

Theological Interpretation of Scripture and Its Future

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This essay will quickly review some of the recent movements and concerns that led to the reemergence of theological interpretation of scripture. In this light, the essay will present and examine three issues facing theological interpretation as it moves forward into the future. The first issue concerns debates around the self-definition of theological interpretation. The less said here the better. The second concerns the relationship between theological interpretation and the practices of historical criticism. After a great deal of hostility and mutual recrimination, the time is now right to reflect on this relationship in less fevered tones. Finally, theological interpreters of scripture should focus some attention on the formation of future theological interpreters.

Establishing an Academic Practice

I will begin with a truism, albeit a truism that took me a long time to appreciate: although I could not have recognized this when I finished my PhD, the rich tradition of Christian theology from the patristic period down to the present is soaked in scripture, even if it is sometimes hard to recognize. In fact, for the great majority of the church's history, you could not really be counted as a theologian if you were not a master of the sacred page, if you did not have a deep knowledge and sharp facility with scripture and its interpretation. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that at its best, throughout its history, theology has always been a mode of scriptural exegesis.

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You don't have to be an expert to see that biblical interpretation during the patristic, medieval, or early modern periods looks very different from the biblical interpretation I was trained to do in graduate school. One way of accounting for this difference is this: the way I was taught by virtually all of my professors, at least implicitly, was that premodern biblical interpretation was simply a form of error.

The assumption was that modern biblical criticism led readers to the meaning of biblical texts better than premodern biblical criticism did. By mastering a number of ancient languages and some modern scholarly languages; by studying the histories, cultures, and societies within which the biblical texts are set and within which the biblical texts were written; and, most importantly, by developing a facility with a number of critical skills that are often lumped together under the name *historical criticism*, one could uncover the meaning of biblical texts in ways that premodern biblical interpreters did not, and could not, do.

In the intervening time, a number of things have rendered this account implausible to many scholars, including me. Many of the practices of historical criticism were shown to be badly flawed in their assumptions and in their methods. Even as these methods developed and adapted to new and different forms of evidence, scholars are now much more circumspect in what they are willing to claim for these methods.

Further, it became clear that the various practices that went under the name historical criticism did not actually work together to produce a single result called meaning. The more proficient we became at these various practices, the clearer it became that their results were rarely compatible with each other. That is not to say that the results of each of these practices were false. Rather, it meant that these results could rarely if ever be combined into some summative result called the meaning of a biblical text.

In addition, new critical practices and critical questions entered biblical studies from such fields as classics, history, literature, and sociology. Moreover, those working in fields such as philosophical hermeneutics began to show us that the notion of the meaning of a text was a lot more complex than we once thought.¹ To add to this mix, scholars

¹ In recent memory, no single scholar put these philosophical issues on the agenda of biblical scholars more profoundly than Anthony Thiselton. See in particular *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with*

are now, slowly, paying much more attention to voices from outside the developed world and from those who have been on the margins. The result has been a fascinating fragmentation within the field of biblical studies, which is more divided now than at any other point in time. A central reason for this fragmentation is that no one critical perspective can lay claim to delivering the meaning of the text at the expense of other perspectives. I take it that despite historical criticism's own particular inner tensions, arguments over the nature and practice of historical criticism and the subsequent fragmentation of biblical scholarship into numerous discrete interests are at their root very specific examples of the larger fate of arguments about textual meaning that one finds in other disciplines. One can still pursue a grand unified theory of textual meaning as well as methods for attaining or displaying it, but I am not optimistic of success here. Although some might consider this a crisis, for those who are interested, as I am, in reinvigorating forms of biblical interpretation that are genuinely theological, this fragmented state of affairs is more like an opportunity.

Although Christians have always read scripture theologically, within the guild of professional biblical scholars this practice had largely fallen out of favor with the rise of historical criticism beginning in the late eighteenth century.² By the time of its methodological ascendance, historical criticism's practices were often seen as the only viable scholarly option and they largely worked to keep theological considerations at arm's length. Whereas in premodern times one could not be counted a theologian unless one was a master of the sacred page, by the time of historical criticism's ascendancy one could either be a theologian *or* a biblical scholar, but not both.³ That disjunction persists down to today and is reinforced in the structure of most graduate school curricula. As I will note later, whether or not this is a good situation in general, it is not a good situation for seminary faculty and students.

Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer and Wittgenstein (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 1980) and *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1992).

² See Michael Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

³ The conceptual roots of this can be traced at least to William Wrede, "The Tasks and Methods of 'New Testament Theology,'" in Robert Morgan, ed., *The Nature of New Testament Theology* (London: SCM, 1973), 68–116. See also the discussion in Stephen Fowl, *Engaging Scripture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 13–21.

As I already mentioned, the fragmentation of biblical scholarship has provided an opportunity to reinvigorate practices of theological interpretation. Here is what I mean: since no one set of interpretive considerations can guarantee access to textual meaning, it becomes difficult to deny a place to most thoughtful ways of interpreting scripture. Theological considerations can no longer be ruled out of court simply for being theological. As a result, the past twenty to twenty-five years have witnessed a significant growth in scholarship directed toward what might be called the theological interpretation of scripture.⁴ Within the profession of biblical studies there has been some opposition to these developments. This opposition, however, seems primarily directed at and driven by poorly done examples of theological interpretation or inept arguments about the place of theological interpretation as a scholarly practice. To the extent that this is true, theological interpreters should be as opposed to poor practice and inept argument as anyone else. Such objections really do not get at the methodological heart of the matter.⁵ There cannot be substantial methodological objections to theological interpretation done well apart from prior agreements about method in biblical studies that would rule out theological considerations. Such agreement is lacking among biblical scholars and is not likely anytime soon.

At the same time, it would be foolish to say that theological interpretation of scripture is now the dominant mode of biblical interpretation in the academy. It is not. I do think it is safe to say that theological interpretation has sufficient support among scholars and the institutions that support them that it seems set to continue as a distinct scholarly activity for some time to come. Given this reality, I would like to set out three separate issues facing theological interpreters of scripture as they move into the future. The first of these issues concerns debates around the nature and practice of theological

⁴ *The Journal of Theological Interpretation* has published continuously since 2007. There are several major commentary series devoted to theological interpretation that have already published numerous volumes. There are at least two SBL groups that work primarily in this field and their sessions are usually well attended.

⁵ See the initial essay by Ron Hendel, "Farewell SBL: Faith and Reason in Biblical Studies," *Biblical Archeological Review* (July/August, 2010): 70–74 and the subsequent discussions in such places as G. Brooke Lester, "'Farewell to SBL' Revisited: Biblical Studies, Religious Faith, and the New 'Blurb,'" *Anumma: Hebrew Bible and Digital Learning* (blog), <http://www.brookelester.net/blog/2012/4/12/farewell-to-sbl-revisited-biblical-studies-religious-faith-a.html>.

interpretation. These debates are largely matters of self-definition. There may be less to say here than one might first think.

The second concerns the relationships between theological interpretation and the other practices of biblical scholarship, particularly those that still go under the name of historical criticism. When theological interpretation of scripture was trying to get a foothold in the academy there was a good deal of overheated rhetoric from both theological interpreters and historical critics about either the necessity or the bankrupt nature of historical criticism. I think the time is right to reflect on these relationships in less fevered tones.⁶

Finally, in the light of these other two discussions, I would like to propose some considerations and concerns for those interested in the growth and formation of theological interpreters of scripture, especially among those whose task it is to proclaim God's word in parishes. In this regard, I believe there are some reasons for concern and some opportunities for further reflection.

Defining Theological Interpretation: Less May Be More

Many new academic ventures are marked by extraordinary methodological self-consciousness and great fussiness over self-definition and boundary marking. Theological interpretation of scripture was not different in this respect. Although theological interpretation of scripture was new to the modern university, it was not a new practice. To the extent that I have participated in these arguments, I have tried to point out that rather than starting something new, scholars should speak in terms of reviving something older, a practice or sets of practices that used to be considered normal but had largely been eclipsed. Clearly, one should not re-pristiniate or fantasize about the past and then seek to repeat slavishly something that never was. Nevertheless, it seems wise to me that the aims of contemporary scholars interested in theological interpretation should be directed to discerning and reflecting on the habits and practices of those premodern interpreters who saw scriptural interpretation as one of the central tasks of theology, not as a separate discipline distinct from theology. Those habits and practices would need to be made serviceable for our modern

⁶ Joel Green's essay, "Re-thinking 'History' for Theological Interpretation," *Journal for Theological Interpretation* 5 (2011): 159–174 reflects a similar concern. I am less certain that the various sets of interests he ascribes to his three types of historical criticism can be retained as clearly as he seems to be.

contexts and related to other interpretive habits and contexts, but this did not and does not require an overly narrow definition of theological interpretation or a distinct interpretive method for it.

In fact, one of the first things to note about the interpretive habits, practices, and results of premodern interpreters is their relative disinterest in matters of interpretive method. Unlike our own time, premodern interpreters produced very few works on interpretive method. Origen's *On First Principles* and Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine* come immediately to mind. In addition, in the medieval period Nicholas of Lyra and Thomas Aquinas write what might be called methodological reflections, though Aquinas's reflections are part of a much larger theological endeavor. One can also learn much from the debates between Erasmus and Luther, as well as from Calvin's writings. There are, no doubt, others besides these that come to mind. Nevertheless, in comparison with the modern period there are very few works dedicated to what might be called interpretive method—theological or otherwise.

I suggest that one of the main reasons for this is that despite the various differences between Origen, Augustine, Aquinas, and Luther, they all share an approach that does not treat scriptural interpretation as an end in itself. Instead, they all seem to share the view that scripture is to be interpreted in the light of the larger ends of the Christian life.⁷ They use different idioms to describe this end. Some invoke the vocabulary of salvation; others speak of ever deeper love of God and neighbor, or ever deeper union with the triune God or deeper friendship with God. These differing vocabularies can lead one to think that there are many different views about the end of the Christian life, but that would be a mistake. There is enormous agreement on this matter; no one of these idioms rules out the others. Moreover, given the fact that there is an inbuilt element of mystery about the precise nature of humanity's ultimate end in God, it is not surprising to find a variety of ways of describing this.

By focusing on the end or purpose of the Christian life one can see that scriptural interpretation is never an end in itself for believers. Scripture becomes one, perhaps the primary, gift of God for drawing believers toward their ultimate ends in God. Scripture has a role to play in the divine drama of salvation. To use Augustine's image,

⁷ Of course, this also presumes a large store of agreements and shared convictions about God and God's self-revelation.

it becomes the vehicle on which one rides towards one's true home along the road laid down by Christ.⁸ Reading Scripture theologically, then, may focus critically on those habits and practices that will enable believers to interpret scripture in ways that will enhance rather than frustrate their progress toward their ultimate end in God. Or, theological readers of scripture might focus on producing or engaging with interpretations that aim, through many and various ways, to enhance this progress. Or, theological readers might explore the various ways in which interpretation of scripture shapes and is shaped by broader Christian theological convictions and doctrines. One could continue at length in this vein.

I recognize that this is a very open-ended account of theological interpretation. There is little to gain and much to be lost by trying to offer too narrow a definition of theological interpretation.⁹ In fact, I would be very happy for all to adopt the view that theological interpretation is that interpretation that keeps theological concerns primary. Keeping theological concerns primary means that scripture and scriptural interpretation does not become a source, tool, or means to attain some other goal or project that is not theological, that is not serving the ends of ever more faithful faith and practice so that Christians might be drawn into ever deeper love of God and neighbor. A definition such as this one is capable of bringing rigorous scholarly forms of interpretation, as well as homilies and congregational Bible studies and other types of scriptural interpretation, all under the umbrella of theological interpretation.

One might want to argue that this account is too open-ended to describe and prescribe how scriptural interpretation might shape and be shaped by Christian doctrine. This narrower focus might also be called theological interpretation of scripture. Although this more narrow focus may account for the scholarly interests of some, it does curiously separate theological interpretation of scripture from a theology of scripture that recognizes scripture's divinely ordered role in the drama of salvation. I would strongly encourage theological

⁸ See *On Christian Doctrine* 1.39.

⁹ Stanley Porter is simply one of the most recent scholars to press this issue. See "What Exactly Is Theological Interpretation of Scripture and Is It Hermeneutically Robust Enough for the Task to Which It Has Been Appointed?," in Stanley Porter and Matthew Malcolm, ed., *Horizons in Hermeneutics: A Festschrift in Honor of Anthony C. Thiselton* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2013) 234–267. For a list of others who press this question see Green, "History," 163n4.

interpretation of scripture that explores how interpretation of scripture shapes and is shaped by Christian doctrine and theology, but I would not want to limit theological interpretation to just that practice.

Moreover, the institutions that support scholars (theological and otherwise) may have an interest in a narrower account of theological interpretation for their own institutional purposes. Theological interpreters can adopt those narrower definitions on an ad hoc basis in order to participate and share in certain institutional goods. They should not, thereby, forget that those interpretive practices that happen outside of formal institutional structures such as universities, seminaries, and the Society of Biblical Literature might also count as theological interpretation and serve God's purposes quite well.

*Theological Interpretation and Historical Criticism:
No Need for War*

My second area of concern is to chart some of the relationships between theological interpretation of scripture and some of the other types of biblical interpretation common in the academy. When theological interests were trying to assert themselves into the scholarly mainstream, advocates for theological interpretation often made overheated claims about the bankruptcy of historical criticism. At the same time there has also been an outpouring of articles by scholars arguing that allowing theological concerns a hearing within such institutions as the SBL will have a deleterious effect on biblical scholarship. These, too, tend to rely on overheated claims about such things as scholarly objectivity, historical integrity, and so forth. Often each side points to poorly executed or poorly defended examples of whatever it is they are arguing against. This seems to be not so much an argument in favor of one sort of interpretation over another as an argument in favor doing whatever work one does better. As long as each side continues to make overheated claims about the logical necessity of their approach relative to all others, we can expect a lot of rhetorical heat, but little hermeneutical light.

For those of us who are both interested in theological interpretation and recognize the legitimacy of other interpretive interests and practices, the question remains, "How should theological interpreters engage other forms of biblical criticism?" The short answer is this: Theological interpreters can and should make use of historical, literary, social scientific, and all other types of biblical interpretation as

long as they understand that such work needs to be subsidiary to the task of keeping theological concerns primary. Scholars can and will interpret biblical texts from a variety of interpretive interests, employing diverse interpretive practices. They can and will offer these interpretations as ends in themselves or contributions toward larger historical, literary, or social scientific projects. This is all to the good. Theological interpreters should read, engage, and learn from such works. This is because theological interpreters can and should make use of them when and as they can help in the tasks of theological interpretation. The practice of engaging and making use of the best work of those who do not share one's theological convictions has a long history in the church. Origen, for example, argued for a deep and thoughtful engagement with pagan philosophy to the extent that it helped Christians think about Christianity better. He used the trope of the Israelites plundering the Egyptians in Exodus to justify this practice.¹⁰

If the theological interpretation of scripture is marked by a sustained interpretive commitment to keep theological concerns primary in one's interpretation, we should expect that readers can and should make ad hoc use of other interpretive habits, practices, and results. The point of doing this is to use a wide range of critical tools and resources in order to help advance the aims of any particular theological interpretation. This raises the pressing question of how to make such ad hoc use of other interpretive habits, practices, and results without sacrificing the primacy of theological concerns. Indeed, for most practicing clergy and for seminarians whose curriculum often leaves historical critical instruction and theological investigation sitting uneasily side by side, this would seem to be an especially important question.

There is no particular method or procedure that will guarantee success here. Just because there is not a method, however, does not mean that we cannot think methodically about these questions. As a way of beginning, I would suggest that rather than pursuing a method for understanding when and how to make theological use of the insights of biblical scholars, theological interpreters would be better served by working to cultivate a set of interpretive virtues that will

¹⁰ See Origen's letter to the as yet unbaptized Gregory Thaumaturgos. *Letter To Gregory*, paras. 1 and 2 in *PG* 11.88–89. See also the discussion in Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, 181–183.

help them make wise judgments about how to keep theological concerns primary in their interpretive work.

*The Formation of Interpretive Virtues:
Charity and Practical Wisdom*

First, although I am certain that theological interpreters of scripture should cultivate numerous virtues both moral and intellectual, two in particular come to the forefront. These are charity and prudence (or practical reason). At their best, these two virtues work together to help theological interpreters engage the wide variety of biblical interpretation while working to maintain the primacy of theological concerns. Further, although I will discuss each of these virtues as if they were discrete things, they ultimately must be manifested along with other virtues in a more or less unified human life.

Charity in interpretation is always directed toward maximizing agreement between interpreters. The point of this is not to reduce disagreement because disagreements are bad and upsetting. Rather charity assumes that if interpreters read each other's works in ways that maximize their agreements, then both the nature and the scope of their disagreements will be clearer and more capable of resolution. Such charity is particularly important when dealing with interpreters and interpretations that come from times, places, and cultures far different from our own. When we seek to maximize the agreements between ourselves and such interpreters we diminish the temptation simply to reduce those interpreters to inferior versions of ourselves so that they can be easily dismissed. In this respect, when historical critics emphasize the temporal and cultural "strangeness" of the Bible, they are emphasizing a necessary, but not sufficient, aspect of interpretive charity. They see the importance of understanding interpreters and interpretations on their own terms.

This is a necessary, but not sufficient, aspect of interpretive charity because the charitable interpreter will not simply desire to display the strangeness of alternative interpretations. In addition, the charitable interpreter will want to present alternative interpreters and interpretations in the most positive light possible. This might require going above and beyond the work done by those who hold these alternative views; this may involve doing more for one's argumentative opponents than they did for themselves. Nevertheless, if one is to produce a better interpretive alternative, then one must build on and extend the

strengths of alternative views without replicating their weaknesses. Doing this requires one to address the strongest possible version of any alternative.

It should be clear from this discussion that charity is not about artificial forms of humility. It does not require one to support weak or erroneous interpretations in favor of keeping interpretive peace. There is no reason for charitable interpreters to shy away from disagreement or argument. Indeed, this side of the eschaton, Christians can expect that disagreement and debate will mark all their engagements with scripture. In such a situation, charity is that virtue that will give us the best chance of resolving our disputes well.

The second virtue to examine is practical reason or prudence. If you pick up a journal in the field of biblical studies or attend a professional conference of biblical scholars, two things would strike you. First, the material under discussion is both exceedingly diverse and complex. Second, those who are fully participating in the discussions and debates are able to address the diversity and complexity relatively well. They can figure out where the critical issues lie; they can make judgments about the weight and relevance of particular claims; they can come to a conclusion that they can defend, revise, or abandon in the light of new evidence or superior arguments. What this shows in part is these scholars have been more or less well formed to be particular types of readers.

It is simply the case that one cannot successfully and proficiently enter into these professional discussions and debates without prior formation. In part this is because there is a great deal of technical information to master. This is not the whole story, however. This technical information is not self-interpreting. It does not organize itself; it cannot identify its own problems, tensions, and underlying patterns. Professional proficiency presumes technical mastery. Such proficiency is distinguished from technical mastery, however, by the well-formed scholars' abilities to engage in interpretive debates and discussions and to reformulate the issues as needed; to marshal evidence both arguing for its relevance to a particular issue and showing how that evidence should lead to specific conclusions; to defend, refine, and reformulate views in the light of counterclaims; and in all of this to advance an interpretive debate or discussion.

The virtue that enables one to move beyond technical mastery to professional proficiency is what Aristotle would call *phronesis*, or practical reasoning, or prudence. Although it is rarely specified this

way, the graduate formation of biblical scholars is primarily an exercise in cultivating the virtue of practical reasoning. The aim of this is so that scholars can deploy their technical knowledge and skills in ways that are appropriate to specific problems, contexts, and audiences. The prudent or practically wise scholar perceives the relevant similarities between complex problems and already agreed standards. Such scholars then move, largely by analogy, to use already proven standards to elucidate the unknown or the contested.

Given that theological interpretation of scripture is marked by debates, discussions, and arguments about how to interpret and embody scripture so as to enhance Christians' prospects of worshiping and living faithfully before God, cultivating the virtue of practical reasoning or prudence will be as important as cultivating interpretive charity. This is so that the technical skills and knowledge of the scholar can fruitfully be displayed, deployed, and directed toward the larger ends of the Christian life. Without practical reasoning, it is too easy to displace theological concerns from their primacy in theological interpretation.

Forming Theological Interpreters

How are such virtues formed and cultivated in people? Most often such cultivation requires institutional contexts where these virtues can be displayed, practiced, and embodied over time. The academy has relatively clear ways of doing this for professional biblical scholars and does so pretty well. Theological interpreters of scripture can and should benefit from such formation. In my view, however, the academy is weakest in developing both the technical skills and knowledge attendant to theological interpretation and the precise ways in which one needs to be formed to be a charitable and prudent theological interpreter. In large part, this is because the skills and knowledge distinctively related to theological interpretation cross the disciplinary and departmental boundaries that currently shape most institutions. There is much work to be done here with regard to the curricula and aims of graduate education that will develop theological interpreters of scripture. Historical and systematic theologians will need to work with biblical scholars and others in ways that graduate training does not equip them to do well.

Whether or not the academy provides sufficient institutional contexts for the formation of theological interpreters, it should also

be clear that this is only a very small portion of the picture. In this light, we must not forget that the aims of theological interpretation will always have an eye on the church, on that primary context where Christians argue, debate, and discuss scripture with the aim of deepening their love of God and neighbor. Given these aims for theological interpretation, what and where are the institutional structures that form theological interpreters whose primary context is the parish and not the academy?

The various institutions of the modern academy do a relatively good job of forming many of the requisite skills, habits, and dispositions biblical scholars need. For the most part, these institutions do not do as well when it comes to forming the specific skills, habits, and dispositions required to form theological interpreters of scripture. Further, although churches benefit from the presence and work of contemporary theological interpreters of scripture, and although one might argue that such scholars are essential to the long-term health of the church, churches have not generally invested in the formation and sustenance of such scholars. Moreover, given the current questions surrounding the state and future of higher education and related concerns and questions about seminary education, there is, perhaps now more than ever, a need to enrich and fortify institutions within which theological interpreters of scripture can be formed in ways that both impart the requisite technical mastery of languages, history, philosophy, and doctrine, as well as such interpretive virtues as charity and prudence within an ecclesial context. The primary question is, Who will invest in such formation?

If the formation of theological interpreters of Scripture is to be more systematic or intentional, one option is to found new academic institutions or new departments or programs within existing institutions. A central aim of such institutions, departments, or programs would be to form theological interpreters of scripture in ways that both impart the requisite technical mastery and the interpretive virtues so that this practice may continue to grow and flourish into the future.¹¹ The structural and economic realities of higher education in colleges, universities, and seminaries makes it seem unlikely new ventures are likely to be sustainable for the foreseeable future.

¹¹ Although the formation of theological interpreters is not its only aim, the ThD program at Duke Divinity School is an example of the type of formation across the theological disciplines that I advocate here.

One might argue that current seminaries are precisely the places where such formation might flourish. I am sure that such formation happens in seminaries. I would, however, also note some structural factors that may work against this. First, seminary faculties are for the most part drawn from the PhD programs of major research universities. Such graduate training encourages disciplinary specialization within which it is difficult to develop the wide-ranging exposure to church history and Christian doctrine needed to interpret theologically. Given this, it will be difficult, but not impossible, for seminary faculty to help seminarians to overcome the disciplinary boundaries that were so important in their own training. Again, this is a challenge, but not an insuperable one.

A second set of challenges are those structural challenges facing the residential seminary model—especially free-standing seminaries. Here is simply one form of this challenge: among mainline denominations there are fewer and fewer congregations that can support full time clergy. In that light, it becomes difficult for a student to justify such things typically involved in going to a residential seminary as giving up a job, moving a family, and taking on debt to finance training that is not likely to lead to a full-time job. There are a number of ways of responding to these challenges. As far as I can tell, however much these responses may enhance the prospects for a seminary's survival, none of these will enhance the prospects of forming theological interpreters of scripture.

In a small volume that has not received the attention it should have, Dale Martin has pointed out how deeply this disjunction between the professional formation of biblical scholars and the tasks for forming theological interpreters is embedded in seminary education in the United States.¹² Martin is one of the most accomplished historical critical scholars of the New Testament writing today. Nevertheless, he argues that this critical paradigm exerts an unfortunate dominance in the curricula of a number of US seminaries. This volume is based on Martin's studying of the curricula of ten US seminaries as well as interviews he conducted with faculty and students at these seminaries. It contains both analysis of the ways in which the Bible is taught in these seminaries as well as some curricular proposals. Martin does not claim any undue objectivity or comprehensiveness for his analysis.

¹² Dale B. Martin, *Pedagogy of the Bible* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).

He does, however, point out what many of us who listen to sermons week in and week out intuitively know already. That is, although seminary faculty are both accomplished scholars and dedicated teachers, there is still a lot of work to do in forming future clergy to interpret the Bible theologically with rigor, clarity, imagination, and joy. Martin presents a number of compelling reasons for this situation: the shape of the curriculum; the fact that seminary faculty often replicate the disciplinary isolation that marked the graduate programs in which they were trained; students are often left to integrate the disciplines in the curriculum without much help or guidance; students rarely come to seminary with the skills to think critically about textual interpretation of any sort.¹³ Without question there are bright exceptions to this gloomy picture. Moreover, in the nine years since Martin wrote his book, the landscape for residential seminaries has changed dramatically and seminaries themselves are already moving to adapt to these changes. The point here is not to bash seminaries, their faculty, or their students. Instead I would like to offer some curricular suggestions that might also be extended into the formation that takes place in parishes. The intent here is not to offer the last word, but to contribute to discussions that I know to be ongoing, though often informal.¹⁴

Martin suggests, “*Teach theology of Scripture before teaching methods of interpreting Scripture.*”¹⁵ Such a claim may raise the ugly specter of debates about the inspiration and authority of scripture that often play a divisive role within churches. Claims about scripture’s divine nature are set against historical claims about the very human processes and activities related to the composition and preservation of scripture. The stakes are often set very high. I have no desire to replicate these types of discussions. I mean something different by teaching the theology of scripture before teaching about interpretive methods. Moreover, I believe that following this recommendation might have enormous consequences.

Recall that premodern theological interpreters were relatively disinterested in questions of interpretive method. Instead, they were

¹³ Martin, *Pedagogy of the Bible*, chap. 1.

¹⁴ I will engage some of the proposals Martin offers in *Pedagogy of the Bible*, 101–104. In addition, this discussion is also informed by team teaching with Rob Wall an introductory course on the nature and interpretation of scripture at Seattle Pacific Seminary.

¹⁵ Martin, *Pedagogy of the Bible*, 102.

more concerned to make sure that scripture was understood within a larger scheme of God's saving activity. A theology of scripture begins not with scripture, but with God. The Christian God is the Trinity, whose inner life is reflected in the gracious and peaceful self-giving and self-communication of Father, Son, and Spirit. In creation God freely wills not simply the existence of humans created in the image of God, but God also desires fellowship with humans, offering them a share in the divine life. Given this, God's self-presentation or self-communication is an essential element in establishing and sustaining the fellowship God freely desires to have with humans.¹⁶ Scripture is thus dependent on God's desire to draw us into ever deeper communion, and it serves that end. In this light, theological interpretation of scripture is not an end in itself; it serves to enhance our prospects of deepening our communion with God and each other.

Given this account, one can fully embrace the idea that even though scholars probably know much less about the processes, interests, and concerns that shaped the final form of scripture than we are willing to admit, it is indubitable that every stage of scripture's composition and preservation was fully historical and fully human. At the same time, Christians' convictions about God's providence should lead them to understand that, however scripture came to look the way it does, scripture reveals all that believers need to sustain a life of growing communion with God and each other.

Moreover, in the light of a theology of scripture in which scripture is understood as part of God's self-revelation designed to draw us into deeper communion with God and others, the often heated but inconclusive debates about various interpretive methods become less fraught. This is because the various questions of interpretive method are all ordered toward helping one read scripture in ways that will lead to deeper communion with God and others. A host of interpretive methods may do this.

Instead of treating the interpretation of scripture as an end in itself, an end that might be achieved if only one could discern and properly employ the correct method, formation of clergy and adults in

¹⁶ John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 13–15, nicely ties revelation to making known the mystery of God's will (Eph. 1:9). In this light, scripture, the written texts, is subsidiary to and dependent upon a notion of revelation that is itself directly dependent on God's triune being (*Dei Verbum*, 1965, para. 2).

parishes could be rethought. Scriptural interpretation would not primarily appear as a set of problems or arguments to be solved once and for all if only one had the right approach, or access to the right expert. The formation of wise, skillful, and apt interpreters would not primarily be directed toward bringing disputes to resolution—though that will have to happen periodically—but about knowing how to carry a conversation forward so that the participants move closer to their ultimate end in God.

This suggestion is more easily written than accomplished. Moreover it needs some qualification. Yes, I am advocating methodological flexibility in the light of the ends for which Christians interpret scripture. I am also, however, advocating that all interpretation should be methodical, rigorous, and open to correction. In addition, I am not advocating the view that all interpretations are equal. Indeed, I would suggest that interpreting theologically within the body of Christ provides a distinctive set of resources for being methodical, rigorous, and open to correction.

Further, I want to be clear that Christians will and should argue, debate, and disagree with each other over scriptural interpretation. Until that time when God's law is written on our hearts (Jer. 33), until that time when we "know just as fully as we have been known" (1 Cor. 13), Christians will have to engage in ongoing discussion and debate about how to interpret scripture in ways that will advance them, through the work of the Spirit, toward deeper fellowship with God and each other in the contexts in which they find themselves. In this light, the standards for resolving such debates and discussions will be those of faithful worship and practice rather than hermeneutical rectitude.¹⁷

The previous two paragraphs have offered a number of claims that need further unpacking. In the space I have remaining, I would like to begin that work. I suggested that despite its methodological flexibility, theological interpretation should be methodical, rigorous,

¹⁷ In this respect, I might disagree with Martin, *Pedagogy of the Bible*, 103, who would introduce seminarians to a range of hermeneutical theories early in their formation. Although I have no objection to seminarians and others studying such work, I have argued that interpretation should be methodologically underdetermined (see Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, chap. 2). Therefore, I would suggest that such study must be carried out in a way that deflates the claims of most of these hermeneutical theories.

and open to correction. Further, that carrying out such interpretation within the body of Christ provides many resources for this work.

The Christian life is an ongoing lifelong process of formation and transformation. Moreover, as God calls Christians to participate actively in the body of Christ, the church, as one of the ways of deepening their communion with God, it is reasonable to assume that theological interpretation of scripture will not primarily be the work of isolated individuals. Rather, if Christians are successfully to engage scripture in all of the various ways they seek to do, then that will generally happen in the context of their participation in Christian communities. Further, contemporary Christians should recognize that they are participants in a tradition that is geographically and historically extended and culturally diverse. In countless, and often subtle ways, Christians' engagements with scripture are (and should be) shaped by the successes, failures, debates, discussions, and prayers of previous generations.

Of course, the church does not exist solely to interpret scripture. The church is the proper home of a host of Christian practices. Thus, theological interpretation of scripture is intimately connected to a host of other ecclesial practices, all of which need to be in good working order. When they are, theological interpretation is likely to be methodical, rigorous, and open to correction. Failure or distortion in one of these practices is likely to invite failure or distortion in the others. One could not hope to enumerate all of these ecclesial practices that touch upon scriptural interpretation. I will simply cover a few that seem particularly significant.

Truth seeking and truth telling in Christ must be toward the top of any list of ecclesial practices crucial to interpreting and embodying scripture in the body of Christ. On the one hand, this seems obvious. Debates, discussions, and arguments about Scripture or anything else cannot be life giving apart from issues of truthfulness. If truth telling is to be a practice essential to Christians' arguments about scripture, we will need to think of truth telling in christological terms.

Here is a brief account of what that might mean. In a passage filled with military images, the apostle Paul commands the Corinthians (and all believers) to bring every thought captive in obedience to Christ (2 Cor. 10:5). It is not that Christ aims to obliterate all thoughts. Rather, they will be subjected to Christ's penetrating, healing gaze. Bringing all thoughts captive to Christ is a way of establishing or restoring their

right relationship to the one who is the Truth. For example, think of the risen Christ's engagement with Peter around a charcoal fire in Galilee. Peter's deceit and betrayal is purged and he is restored in the course of being questioned by the resurrected one who is feeding him at the same time he interrogates him. The truth about Peter is never glossed. Nevertheless, the resurrected Christ uses this truth to transform Peter (John 21).

I mentioned truth telling first for two related reasons. The first reason is that our capacities for truthfulness are bound up with our sin. This makes it much more difficult to recognize sin, and our own sin in particular. The second reason is that truth telling is the first component of the practices of forgiveness and reconciliation. I want to turn to these two practices as essential for Christians' engagements with scripture.

To engage in the communal discussion, argument, and debate crucial to faithful embodiment of scripture, Christians must be capable of recognizing and naming sin, particularly their own sinfulness. This ability to recognize and name sin is not a one-time achievement, but an ongoing process of transformation and repentance. Without a community well practiced at asking for and offering forgiveness, without a community committed to the penitential work of reconciliation, Christians have little reason to recognize, much less repent of their sin. If believers think that sin is both the first *and last* word on their lives, then self-deception will always appear the easiest and best option.

When Christians' convictions about sin and their practices of forgiveness and reconciliation become distorted or inoperative, then Christians will also find that their discussions, debates, and struggles to embody scripture are much more likely to tear at the body of Christ than to build it up. A community whose common life is marked by the truthfulness of Christ and regularly engaged in practices of forgiveness and reconciliation is much more likely to be able to engage in the rigorous discussion, argument, and debate crucial to interpret and embody Scripture faithfully in ways that deepen their communion with God.

One further practice crucial to engaging Scripture is patience. As a way of teasing out some issues around patience I want to turn to Philippians. I will focus on what seems to be an inconsequential line in this letter. In 3:15 Paul wraps up a long plea to the Philippians to

adopt a pattern of thinking, feeling, and acting that is focused around the patterns displayed to them by the crucified and resurrected Christ. This pattern will lead the Philippians to do certain things and avoid other things, and enhance the Philippians' prospects of attaining their true end in Christ.

Paul then turns to himself (3:4–14). He does not claim that he has attained this end yet (3:12). Rather, he presses on to the finish line so that he might win the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus (3:13–14). Rather than stopping there and moving on to something else, Paul adds, "If any of you are inclined to adopt a different pattern of thinking, feeling and acting, God will reveal to you the proper mindset to adopt" (3:15).

After this impassioned plea, Paul seems willing to allow that others may think differently. This is not because Paul is a good liberal and thinks that in matters of faith people should be allowed their own opinions. Instead, Paul can display a certain detachment from his own argument because he is convinced that God is directing and enabling the advancement of the gospel. Paul does not have to coerce the Philippians into adopting his pattern of thinking, feeling, and acting because he is confident that God will bring both him and the Philippians to their proper end in Christ (compare with 1:6). This sort of patience must underwrite all theological interpretation of scripture.

Although these strike me as the most significant issues, these are simply some of the resources and formative practices that will enhance theological interpretation within the body of Christ.

In the course of the final part of this essay, I have focused on the formation of theological interpreters of Scripture. Moreover, I have identified three distinct though interrelated contexts within which this formation takes place: the academy, seminaries, and the churches. Within each of these contexts there are both significant challenges and opportunities for enhancing and deepening the formation of theological interpreters. I must confess, though, that these are barely the first, let alone the last, words on these matters. As a last word for this essay however, I submit that the fact that those invested in theological interpretation might now direct their attentions to matters of formation is in itself a sign of the vibrancy of this enterprise.