication in terms of its relation to society, to economics, to production, and to human desires for personal and social emancipation—always with the goal of the ideal society in view. If such a procedure is not to be an idolization of human society and human freedom, it must confront the emancipatory communication of Scripture, whose author is the ideal trinitarian communicative Society. Hence Scripture, as simultaneously emancipatory power and communication from the ideal divine society, takes precedence over all human thoughts, which must be freed from bondage to sin (see 2 Cor 10:4–5).

8. *Author, discourse, and audience*

Consciousness of the Lordship of God also helps us to defuse a controversy over the priority in interpretation of author, discourse, or audience. Is interpretation interested primarily in what the author intends, in what the discourse discloses, or in what the listener/reader makes of it all? As I have argued elsewhere, these three interpretive interests may differ from one another.¹⁹ A human author may not always succeed in expressing what he intends; or he may express it partially but not fully. In such cases, authorial intention and discourse expression are distinguishable. Likewise, listeners may misunderstand a discourse which is not in itself ambiguous. In such a case, discourse expression and listener interpretation are distinguishable.

To resolve this problem, let us ask ourselves first what happens in God's communication to us. God is a master communicator, fully in control of the media that he uses. Hence he brings to expression in the text exactly what he intends to express (Isa 46:10). Authorial intention and discourse expression agree. We as human beings may sometimes misinterpret the Bible. But the Holy Spirit is the true interpreter who

¹⁹ See Vern S. Poythress, "Analyzing a Biblical Text: Some Important Linguistic Distinctions," *SJT* 32 (1979) 113–37.

guides us into all truth. "He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears" (John 16:13). We are accustomed to thinking of the Holy Spirit as the author of Scripture, and that view is correct (e.g., Acts 1:16). But John 16:13 presents the Spirit as the divine "hearer" of God's word. Paul points out that the Spirit "searches all things, even the deep things of God" (1 Cor 2:10). Here the Spirit is presented as a recipient. As one who indwells us, he stands with us in interpreting what God says. And of course because he is able to search the things of God even to the depths, his interpretation is always correct.

By using this insight and by piecing together a number of other texts of Scripture, we can arrive at a trinitarian picture of God's communication. God the Father is the author and source of his wise speech; God the Son is the content of divine wisdom (Col 2:3); and God the Holy Spirit is the hearer or searcher of God's wisdom. Here we have an author (the Father), a discourse (the Son), and a listener (the Holy Spirit). All three agree in wisdom, but none is simply reducible to the others.

When now we deal with God's communication to finite human beings, we must assert that we are fallible, sinful listeners and interpreters as well as sinful in our speech to God. But the Holy Spirit indwelling us is an infallible listener and an infallible speaker of our prayers (Rom 8:27). We are not left alone in either our listening or our speaking.

When we come to communication from one human being to another, we know that human beings created in the image of God cannot but reflect God's speech. Human beings do express what they intend, and those intentions are understood by listeners. But communication is still finite, and since the Fall it is marred by sin. Authors bungle, they lie, they misperceive the implications of what they say, they deny the knowledge of God that they simultaneously presuppose, they suppress the knowledge of their evil intentions, they violate the standards of God for truthfulness, sincerity, respect, and love at the same time that they simultaneously endorse them (Rom 1:32). Readers are sinners as well. They bungle, they twist, they pervert, they slander, they distort what is plain, they too disobey God's standards. Language and discourse

become instruments of sin. We cannot find perfect purity here. Respect for the humanity of authors and readers must be combined with criticism of sin and its effects.

As human beings we are authorized by God to take an interest in all that goes on under the sun. All of God's works display his glory—even what is perverse reminds us by its perversion of what is straight and right. But we must also exercise the caution enjoined in Phil 4:8 to fill our thoughts with what is good. In principle we may attend to the entire process of communication. We probe the author's intentions, the structure of the discourse itself, the readers' interpretations and reactions. Out of respect to and love for other human beings—whether authors or readers—we are to pay careful attention to what they say, and not merely to impose our own ideas. Such is an important emphasis of the approaches focusing on authorial intention and on textual expression. We may also analyze our own reactions, querying whether our own sins or presuppositions have kept us from understanding. But we must not suppose that author or reader always understand their motives, any more than we ourselves do. Nor do we ignore the fact that human speech can manipulate, enslave, deceive, and blaspheme. We will sometimes stop trying to understand because it is not profitable. In any case, we live as servants of God in a world that is God's, in dialog with human beings who owe him allegiance. Our responsibilities and opportunities are rich. Understanding the author, understanding the discourse, understanding ourselves and other readers are all worthy tasks. Without confusing them, we can learn things from any one of the tasks in a way that throws light on the other tasks.

Yet we cannot agree with the goals and interests of any of the major schools of hermeneutics, unless those goals include a critique of authors, readers, and texts alike on the basis of God's standards for sin. For example, we can never legitimate the goal of understanding in depth the devil's intentions in his deceitful speech (following a Hirschian program) or fusing with the horizons of a blasphemer (following a Gadamerian program) or incorporating the inhabitants of hell into an ideal dialog (following a Habermasian program). Sometimes God

calls us to stop trying to understand "from inside," and instead to condemn.

9. *The dynamics of interpretation*

Let us see how the framework developed above can explicate the process of interpretation in a particular case. Interpretation of the Bible has corporate, ecclesiastical, ideological, and even political dimensions. However, for the sake of simplicity we will concentrate on an individual interpreter, who is reading a passage of the Bible alone. Let us suppose that Sally (a Christian) is studying Ps 23:1a, "The LORD is my shepherd." For the purpose of our analysis, let us skip over the process of copying and translation that brings the message from its origin in the autograph all the way to Sally. Even when we start with Sally's immediate situation, there is complexity enough.

We may use God's Lordship attributes in analyzing the impact of the passage. In the English translation, the passage itself reminds Sally of the Lordship of God with the word "Lord." The underlying Hebrew word is the tetragrammaton YHWH, which is closer to a proper name than is the English word "Lord." But in view of the explanation in Exod 3:14, the proper name probably does have some of the connotations of Lordship. In any case, we are for the moment concerned with Sally's interaction with the English translation, so we shall ignore technical questions about the accuracy of the translation.

In addition to the word "Lord," the analogy with shepherding suggests control, authority, and presence. The shepherd guides the sheep (control). The shepherd has a right and a claim as the owner of the sheep, because he is a skilled person who understands their needs and a person who has their good in mind (authority). The shepherd is involved with his sheep (presence, cf. Ps 23:6). Even if Sally does not think self-consciously about these attributes of God, she will hear the thrust of the message holistically. All these implications are wrapped up together in the one assertion "The Lord is my shepherd." The one assertion can suggest a multitude of

implications, which Sally absorbs without explicitly enumerating them.

We may also see how God expresses authority, control, and presence in the very act of speaking the passage to Sally. First, God expresses his authority. He makes a definite claim about a propositional truth. He demands that Sally hear what he is saying. Sally ought to pay serious attention even to another human being who speaks to her, because human beings are made in the image of God and she is commanded to love her neighbor. But when God speaks, Sally ought to give absolute submission. She *ought* to believe that the Lord is her shepherd, because he tells her so. And of course this "ought" is reinforced by the entire context, not only the message of other parts of the Bible, but the (general revelational) experience of her own life and of other Christians whom she knows.

Next, God manifests his presence by meeting Sally. She has communion with God as she reads this passage and God through his Holy Spirit comes to her. God in speaking to her shows his truthfulness, faithfulness, wisdom, and so on in everything that he says. He shows his wisdom in understanding that she needs to hear these comforting words, that she needs to be reminded, that she needs to have the truth driven home to her using a variety of comparisons (in this case, a comparison between God and human shepherds). Like a human lover, God says "I love you" not merely by using the sentence "I love you" but by many acts of thoughtfulness and understanding, of which this passage is one. Thus in reading this passage Sally experiences God coming to her and saying "I love you."

Next, God controls Sally. God's word is powerful to change her. By saying this word, God changes her inside. He creates and deepens faith in her, and he strengthens her character to stand firm in trials like those mentioned in later verses (23:4-5). He alters her mind by making firm in her memory the record of these words. He causes her to start thinking again about the relation of the truth of these words to the rest of Psalm 23, to other passages of the Bible, and to Christians' experience today.

Any one of these three points could be expanded in depth. For the purpose of examining the dynamics of interpretation, let us concentrate on the third aspect, namely God's control.

10. *Understanding more content*

God controls Sally in causing her to come to understand more about what he is saying. Perhaps up to the present she had romanticized ideas about shepherds and sheep, ideas that kept her from appreciating the note of authority. Then God's control may be exerted in the direction of straightening out her ideas. Or perhaps she simply grows in depth of emotional appreciation and love for the goodness that God expresses to her in this passage.

Her growth through God's control can be further analyzed as growth in understanding the truth expressed in the passage, growth in understanding God the author, and growth in understanding herself. First, God brings about growth in her understanding the passage. Not all the Bible can be read at one moment, and not all knowledge can be acquired in a moment. Even a passage as short as Psalm 23, or as short as the single half verse 23:1a, takes time to read and process linguistically. At a very low level, she must synthesize the message of "The Lord is my shepherd" from the visual data that impinge on her eyes. But it is more interesting to look at the higher levels of integration. Ps 23:1a says something, even when taken by itself. But it says more to her after she has read through the rest of Psalm 23. Then she is more confident that she understands the *ways* in which God is like a shepherd, and the ways in which she is like a sheep. Moreover, in the purpose of God this passage is meant to be read in the light of other OT passages that speak of God as shepherd (e.g., Gen 49:24), other psalms concerning the experiences of David as a representative Israelite worshiper, and still other passages that, without using the word "shepherd," illustrate God's shepherding care (e.g., the story of Jacob's life or Joseph's life in Genesis).

In addition, God intends that Sally should read Ps 23:1a in the light of Jesus' claim to be the true shepherd (John 10).²⁰ God controls the entire process whereby Sally reads larger and larger contexts and thereby refines her appreciation of the implications of this one passage. God brings to bear on her even general revelational knowledge about shepherds and sheep. Without *some* knowledge of what a shepherd is and what a sheep is, she simply would not understand the passage. More knowledge helps, because it may serve, for example, to dispel romanticized pictures of the cuteness of sheep. Moreover, Sally's appreciation of the implications of the passage grows as she identifies experiences in her life where God showed his providential care. She grows as she identifies situations where she needs to trust God rather than grasping for a moment's pleasure or lashing out in anger or shriveling up in bitterness.

The process of growing in understanding need not involve only linear reading. Sally might oscillate back and forth through the verses of Psalm 23 or through the pages of the Bible as a whole. Of course, she ought to realize that God gives Psalm 23 to us in a certain order, and that this order must be attended to in understanding how the message of the whole psalm fits together. But to accomplish this very assessment, she may find that her eyes will move first to one verse, then to another, in an order different from the order on the page.

Note that we can further analyze the details of this process in terms of the triad of law, fact, and self. Every move that Sally makes in reading and meditating is defined by facts. Sally deals with the facts of written communication, the facts of the English language, the facts that these words stand in this order in her Bible, the facts about shepherds, the facts about her needs before God, the facts about the typical ways in which she fails to trust in God's care, and even the facts about how she as a human being goes through a process of interpretation. These facts are ordained by God and controlled by God (Eph 1:11; Ps 103:19; Lam 3:37-38; etc.). Every

²⁰ For a further explanation of my view of the relation of single passages to the entire canon, see Vern S. Poythress, "Divine Meaning of Scripture," *WTJ* 48 (1986) 241-79.

one of these facts manifests a law: it is something that Sally has an obligation to acknowledge. At every point she ought to attend to lawful principles of interpretation. The interpretive principles touch again on how language operates, how Sally operates as an interpreter, how she may expect God to speak to her, and so on. Finally, all of this process that is taking place is taking place in *Sally's* consciousness. It is a process of the self.

In addition, the content of the psalm cannot be isolated from its contexts, above all the context of the subject-matter about which it speaks. Sally's growth includes growth in understanding the world.²¹ At the very least, she may come to understand more of how the Lord in his wisdom has designed that the shepherds and sheep in this world would be able to serve as an analogy for his care for his people. But Sally may also grow to appreciate more how the Lord is able to deal with her enemies in the world (23:5), to provide circumstances which give her relief or nourishment (23:2–3), and to deal with the power of death (23:4). Sally begins to perceive the whole world differently because she sees it as a platform for God's shepherding work. And she sees that the same is true for other people besides herself. She understands other people differently as she sees that they are people with the same needs and the same promises offered by God. She sees more clearly how she can help others, either by verbally reminding Christians that the Lord is their shepherd, by speaking to non-Christians about God's offer to those who come to him, or by acting to supply other people's needs and so become a channel through which God exercises shepherding care to others (e.g., 2 Cor 9:12–15).

11. *Understanding God*

But let us move on to consider another aspect of the process. Sally's study of Psalm 23 increases not only her understanding of the contents of Ps 23:1a but her understanding of God the author (the perspective of personal presence).

²¹ Cf. "mundane context" in Poythress, "A Framework for Discourse Analysis," 290–93.

God controls the process of coming to know him. This process involves struggle. Sally must overcome lack of understanding in some areas and even misconceptions of who God is. Because Ps 23:1a speaks directly about who God is, it directly controls Sally's conception of who is speaking to her. But even if this were not so, she would have to take into account who God is. As a general principle in interpreting any message, an interpreter must try to learn about who is sending the message and for what purpose. To use a simple example, the message "I love you" can have very different implications depending on who is the author, who is the addressee, and what are the circumstances (is sexual passion, deep friendship, or Christian love in view?). Likewise, in reading Ps 23:1a Sally must interpret it in the light of what she knows about God. If in the past Sally has thought of God only as a teacher who gives her facts, she will have to alter her perceptions to hear the note of love. Or if she has thought of God only as a supplier of on-the-spot solutions to difficulty, she will have to alter her perceptions to perceive that God is asking her to store up his word as a promise of which she can remind herself when difficulties do not resolve immediately. Moreover, as Sally adjusts her ideas about God, she will find herself going over the whole psalm and all of its surrounding biblical context once more. Subtle changes in interpretation can take place all along the line once she has a different perception of the author.

12. *Understanding oneself*

Using the perspective of the self, we can also view the entire process of interpretation as a growth in self-understanding. Sally's study of Psalm 23 causes her to grow in understanding of who she is as a sheep of the shepherd. Ps 23:1a speaks specifically of the role of David when it presents David as saying, "The Lord is *my* shepherd."²² According to the general purpose of the Book of Psalms, the psalms are to be viewed as poems uttered by the king of Israel as a represen-

²² I will not at this point enter the debate over whether the titles to the psalms are inspired. Inasmuch as David is a salient part of the background of reflection even of non-Davidic psalms, the general point is valid.

tative worshiper of God. If so, they also apply in one way or another to the experience of those whom the king represents, including Sally. So Sally is right to place herself in the role of being a sheep. Even if Psalm 23 had no direct reference to the role of a worshiper, it would be proper in the light of the practical applicability of all Scripture (2 Tim 3:16–17) for Sally to ask herself what implications it has for her understanding of herself, her attitudes, and her behavior.

Sally's growth in self-understanding and in her own experiences puts her in a better position to understand the psalm itself. If she knows her own weakness and waywardness, she can better see the meaning and appropriateness of being called a sheep. If she has experienced comfort, guidance, nourishment, and protection in the midst of the threat of death (23:4), she is better able to imagine what these words meant to David, and what they are intended to mean to all who experience comfort or protection from God the shepherd.

Moreover, we know that in a very general sense sin darkens our minds (Eph 4:17–18), makes us hostile to the truth of God, and gives us a propensity to distort what other people say because of our pride, willfulness, and desire for self-justification. Sally's sin is overcome by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, by the love that Christ has stirred up in her heart as a result, by the renewing of her mind (Rom 12:1–2), by the work of the Holy Spirit enabling her to "see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3), and by the Spirit interpreting spiritual things to those who have the Spirit (1 Cor 2:14–16). Sally is not able to form a valid conception of God the author of Psalm 23 unless the Holy Spirit gives it: "no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us" (1 Cor 2:11–12).

Sally's growth in self-understanding also includes growth in humility. As one aspect of humility she grows in understanding her limitations in knowledge and in interpretive skill. For example, in coming to know for the first time details about shepherds and literal sheep, she may also come to realize that she had mistaken, romanticized conceptions about sheep. She

did not know that there was a possibility of error in this way until she began to grow out of the error. Similarly, she may not realize that sin or lack of Christian experience keeps her understanding at a superficial level, until in a situation of distress she gets desperate and starts taking Psalm 23 to heart. Then in turn she realizes that the psalm means more than she had thought at first. But if so, still other limitations of which she is not aware may still conceal some of the implications of the psalm. In the light of the consummation she will see still more (1 Cor 13:12).

Thus Sally could come to appreciate that explicit reflection on her own assumptions and limitations may give her a greater humility about her present understanding and may aid her to break through to deeper understanding. She could self-consciously adopt hermeneutical distance from time to time in order to overcome blind spots.

13. *The possibility of destroying understanding*

So far we have described Sally's experience in entirely positive terms: she grows in understanding. But in their sin people can also suppress truth and grow more ignorant (Rom 1:18–23). Sally could increasingly doubt whether Ps 23:1a is true. She could be swayed by experiences in which she has not been conscious of God's care (e.g. Ps 43:2), or experiences in which she has selfishly expected God to do something that he did not do (Jas 4:2–3), or arguments that God does not really know her need, or arguments that the Bible is not divinely inspired, and so on. For one reason or another she could cease to be confident that Ps 23:1a is true. But destruction of understanding can also take place more indirectly. Sin may affect hermeneutics, self-understanding, and knowledge of God, and thereby subtly distort the way Sally goes about studying the text. Through a distorted concept of spirituality she might suppose that detailed study or meditation or memorization of a passage is "unspiritual" and that the Holy Spirit works best through an empty mind. Or in pride she may overestimate her understanding. Or under the influence of skeptical ideas she may doubt whether she can ever come to understand what a text is saying. Wrong ideas about God or

about herself will necessarily affect her interpretation, since every text must be interpreted in the light of what she knows about the author, what she knows about the reader, and what she knows about the subject-matter about which the text is speaking.

The interaction of understanding and sin is a deep and complex process, involving innumerable interlocking influences. Some non-Christians may demonstrate much knowledge about Psalm 23. There is nothing surprising about this state of affairs. No one escapes knowing God (Rom 1:21). Even the demons believe and shudder (Jas 2:19). The crucial question is not how much insight God has granted to us in some particular area, but whether we are friends or enemies of God. On the other hand, some non-Christians may know little or nothing. Their particular form of sin leads them to refuse to read the Bible, or to adopt a radical skepticism that evaporates the possibility of communicating truth, or to adopt a radical hermeneutic which discounts the possibility of any authoritative speech of God appearing in this world.

In all this situation, both growth in understanding and destruction of understanding take place under God's control. God gives people all the knowledge that they possess (Ps 94:10b; Job 32:8; Jas 1:17). All their knowledge derives from the store of all wisdom in Christ (Col 2:3). Contrariwise, as a judgment on sin, God "gives people over" to foolishness (Rom 1:18-32, especially 1:21-22).

14. *Types of hermeneutical circles*

Without calling things by their usual names, we have analyzed not one but several interlocking hermeneutical circles. One circle concerns growth in understanding the text. We interpret each part of the text in the light of the whole, so that there is a circular dependence of judgments about the parts and judgments about the whole. A second circle concerns growth in understanding the author. Our understanding of the author and his purposes depends on the text, while understanding the meaning of the text depends on previous judgments about the author. A third circle concerns growth in self-understanding. Interpretation of the text depends on

our previous experience, while our understanding of ourselves and our experience depends on the illumination that the text casts on who we are. If we wish, we can also delineate a fourth circle, in which knowledge of the world informs our judgments about the text and knowledge of the text may alter our judgments about the world.²³ In fact, these circles are not distinct but interlocking. Growth in understanding is simultaneously growth in understanding what the text means, what the author means, what the world means, and who the interpreter is. And, as many have observed, the circles are not really circles but spirals: there can be growth or destruction as well as simply maintenance of an existing state.

We may also speak of a fifth circle, the circle in which we self-consciously analyze what Sally is doing as she interprets. But we are not neutral onlookers. We ourselves are engaged in interpreting God's world, God's law, and God's design for ourselves. Or, to put it more pointedly, we are all so many Sallys. Sally can herself stand back and analyze hermeneutically what she is doing. She can then adjust what she is doing in her "naive" contact with the text by bringing to bear her hermeneutical standards. But her standards may also undergo adjustment as she sees more what texts are like, who God is who creates and governs the interpretive process, and who she is who is practicing interpretation. For example, suppose that in hermeneutical practice she has assumed that the task of interpretation is merely intellectual mastery of content, or that she has assumed that it is more spiritual not to use one's mind to study the Bible. Either of these hermeneutical biases might be overcome through deeper knowledge of God, deeper knowledge of the workings and intentions of biblical texts, and deeper knowledge of herself. In particular the hermeneutical biases might be overcome when a deep experience of God speaking to her in Psalm 23 makes her realize that there is more to reading the Bible than what she had supposed before.

Hermeneutical standards are "oughts," hence they too must derive from and be subject to God's law. Hermeneutical stan-

²³ This fourth circle was discussed above as a subdivision of the first circle, growth in understanding the text.

dards must embody the truth about the law, the facts, and the self. That is, they must express the universal rule-like obligations that require human beings to interpret responsibly (law); they must take account of what texts, language, and communication are like (facts); and they must take account of the particular limitations and predispositions that Sally has as an interpreter (self).

All these circles are related to the correlativity of law, world, and self. We always know what we know in the context of other things. Sally knows God through the created means of world and self; hence Sally increases in understanding as she interacts with God, world, and self. Any part of the world is itself understood only in context of the rest of the world, the self who knows the world, and God who governs the world with his law. Hence texts are interpreted by contexts. The circles are so many expressions of the implications of what it means to be a finite creature in the image of God.

At this point we can use the self as a perspective on the whole. All these circles are manifestations of a single circle, the circle of a growing self. Each act of interpretation changes Sally, and each change in Sally influences every subsequent act of interpretation. This circle expresses God's control over his image bearers. At every moment God exerts control over Sally and changes her. At every subsequent moment God as wise controller exerts control over Sally in harmony with the change he has controlled in the past. Sally's experience is not really a dialectic but a dialog, or better a communion between Father and daughter through the Word. God speaks to Sally in every moment and in everything ("I will be your God"). In response she interprets God ("You will be my people"). Because in speaking God controls Sally, impresses himself on her, and renews her in his image, she continually surpasses her past. Conversely, because God and his law are the same, Sally continually returns to interpreting the same beauty of God. As a servant of God subject to his law, she is herself the same through all the changes. Both continuity (the same law and the same Sally) and discontinuity (surpassing the past) belong together as implications of the Lordship of God over Sally and her history.

Because God is present everywhere, this pattern reoccurs at every scale: in long time spans and indefinitely short time spans, in superficial matters and in matters of infinite depth. The creation and the consummation, the individual depth of heart and the totality of the human race manifest God's control. God's control affects non-Christians as well as Christians, since in spite of non-Christians' desires they do not escape God's control and presence. It affects not only our reading of the Bible, but all of our interaction with the world, since the whole world is a product of God's word (Ps 33:6; Lam 3:37-38; Rom 1:20).

15. *Validation of philosophical hermeneutics*

Thus we have established the universality of the hermeneutical circle and the radical historicity of human existence. But we have done so in a nonstandard way, namely by appealing to God. Secular philosophers might object to bringing in such a "dogmatic" premise. They would observe that (1) such a premise cannot command universal assent and that (2) the appeal to dogmatic content is alien to the conditioned character of all human knowledge.

But actually, the real quandaries arise when we suppress the knowledge of God. Let us consider the two objections one at a time. The ideal of universal assent is a mythic ideal unless it is rooted in God's promise of the new Jerusalem. Genuine positive progress toward consensus in the truth takes place only through love, which we receive only in communion with God (1 John 4:7-21). Outside of fellowship with God and knowledge of his law, love turns into sentimentality or paternalism.²⁴

Next, what about the objection of dogmatism? How do we tell when an attitude, a presupposition, or a worldview is "dogmatic"? When should it be jettisoned or critically reformed? When and where is it valuable to be hermeneutically self-conscious? If everything is subject to doubt, how do we know that our consciousness of historicity is not an illusion

²⁴ Herbert Schlossberg, *Idols for Destruction* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1983).

conditioned by our particular tradition? What are our standards here?

To answer such questions we must return to the same basic truths as before. We are indeed able to transcend or surpass ourselves, to see our own self-consciousness, to see ourselves in a larger historical setting, and to arrive at universal truths. We can do so because we are made in God's image. Because we know God and his wisdom, we have a degree of understanding of larger wholes to which we belong. We are finite and simultaneously we know the One who is infinite. In fact, only in knowing God do we know our own finiteness. But when we refuse to acknowledge God, our sense of transcendence shrinks to an invisible mathematical point and becomes empty. Our very self-mastery becomes a curse, because we become our own standard which is the same as having no standard. Human life disintegrates into a million possible standards. There becomes no way to mediate the infinitude of a universal claim (law) and the finitude of the human being (self). Thus the debates over criteria for hermeneutical criticism can find no resolution. If we posit the ultimacy of human limitations, the very description of those limitations becomes merely formal, unable to provide criteria for discrimination (as Karl-Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas fear). At bottom we become relativist and subjectivist. Or if we posit the ultimacy of critical criteria that contain specific substantive content, we deify the criteria (as Gadamer fears). Their universality rests on dogmatic assumption. Other people and other ages may deny them, and we ourselves hold them to be universal in apparent violation of our own limitations.

16. *Naivete and critical distance*

What role then do we give to critical analysis in interpretation? Paul Ricoeur speaks here of a hermeneutical arch containing three phases, a first naivete, an adoption of critical distance in order to explain a text, and a second post-critical naivete.²⁵ Without following Ricoeur in detail, we can say that

²⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967) 356; id., *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1981) 164. But there are considerable difficulties in discerning just what

several kinds of distance and several kinds of "belongingness" or naivete characterize interpretation. In a broad sense, everything in creation has distance from everything else, because there is no exhaustive understanding or exhaustive communion between creatures. Conversely, everything belongs to us and is near to us naively, even before an act of critical analysis. As image bearers of God we can understand something about everything through our knowledge and communion with God. Sin introduces an additional complexity by creating both ethical distance from God and belongingness to Satan's kingdom. In some ways both distance and belongingness must characterize our entire situation as creatures and as sinners, including our acts of interpretation. Interpretation and coming to understand something overcome epistemic distance without abolishing it in exhaustive insight.

But let us be more specific. One kind of distance arises when Sally feels that the text as it stands does not make sense. Her puzzlement may have a variety of sources. She is at a loss as to what kind of person the author is or what are his purposes, or how to make sense of the text semantically, or how it can possibly be true of the world that she knows, or to whom it is addressed, or how it can be relate to what she knows about herself. Another kind of distance arises when she analyzes hermeneutically what she has been doing in interpretation. This may or may not be occasioned by an experience of one or more of the other kinds of distance. A second naivete in one sense will occur when she returns to studying

Ricoeur is talking about, whether one phenomenon or several. To begin with, Ricoeur's three phases are neither linearly successive to one another nor circular. (See Thomas W. McCormick, "Interdisciplinary Contributions to the Theory of Reading" [Ph.D. dissertation, University of Texas at Arlington, 1985] 244-62.) In addition, Ricoeur analyzes five or six kinds of "distanciation" characterizing written texts over against oral communication (Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* [Forth Worth, TX: Texas Christian University, 1976] 25-37; id., *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 139-44; McCormick, "Interdisciplinary Contributions," 57-66). A close analysis shows that all six characterize oral communication to some degree, and the degree to which they characterize written communication varies enormously with the circumstances, the type of text, and the stance of the reader. In light of what we have already observed, we can also say that Ricoeur is presenting merely a secularized form of the structure of creation, redemption, and consummation.

the text after her self-conscious hermeneutical reflection. Another type of naivete occurs if she works through her problems and questions about the author, about the semology of the text, or about the text's relation to the world that she knows. Then she is ready not simply to puzzle over an unknown quantity in the text, but to read it as something enabling her to meet the author, to enhance her understanding of the world, and to transform herself. In addition we might say that a third type of naivete enters if her hermeneutical reflection leads her to reject modern assumptions about interpretation—for instance, the assumption that God cannot speak to her in fixed verbal propositions in a text.

Ricoeur sometimes has in mind something more specific than any of these cases. In the modern West, the growth of historicism (including the historical-critical method), Marxism, Freudianism, the sociology of knowledge, structuralism, and deconstructionism provides hermeneutical critical tools that enable people to notice previously hidden aspects of texts and that simultaneously inhibit them from seriously hearing what the texts have to say after they have been analyzed. Ricoeur wants to retain the insights generated by the critical distance that these methods involve, yet to be able to hear what the texts say after the critical analysis is finished.

Ricoeur's concerns are valid and helpful. In one sense, the use of the above methods are simply instances of the oscillation between study of the text and hermeneutical study of what one has been doing in studying the text. But two warnings must be included. First, to some degree the above methods discount, deny, or prescind from the fact that whole people are reading texts and being changed in enormously complex ways. To the degree that they do so, they reductionistically falsify the very reality of the process of communication, and so must inevitably distort our judgments about texts (though sometimes by causing us to concentrate on one aspect of communication they may provide limited insight). It is not enough to affirm as a matter of faith that we can somehow get back to a second naivete. If we ever leave behind a knowledge of the wholeness of human communication, we get darkness rather than profundity. Second, all the modern methods are fruits of the Enlightenment assumption that God

cannot appear or speak in the phenomenal world. We must therefore apply to these methods themselves a hermeneutic of suspicion. We must become suspicious first of all of the effects of sin and the desire for human autonomy. Do people use these methods in order to find sophisticated ways to escape God and deny his presence? Why have these methods typically served to keep people back from a second naivete in which they read texts seriously and respectfully? The methods appear to promise definitive redeeming insight into human beings' position in the world. They promise renewed dominion and freedom. But because these methods do not submit themselves to God and his wisdom (1 Cor 1:18–25), the dominion and freedom of which they speak are tailored to make human beings their own gods. People who have achieved godlike liberation need no longer submit themselves to any other people, particularly since the others are still in bondage.

But the hopes of liberation through these methods are illusory. All of us are in bondage to sin apart from Christ. Freudian interpretation takes place in bondage to the desire to kill the Father. Marxist interpretation takes place in bondage to an ideology that conceals the true structure of the functioning of the means of production. That is, the ideology conceals the reality of God's ownership in order oppressively to appropriate work, possessions, and thinking itself under the exclusive power of a revolutionary leadership disclaiming obligations to God.

We may go on. Rationalist interpretation takes place in bondage to the desire for godlike, absolute human control of meaning. And so it irrationally refuses to listen to what every author and every text subconsciously says, namely that the intention of an author and the meaning of a text exist only by virtue of communion with the unfathomably infinite meaning and intention of the absolute personal God imaged in them. Subjectivist interpretation takes place in bondage to the desire to master oneself without God. And so it objectivistically claims to know when it has achieved definitive insight in self-understanding as opposed to deception or suppression.

Structuralist interpretation takes place in bondage to thinking structures of Satan's deception. The assumption that God

is not present in all meaning closes the mind to the personal character of meaning and creates ignorance of the structures relating meaning to God. Deconstructionist interpretation takes place in bondage to a piece of undeconstructed Western metaphysics. Namely, when deconstructionism exposes the desire of Western metaphysics to satisfy hunger for God with false "presence," it does not deconstruct the underlying motivating denial, the denial that hunger is satisfied through the life of Jesus Christ, true man and true God (John 6:32-40).

The very insights of hermeneutical self-consciousness can snare people in their pride. Sally could take pride in her hermeneutical insight. She could imagine that her own self-criticism is sufficient to free her from misunderstanding. So she would make out of the process of hermeneutical self-reflection a definitive means of purification. She would have subtly shifted from redemption through Christ to redemption through hermeneutical insight. She would be relying on herself and not on God.

Such a procedure will not work. We can never discern the distinction between self-reliance and reliance on God merely by better hermeneutics but by humble submission to Christ and the working of his Spirit, sometimes operating in ways that we cannot anticipate. Modern philosophical hermeneutics fails most deeply here in not seeing the idolatrous foolishness of its autosoteric desires. Claiming to be wise in self-consciousness, it has missed the foolishness of the cross (1 Cor 1:18-31), and so also missed the *sina qua non* of self-understanding (Prov 1:7).

Intellectual bondage is no less severe than other forms of bondage. It is bondage to darkness (John 3:18-21) and to the power of the evil one (1 John 5:19). To this bondage Jesus Christ is the only remedy (John 14:6). "For there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). But accepting such a remedy destroys human pride and wisdom (1 Cor 1:29-31). With men this acceptance is impossible, whatever hermeneutic they use (Luke 18:27). People are willing to abandon pride only if they are made willing by the control of God (John 6:44,65) revealing the beauty of the Son (John 1:14).

I do not mean that Christians should cease interacting with philosophical hermeneutics. But we must be aware of the ways in which the spirit of autonomy and apostasy have deeply penetrated the modern discussion.

17. *The omnipresence of God in human interpretation*

We have reflected on interpretation itself and on the self-consciousness of the hermeneutical principles that bear on interpretation. It is fitting to close by returning once again to our main concern, God's Lordship in interpretation. God's Lordship is the necessary presupposition not only of interpretation of the Bible but interpretation of all human communication.

The facts of human utterances are intelligible only as utterances of persons rather than random sounds or marks. Persons in turn are intelligible only as beings made in the image of God. Their created structure and relation to God distinguish their sounds from the roaring of the sea or the crash of thunder. Without knowledge of God, persons disappear into facts in the world, as in structuralism. Or else the world disappears into the self, as in solipsism. But because we know persons against the background of knowing God, we treat their sounds as sounds from people who have a derivative, finite authority, control, and personal presence. Thus all of interpretation must follow the patterns delineated above. These patterns are nothing other than the law of God for his created world and his image bearers in the world. Whenever we interpret human communication, we confront the realities of God's law for us, and we engage in interpretation of God's word, his wisdom governing creation (Ps 33:6; Prov 1:7; 8:1-36).

It is fashionable in theological circles to hope that maybe some way may be found to make intelligible the idea of divine revelation in the Bible by stretching the frameworks for interpreting human communication that have grown up from the Enlightenment. Actually, the converse is the case. Only by rooting ourselves in the knowledge of God in Christ, provided by his communication to us in the infallible Bible, may

we truly understand human communication and how to analyze it.

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CHRIST THE ONLY SAVIOR OF INTERPRETATION

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THE *Westminster Theological Journal* has long provided a platform for creatively investigating implications of Reformed theology. In this article, I endeavor to continue the tradition by sketching some implications of Reformed soteriology for biblical hermeneutics.

Since human interpretation is corrupted by sin, it no less than other human activities stands in need of redemption. Interpretive sins no less than other sins can find a remedy only in the sacrifice of Christ (Acts 4:12). Hence we must affirm that Christ is the Savior of interpretation. We acknowledge this truth indirectly whenever we speak of the indispensable work of the Holy Spirit in illumining to us the message of Scripture (1 Cor 2:14-16). Yet this work of the Holy Spirit can never be independent of the work of Christ in dying and rising in order to save us. Hence it is worthwhile to make explicit ways in which Christ redeems our human interpretation, as one aspect of his redemption of the total creation (Rom 8:18-27; Col 1:20).¹

We are accustomed to thinking of biblical interpretation as Christocentric. Biblical theologians correctly observe that the NT use of the OT is consistently Christ-centered in character (note Luke 24:25-27, 44-49). "No matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ" (2 Cor 1:20). Certainly this conviction should affect our hermeneutical procedure: we ought to come to any particular passage of the Bible asking

¹ I assume that the Bible consistently teaches not universal salvation but salvation of the cosmos—that is, a total world-system and a renewed human race united in Jesus Christ. This salvation includes the aspect of purification that takes place when God finally and eternally cuts off unclean individuals (Rev 21:8, 27; 2 Thess 1:8-10). See Benjamin B. Warfield, "God's Immeasurable Love," in *The Saviour of the World* (reprint; Cherry Hill, NJ: Mack, 1972) 69-87.

the question of how the passage speaks about Christ. In a real sense, Christ is the central content of the Bible's message.

But Christ is the center of interpretation in at least two more senses besides this familiar one. First, he is the Lord of interpretation. As the omnipotent God and the eternal Word he is not only the author and speaker of Scripture, but also the creator, the providential ruler, and the standard for every step in every person's interaction with the Bible.²

Second, Christ is our redeemer with respect to interpretive sinfulness. He is the substitute, sin-bearer, and purifier for our interpretive rebellion. On this second point I propose to concentrate. For convenience, I will employ the categories and perspectives developed in my earlier article on God's Lordship.³

1. *Christ as Savior in relation to divine authority, control, and presence*

All human interpretation takes place in subjection to God's authority, control, and presence. But sin perverts interpretation because sinners hate this subjection to God. Our sin corrupts our relationship to God and thereby calls forth God's judgement. We remain under God's authority (Deut 32:39), but in sin we seek to set up our own rival, counterfeit authorities. We remain under God's control (Prov 21:1), but in sin we seek to have exhaustive control of ourselves. We remain under the scrutiny of God's presence (Ps 51:4; 139:7-13), but in sin we seek to hide ourselves from him. Hence God's authority impinges on us as judicial condemnation; God's control operates on us to punish and destroy us; God's presence in blessing is withdrawn, and he is present in cursing as an enemy to war against us and terrify us (e.g., Deut 28:15-68).

Christ saves us from our desperate lostness. He is the eternal God who has God's own authority, control, and presence to save us. He becomes man, subjecting himself to our misery, and takes away our lostness by bearing it himself on the cross. We can explain Christ's work in terms of reconciliation to

² I have explored some implications of this Lordship in an earlier article, Vern Sheridan Poythress, "God's Lordship in Interpretation," *WTJ* 50 (1988) 27-64.

³ *Ibid.*

God's authority, control, and presence. Christ reconciles God's authority to us by bearing judicial condemnation. By his vindication in the resurrection we receive God's authoritative pronouncement that we are justified.

Next, Christ reconciles God's control to us by utterly submitting to God, dying in weakness and desolation. Therefore we are not destroyed but made alive by God's power at work in Christ's resurrection.

Finally, Christ reconciles God's presence to us by being alienated from God's presence, forsaken by God (Matt 27:46). Through Christ's resurrection and ascension we ascend to the heavenly places with him (Eph 2:6).

In sum, in the cross and the resurrection Christ definitively reasserts God's authority, control, and presence over a fallen world. He asserts God's utter goodness by blessing and saving in the midst of the wickedness of the people who crucify him. He asserts God's utter control over evil by fulfilling the prophecies of the OT. In addition, his own predictions are fulfilled in the very midst of the worst crime of human history (Acts 2:23; 4:26-28). He asserts God's assured presence to the end of time by manifesting his glory to the world in the resurrection, the foundational act that has power to fill the world with God's glory.

Hence Christ's life, death, and resurrection bear directly on every human act of interpretation. First, every step and every act of interpretation takes place in the context of standards, whose ultimate reference point is divine authority. Only through the effect of Christ's work do we receive approval from his standards. Second, every act of interpretation takes place under the control of God. And only through the effect of Christ's work does God's control renew us rather than destroy us. Moreover, only through Christ do we subjectively cease to have the sinful impulses to replace God's authority with our counterfeits, to throw over the bonds of God's control, and to hide from God's presence. Third, every act of interpretation takes place before the presence of God. Only through the effect of Christ's work does God become our friend, and the blessed intimacy of his presence is reestablished.

These conclusions about the implications of Christ's work apply preeminently in the case of interpretation of the Bible. When we are interpreting the Bible, we are interpreting God's own speech to us, so that the influence of our sin is most prominent. Hence only through Christ can we come to interpret the Bible rightly. But the implications also hold in the case of interpretation of all human communication. Human communication derives from people who are made in God's image. As God's image, human authors have limited but real authority, control, and presence. Hence we are able to say analogous things concerning divine and human communication. Moreover, love of God and love of neighbor go together. Hatred of God is the ultimate source of all human enmity. Sin will therefore affect interpretation of human writings in a manner analogous to the effect on divine writing in the Bible.⁴

To many people these claims must seem unbelievable. Surely the situation is not that bad, they say. We have only to look around us. Many non-Christians achieve creditable and valuable interpretations of human writings and of the Bible as well. To this complacency there are several replies.

First, the subtlety of a sin does not imply its triviality. Some of the worst sins—hypocrisy, for example—are the most subtle. What to the human eye may seem like a tiny, almost undetectable deviation from ethical perfection may be a symptom of raging wickedness in the heart (see Matt 5:21–42).

Second, no sinner, however violent and fanatical, escapes God (Ps 139:7–12; Heb 4:12–13; Acts 17:28). The inescapable knowledge of God (Rom 1:20) causes people in spite of themselves to acknowledge truth—sometimes a truth that a Christian has overlooked and can profit from.

Third, the sacrifice of Christ causes benefits to flow even to those who are not saved. The Bible nowhere speaks directly of these broader benefits, but we can produce an indirect argument. The promise made to Noah concerning the preservation of the world is a response to Noah's sacrificial offering (Gen 8:20–22). The sacrificial offering can have no ultimate

⁴ In terms of older categories of systematic theology, I am simply reasserting the doctrine of total (radical) depravity.

value before God unless it faintly points forward to the efficacious sacrifice of Christ. Moreover, the preservation of the world in a broad sense involves the good gifts that God gives to unbelievers such as in Acts 14:17. Hence all good things that unbelievers temporarily enjoy in this life flow from the goodness of God in Christ. We could also argue simply from general principle. When God restrains his judgement against those who deserve it (Luke 13:1-5), it must be because he has found a way to be merciful for a time, and that mercy can harmonize with perfect holiness only because of Christ's suffering. From these arguments we conclude that we owe the achievements of unbelieving interpretation to the broader implications of the work of Christ.⁵

Fourth, no one can fully assess how much the practice of interpretation in the Western world is still living on "borrowed capital" from the Christian world view of its past. What may happen once this capital is consumed? From where will the culture obtain standards for interpretation? Though a few voices of warning and despair are raised, most secularists do not realize the abyss of interpretive arbitrariness and demonic deception into which they may gradually slip. If one looks at consumerist propaganda, Nazi propaganda, and Communist propaganda, one gets some foretaste. But abysses of Hinduism, sadism, occultism, Satanism, and animism lurk beyond.

The exalted character of human beings as the image of God becomes their terrible curse when they apostasize. In a horrible way they do become like God, knowing good and evil (Gen 3:22). That is, human beings who are sinners continue to image God, but now in a horrible way. They pretend to determine good and evil by their own standards, just as God determines good and evil by the standards of his own divine being. Moreover, human beings exercise a dominion that is an image of God's dominion. In this dominion their own idolatrous determination rules themselves and all their works. Once they repudiate God, they have no anchorage except in

⁵ Here I am simply applying the Reformed doctrine of common grace to the question of human interpretation. See, for example, the penetrating discussion of Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955) 155-78; id., *Common Grace* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1947).

the overwhelming judgement of God making them slaves to Satan (1 John 5:19). They are capable of indefinite degeneration and destruction, limited by the bounds of hell. We do not dream of what is possible for human perversity to do in interpretation.

2. *Christ as Savior of the self, the law, and the world*

Now let us consider how Christ accomplishes the salvation of various aspects of interpretation. Every act of interpretation is simultaneously interpretation of oneself, interpretation of the law or standard, and interpretation of the world.⁶

It is easy to see how Christ is the Savior of the self. Christ provides the forgiveness of our sins and the Father translates us from the kingdom of Satan into Christ's kingdom (Col 1:13). We are renewed in the image of Christ and made sons of God (Rom 8:29; Gal 4:5). All interpretation is in a sense necessarily interpretation of one's own thoughts and impressions. How is this interpretation changed by Christ? Having died and risen with Christ, we are new people whose own thoughts and impressions have been subject to death and resurrection. They are the same yet not the same, for they have been judged, what is sinful has been crucified (Gal 5:24), and they have undergone renewal by the resurrection power of Christ.

Christ is also the Savior of the law. First of all we may speak of the law in an objective sense, that is, the standard of God governing our activity of interpretation. Christ comes into the world as the truth, as the very embodiment of God's standard. But people reject this truth. The truth of God is crucified. Christ's crucifixion is thus the archetypal accomplishment of that crucifixion of God's truth to which we all incline in our sin. But then Christ is raised. Thus the truth of God is vindicated and established. Christ releases us from condemnation for having crucified God's truth in our previous interpretation (justification). Christ also bring us into real (though imperfect) conformity with God's standard (sanctification).

⁶ See Poythress, "God's Lordship in Interpretation," 34-39.

We begin to conform our interpretive acts to God's norms instead of violating them.

Second, we may consider the law from the point of view of what the interpreter actually knows. Interpreters in fellowship with Christ come to know Christ's purity, and hence have a renewed knowledge of the purity required of them in interpretation. Knowing Christ the truth, they are open to the knowledge of the subordinate truths of the text. Through the power of Christ's death they daily die to self, repudiating sinful desires for perverse substitutes for God's law. Through the power of Christ's resurrection they daily come alive to God in celebrating the wisdom of God's law.

Next, Christ is the Savior of the world. Sinners desire to be like God, and this desire inclines them to sovereignly dictate the facts, including the facts that confront us in interpretation. Christ in submitting himself to the facts of his earthly existence accomplishes the healing of our desires to set aside the facts. Moreover, as we have observed, the broader benefits of Christ's sacrifice include the preservation of the world and the giving of gifts even to unbelievers. We are provided with the resources of textual copying, lexicons, and historical information through the benefits of Christ.

In the previous article on Lordship I argued that non-Christian interpretation tends to create idols and thereby produce tensions between law, world, and self.⁷ Rationalism, empiricism, and subjectivism in interpretation arise from an idolatrous absolutization of law, world, and self, respectively. Against this background, we can simply say that Christ came to save us from these idolatries. Let us make explicit the meaning of his salvation.

Christ was crucified because of the Pharisees' idolization of law, their human standard of tradition. But by his death the power of idolized law was broken, and even what was temporary in character in the Mosaic law was abolished (Eph 2:15). The law henceforth must always be the "law of Christ" (1 Cor 9:21). Even in the OT the law was never a rationalized abstraction. But since the resurrection and ascension of Christ his law and standard is inseparable from the personal presence

⁷ *Ibid.*, 37-39.

of Christ and the historical facts of his incarnation and life in the world.

Christ was crucified because of the empiricist pragmatism at work in Pilate's concern to keep intact Roman peace and order and his own position (Luke 23:1-25). But now we must live in the light of the supremely empirical facts of the crucifixion and the resurrection of Christ. These are not bare facts or neutral facts, but facts inseparable from the plan of God and the abiding presence of the crucified and resurrected Christ who now rules over all the empirical kingdoms of the world. Moreover, a thoroughgoing attention to facts includes attention to the fact of the certainty of coming judgement of Christ. Only what is done in service to Christ will stand the "pragmatic" test of judgement by fire.

Christ was crucified because of the subjective emotivism of the crowds who were stirred up to demand his crucifixion and the release of Barabbas. As a result, Christ demonstrated on the cross the supreme subjective depth of his love for us. His love is not mere unbridled subjectivity, but obedience to the Father and to his plan. As the risen one Christ pours out his love and demands of us a love that is not a contentless gush of woozy feeling, but obedience to his law, his commandments, and his person (John 14:15-24).

All non-Christian accounts of hermeneutics necessarily fail at this point. In failing to acknowledge God as the source of law, world, and self, they open themselves to idolatry and so contribute to the deepest hermeneutical difficulties and alienations rather than solving them. Non-Christians examining hermeneutics may be admirably sensitive to human weakness and perversion in many respects. Frequently, it seems, they have achieved much greater intellectual penetration than Christians. But by refusing to call human corruption sin, they obscure its roots. In addition, they are blind to the only remedy. Growth in autonomous hermeneutical self-consciousness and sophistication never reveals the radical character of sin or its remedy, but only spreads the cancer of sinful pride. Human beings who have made themselves like gods (Gen 3:22) cannot rectify their mistake, because their gods control their interpretation. Only the foolishness of the cross can save.

3. *Christ as Savior of meaning, personal fellowship, and worldly application*

The word of God in Scripture expresses propositional meaning, confronts us with the presence of the person of God himself, and exercises control over us and over the world. In fact, these three functions of Scripture each characterize the whole of Scripture: they are perspectives on one another. But they become a curse to us rather than a blessing apart from the work of Christ.

First, the propositional meaning of Scripture is a witness against us (Deut 31:26–29). Its truthfulness witnesses to our untruth, its statements of fact witness against our denial or contradiction of facts, its pure ethics witnesses against our failures and compromises. We do not wish to come to the light, lest our deeds should be exposed (John 3:19–20). In conformity with the intrinsically fissiparous character of evil, rebellion against truth takes many forms. Some of us may hypocritically acknowledge the truth in the hope that we will conceal our lack of obedience and conformity. Others may try to destroy meaning altogether. And truly there is no meaning apart from God's creation, or apart from his wisdom and plan that has decreed each fact and assigned to each thing its role. Hence modern people feel the malaise of what seems to be a meaningless world, a meaningless self, and empty or meaningless standards. Christ came as the truth to save us from our propensity to untruth. He came as the way and the life to save us from our meaninglessness and evaporating morals. He was crucified and so underwent an "absurd" destruction. He descended into the meaninglessness of the absence of the Father. We too will descend into the meaninglessness of hell, or else find our meaning in the life of another, in the resurrection life of Christ's reign.

In the beginning Adam and Eve found meaning in all the world through their fellowship with God. All the world contained facts ordained by God for their blessing. They had no need of reconciliation from sin. But now, when we are sinners, we will not find the secret of any meaning at all in the world except if our hatred of the glory of God is removed through Christ's substitution.

Next, the word of God confronts us with God's presence, the presence of personal fellowship. But we can never experience his presence in neutral fashion. We are either a friend of God or an enemy. We are made uncomfortable and we grow in hatred, or we are made admirers and we grow in love. God came to earth and become supremely present to us in Jesus Christ. In Christ's crucifixion the world expressed its hatred of God's presence and declared its enmity. Echoing this supreme hatred, unbelievers in interpreting Scripture react in fundamentally the same way. But Christ's crucifixion also means the salvation of the world. Christ overcomes enmity with God and establishes friendship, because he has borne God's enmity and wrath on the cross. He has suffered God's abandonment and hatred (Matt 27:46), in order that in Christ we might be indwelt by the Father and the Son.

These facts apply to the interpretation of Scripture. Christ by the power of his death takes on himself the enmity of God, and opens the way for God to come to us as we interpret Scripture as our divine lover and friend. Christ by the power of his resurrection brings us into heaven as we interpret Scripture, and we meet God in person without dying.

Next, the word of God controls us. God's word hardens us, darkens us, and announces our death when we hear in unbelief (Isa 6:9-10; Mark 4:11-12; 2 Cor 2:15-16). By God's prophetic word Christ was put to death, and the world became dark (Luke 23:44), in order that through Christ's resurrection the message of the gospel might come as a power of life (2 Cor 2:5-6; 4:6). When we are united to Christ, we experience the word of God as gospel, as saving life, because Christ's own resurrection life is not only announced but imparted (John 15:7-8, 10).

4. *Christ as Savior of author, discourse, and audience*

To interpret responsibly, we must pay attention to author, discourse, and audience. That is, we must attend to the particularities of the discourse we are interpreting, we must bear in mind that the discourse expresses the intention of a particular author, and we must bear in mind that the author intended to address a particular audience in a particular sit-

uation to persuade, motivate, or command them. The same sequence of words can mean different things if used by a different author in a different situation.

Christ comes as the light of the world to restore and renew our interpretation of authors, discourses, and audiences. Though all these areas are linked, let us consider each separately.

First, Christ is the Savior of our interpretation of authors. His saving power preeminently affects our knowledge of God, the divine author of Scripture and the source of all general revelation. Only through Christ is our knowledge of God renewed. "No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and no one knows who the Father is except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Luke 10:21). Our knowledge comes supremely through Christ's death and resurrection. "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know who I am and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me" (John 8:28). Since all interpretation must continually adjust itself to what an author is likely to have meant, all interpretation of the Bible, and subordinately all interpretation of general revelation, must adjust itself in the light of the Son's revelation of the Father on the cross. In the light of the cross and the resurrection we understand the seriousness of God's assertions of his justice, his holiness, his power, his mercy, and his love. Thus, only through the cross do we really understand what Scripture says as the speech of this God who has revealed himself in Christ.

Christ also renews our knowledge of human authors, including not only the human authors of the books of the Bible but authors of uninspired writings. To see how, we must first appreciate some of the difficulties. All interpretation of authors presupposes a knowledge of human nature. We must know something about the similarity of other human beings to ourselves, in order to have confidence that they are talking about experiences and insights in terms with which we are familiar. We must share at some level common institutions of marriage, family, work, and religious cult, a sense of right and wrong, of justice and injustice. But we must also be aware of the possibility of deep differences between different human

beings, lest we simply project our own ideas onto another person. We must know something of differences among male and female, young and old, wise and foolish, worshipers of Yahweh or of Krishna or of Mammon, participants in an industrial technological culture, a nomadic culture, an agricultural tribal culture, or an ancient city culture. We must know what human beings are like in their depths. But how do we obtain knowledge of human nature? Are its depths to be revealed by psychoanalysis, or existentialism, or biblical teaching about the creation and fall? How do we know what is possible here, when people do not necessarily know themselves? How do we make judgements about human intention, if such intention includes not only the differences of human beings but the depths of the unconscious?

We may naively suppose that there is agreement among thinking people about these matters. But why should we ignore the controversies in philosophical hermeneutics that touch on the nature of human beings? Why should we ignore the kind of perversion of understanding human nature that arises in behaviorism, or in Communism, or in Hitler, or in Marquis de Sade, or in the Pharaoh who opposed Moses? People with ideologies like these interpret virtually all human communication in a manner globally different from what we approve. Who is to say what human nature is?

People who no longer acknowledge their creatureliness and who bury their sin are self-deceived and perverted in knowledge of human nature. They cannot rescue themselves, neither can they even define themselves or find the meaning of humanity. There is no way back to unfallen Adam. Even the Bible gives us only a small amount of information about Adam. We can renew our knowledge of human nature only by anchoring ourselves in what human nature will be, through the man Jesus Christ. As perfect man, his knowledge of himself and of human nature is unperverted. Through him we see that now, after the fall, our purpose as human beings is to serve God through the renewal that comes from his death and resurrection. The destiny of human nature is to worship God in being conformed to the image of his Son (Rom 8:29). Such worship reaches a climax when we receive a body in the likeness of the man from heaven (1 Cor 15:49). Only in union

with Christ's death and resurrection do we any longer understand what human beings are. The implicit intention of every Christian author must be to promote the reflection of the glory of Christ in us. The implicit intention of every non-Christian author must be to suppress the light (John 3:19–20). Thus, only through Christ can we understand authorial intention.

Second, Christ is the Savior of our interpretation of discourses. Self-centeredness tempts us to overwhelm texts and read into them what we want, rather than respect their objective factuality. We make a god of our own desires. Even the ancient textual copyists were tempted by their own desires to "improve" on the text. This impulse needs redemption through crucifixion of the flesh (Gal 5:24). In addition, as I have already argued, the whole idea of meaningfulness presupposes a context of God-given order, including the orderly structure of human language. Some instances of modern deconstructionist interpretation make it plain that stable meaning can disappear when the presence of God is denied.

How, then, do we find a remedy for the abuses of human language and discourse? Such abuse is remedied by the abuse that was suffered by Christ the Word. From the beginning to the end of his life he was misunderstood (John 1:10–11; 3:4; 4:11; 6:52, 66; 12:37–40; Matt 27:47). The destructive power of human language was typified in the accusations and taunts about the "King of the Jews" during Jesus' crucifixion. Such destructive power is remedied in part by the fact that the gospel records place those taunts in the new narrative context of the resurrection, in which they speak better than they knew. The gospel records cause even those words to serve the purposes of God.

Third, Christ is the Savior of our interpretation of audiences and their situations. As we have observed, our interpretation is influenced by our understanding of the intended audience and their situation. As before, interpretation of the audience presupposes knowledge of human nature. But now the most prominent issues concern the profitability of discourses and the responsibilities of audiences. Our evaluations must be based on the standards of God and God's goal for human

existence. Christ as the man from heaven is both our standard and our goal.

Not only the persons of the audience, but the situation of the audience, and what the audience is to do with the situation, depend on knowledge imparted through Christ. We must know what is the proper goal for the situation. Our interpretation thus depends on our vision of the new Jerusalem as the final situation, and the light of the Lamb as the defining component of that situation (Rev 21:22–23).⁸

5. *Christ as Savior of the dynamics of interpretation*

Let us see how the framework developed above can explicate the process of interpretation in a particular case. Let us suppose that Sally (a Christian) is studying Ps 23:1a, “The LORD is my shepherd.” Sally grows in understanding of the content of the passage by integrating it with the surrounding literary context and the context of general revelational facts about shepherds and sheep. In doing so, Sally overcomes not only ignorance characterizing all finite creatures, but sinfulness resisting facts. Sally may have sinful pride that causes her to think that there is nothing to be learned about shepherds or sheep, or that there is nothing to be learned about a passage like this one that is already familiar, or that there is nothing to be learned from a passage from the “inferior” revelation of the OT. She may have a distorted otherworldliness that makes her think that shepherds and sheep are not worthy of attention, or that makes her think that it is not worthwhile asking about the applications of this passage to mundane affairs like her use of money and her attitude toward her work. God overcomes the sinfulness of her pride by the humiliation of Christ in his death, and overcomes her false form of otherworldliness by the worldliness of Christ’s death and the tangibility of his resurrection body.

⁸ From within the liberal/modernist tradition, the emphasis on the importance of history and its goal is especially prominent in the writings of Pannenberg. See, e.g., Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Kingdom of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969); id., *Human Nature, Election, and History* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977); id., *Basic Questions in Theology* (3 vols.; Philadelphia: SCM, 1970–73).

We may also view the same process as a process of understanding God. Through Christ's salvation Sally grows in understanding the God who speaks Ps 23:1a. Suppose that previously Sally had thought of God only as a teacher, or only as a helper in immediate difficulty. These inadequate thoughts had caused a truncated interpretation of the implications of Ps 23:1a. The effect sprang partly from sinful blindness that caused her to retreat from the full-orbed impact of God's fellowship. As Sally reads, Christ overcomes her misconceptions by removal of fear and retreat, because he himself suffered ultimate "retreat" from God in his death.

Next, the same process is a process in which Sally grows in understanding herself. Through sinfulness she has resisted the humiliation involved in being compared to sheep, or resisted the truth about the incompetence of sheep to look after themselves. She has desired to be autonomous and so resisted the implications about comfort, guidance, and nourishment in the psalm. Christ gives her true self-knowledge because in the cross he shows the deep dimensions of Sally's sin and in the resurrection he gives her the confidence to look at her sin without shrinking, because of the promise of new life. And so Sally puts to death her former resistance.

Much of this process may take place without Sally consciously being aware of all the ways in which the work of Christ is implicated in her growth. But Sally's subjective consciousness is not the only measure of what is going on. In view of God's holiness, the seriousness of God's curse on sin, and the frightfulness of God's giving people over to evil (Rom 1:18-32), we know that Christ's work must be the objective basis by which Sally overcomes sin at any point in her life. It is so even when Sally is not self-consciously aware that she is overcoming sin, much less self-consciously aware of how and why she does so.

6. *Christ as Savior of the hermeneutical circle*

As I observed in my earlier article, Sally's growth in understanding involves several instances of hermeneutical circles.⁹ Her understanding of any one passage (Ps 23:1a) is

⁹ Poythress, "God's Lordship in Interpretation," 54-63.

affected by the surrounding passages (Psalm 23 as a whole; the Book of Psalms; the Bible as a whole); her understanding of God is affected by her previous understanding of God; her understanding of herself is affected by her previous understanding of herself; and all these influence one another. We who are analyzing Sally are ourselves like her. Our self-conscious hermeneutical reflection is still one more circular influence. Hence our sinfulness in each aspect also contributes to the continuation of sinfulness in all the aspects. The radical nature of human depravity means that sin contaminates every aspect of human life. The hermeneutical circle simply traces ways in which such contamination operates.

In this situation, hermeneutical self-consciousness can be an instrument that we use to discover, criticize, and root out sin. But it can be so only if our own self-consciousness is purified by the work of Christ. In other words, our hermeneutical reflection must itself be an instance of "working out our own salvation in fear and trembling, because God is at work in us both to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Phil 2:12-13). On the other hand, hermeneutical self-consciousness can easily become a way of saving ourselves instead of believing in God's salvation. Then it becomes a curse. From this curse as well Christ came to save us. Christ in his death suffered the destruction of his own understanding (Matt 27:46) in order that in his resurrection he might communicate to us perfect wisdom (Luke 24:45). Christ's cry of dereliction in Matt 27:46 is so deep that it is not exhaustively analyzable. But we can say that Christ's suffering included great intellectual and emotional distress, not merely physical pain. As a man he ceased to understand himself, because in his intellectual agony he did not comprehensively understand the action of God toward him. By contrast, in his resurrection he perfectly understands himself, because out the fullness of Messianic accomplishment and wisdom he communicates what all the Scriptures say about him (Luke 24:44-45). Christ undergoes, as it were, a hermeneutical death and resurrection with respect to his understanding of himself and the OT, in order that we may be saved from our hermeneutical sin.

7. *Conclusion*

The fundamental implication of these reflections is similar to that of my earlier reflections on God's Lordship in interpretation. Just as there is no metaphysical interpretive standpoint free of the Lordship of God, and just as no moment in interpretation escapes his exhaustive mastery, so no human standpoint is free of the conflict of sin and redemption, and no moment in interpretation escapes the penetrating influence of our relation to Christ's life, death, and resurrection. There is no neutrality. There is no "objectivity" even, in the sense of which Enlightenment rationalism dreams. The only ultimate objectivity is also an exhaustively personal subjectivity, namely the eternal objective fact of intra-Trinitarian communion in truth, power, and personal fellowship. The only finite replicas of such objectivity are never to be found in the realm of the lie (John 8:44), but in the freedom of the sons of God. As we are subjectively indwelt by the Spirit of truth, we bow before God's majestic wisdom and drink our fill of the water of life flowing from the throne of the Lamb. Only through this deeply subjective experience do we have unfettered access to objective truth. All interpretation present and future is controlled by these realities.

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THE PRESENCE OF GOD QUALIFYING OUR NOTIONS OF GRAMMATICAL-HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION: GENESIS 3:15 AS A TEST CASE

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What is grammatical-historical interpretation? Do we know as well as we think we know? For many scholars, grammatical-historical interpretation means an objective procedure for determining the meaning intended by the human author through an examination of the language of the text and its historical circumstances. But just how objective can we make it? Objectivity, in the eyes of many, implies at least two conditions. First, by rule-based procedures we can weigh the information from language and historical circumstances, and on the basis of that information construct a probable total meaning. Second, the meaning in question belongs to the human author. The divine author can effectively be left out of consideration until after the analysis is complete.

I wish to question this second assumption concerning the elimination of the divine author. And questioning it leads logically to revising our estimation of other assumptions as well.

I. THE CONVENIENCE OF ELIMINATING THE DIVINE

In our present environment the scholarly world would no doubt find it convenient to eliminate the divine author. For if one must debate about the divine author, there is little hope for consensus about meaning. To begin with, not everyone in the scholarly world accepts that God was involved at all as a divine author of Scripture. According to the atheist there is no God to supply the involvement. According to the deist he exists but is uninvolved.

Even if God is somehow involved, the nature of his involvement might vary. Orthodox thinking about the Bible has confessed over the centuries that the Bible is the word of God. But there are modern alternatives. According to one kind of liberal thinking about inspiration, God gives the human authors inspiring thoughts. But they then mix those thoughts with their own and come out with a product that shows God's influence to varying, unpredictable degrees. In neo-orthodoxy the words of Scripture are a witness

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to Christ and to God in Christ. But only indirectly, in the moment of a divine encounter, do they somehow become the word of God.

And what God (or god) are we talking about? The rise of process theology and open theism has made us more aware of the fact that questions about the character of God must be confronted. And if our conceptions of God differ, our assumptions about the meanings that he generates may also differ. Thus any hope for a scholarly consensus about the meaning of a particularly text would appear to vanish.

We need also to be aware of the question of the historical veracity of Scripture. Evangelicals rightly care about maintaining the claim for the reality of the events about which Scripture testifies. It is of the essence of Christianity that certain events, like the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, happened as real events in time and space (1 Cor 15:1–20; in contrast to Bultmann's idea of mythological expression of existential truths, some post-modernists' exclusive attention to "story"). One would then like to keep the discussion of historical veracity open for a wide inspection. The events themselves really happened, rather than being generated merely as religious feelings among people with the right kind of subjective faith. Hence, the Bible as a testimony to the events must be open in some sense to inspection by those who do not yet believe.

II. FAILURE OF THE ARGUMENT FROM HISTORICAL OBJECTIVITY

Despite the attractions of these arguments, I do not think they hold water. Consider first the concern for the historical reality of the events. The events are indeed real. But it does not follow that events fraught with stupendous religious significance are equally accessible to all human beings, regardless of the religious condition of those human beings. The Bible itself informs us that ever since the fall of Adam humanity has been in a state of rebellion against God. Only through God overcoming human resistance do people come to him: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (John 6:44).

In particular, if an unbeliever does not acknowledge that the Bible is the word of God, he does not give its testimony the proper weight, the weight that it deserves in virtue of the trustworthiness of its Author. Hence, believers and unbelievers will inevitably differ in their reasoning about the historicity of various events.

Yes, an unbeliever could come to admit that parts of the NT are generally reliable. He could then come to admit that the testimony concerning the resurrection of Christ carries serious weight. After considering some of the alternative explanations, he could decide that the resurrection is probable. That in turn might lead to a serious consideration of the religious claims of Jesus and of the NT. In this sense, the evidence is there for anyone who would care to examine it. And the evidence can be instrumental in leading to religious faith.

But unbelievers also have many ways of escaping through assumptions about history and assumptions about the supernatural. If they really want

to do so, they dismiss the Bible out of hand. There is not going to be consensus about how to evaluate the testimony.

Moreover, even those who may be more sympathetic toward an overall historical reliability in the NT are not treating the evidence fairly. General reliability is not the same as the reliability that the Bible deserves. An agreement on historical methodology concerning biblical testimony is possible only if the unbeliever becomes a believer. And this will happen only through the presence of the Spirit, speaking in Scripture. Trying to eliminate the divine author means trying to eliminate the only source through which genuine objectivity and genuine consensus could actually arrive!

III. FAILURE OF THE ARGUMENT SEARCHING FOR SCHOLARLY CONSENSUS

The argument that we must eliminate God in order to achieve consensus about meaning also fails. In fact, it fails for two complementary reasons. First, consensus about meaning does not arrive even if we do eliminate God. The Enlightenment hoped that secular Reason would serve as an adjudicator that would bring consensus where religious unity of mind had failed. More than anything else, the Enlightenment triumph of Reason stood behind the progress of the historical-critical tradition and its investigation of Scripture.

So, did the historical-critical tradition bring consensus, at least within its own gates? Far from it. Even within the tradition one heard increasing restlessness, as people began to realize that, apart from a few fleeting cases of "assured results of modern criticism," the critical tradition multiplied hypotheses indefinitely. We now know by sad experience that the goddess of Reason does not lead to an increasing body of assured results about the Bible. We know also, from the disruptive forces of postmodernism, that Reason itself was a false goddess, who was subtly reconstructed by her worshipers in each eddy of critical subtraditions.¹

The second failure in eliminating God is that the argument simply presupposes what it needs to prove. The mere desire to eliminate God cannot eliminate the facts of authorship any more than a human desire to eliminate Paul the apostle could change the authorship of the Letter to the Romans. Thinking does not make it so. The alleged practical convenience of eliminating God does not eliminate his authorship or his presence in the biblical text.

IV. OBJECTIVITY IS A GIFT FROM GOD

Finally, the desire to eliminate God for the sake of objectivity misconstrues both the nature of God and the nature of objectivity. First, consider the nature of objectivity. God is the giver of objectivity. He gives human beings the ability to rise above their prejudices. True objectivity aspires to

¹ See Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

know the truth. And truth is from God. Truth that we come to know comes from God.

In addition, those who suppress the presence of God typically misconstrue what that presence would mean. They suppose that God's presence would automatically lead to a situation in which the reader would *only* consider what the text means here and now. God would be speaking immediately to the reader in a kind of existential encounter that ignores anything that the text ever meant in the past.

But that conclusion does not follow. In the first place, the presence of God would mean a growth in humility, which is one of the prerequisites for sound interpretation. And the God who is present now is sovereign over history. As redeemer of human beings he cared for the people long ago. Hence, a proper reckoning with the character of God leads to an affirmation of and interest in what God was saying and doing long ago to people back then and there. It does not short-circuit the process of interpretation and wipe out the sense of history—history which after all God governs to his planned goal.

We may illustrate this point by using Gen 3:15: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." What does Gen 3:15 mean? Does it make any difference if we reckon with God's presence in addressing the text to us? If an ordinary layman is informed by the NT, he can easily read the verse as a direct statement about Christ's defeat of Satan, as described in Col 2:15; Heb 2:14; Rev 19:11–21; 20:10; and Luke 11:17–23. He sees in it what the NT teaches. He knows that God had in mind the defeat of Satan by Christ when he originally caused Gen 3:15 to be written. Therefore, that is the "meaning."

Some people are bothered by such a process for several reasons. For one thing, it could potentially lead to arbitrary readings. Whatever meaning someone claims that the Spirit has shown him becomes normative. A modern reader belonging to the Unification Church, the cult of the messianic figure Sun Myung Moon, could read the text as prophesying the coming of Rev. Moon rather than the coming of Jesus Christ. But such aberrant interpretations can be avoided by genuine submission to God, the God of Scripture, whose scriptural instruction in the total canon guides and provides a context for the interpretation of any one verse. The principle of having the clear interpret the unclear also has a role.

People may also be bothered by the fact that a Christological interpretation of Gen 3:15 appears to ignore the original context with Adam and Eve, and the context of the Book of Genesis addressed to the OT Israelites. But again this problem can receive a solution within the context of divine authorship. If one appreciates the greatness of God, one also begins to appreciate that God has a plan for history that encompasses Adam and Eve and the Israelites. So within the total plan of God one then learns to affirm not only that God teaches what one can see when one looks back from the NT, but also that God teaches at a more elementary level what Adam and Eve and the Israelites might grasp before the coming of the NT.

So the affirmation of the presence of God implies not the end of rational reflection, but beginning rational reflection within the context of obedience

and submission to God. It implies not the end of meaningful historical appreciation, but its genuine beginning, because God as the ruler of history is also the source of its meaning.

V. THE PRESENCE OF GOD AS AUTHOR

But we are still left with the question of just how God is present as divine author in a biblical text. We can acknowledge a general principle of “organic inspiration,” in which God through his providence brings it about that the human authors are just the people that God designed them to be, and that God then fully uses all their human faculties in the process of thinking and writing. Within the broad field of organic inspiration there can then still be notable variations. Luke writes like a careful historian. John, the author of Revelation, receives spectacular visions. Abraham Kuyper, observing some of the diversity, classifies inspiration into four “forms”—lyric, chokmatic, prophetic, and apostolic—corresponding roughly to what happens with Psalms, Proverbs, OT prophetic books, and NT epistles.² We could if we wished refine and further subdivide.

VI. THE TEN COMMANDMENTS AS MODEL

Without denying this variety let us consider a more fundamental issue. Can we rightly conceive of the Bible and biblical interpretation in the way that puts divine authorship at the center rather than at the periphery? Consider the first record of a canonical deposit, namely the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments were first delivered by the audible voice of God from Mount Sinai (Exodus 19–20). Then God wrote them with his own finger on stone (Exod 32:16; 34:1). The people could not bear to hear the audible voice, so God made Moses a mediator of his word (Exod 20:18–21; Deut 5:22–33). God later told Moses to write many other words and these were placed beside the ark (Deut 31:24–46). The Ten Commandments had already been placed inside the ark (Exod 25:16). Thus we have provision for the nucleus of a growing canon.³

Technically speaking, for the Ten Commandments there is no human author. For the oral delivery of the Ten Commandments to Israel we have simply the direct divine voice. With respect to the written form the finger of God produced the writing on stone. So what becomes of the typical formula that we are supposed to focus only on the human author? Clearly it does not work. Focusing on the human author alone violates the essential character of the Ten Commandments.

But, of course, the Ten Commandments as we now have them are written down as part of the larger scrolls of Exodus and Deuteronomy, and these do involve a human hand. Does the presence of the human hand negate the

² Abraham Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968) 520–44.

³ See Meredith G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 27–44.

presence of God? Clearly not if we look carefully at the exposition in Exodus and Deuteronomy. Moses is placed as an intermediary, but that does not interfere with the power or authority of God to address the people of Israel and to require complete obedience. The original Ten Commandments, far from being a wild exception, become the original model for understanding what will happen later through Moses. And the instruction in Deuteronomy anticipates that after Moses God will raise up further prophets (Deut 18:15–18). Thus the prophets, and by implication all later scriptural writers, enter into a pattern already established with Moses.

Now all this should be fairly obvious. But what are the implications? Ultimately we know that Moses' mediatorial role is only a type. The final mediator of the divine voice is Christ himself, the final prophet (Acts 3:22–26; Heb 1:1–3), God and man in one Person. Therefore it is legitimate to use the analogy with the person of Christ in order to show how we can think about the relation of divine and human authors. Orthodoxy says that the Second Person of the Trinity became man, not by changing his divine nature, but by assumption of human nature. Remaining what he was he became what he was not. Similarly, God speaks to human beings by remaining God and speaking through human beings whom he summons as instruments.

But modern evangelical scholars in dialogue with the historical-critical tradition, and in dialogue with traditions skeptical of biblical history, are tempted to compromise this picture. In practice, we may instead have the equivalent of an adoptionist view of inspiration. God looks down at what various people are saying. Those words he approves he "adopts" as his own, and they gain the stamp of his approval. But their meaning is merely human meaning. We then do obtain a univocal human meaning, but still such that the human meaning is the meaning of God. But the cost is an adoptionist model at odds with the picture at Mount Sinai.

A second view might be called kenotic. In inspiration God accommodates himself to the human instrument. He does what can be done given the limitations of a human being, but is careful never to go beyond the limits of strictly finite human functioning. Again, the meaning is strictly the human meaning at the cost of a heterodox model of the relation of the divine and the human.⁴

Neither the adoptionist nor the kenotic model harmonizes with Christology. But they also do not harmonize with the detailed texture of OT texts. To begin with, they do not harmonize with the picture of Mount Sinai, where meaning originates in the most emphatic way from God himself. Nor do they fit the OT instances of long-range prophetic prediction, such as predictions of the coming of the Messiah. Such long-range prophetic prediction is impossible to normal unaided human beings. In OT times the hearer or reader of such predictions has only two obvious choices. On the one hand, if the prediction comes merely as a human-generated meaning, then it is only

⁴ See my further discussion of the relation of divine and human meaning in "Divine Meaning of Scripture," *WTJ* 48 (1986) 241–79.

a speculative possibility, not a real promise to be believed. On the other hand, if the prediction arises preeminently from God's intentionality, it can be believed. To receive such a prediction as it ought to be received tacitly requires reckoning with divine intention as something greater than what is merely human.

The prophetic expression, "Thus says the LORD," should also steer us away from reckoning in terms of a merely human intentionality. The expression directly indicates that what follows is not to be treated as merely a question of the human prophet's own normal ideas—even if those ideas have been providentially controlled by God. It cautions the reader not to think merely in terms of what he already knows about his neighbor Isaiah or Micah.

Genesis 3:15 has a similar flavor. It is introduced as part of God's direct speech to the serpent with no mention of a human intermediary (Gen 3:14). The Book of Genesis as a literary whole does have a human author. But that human author is inviting us in Gen 3:15 not merely to focus on his human interpretation of Gen 3:15 but on the fact that God said it. The human writer of Genesis need not have totally understood what God said. All that is required is that he faithfully recorded it. So we are pushed by the human written product to pay attention to the divine source of meaning.

Finally, consider the broader case where a human being hears the word of God. Once he recognizes that it is indeed the word of God, he can no longer ignore the presence of God. It is not psychologically or religiously normal for him to ignore God in favor of an *exclusive* focus on the human author. Because of the majesty and awesomeness of God, the godly reaction is to have God himself and his speaking in focus. Because God commissions and empowers the human author, the hearer can still, within that God-centered focus, take time to think about how God is intending to use the human spokesman with all his God-ordained capacities and gifts.⁵ A focus on the human spokesman is thus not in itself wrong. But the overall framework is God-centered, not man-centered, because that is instinctively the attitude that a godly person takes toward the holiness of God, as that holiness is manifested in the word that God speaks.

The principle applies to the Book of Genesis. When the reader recognizes that it has divine source, he naturally pays attention *preeminently* to that divine source. He asks, "What does God mean?" "What does he mean not merely by giving the promise to Adam and Eve, but by recording it for me as well? God must be indicating that in some way it is pertinent to me."

VII. THE HISTORY OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

I would suggest that church history up until the rise of modern skepticism confirms this practice. Within the ancient church, the Antiochenes disputed with the Alexandrians about how best to find the meaning of OT texts,

⁵ See Poythress, "Divine Meaning of Scripture."

whether by allegory or by *theoria*. The Reformers disputed with the Roman Catholics about the use of allegory and the literal sense. But these disputes were carried on within an environment where everyone was concerned with God's intentionality, not just human intentionality. The Reformers and the Antiochenes, the people whom we typically identify as more literal in their approach, found Christ in the OT in types as well as in direct predictions. They saw the OT as a book in which God continues to speak today by addressing us concerning the salvation in Christ and its implications.

And in this conviction they were simply following the apostle Paul: "For whatever was written in former days was written *for our instruction*, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Rom 15:4); "Now these things took place as examples *for us*, that we might not desire evil as they did" (1 Cor 10:6); "Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down *for our instruction*, on whom the end of the ages has come" (1 Cor 10:11). Paul proclaims that the OT is the word of God addressing not just the immediate contemporaries but intended by God for all future ages, including especially and even pre-eminently the NT Christians "on whom the end of the ages has come." The conviction about divine address carries over naturally into a hermeneutical practice in which we seek preeminently what it is that God says to us now, even if it was imperfectly understood by the human author of past ages.

This focus on God's speech is shared not only by the pre-modern Christian church but by pre-modern Judaism as well. One can see it in rabbinic Judaism, in Philo, in the Qumran writings, and in various sects of Judaism. The modern scholarly spirit does not live in this ancient atmosphere. Rather it objects to that atmosphere by pointing out that the door is then opened to aberrations. And indeed many aberrations did arise. One can imagine that one is hearing the voice of God in an idea that is generated by the text when in fact one is still going astray and blind. Someone imagines, for example, that the seed of the woman is Sun Myung Moon rather than Jesus Christ. Similarly, in ancient times, the Sadducees, according to Jesus, did not know either "the Scriptures or the power of God" (Matt 22:29). So, proposes the modern scholar, the remedy is to be found in the objective rigor of a grammatical-historical interpretation that focuses solely on the human author.

But that is not what Jesus implies in addressing the Sadducees. The problem with the Sadducees is not that they lacked intellectual acuity or intellectual discipline or hermeneutical rigor or information about the contents of the OT. Their problem was that they did not know the power of God. Or, to put a point on it, they did not know God as they should. And not knowing God the divine author they failed to have a route to understand his mind as expressed in the Scriptures. Their problem was spiritual.

Much the same can be said for the followers of Sun Myung Moon or other heretics. The apostle Paul teaches that the fundamental problem is spiritual darkness due to bondage in the kingdom of Satan: "God may perhaps grant them [opponents] repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do

his will” (2 Tim 2:25–26); “Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared” (1 Tim 4:1–2). “In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor 4:4).

Only through knowing God does one find humility. And only through knowing God in humility does one find oneself in a situation in which one can listen patiently for what God was doing long ago through human authors, and thereby use the insights that we associate with grammatical-historical interpretation. But grammatical-historical interpretation cannot serve as the fundamental remedy for interpretive confusion about the Bible. Look at the historical-critical tradition. It is determined to use grammatical-historical interpretation. And the result is a multiplication of options. Historical-critical interpretation remains in darkness about the true import of the very Scriptures that it studies so minutely. One can repeat concerning historical-critical tradition what Jesus said of the Sadducees, “You know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God.” The remedy is spiritual, now as always. The remedy is repentance and turning to God, through which one knows God and then begins to hear aright God speaking in Scripture.

The church through the ages, and even Judaism through the ages, has known this. But modern skepticism and the Enlightenment have changed the circumstances. And I now wonder whether evangelical scholarship, for the sake of dialogue with the mainstream of scholarship, has absorbed the influence of the Enlightenment. In practice do we have a model of objectivistic grammatical-historical interpretation of human meaning, a model that is at odds not only with the tradition of the church, not only with the fact of divine authorship, but at odds with God himself, and with his purposes for his inscripturated word? The wheel revolves full circle back to us, and we hear ominously echoing, “You know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God.”

Other evangelicals may already have become disillusioned about the influence of the Enlightenment and now seek a remedy in postmodernism. But postmodernism perpetuates the problem of the Enlightenment by rejecting the presence of God. Typically, it tries to confine itself to a horizontal analysis of human readers embedded in human societies and human interpretive traditions. In doing so it denies the possibility of divine revelation and the accessibility of real, solid truth as a gift from God. In this respect it has not really broken with modernity’s systematic blindness to divine presence and divine speech.⁶ So let us take seriously the presence of God both

⁶ Since the Bible is the word of God, it provides a *foundation* for true belief and lived certainty concerning God and his message to us. But this foundation is not *foundationalist*, because the believer does not receive it through autonomous power and self-possessed perfect purity of insight, but through the grace of the Holy Spirit, who in his ministry gives truth to the humble and needy who trust in God through Christ. All the while believers remain finite and contaminated by the remnants of sin. Neither foundationalists nor anti-foundationalists seem to have a clue about the Holy Spirit.

in the giving of Scripture and in its modern reception. How will it affect our hermeneutical approach?

VIII. LIMITS ON UNDERSTANDING THE HUMAN AUTHOR

God in his providence does take up the human author. He speaks to people back then and there in the past, and that fact can now be the basis for our receiving light from reflection on the past and its environment. But there are notable limitations. God created each human author in his own image. We cannot expect to understand man in general, nor the human authors in their particularity, without reckoning with the presence of God in human life. "In him we live and move and have our being," Paul reminds us (Acts 17:28).

What were Adam and Eve like when they heard Gen 3:15? What were the Israelites like? What was the writer of Genesis like? Were they merely complex, animated biological machines? Did they live merely on the surface? Then perhaps in Gen 3:15 they saw only an explanation for the age-long human fear of serpents and a promise of continued domination over them. Nothing in the immediate context forces us to see in this verse anything other than an observation about literal serpents and their literal offspring. Estimating the nature of human nature figures into interpretation.

The rise of pluralism and postmodern reflection on pluralism have made more evident what should have been evident all along—that different religions and different worldviews include different conceptions of the very nature of humanity. One's view of God, or one's substitute for God in the form of various mental idols, has its influence on one's view of man. And from there it trickles into judgments about what one can or cannot rightly expect from human authors.

Modern secularism assumes that the human mind operates in normality. But it is in fact corrupted by sin (Eph 4:17–19). Secularism also assumes that the mind is autonomous, insulated from the thoughts of other intelligences except when we encounter those intelligences through the medium of speech or the printed word. But that is simply not true, as the phenomenon of demon possession illustrates. Even apart from actual demon possession the Bible indicates that Satan and his agents exercise a startling influence: "the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Cor 4:4). The entire secular model of autonomous independence in the mind is actually a radically inadequate model.

If such is true we really understand very little of the capabilities of the human mind in an evil direction. But, by symmetry, neither do we understand the capabilities of the human mind in a positive direction. Human beings sometimes think extraordinary, surprising thoughts, and dream extraordinary dreams. The furniture of your own dreams is sufficient to prove that you know very little about what could come into your head or where it comes from. Even within states of consciousness that seem quite ordinary intelligent people can sometimes commit stupid logical fallacies without observing

what they are doing. What accounts for these gaps in our thought? And what accounts for creative thoughts? Many times they seem, as far as conscious observations go, to come out of nowhere.

The human authors of Scripture are in one respect ordinary human beings. But in another respect they are not ordinary. They operate under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Since the Holy Spirit is God, he exercises more extraordinary capabilities than do the demons. What are human minds capable of when under the extraordinary influence of the Holy Spirit? We really do not know. And it is this kind of mind that God employs in writing the Scripture. How do we control what is or is not possible? We cannot. Rather, as scholars, we simply pretend that ancient human authors were pedestrian, that they can hardly do a thing that goes beyond what our petty version of rationality could potentially explain. Is the worship of Reason alive and well among evangelical scholars when they attempt to calculate the limits of thought in what they read?

IX. LIMITS ON HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING

We also encounter limits in understanding the ancient historical environments from which the writings came. We are indeed better off than previous generations because of the gradual accumulation of texts and artifacts from ancient Near Eastern civilizations. We continue to learn about the Graeco-Roman environment and the Jewish environment of the NT. But there is much that we do not know because of limitations in the surviving evidence. And, given our limitations on understanding the human mind, there are also limitations on understanding other cultures.

But in the area of history we confront extra mysteries. Let us consider what we mean by the *historical* part of grammatical-historical interpretation. We look at the historical environment. But how broad an environment? God sees and plans beyond the chronological limitations of a single human lifetime. In his words and in his deeds within OT times, he was already working on our behalf, as the above quotations from Paul testify. It is therefore a mistake to consider a text of the OT as if it could be isolated like a dead butterfly within a historical time-span of a few years.

Human beings made in the image of God are themselves capable of dreaming of the distant future and the distant past. We can think God's thoughts after him. How much more when human beings are inspired by the Spirit! Did Adam and Eve worry only about the fact that they had been cast out of the Garden of Eden? Did they worry only about the next month's effort to get enough food? Did they worry only about the next hundred years? What about the Israelite readers of Genesis? We do not know how far ahead they may sometimes have looked in their imaginations.

It would be convenient if OT writings were wholly preoccupied with immediate crises, such as how to escape Philistine plundering or how to determine who succeeds David as king. That would help give us as scholars the control that we think we need for objectivity. But in fact the practice of narrow historical focus amounts to a methodological mistake. Such isolated

focus on the immediate is not how human nature works. And is it certainly not how human nature works when it works under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, as Paul indicates, has us in mind as well as the original hearers.

But now what becomes of the historical aspect of grammatical-historical interpretation? I claim that it remains radically undefined. One can focus on people back then and there. But one can never isolate that focus from broader questions. And those broader questions ultimately engage the meaning of the entirety of history. To a sensitive Israelite reader, the enmity between the two seeds or two offsprings in Gen 3:15 can suggest a principal conflict that extends ultimately to cosmic dimensions and long historical time periods. Any one piece of history is ultimately intelligible only as part of the plan of God for all of history. One must have the mind of God in order even to begin to reckon with any piece intelligibly.⁷

In principle, Adam and Eve could understand that the promise in Gen 3:15 pointed into the distant future. They could have realized that God had a plan whose depths and details they could not yet see. They could understand that they did not understand. That is, they did not understand “the meaning” of God *in full*. They could grasp that full understanding includes the entire plan of God. Adam and Eve themselves, if transported by a thought experiment into the present time, might be impatient with the fussiness of scholars who insist on long and elaborate discourses on “original meaning” while they virtually ignore God. Adam and Eve might justly point out that the real goal, which God already began to open up to them, is to understand God in full. The scholar who focuses wholly on original meaning fails to grasp that part of the original meaning is the implication that the original meaning proclaims its own mystery, insufficiency, and anticipatory character. The message includes an invitation to wait for and search out that fullness of God’s plan that the message announces in seed form.

And then, when Adam and Eve heard us tell of Christ’s redemption, they might delightedly insist that this was the real meaning all along. They would laugh at modern fanatics for grammatical-historical interpretation, who foolishly thrust this richer meaning from them in a desire to be historical. These fanatics are historical in a sense without understanding either Adam or Eve, or human nature, or history as it really has significance according to the plan of God.

X. LIMITS ON GRAMMATICAL, LINGUISTIC UNDERSTANDING

Do similar observations hold for the *grammatical* aspect of grammatical-historical interpretation? We are here dealing with language. And what is language? Do we really understand it? In the twentieth century advances in symbolic logic, structural linguistics, and translation theory have given us further tools to aid understanding. But these tools also have their limitations,

⁷ Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (2nd ed.; Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1963).

and to some extent may have been made possible only by radical reductionistic assumptions that entered when the attempt was made to make the subject-matter rigorous.⁸

In Genesis 1 God speaks words of command to call the creatures into being. And, having created man, he speaks words of instruction to him, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen 1:28). From the beginning language, far from being a mindless product of emergent evolution, serves not only human communication but divine communication. Language is a gift that belongs not exclusively to man, but is shared by God and man. And John 1:1 goes further. By calling the Second Person of the Trinity "the Word" and including an allusion to Genesis 1, John indicates that language as we know it has its archetype in the very being of God. Language is incomprehensible, because God is incomprehensible in his trinitarian Being. The meaning of communication has its original in God himself. Meaning is not scientifically isolatable, as if only the creature and not the Creator were involved.

What would it be like for Adam and Eve? They would hear God's address to the serpent and the mention of the offspring of the serpent. Who is the serpent? It is the snake they see before them. But is that all? There can be depths in a reference like this. The literal serpent, because of his role in the temptation, embodies a particular example of the larger issue of evil and rebellion against God. Killing this particular serpent would not necessarily bring an end to sin. Adam and Eve could come to understand that God is making a promise concerning something much larger and deeper than this particular serpent alone. The language about the serpent functions both to point to this serpent and to point beyond it. And the meaning of God's statements will be illumined not merely by subsequent events but possibly by subsequent words that carry further explanation. The explanation will include explanation of what is the larger reality of evil behind the literal serpent. They may also include explanation of the larger reality of redemption alluded to in the expression concerning the offspring of the woman.

We may say that the linguistic communication from God carries a particular meaning because of particular words like "serpent," "offspring," "enmity," "bruise," and so on, and because of the particular grammatical combination of those words.⁹ But understanding a communication like this one does not consist merely in looking up the words in a dictionary and then putting them together in a particular order. We must attend to God's meaning. And God's meaning is not boxed in. Rather, it will become evident in the subsequent events and in the subsequent words of explanation. This early communication already evokes those later realities in anticipation.

One must avoid here a reductionistic approach to meaning. One must not reduce the meaning of a communicative act of God to the joint meanings

⁸ See Vern S. Poythress, "Truth and Fullness of Meaning: Fullness versus Reductionistic Semantics in Biblical Interpretation," *WTJ* 67 (2005) 211–27.

⁹ Or the equivalents in Hebrew or in the language in which God originally spoke to Adam and Eve.

of dictionary words or to their grammatical construction. Thinking and promising and anticipating are going on here. One attends to discourse meaning through grammar and through words. But one misses the point if one attends solely to the grammar and the individual words.

Our modern standard label for rigorous interpretation is “grammatical-historical” interpretation. The first of the two adjectival terms is “grammatical,” not “semantic,” much less “meaning-focused.” In natural languages “grammar” primarily denotes an apparently finite, intellectually analyzable system of rules about constructing words and sentences from simpler components. Grammar is limited—but meaning is not. We use the limited resources of grammar. But on the level of meaning we talk about everything under the sun. Meaning is so rich and complex as to be virtually intractable in comparison with grammar. The label “grammatical” may be used as a synecdoche to stand for the whole. But I fear that, as a label, it can also support the illusion that meaning can be “scientifically” mastered in the same way that grammar apparently can.

The history of structural linguistics shows a whole series of attempts to avoid the full complexities of meaning by various simplifications and reductions in order to establish a field that would be more rigorously tractable. Benefits and insights have resulted. But in the process it is easy to lose sight of the fact that understanding human communication includes understanding references in the world. Reference is usually excluded from internal professional linguistic analysis, for the obvious reason that it is scientifically intractable. And reference is not the only intractable problem. The functions of language in the larger world are richer than what we capture in dictionaries or grammars or discussions of reference.¹⁰ The language of promise in Gen 3:15 evokes anticipation of more words and events. And these words and events, once behind us, we use to see into what God all along had referred to in Gen 3:15.

XI. LIMITS ON UNDERSTANDING READERS

Finally, we confront mystery when we consider readers. We observed earlier that the Holy Spirit is present to inspire the human biblical writers. His presence brings incalculabilities about what human writers may think and imagine. By contrast with the writers, human readers are neither inspired nor infallible. But the Holy Spirit works understanding in them in what theologians call “illumination.” When we are reading the Bible, do we control our own thoughts perfectly? No, because blasphemous thoughts may peak out at us in spite of our general conscious intention. Where do creative ideas come from? What happens when a passage virtually leaps off the page and seems to address a modern reader vigorously, directly, overwhelmingly? What happens, for example, when a layman reads Gen 3:15 and sees as if by immediate intuition that Christ is the seed of the woman, who crushed Satan by his crucifixion and resurrection? Is this the meaning of the text?

¹⁰ See Poythress, “Truth and Fullness of Meaning.”

We must admit that “the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jer 17:9). We can deceive ourselves into thinking that we are hearing the voice of the Holy Spirit when we are hearing the voice of our own desires or even a demonic voice (1 Tim 4:1–2). But then are we to go to the opposite extreme and maintain that the Spirit is present only when we are most rationally aware of the sources of all our thoughts? Are we then deifying our rationalism?

Appeals to the direct voice of the Spirit, as if it were superior to the written text, generate heresies. But rationalism of a certain kind can also produce heresies. Many have rejected the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity because they claim it is irrational.

I think, then, that it is wisest to confess that we have rationality as a gift, but that it is a gift to complete persons who are more than rational. And we affirm that we do not perceive to the very bottom from where our ideas come. Yes, we hope that they come from the text. But the text, by processes of association, and by processes even more mysterious, gives rise to thoughts of very diverse kinds, not all of which were “in” the text in any obvious way.

If one text evokes thoughts in harmony with the direct teaching of another text that is not immediately present to us the harmony we see is one we do not invent. God knew it before we knew it. And if he knew it it would seem that he designed the texts such that together with the operations of our mind and the operations of the Spirit they could and did lead to our perceiving the harmony and the connection that we now perceive. So God intended from the beginning that such should be one effect of this text. And if God intended it, it is an aspect of the meaning. And we may infer that the Holy Spirit has had a role in bringing the meaning to our attention. God is present today with his word, not only to bring to our attention obvious ancient meanings, but to bring to our attention the harmonies and the connections that he brings into our minds for the first time. We have indeed lost autonomous control of our own minds. But then we never had it in the first place.

Thus when the layman sees in Gen 3:15 that Christ is the seed of the woman who crushed Satan he is seeing what the Spirit intended him to see. That is part of the total import of the text as intended by God. The scholar does not control this process.

XII. HARDENING READERS

The Parable of the Sower suggests not only that the word of God can bear copious fruit in the mind and the life. It also suggests that the word of God can fail to bear fruit. Not all hearts are receptive soil. And if not, the true meaning of the word of God remains in part concealed from them. Their hearts are hard. And they may even become further hardened as they hear, by analogy with Pharaoh. God gives the word “so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand” (Mark 4:12). For those who resist his word God can still be present in darkening the mind: “Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth

but had pleasure in unrighteousness" (2 Thess 2:12). Believers do not control their minds because the Holy Spirit is present to enlighten. Neither do unbelievers control their minds, because God is present to darken—or to enlighten, if perchance they come to know the truth (2 Cor 4:4–6).

XIII. SCHOLARLY RESISTANCE

Most of the scholarly world does not accept the full extent of the mysteries in biblical interpretation. Why not? There are various reasons. Let me focus on two. First, we scholars, like other sinners, may lack humility. The Spirit may even have worked great humility in other areas of our lives. But the intellect may be the last stronghold. It is a precious gift of God and we will not give it up, both for our own sake and for the sake of benefiting the Christian community. The community needs us and our intellect in order to straighten it out and move it forward. But you see how these truths can become a subtle cover for a sense of superiority. We desire to seek God and to love him. But that desire covers a desire to achieve superiority in understanding both by one's own intellectual mastery of the Bible and one's demonstration of that mastery before the rest of the scholarly world, including that large portion of it that does not reckon with divine authorship.

Second, if we are in a dialogue with the scholarly world, what would it mean to acknowledge the presence of God in that environment of dialogue? Acknowledging God's presence leads logically to acknowledging the need for spiritual purity in order to stand in his presence. We need hermeneutical redemption.¹¹ And that brings us right up against the foolishness of the gospel: "For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; . . . so that no human being might boast in the presence of God" (1 Cor 1:21, 27–29). In a scholarly environment we may rightly wonder whether bringing up the issue of God's presence will simply close the dialogue, because we have shown ourselves to be utterly foolish by the standards of this world (1 Cor 1:26; 2:6; 3:19).

XIV. POSTMODERN SUBJECTIVISM AND UNCERTAINTY

So we must reject modern autonomous rationalism. Do we then follow post-modernism in the opposite direction and become champions of an autonomous irrationalism? Does humility mean that we can never really know the truth and must live in radical uncertainty? By no means. The parable of the talents is pertinent. You must use the truth that God gives you rather than burying it with a false humility as the excuse. You must stand boldly for the truth in the power of the Holy Spirit. You must oppose heretics, even

¹¹ See Vern S. Poythress, "Christ the Only Savior of Interpretation," *WTJ* 50 (1988) 305–21.

as Paul and John did. You must bear the reproach of being thought to be a dangerous fanatic because you are certain that you hear the voice of God in Scripture, that you know God, and that you know the one way of salvation. That one way in its exclusiveness will be mightily resisted by the sophisticated postmodernist, who claims that one cannot ever really know truth, and cannot ever have complete certainty, and must always be “tolerant”—except that the postmodernist pronounces that the gospel of Christ cannot be the answer.¹²

XV. CONCLUSION

God as Sovereign is present with human authors, with the text of the Bible, and with the recipients. On all three fronts his presence is the one true foundation for the proper functioning of communication. On all three fronts his faithfulness gives hope for our understanding. God gives us access to genuine truth. But on all three fronts there is no such thing as mastery that evaporates mystery and succeeds in fully controlling meaning.

¹² Cornelius Van Til summed up the non-Christian point of view very aptly: “No one knows [non-Christian irrationalism], but you are wrong and I am right [non-Christian rationalism: whatever may be the case, the Christian position is radically wrong]” (Cornelius Van Til, *Christian-Theistic Evidences* [1961] 68).

DISPENSING WITH MERELY HUMAN MEANING:
GAINS AND LOSSES FROM FOCUSING ON THE HUMAN
AUTHOR, ILLUSTRATED BY ZEPHANIAH 1:2–3

VERN S. POYTHRESS*

How important is it for biblical interpreters to focus on the human author and his intention? For many books of the Bible, we know little or nothing about the human author, except what we might tentatively infer from the text itself. We who are inerrantists say that we believe that Scripture has a divine author, and that we have come to know him. What gains are there in focusing on the human author whom we do not know?

People might list several benefits: (1) focus on the historical and social environment, as a context for the text; (2) reckoning with human capacity, the characteristics of human linguistic communication, and the limitations of human understanding; (3) reckoning on limited canon available at the time; (4) reckoning on the structural coherence of a single biblical book, written by a single human author.

All of these are indeed valuable benefits. But a robust conception of divine authorship and divine purpose leads to exactly the same benefits. In addition, focusing on the divine author leads to fewer interpretive problems, because problems are generated by what we do not know about an author.

We will use Zeph 1:2–3 to illustrate the difficulties. In the process, it may seem at times as if we are multiplying the uncertainties about human intentionality. But I believe we can have confidence on the other side of the uncertainties.

I. THE HUMAN AUTHOR

Consider first what we know about the human author of the Book of Zephaniah. Who was Zephaniah? Zephaniah's paternity, given in Zeph 1:1, shows that he was a great-great-grandson of Hezekiah, presumably the same Hezekiah who was once king of Judah. Hezekiah was also the great-grandfather of Josiah king of Judah, during whose reign Zephaniah prophesied. In a broad sense, Zephaniah belonged to royalty, and he may have had special access and an honored position in the royal court. Or maybe not. He may have been out of favor or just ignored.

Nothing more is known about Zephaniah the son of Cushi. The Book of Zephaniah contains no personal information, other than what is found in Zeph 1:1. We know that Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of Josiah king of Judah (640–609 BC), which gives us a rough location in time and space. But that is all.

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Moreover, we do not actually know for sure whether Zephaniah personally composed the book that bears his name. Perhaps he did. But perhaps he entrusted the task to a faithful scribe, in a manner similar to Jeremiah's use of Baruch (Jer 36:4; cf. Rom 16:22). Or perhaps, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, some disciple or disciples of Zephaniah put the book together in its final form after his death. The Book of Zephaniah does not give details, one way or the other. The consequence is that we cannot be certain about such details.

Where now is the unique human author? The superscription, "The word of the LORD that came to Zephaniah," indicates that the contents are substantially what Zephaniah received. But is the order and arrangement of the materials due directly to Zephaniah or partly to a scribe or a later disciple or disciples?

By raising these questions, I have no intention of disturbing our confidence in the Book of Zephaniah. I fully endorse the classical church doctrine of inspiration, which I believe is also the biblical doctrine of inspiration. The Book of Zephaniah, not just the oral words that the Lord earlier sent to Zephaniah, "is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16). The reason we can know this is not because we can independently check out all the details about what roles Zephaniah himself or his scribe or disciples played in the composition of the book, but because of God's own testimony. This testimony includes the self-authentication of Scripture, the testimony of Jesus (Matt 5:17–18), and the testimony of other parts of Scripture, such as 2 Timothy's testimony to the divine authority of the OT. These arguments are, I trust, well known in evangelical circles, and I do not need to repeat them.¹

My point, then, is that God's testimony gives us confidence in the divine authorship of the Book of Zephaniah, whether or not the final (autographic) text was personally composed by Zephaniah. We also know that Zephaniah as a true prophet spoke the word of the Lord during the time of Josiah. But we remain with considerable vagueness and unanswerable questions about the human author and/or scribe. Such a situation is not that uncommon, both with respect to many books of the OT and some in the NT. (The Four Gospels are anonymous, as is Hebrews. We know the names of the authors of James and Jude, but little more about them.)

In spite of our lack of information, modern scholarly interpreters are accustomed to devote considerable attention to the human author. Often they treat this procedure as distinct from attention to the divine author. In practice, they may even consider the human author in *isolation* from the divine author. Why? They expect to gain benefits that would not otherwise accrue. Let us consider these benefits one by one.

1. *Reckoning with social and historical circumstances.* First, interpreters are accustomed to think that a focus on the human author helps us by telling us to pay at-

¹ I am thinking especially of B. B. Warfield's classic exposition, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948). We may add John Murray, "The Attestation of Scripture," in *The Infallible Word: A Symposium by the Members of the Faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary* (ed. N. B. Stonehouse and Paul Woolley; Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1946) 1–54; and John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010).

tention to the social and historical circumstances in which the author wrote. For example, the Book of Zephaniah was written during the reign of Josiah king of Judah. Or was it? We already observed that we do not know exactly when it was written. If Zephaniah himself wrote it, he could have written it shortly after he received the prophetic message or the last portion of it. But it is also possible that he wrote the book near the end of his life. The superscription says only that the word of the Lord “came to” him in the days of Josiah. Presumably he delivered his messages during that time. But we do not know, from the text of Zephaniah, whether he initially delivered his prophecies orally, rather than in written form. The patterns with Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Amos show that some of the prophets delivered messages orally. If Zephaniah delivered his messages orally, there might have been a gap in time between the oral delivery and the written composition. We do not know how long the gap might have been.

Moreover, we have no certainty as to whether Zephaniah lived for long afterwards. It is theoretically possible that he was a young man during Josiah’s reign, and that his prophecies were originally sent to him from the Lord near the end of Josiah’s reign. In that case, it is possible that he lived into the exilic period. He might have composed the book in its present written form as late as that. Or, as another alternative, the composition could have been undertaken under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit by one of his disciples who outlived him. We do not know.

If the prophecy were originally delivered orally, the composer of the written form might have used memories of Zephaniah’s oral prophecies. He could also have used written notes or written records that contained portions of what is now the Book of Zephaniah. Perhaps there were several written records of individual prophecies, and when taken together they contained all of what is now the Book of Zephaniah. The composer obviously had an interest in the original prophecies. But if he—either Zephaniah or a disciple—was doing the final composition during the last days of the declining kingdom (say, in the time of king Zedekiah) or in the exile, his intentions in composing the book might vary.

One possible intention might be primarily to make a permanent historical record of what Zephaniah said, and to allow readers to appreciate its pertinence first of all to the days of Josiah. The focus would then be almost wholly on the days of Josiah.

Or, alternatively, the editor might be writing primarily with the desire to have people in Zedekiah’s time or in the time of the exile to take to heart the implications of Zephaniah’s words for *themselves* and for *their* later circumstances. For example, the sweeping away mentioned in Zeph 1:2–3 could be intended to function as a prophecy of the coming exile (cf. vv. 4–6). It was pertinent to the days of Josiah, because even though Josiah called the people to reform, the reform was insufficient (2 Kgs 23:26–27). The prophecy was still more pertinent to Zedekiah’s time, when the spiritual situation was spiraling down to a low point (2 Kgs 24:19–20), and when the exile was looming in the immediate future. The prophecy was pertinent to the time of the exile, both because it explains that the Lord’s hand was in the devastation, and because the prophecy is capable of even more climactic ful-

fillment at some future time when God will act decisively to cleanse the whole earth from all wickedness (cf. Isa 25:6–12; 65:17–25).

All in all, there are several possibilities.² We cannot confidently choose between them, because we do not have definitive information about the final composition of the Book of Zephaniah, nor do we have definite information about the intentions of the human author/editor to address his immediate contemporaries or future generations or both.³ Thus, focus on the human author does not help us reach a stable interpretation, but leaves us with unanswerable questions, some of which affect the interpretation of Zeph 1:2–3 in a vital way.

2. *Pertinence of divine authorship.* Now suppose that we focus on the divine author. Some scholars might think that such a focus results in unstable meaning. According to their reasoning, if we just have a divine author, we may end up attributing to him whatever meaning we want. The meaning is whatever pops into our heads—and we may even allege that the Holy Spirit gave the meaning to us. This sense of instability or arbitrariness is probably one of the reasons why some interpreters avoid the divine author and want to think wholly in terms of the human author.

But two counterarguments exist, one from the side of the human author and the other from the side of the divine author. Consider first the human author. In a sense the same potential for instability or arbitrariness exists when we focus on the human author. There are many ways of conducting interpretation in an irresponsible and willful fashion. An interpreter may claim that what has popped into his head is the meaning of the *human* author. In reply, other interpreters appeal to textual evidence that makes his postulated meaning seem unlikely. But when we know nothing about the human author, who can tell for sure? Maybe the human author was a peculiar or mentally odd person, who had strange ideas and expressed them in strange ways.

Now let us turn to consider the divine author. The same textual evidences that interpreters use in weighing possibilities for human meanings are still there when we talk about divine meanings. The main difference in available information is that we know something about the divine author, and this knowledge (derived partly from many other passages of Scripture) assures us that God is not “peculiar” and is not communicating in the odd ways that might characterize some ill-adapted human beings.

The key principles to bear in mind with the divine author are that he is all-wise, and that he has a plan for all of history. As an aspect of working out his plan, he speaks to his people at particular times and places. Those speeches that he causes to be recorded in the canon are also addressed to future generations (Rom 15:4),

² See, e.g., Adele Berlin, *Zephaniah: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 25A; New York: Doubleday, 1994) 32–43.

³ I leave to one side the further issues that are generated by speculation as to whether the books of the Minor Prophets received further editing when they were included in the “Book of the Twelve” (Hosea-Malachi).

as well as to the original generation, that is, the generation in which they were written down autographically.

Because God is all-wise, he takes into account social and historical circumstances when he communicates to people in particular circumstances. In fact, he takes circumstances into account thoroughly, much more so than a merely human author with human limitations.⁴ According to God's wisdom, his speech is contextually suitable. It fits with speeches on either side of it within the same larger book. It also fits the larger cultural circumstances. So an appreciation for the wisdom of God actually leads us to a hermeneutical stance very similar to the stance we take in focusing on a human author. The main difference is that God is superior in his knowledge and skill. That additional fact actually increases our confidence in our use of information from social and historical circumstances. So focusing on divine authorship increases our accuracy and skill in interpretation.

This result may seem paradoxical. But why? Let us acknowledge one main concern: over the centuries, the history of interpretation has been littered with examples of people appealing to divine intention in order to do strange and peculiar things with the text of Scripture. But all these examples are actually fighting against the very character of God and the wisdom of his communication. Contrary to naïve impressions, focus on the divine author does not *in itself* cause irresponsible interpretations. Rather, the real cause lies in repeated misconstruals of who God is and how he works. People have not reckoned with the fact that his character leads to rather than opposes the interaction of texts with their contexts.

In fact, then, the nature of God's character calls for more attention to literary and cultural and historical contexts, not less. And the weight of responding to divine speech, instead of merely human speech, calls for greater responsibility, not less.

Reflection on God's divine authorship also alleviates the problems with the *date* of the final composition of the Book of Zephaniah. Whenever the Book of Zephaniah was composed in its final state, Zeph 1:1 was part of it. Through this verse, God says that he is inviting us to see its pertinence first of all to the time of Josiah, and to the circumstances of Zephaniah as a member of the nobility. This observation holds whether or not the final written composition of Zephaniah took place in Josiah's time or later. At the same time, because the Book of Zephaniah is part of the canon, according to God's purposes, we can infer that God intends it to address future generations. It addresses the time of Zedekiah, the exile, the post-exilic returnees, the people of NT times, and we ourselves in our own time. The Book of Zephaniah has a once-for-all historical focus in the time of Josiah, and simultaneously a universal relevance, because God so designed it.

⁴ God's attention to contextual suitability within history has an ultimate foundation in intratrinitarian communication, which always has the context of the three persons of the Trinity in their personal fellowship. Contextual suitability is not a limitation, but an expression of God's divine nature (Vern S. Poythress, *Inerrancy and Worldview: Answering Modern Challenges to the Bible* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012] chap. 11).

3. *Human authorial intention.* It might seem therefore that we have left the intention of the human author behind. And in one sense this is true, as long as we think in terms of an *isolated* human intention. There are a host of uncertainties about the intentions of an otherwise unknown author, and no feasible way of settling them when the author is dead. But no human being is in fact isolated. All human beings live in the presence of God. Their minds operate in imitation of the mind of God, whether they acknowledge it or not. All the more do these principles operate in the case of an inspired author.⁵

Any author who has come to know God through Christ, and who has communion with the Holy Spirit, has been fundamentally renewed. Therefore, at the deepest level of the heart, he desires to serve God. Yes, all his service is contaminated by sin, but his heart has been renewed. The fullness of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit belongs preeminently to the post-Pentecostal age. But the OT saints experienced a foreshadowing of it, or else they would not have been saved. The same is true of OT prophets and any scribal assistants whom God commissioned to write Scripture.

The human writers, we say, wanted to serve God. So they wanted to express spiritual words with spiritual meanings. Consequently, they intended to communicate whatever God wanted to communicate through the Holy Spirit. On one level, this is true for any spiritual person; it is true for anyone who desires to honor God in word and deed. If a person loves God, he does not want his words or deeds to proceed in independence of God. He wants God to be working through them. He wants to be filled with God's wisdom, and to express that wisdom in what he says. He wants God's presence to fill his life and his words, in order that the words may honor God and bring a blessing to those addressed. He wants others to recognize that, in what he says, he is pointing beyond himself. He is not speaking from a platform of self-sufficiency, but in ways that honor God as the source of all wisdom and truth.

These same principles hold preeminently in the case of a writer who is writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the intention of the prophet is to express the intention of God. Hence, focus on the intention of the human author, if taken with full seriousness and with attention to depth, leads to focus on God's intention.⁶ The human author intends the divine intention. Thus, it is artificial—in the end false—to try to isolate a human author's intention.

Conversely, God's intention is that he would speak *through* the human author whom he has chosen and raised up. Just as God's wisdom leads God to suit his speech to social and historical circumstances, so it leads him to suit his speech to the human intermediary. God himself invites us to reckon with Zephaniah. Only

⁵ Poythress, *Inerrancy and Worldview* chaps. 19–21, 31; idem, "The Presence of God Qualifying Our Notion of Grammatical-Historical Interpretation: Genesis 3:15 as a Test Case," *JETS* 50 (2007) 87–103.

⁶ Vern S. Poythress, "Divine Meaning of Scripture," *WTJ* 48 (1986) 241–279; idem, "Presence of God." The significance of language gets even deeper, because no human communication exists in isolation from the original divine communication in the eternal Word (Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009]).

we must not construe this reckoning as producing a picture of a human mind in isolation.

Unfortunately, the mainstream of biblical scholarship has developed a firm habit to the contrary. Scholarship tends to treat human meaning as if it were “there” as a fixed, limited object. Scholars ignore the fact that the human author intends the fullness of divine meaning. So let us continue to reflect on what scholars propose to do when they take the route of considering human authors and human intentions *by themselves*.

4. *Benefits of focusing on human language.* The next benefit that many people associate with focusing on the human author is a proper attention to language. The Hebrew text of Zeph 1:2–3 is human language. Zephaniah would have used the language in accord with normal rules and regularities for the Hebrew language of his day. Focusing on the human author encourages us to focus on normal expectations for human language. And the structure of human language provides controlling guidelines for understanding the text. By contrast, so the thinking goes, if we focus on God as divine author, God is unlimited, and so there are no controls for understanding what he says.

We may illustrate using the linguistic contents of Zeph 1:2–3. Suppose a person thinks that a focus on divine meaning leads to uncontrollability. He may reason as follows. Perhaps, because God is uncontrollable, the verses may mean anything at all. Or, if we allow that the words are intended by God to make some sense that is related to their ordinary meanings, we may still postulate in medieval fashion that God intended four levels of meaning, literal, tropological (moral), allegorical (centered on Christ and his church), and anagogical (eschatological). So the interpreter proceeds to find in Zephaniah 1:2–3 a fourfold meaning, which may be expounded as follows.

The literal meaning is directed to Zephaniah’s situation in the time of Josiah. It predicts the future devastation of Judah in 1:4–5. The language about “the face of the earth” applies to the face of the land of Judah (since “earth,” Hebrew אֲדָמָה, is capable of referring to a particular land as well as the universal scope of all the earth).

The tropological meaning applies to God cleansing the soul. By the Spirit of Christ he sweeps away all sin “from the face of” the soul.

The allegorical meaning applies to Christ. Man, beast, birds, and fish stand allegorically for the various types of peoples and nations on earth. When these peoples are united to Christ, Christ renews them through his death and resurrection. In his death he sweeps away the old man; in his resurrection he brings the new man to replace the old (Eph 4:22–24; Col 2:20–3:4).

The anagogical meaning applies to the new heavens and the new earth. God through Christ sweeps away the old earth and its structure in order to bring the new (Rev 21:1–5).

I sympathize with the concern of those who worry about uncontrollability of this kind. It appears that the scheme of fourfold interpretation, already in place as an interpretive method, has forcibly injected four disparate meaning into a helpless

text. Moreover, it may also appear that the fault lies in the interpreter's focus on divine intention.

But appearances may be deceptive. Is the focus on divine intention the real cause? I claim that it is not. The real cause lies in faulty *assumptions* about the nature of divine communication.

To begin with, we may ask whether the same uncontrollability arises with the human author. How do we know whether the human author, either Zephaniah or a later scribe, intended four distinct meanings? The initial reply might be to argue that this supposition is anachronistic, since the fourfold method of interpretation came into use only much later. Yes, but we do not know whether some earlier genius might have gotten the fourfold method or something similar into his head.

Moreover, is it really so fanciful to propose that a human author might have thought in terms of at least two meanings, or even three? For example, could he have prophesied about the coming exile of Judah, and at the same time realized that God is king and judge of all the earth (cf. Gen 18:25)? Since God is always the righteous judge, could the human author have reflected and decided that the small judgment on Judah was a small-scale analogue for a greater, universal judgment to come?⁷

The Book of Zephaniah discusses not only judgment against Judah (1:4) but against Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron, Canaan, Moab, Ammon, the Cushites, and Assyria (2:4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 12, 13). By the time we get to 3:8, we read, "for in the fire of my jealousy all the earth shall be consumed." We may be looking at a universal judgment. If so, is universal judgment already echoing in the background in 1:2–3?

Maybe. But maybe not. Maybe the author just intended local judgment on Judah at that point in the text. Then, when he came to 3:8, he shifted to something broader. How do we know whether he already had universal judgment in the back of his mind when he wrote 1:2–3? If he did have universal judgment in the background in 1:2–3, did he already intend two levels of meaning: a "literal" meaning applying to Judah, and an "anagogical" meaning applying to final judgment?

Pushing even further, how do we know whether the human author saw an analogy between large-scale judgment of nations and small-scale judgment on an individual or on his heart? Even if the author did not consciously contemplate such judgment, did he have a sensitive conscience? And if he did, was he aware that God judges the secrets of human hearts (cf. Rom 2:16)? Would not this imply, at least indirectly, a kind of judgment on the soul? Perhaps it is not so likely that the human author *consciously* had in mind a judgment on the soul. But would it have still been an *unconscious* implication? Authors typically imply (and *mean* to imply) more than they *consciously* have in mind, because they know (tacitly) that the principles that they have in mind have broader applications. So, if there are implications concerning

⁷ David Baker, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988) 85.

judgment on the human soul, do we then have in the text a tropological meaning in addition to the other two? How do we tell what was going on in the author's soul?

I think that we confront difficulties when we ask such questions. It is comparatively easy to reject a "classical" fourfold interpretation of Zeph 1:2–3. We reject it because the four meanings seem to have no relation to one another. The isolation of four distinct meanings destroys any organic unity in meaning. But further reflection and further questioning show that there might be a deep organic relationship between modes of judgment. Preliminary judgment on Judah, in the form of Babylonian exile, has an organic relationship to final judgment at the Second Coming. External judgment on the land has an organic relation to internal judgment on the soul. The principle of the universality and justice of God's judgment unite all particular instances of judgment. So it is not so outlandish to wonder whether a human author might or might not have combined more than one "level" of judgment. And the combination could have been partly or wholly unconscious. The implications from one kind of judgment to another could be implicit rather than explicit.

We can go ahead and speculate as much as we wish about possible implications of the text, given the author's disposition. But it is speculation, and it is best to admit to ourselves that that is what it is. We do not know the soul of a man about whom we otherwise know practically nothing. We cannot know. It is speculation to say that he had anagogical and tropological meanings in mind; it is equally speculative to say that he did not intend such meanings in any way (even indirectly or "unconsciously").

Zephaniah 1:2–3 is poetry. It has allusiveness. The allusiveness is not easily controllable. The human author does not say, in so many explicit words, whether he has some added depths of meaning in mind. Maybe he was fairly dull; but in the providence of God, he nonetheless came out with some good poetic lines, in spite of his general dullness. Maybe he was brilliant, and thought about all the things that we have mentioned, and more as well. But even if he thought about them all, how much did he intend to express in print? We might picture him as saying to himself, "Well, I cannot write this all down without taking a lot of space, and the Lord has not commissioned me to write a lengthy essay. I'll just write something simple."

In my opinion, we relieve ourselves of much of this fruitless speculation if we turn to consider the divine author. Turning to the divine author does not mean loosening the meaning of Zeph 1:2–3 from the normal structures of the Hebrew language. Why not? For the same reason that it does not mean loosening ourselves from the social and historical environment. The linguistic environment of Hebrew and its structures is one aspect of the total environment. God sovereignly controls this total environment. In addition, because his plan is unified and wise, what he communicates coheres with the environment that he himself has ordained.

Let us put it concretely: scholarly interpreters think they can have a certain amount of confidence when they try to determine Zephaniah's meaning, because they suppose that Zephaniah knew the Hebrew language and the customs for communication. They suppose that he acted in accordance with that knowledge. Good—though doubts could creep in with a merely human writer. Some merely

human writers just go crazy, and do not keep to normality. But, laying that aside, we can say for God what we just said for Zephaniah. God, having *ordained* Hebrew and having *ordained* all the structures involved in human communication, is surely able to act competently in a manner that coheres with the language and the structures that he has ordained. In comparison with God, Zephaniah is not nearly as competent at the things with respect to which we ascribe him competence! Only the authorship of God is actually capable of giving us good security that Hebrew and communication are in fact being used with thorough competence.

When we come to the question of fourfold meaning, divine authorship again comes to our aid rather than being a barrier—provided first of all that we have reasonable humility before God. The irresponsible interpretations come not from the mere contemplation of divine intention, but from misconstruals of who God is and how he speaks and what our responsibility is. In particular, given the character of God, we ought not, from outside the Scripture, to approach it with an autonomous specification that says that each text must have only a literal meaning, or that each text must have a fourfold meaning. We come to learn. The medieval interpreters doubtless thought that their fourfold approach was not imposed from outside, but discovered from inside. Do modern literal interpreters think the same? Both must exercise care in being ready to reform their ideas in the light of what God teaches about himself and the purposes of Scripture.

When we focus on the purposes of God the divine author, we have the advantage of being able to grow in knowledge of him, rather than remaining at the level of ignorance that we have with respect to Zephaniah or a disciple who compiled his work. We know that, in conformity with God's wisdom, his speeches fit the context, including the historical context and the immediate literary context of Zeph 1:2–3. So we might conclude that the language of “sweeping away” applies first of all to the judgment that will fall on Judah. We also know that God is a God of justice—as Abraham says, “The Judge of all the earth” (Gen 18:25). We know also, in the light of the entire canon, that he will bring a future universal judgment that will fully express his justice (Rev 20:11–15).

God has established a unity between the preliminary judgments and the final judgment, since they both express the same justice—*his* justice. Preliminary judgments anticipate and point to the final judgment (cf. 2 Pet 2:6). Consequently, we can with confidence conclude that God intended us to relate what he says in Zeph 1:2–3 to the final judgment. Just how much emphasis falls on the judgment on Judah in the near future (Zeph 1:4–6), and how much falls on the final judgment in the more remote future? It is impossible to say exactly. But it does not matter that much, once we become convinced that both aspects are implied. We can also ask how much the original audience of Zephaniah understood. Did they understand the relationship between preliminary judgment on Judah and final judgment on the whole world? How much did they reckon with such a relationship? It is impossible to say. But they had an understanding of God's justice, so they could have made the beginning of a connection, even if they did not fully work things out consciously.

We also know that God is the judge and cleanser of human souls. The redemption of individual souls is an aspect of the redemption of the whole world. So an application to human souls, such as the tropological interpretation finds, is actually not alien to the principle of justice and cleansing that the passage literally expresses. There is a connection because of the unity of God's character (justice) and the unity of his plan (wisdom).

Finally, we know that God's plan for the redemption of the world came to a climax in Christ. We know that people are redeemed through being united with the death and resurrection of Christ. This redemption is the climactic redemption that is foreshadowed in all redemptive acts in the OT. Zephaniah 1:2–3 has its focus on negative judgment, rather than positive salvation. But negative judgment, which wipes out wickedness, is one necessary aspect of positive salvation. We must be saved *from* wickedness. Thus the unity of God's plan enables us to see an organic connection between Zeph 1:2–3 and fulfillment in Christ. The connection is organic, based on the character of God—it is not just a fanciful one or one based on a general rule that says that we ought to look for and find an “allegorical meaning.”

We may also freely allow that some verbal, thematic, and theological connections are looser and more distant than others. It seems to me, for example, that the connection between immediate judgment on Judah and final judgment on all the world is fairly near the surface in Zeph 1:2–3, because the actual language has a universal tone, and because of the universal language in later verses (especially Zeph 3:8). The connection with the cleansing of the soul is remote, because nothing in the immediate literary context draws attention to such a connection.

We should underline the fact that the connections to which we point are not just being made up in our heads. We are not talking about uncontrolled subjectivity or uncontrolled license to find allegedly “divine meanings” in whatever direction our fancy flies. We are trying to do justice to the objectivities of the text and to observe organic connections. We are trying to do justice to contexts, because that is what God calls us to do, in harmony with his character and with the purposes in his communication. If we are doing well, the connections are not just whatever pops into the mind, but are discerned by us because they are already objectively present in God's speech to us.⁸

In all of this reasoning, we have avoided the conundrums that arise when we try to figure out how much Zephaniah as an individual human person “knew,” how much he “thought through,” how much he sensed intuitively or unconsciously, and how much he intended to include as implications in what he wrote. We do not know the answers to such questions, and within this life we never will. We do not *need* to know them. And we do not need to remain uncertain about the meaning of

⁸ Moreover, people should avoid saying, in a superficial way, that whatever idea they happen to have from interacting with the text is given “by the Holy Spirit.” I believe in the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. We should praise the Lord for his presence and his work. But I also believe in the ongoing work of human pride and self-deceit and base attempts to baptize our own ideas with divine authority. We must not be naïve about either the positive or the negative sides when we reflect on human subjective impressions.

Zeph 1:2–3 just because we do not know these answers. If we understand God, we grow in our understanding of how Zeph 1:2–3 fits into the revelation of his character and his plan throughout Scripture. And with that knowledge we grow in confidence concerning how Zeph 1:2–3 has relations to the judgment of Judah, the cleansing of the individual soul, fulfillment in Christ, and fulfillment in the new heavens and new earth.

5. *Benefits of reckoning with previous canon.* Next, another of the benefits of focusing on the human author might be that it encourages us to think about the author's writings in the light of the canon of Scripture available at the time he wrote. Suppose that we accept traditional early dates for OT books. Then by the time of Josiah there would be available the Pentateuch, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1–2 Samuel, Proverbs, parts of Psalms, Job, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Isaiah, Hosea, Amos, Jonah, Micah, and some other books. But there are also some uncertainties. Was Joel written early or late? Where do we place Nahum and Habakkuk in time, relative to Zephaniah? Are the traditional early dates always the right ones? Inspiration by God guarantees the authenticity of the contents of each book, but it does not by itself indicate when the book was written in its present form.

Even if we knew what canon was available in Zephaniah's time, that knowledge would not give us confident insight as to whether Zephaniah as a mere human being consciously used or alluded to earlier canon, or whether he expected his readers to see such uses and allusions. For example, Zeph 1:3, with its mention of beasts, birds, and fish, shows a possible parallel to Hos 4:3, which says that "the beasts of the field and the birds of the heavens, and even the fish of the sea are taken away" because of Israelite wickedness. Zephaniah's list has the same order as Hosea's, and includes the same three categories of animals. At this point in the text, did Zephaniah the prophet make a deliberate allusion to Hos 4:3? Or are both expressions independent of one another?

Conceivably they could be independent. They do show differences: (1) Zephaniah includes "man" as the first item in his list, before he comes to "beast"; and (2) Zephaniah is talking about divine judgment on Judah, whereas Hosea is talking about the "mourning" of the land and the animals because of human wickedness. The two lists could be similar merely because, if a person draws up a list of animals, a minimal list might obviously include the land animals ("beasts"), the animals of the air ("birds"), and the animals of the water ("fish"). Or both lists could have developed because both human authors intended to allude to Genesis 1, which on days 5 and 6 includes a narrative of the creation of these three groups of animals.

Both Hosea and Zephaniah include the three groups in an order that reverses Genesis 1, but this reversal may be for an obvious reason. The land animals are "closest" to man, because some of them can be domesticated, and they all live in the same "region" as man, namely the dry land. The birds come next, because some would be in the vicinity of human habitations. The fish come last because people have to travel to a stream or to the sea to find them. The order of the list results in a heightening with each new group of animals, because the mention of each new group shows a progressively more extensive devastation.

We may also include another question about Zephaniah's intention. Did he intend to allude to Genesis 1 in addition to or instead of Hos 4:3? It is impossible to say for sure. An allusion is surely possible. In Genesis 1 God produces by the end of the sixth day an ordered cosmos, which includes the order or structure belonging to groups of animals. In Zeph 1:2–3 he “de-creates” or ruins the order, as a judgment on wickedness. On the other hand, we have seen that the mention of the three groups of animals is natural, even if Zephaniah had never read Genesis 1.⁹ Perhaps the inclusion of animals mainly shows that the destruction will be sweeping, like the destruction of Jericho.

There are still other possible allusions. The complete Psalter of 150 psalms was not available until after the time of Zephaniah. But perhaps Psalm 8 was available in an earlier collection. Psalm 8:7–8 mentions “the beasts of the field,” “the birds of the heavens,” and “the fish of the sea,” in that order—the same order as Zeph 1:3. Does Zephaniah intend to allude to Psalm 8? Or is it just that both build on Genesis 1?

In addition, perhaps the expression “the face of the earth” in vv. 2 and 3 of Zephaniah 1 alludes to Genesis 6:7; 7:3, 4, 23. The flood of Noah swept away man and beast from the face of the earth, and so Zephaniah draws an apt parallel. The parallel is indeed suitable, but did the human author intend it? The expression “face of the earth/land/ground” is common enough (e.g. Num 12:3) that it could easily be used even without the intent to make an allusion.

In a similar way we can consider a possible allusion to Deut 4:17–18. The passage in Deuteronomy warns against making a “likeness” of an animal or bird or fish in order to have it serve as an idol. The sweeping away of animals in Zeph 1:3 may stand for the sweeping away of idolatrous worship associated with the worship of the animal images. But the allusion cannot be considered as firm, since Deuteronomy talks about making a “likeness” of an animal, while on the surface Zeph 1:3 talks about the animals themselves.

When we reckon with the divine author, we can relieve some of the uncertainties. Since God is all-knowing and all-wise, we can be confident that he intended the resonances that we can observe between Zeph 1:2–3, Hos 4:3, Genesis 1, 6–7, and Deuteronomy 4. At the same time, God took into account the circumstances when he addressed his people through Zephaniah. He knew that they would have access to Hos 4:3 and Genesis 1, but not to subsequent canon such as Ezek 14:17. Thus, Zeph 1:2–3 would resonate with Hos 4:3 and Genesis 1, but not with Ezek 14:17—not yet. Psalm 8 may or may not have been publicly available when Zephaniah was written. Knowing the end from the beginning, God also knew that he would later cause other portions of the canon to be written, which have similar themes of destruction, such as Ezek 14:17 and NT passages on judgment. Whether earlier or later, Psalm 8 would fit into the overall picture as well. God intended that

⁹ Adele Berlin points out that “themes from the early chapters of Genesis appear in all three chapters of Zephaniah” (*Zephaniah* 13). The presence of several distinct links raises the probability of direction allusion. But the links are tenuous, and Berlin wisely phrases the commonality in terms of “themes” rather than intended allusions.

Zeph 1:2–3 would eventually contribute to the total picture presented by all the canonical passages on judgment.

Moreover, we can appreciate that the connections with earlier passages have a variety of purposes and a variety of strengths. For example, the connection between Genesis 1 and Zeph 1:2–3 is loosened by the fact that one passage speaks of creation and the other of ruination. But the two sides continue to relate to one another as opposites. Ruination is a kind of “de-creation.” The connection with the flood of Noah in Genesis 6–7 is not a strong *verbal* connection, since it rests mostly on the repetition of the common expression “the face of the earth/land/ground.” But both Genesis 6–7 and Zeph 1:2–3 speak about judgment that encompasses both man and beast, so there is a substantive thematic connection. The connection with Deut 4:17–18 is quite a bit more tenuous, since the likenesses of animals in Deut 4:17–18 are not identical with the animals themselves in Zeph 1:3. Yet there is a common general theme of judgment on human rebellion against God, and this judgment takes into account the relation of human beings to their environment, including the environment of animals. We can speak with confidence about such things because God, unlike man, knows all the connections between passages.

It helps to observe that God not only knows all possible connections between passages, but crafts and appreciates the variations in strength and relevance of different kinds of connections. Not all verbal connections and not all thematic connections are equally pertinent. We may observe a *gradation* in strength, with obvious, tight connections at one end and very loose connections at the other. We need not force ourselves into a black-or-white, yes-or-no dichotomy when we try to evaluate what connections are in play with any starting passage.

6. *Literary unity in Zephaniah.* As a final possible benefit from focusing on the human author, scholars might think of the benefits from appreciating the literary unity of the whole Book of Zephaniah, as it proceeds from the human author. This literary unity invites us to understand Zeph 1:2–3 in the light of its position in the whole book and in light of its thematic unity with later announcements of judgment. The Book of Zephaniah includes (1) judgments on particular groups like Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, etc., in Zephaniah 2; (2) general themes of judgment on the day of the Lord (1:7–16; 2:2); (3) the theme of universal judgment (1:18; 3:8); and (4) the theme of final salvation for God’s people, as a reversal of judgment (3:9–20).¹⁰

It is indeed profitable to consider the Book of Zephaniah as a literary unity. But the unity exists just as much when we approach the book from the standpoint of the divine author. Both divine author and human author produced the unity. So the appreciation of unity does not really depend on an *exclusive* focus on the human author. God has all wisdom and all mastery. The principle of wisdom implies that he knows how language functions at the level of literary wholes, including whole books. He knows how such contexts affect the use of individual passages such as Zeph 1:2–3. He himself has sovereignly ordained all these literary functions of lan-

¹⁰ Baker, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah* 87.

guage. So he is obviously able and willing to use them competently. Thus, attention to the divine author leads to attention to the literary unity of Zephaniah. This contextually sensitive approach may once again be contrasted with the history of interpretation, where people have sometimes used divine authorship as an excuse for isolating a single verse and ignoring context.

In fact, here as before, the divine author gives us a reliable foundation for considering unity, whereas the human author does not provide such a foundation—at least, if he is taken in isolation from the divine author. The older historical criticism often tended to break up OT books into pieces from various sources. It might allege that these pieces were combined by a redactor or scribal editor who was dull or sleepy. The redactor just collected miscellaneous bits and threw them together, sometimes haphazardly. This kind of sloppy “author” can hardly encourage us to pay close attention to overall structure and themes. In the case of Zephaniah, an inspection of the text and its arrangement shows signs of literary unity. But how do we know whether this apparent unity is an accidentally happy outcome from a scribe who was not paying attention? In the manner of some critical scholars, could an analyst speculate that maybe a sleepy copyist put together fragments from Zephaniah’s prophecies in 1:2–3:8, which have a message of doom, with happy prophecies from some other prophetic figure in 3:9–20, not realizing that the two do not belong together?

On the other hand, a new kind of criticism, oriented to synchronic literary analysis,¹¹ can travel to the opposite extreme. It might picture the editor/redactor as a super-genius in literary sensitivity, who was aware, perhaps even consciously aware, of every possible nuance and the resonant effects of every turn of phrase. This kind of picture is good in a certain way for encouraging the literary sensitivities of readers, but it may actually promote *over-sensitivity*. The modern literary analyst can be tempted to read in significance. He may pile up alleged artistic, political, economic, and religious agenda even in cases where there is no unambiguously clear evidence. It is all plausible, because the hypothetical ancient author may, after all, have had all these things in mind.

Both of these extremes, the fragmentizing extreme of older criticism and the literarily oversubtle extreme of newer criticism, have a common root: they grow from lack of information. We have virtually no knowledge about the human prophet Zephaniah or of scribes or disciples who may have compiled his prophecies into a single book. In the absence of thorough, substantive information, speculation can grow unchecked. Even though some interpreters may regret the speculation, it almost becomes necessary when we think that the meaning is bound up with the human author (or scribe) as a person in isolation from the presence of God. Even if some interpreters acknowledge in theory the presence of God, they artificially isolate the human source, because only in this way can they control meaning.

¹¹ Berlin, *Zephaniah* 20–23, expounds the contrast.

The irony here is that, far from controlling meaning, we lose control and fall into speculation. Many people would admit that we could determine human meaning from a human author in isolation only if we knew lots and lots about the human author, so that we could interpret his concerns thoroughly as we read the text.¹² If we do not have this knowledge, the interpretive process proceeds *of necessity* either to invent it, in the form of speculation, or to refuse to invent it. The latter course leaves us with little to say, because there is too much uncertainty about what the text could mean. In general, the world of scholarship slants in favor of speculation, because the scholar must have some meaningful employment.

The proper solution to the problem is to focus on the divine author. As we have indicated, this focus does not mean *discounting* the presence of the human author. It means rather than we affirm that the human author was in fellowship with the Spirit, and this fellowship meant that he intended to affirm the divine intention. The divine intention is accessible, because we know God, even though we do not know much about Zephaniah. The difficulty with this route is that it destroys the ideal of religious neutrality in scholarship. And, beyond that, it also implies that ultimately none of us is in control of the interpretive process. Interpretation is not *first of all* a method for cross-examining the text. Sound interpretation is first of all encountering God, bowing before him, and humbling asking him to teach and transform us.

II. THE APOSTLE PAUL AS AN EXCEPTION?

Up to this point we have considered Zephaniah as our illustration for human authorship. Similar reasoning applies to most other books of the Bible, where we know little about the human author.

The biggest exception to this principle would appear to be with the apostle Paul, because we know about him from the Book of Acts as well as from his letters, and in some of his letters his personality comes out strongly.¹³ So should not we

¹² And even then, the interpretation would be artificially skewed, because it would neglect the presence of God in all human life and all human minds.

¹³ Next after Paul, in terms of fullness of knowledge available to us, might come Moses, David, and Jeremiah. Let us consider them briefly. The texts deriving from Moses came from God having known Moses "face to face" (Deut 34:10), and God speaking to him "mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in riddles, and he beholds the form of the LORD" (Num 12:8). These words offer us an awesome description, confirmed by the fact that Moses's face shone after meeting with the Lord (Exod 34:29–35). Moses's intimacy with God presents us with a caution against any attempt to calculate a merely human meaning.

We also know a good deal about David, from the history recorded in 1–2 Samuel and 1 Chronicles. We may also draw on the Davidic psalms. But there are difficulties. For one thing, scholars dispute whether the superscriptions to the psalms mean that David was the author, or the collector, or the one for whom or about whom the psalms were written. In addition, note David's own words about his experience in composing religious songs: "The Spirit of the LORD speaks by me, his word is on my tongue. The God of Israel has spoken; the Rock of Israel has said to me" (2 Sam 23:2–3). The presence of the Spirit with David on special occasions cautions us against merely interpreting his inspired words on the basis of "ordinary" human backgrounds in David's life.

use this information when we read his letters? Of course we should. But even in this case we know about Paul through what God has given us to know, through Acts and the letters. We know little else, though we can tentatively infer a few things from his being a former Pharisee and a Roman citizen.

As usual, if we bear in mind the divine author we can reach the same conclusions about positively using our information about Paul. God in his wisdom speaks in contexts that he has ordained. In the case of Paul, God speaks to us through Paul in a manner that takes into account the context of who God made Paul to be, what God has accomplished through Paul (Rom 15:15–20), and what God has told us about those contexts through Scripture itself. In particular, God's wisdom invites us to read Paul's letters as a single literary whole, from the point of view of divine authorship, not merely human. They are a single literary whole in God's divine intention precisely because God chose to unify them in the very process of speaking them through Paul as a human author. Similarly, God invites us to read Paul's letters in the context of Acts.

We are using the same principle that we have used before. God's wisdom implies that he speaks in a way that suits the context that he himself has ordained. In the case of Paul's letters, the context includes Paul himself, as the human author. Hence, it is appropriate to note things such as common terms, common themes, common modes of expression, and common styles in theological reasoning that hold among Paul's letters, as distinct from other parts of Scripture that came about through other human authors. The uniqueness of the human author gets affirmed precisely because of the wisdom of the divine author.

It is also appropriate to note common themes between 2 Peter and Jude, which do not share a common human author, or between Revelation and the Gospel of John, where the commonality of authorship is disputed, or between two Synoptic Gospels, or among the OT books of "wisdom literature": Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. We also note special unity in the Pastoral Epistles, because of their overlapping topics and concerns. God has put in place many forms of organic unity. The profundity of his wisdom invites us to meditate on them all.

Moreover, the inclusion of Davidic psalms within the Book of Psalms has the effect of inviting us to generalize beyond the personal experience of David. The psalms become the hymnbook and prayer book of Israel—both Israel corporately and every Israelite individually. Presumably a scribe or scribes were involved in the final compilation of the book of 150 psalms, in the arrangement that we now have. God superintended this process in inspiration, and the human role of the scribes virtually disappears behind the pre-eminent role of divine authorship in creating the resulting canonical book. So where are the individual human authors of individual psalms? Far in the background. The contents of the psalms are very human in their expressions of suffering, groaning, and exultation. But the voice is the voice of God, and ultimately of Christ the singer (Heb 2:12), teaching Israel through the work of the Holy Spirit to find her own voice in response.

Finally, consider Jeremiah. Jeremiah's struggles with respect to his opponents and with respect to his calling from God come out strongly in the book of Jeremiah. Such struggles reveal his personality. But precisely in his struggles with his calling, we see a distance open up between what God calls him to say and what he himself wants (e.g. Jer 1:6; 11:14; 20:9). Such distance inhibits an interpretation of the Book of Jeremiah in terms of a focus on merely human meaning.

There is room, then, for a distinctively Pauline biblical theology. But how do we do it? Do we do it in a way that presupposes the isolation of the human author from divine communion? We can illustrate the difficulty by asking what Pauline biblical theology really is. Does it mean treating Paul's letters as a God-ordained literary unity? Such an approach is what God's attention to Paul the person already suggests. Or does it in addition mean trying to "climb into Paul's mind"? If the latter, do we conceive of Paul's mind in isolation from the divine mind? And do we think about "what he believes" in isolation from the missionary activities in which God is at work through him?

How many of the modern books on the theology of Paul have had at the heart of their discussion Paul *the missionary*, that is, Paul as sent, empowered, and speaking as an emissary of Christ and a church planter among the nations? Such is the picture given to us both in Acts (9:15; 13:2) and by Paul himself (Rom 15:18).¹⁴ Could it be that the attempt to isolate "Paul's mind" has had a role in minimizing Paul the missionary, the bearer of divinely endorsed good news? Commentaries and books of theology are nowadays written by scholars, and it is easy to reconfigure Paul as primarily a theologian or rhetorician rather than a missionary. If we pay attention to what God tells us about Paul, and what God was accomplishing by speaking through Paul, our reflections may turn out differently.

In saying this, I have no wish to depreciate the modern theologies of Paul, or modern commentaries on his letters, many of which are wonderfully insightful.¹⁵ But some of them may have achieved their positive results in spite of a false method, namely the attempt to isolate a human level of understanding. I am saying that we need to pause before adopting a false method or continuing with it if we have already adopted it. The method of focusing on a human author, as though we could treat his intentions, his meanings, and his ideas in isolation from divine presence, is a false method, and it leads to distortions, speculations, and fogginess about his intentions.

The distortion is obvious with the case of Paul, if the false method has had a part in overlooking the central role of God's speaking in the whole work of Paul. Consider what Paul speaks of

¹⁴ Years ago I heard Harvie Conn, professor of missions at Westminster Theological Seminary, point out that Herman Ridderbos's monumental *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), a truly admirable piece, has almost nothing on missions.

¹⁵ We leave to one side yet another question, whether an attempt to emphasize the *distinctiveness* of Paul's theology, in contrast to the theologies of other NT writers, runs the danger of producing tension between the modern book about *Paul's* theology and Paul's own understanding that his gospel harmonizes with what other apostles are proclaiming: "Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed" (1 Cor 15:11). Galatians 2:7–10 indicates a division of labor, but this friendly division presupposes a harmony about the nature of the gospel.

We may point out still another, opposite danger. When we treat Paul's letters together, as witnesses to "Pauline theology," we may minimize the distinctiveness of what takes place in letters directed to distinct missionary situations: Rome, Corinth, Galatia, Colossae, Thessalonica; or to individuals: the Pastorals. A focus on divine authorship leads to acknowledging the wisdom of God in the distinctive letters, each of which take into account the addressees and their situation.

the grace given me *by God* to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of *the gospel of God*, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. . . . For I will not venture to speak of anything except *what Christ has accomplished through me* to bring the Gentiles to obedience—by *word* and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the *power of the Spirit of God*—so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of *the gospel of Christ*. (Rom 15:15–19)

Can we as modern interpreters read these words with full attention, and not realize that Paul is implying that all his letters are part of the mission that God has given him? If so, his letters set forth the message of good news that God is speaking through Paul, in the power of Christ and in the power of the Spirit. Note, for example, what Paul himself says in reflecting on what happened when he brought the gospel to the Thessalonians: “when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the *word of God*, which is *at work* in you believers” (1 Thess 2:13). Paul’s activities have as their goal “to bring the Gentiles to obedience,” which can only be accomplished when the divine word comes with divine power and works a divine missionary goal. In a broad sense, we ourselves are among the Gentile recipients of Paul’s message. With this in mind, are we going to set ourselves to isolate a merely human meaning from a merely human Paul? Then are we ignoring Paul’s own convictions about his letters, about his apostleship, and about what he says about his message? Is this a good recipe for producing genuine interpretative understanding?

III. CONCLUSION: GIVING UP ON THE HUMAN AUTHOR

My concluding advice with respect to the focus on an isolated human author is that we give it up. Period. There is no gain to it, and much loss. We who are scholars work on the intentions of human authors as if this focus will give us answers. But we are living an illusion. Instead, let us seek God. If we do so, we will get more spiritual health, because we are encountering God seriously. We will get more accuracy, because we can settle many interpretive questions concerning authorial intention. We will get more candor, because we can give up concealing from ourselves that in most cases we do not know anything about the human author except what we infer from the text, and that many such inferences are questionable.