

## Catching Up on a Conversation: Recent Voices on Theological Interpretation of Scripture

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*A Manifesto for Theological Interpretation.* Edited by Craig G. Bartholomew and Heath A. Thomas. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2016. xi + 292 pp. \$29.99 (paper).

*Practicing Theological Interpretation: Engaging Biblical Texts for Faith and Formation.* By Joel B. Green. Theological Explorations for the Church Catholic. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2011. xiv + 146 pp. \$22.00 (paper).

*Scriptural Interpretation: A Theological Exploration.* By Darren Sarsky. Challenges in Contemporary Theology. Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013. xvi + 276 pp. \$110.95 (cloth).

*Theological Interpretation of Scripture.* By Stephen E. Fowl. Cascade Companions. Eugene, Ore.: Cascade, 2009. xvi + 92pp. \$13.00 (paper).

*Trinity, Revelation, and Reading: A Theological Introduction to the Bible and Its Interpretation.* By Scott R. Swain. T&T Clark Theology. London: T&T Clark, 2011. viii + 153 pp. \$29.95 (paper).

*The Word of God for the People of God: An Entryway to the Theological Interpretation of Scripture.* By J. Todd Billings. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2010. xviii + 235 pp. \$20.00 (paper).

A decade ago I suggested the “meaning” of scripture was more analogous to a topic of a conversation. Theological interpretation of

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scripture (TIS) is that conversation.<sup>1</sup> At the time I was worked in knots about the meaning of scripture. I've since come to think Stephen Fowl is right to suggest *meaning* is not all that helpful of a term. Fowl encourages biblical interpreters to be specific about what it is they are after: "the better and more precise we can be about what we are doing in interpreting any particular text in a specific way in a concrete situation, the easier it will be to avoid using the term 'meaning' to justify our interpretations."<sup>2</sup> But I haven't let go of the idea that TIS is a conversation, "an ongoing discussion and debate."<sup>3</sup> In this essay I place myself as a party host whose purpose it is to introduce new guests and point out contours of the discussion. I am not the first to think of writing as hosting a party, nor am I the first to do so with regard to TIS. Fowl describes his Cascade Companion "as if I have invited you to accompany me to a large and somewhat chaotic party."<sup>4</sup>

As we make our way to the central hall where the conversation is most chaotic, it will be helpful to provide a sense of the conversation's history and give some idea to what we are talking about. The former is easy enough. The past two to three decades have seen a steady stream of scholarly writing on TIS.<sup>5</sup> The latter, however, is not so simple. Defining TIS has been a crucial part of the discussion for its proponents. There are many and a growing number of voices we could listen to, but I've selected six recent books whose voices will rise above the din as I proceed.<sup>6</sup> It will be up to the interested reader to explore the range of voices and to probe more deeply the voices we are listening to here.

### *Background*

One unfamiliar with the development of biblical criticism over the past couple of centuries might ask, "What's the big deal about reading Christianity's sacred texts with theological scaffolding and theological aims?" It is true TIS is something the church has been

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<sup>1</sup> D. Christopher Spinks, *The Bible and the Crisis of Meaning: Debates on the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 149–180.

<sup>2</sup> Fowl, *Theological Interpretation*, 41.

<sup>3</sup> Sarisky, *Scriptural Interpretation*, 136.

<sup>4</sup> Fowl, *Theological Interpretation*, x.

<sup>5</sup> Fowl, *Theological Interpretation*, ix.

<sup>6</sup> I should mention Daniel J. Treier's *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2008), an excellent, if now somewhat dated introduction to the conversation.

about since its inception. The *Manifesto* notes, "Attention to Scripture's life in the context of faith reminds us that the church has always practiced theological interpretation in some form, not least in and through its preaching, sacraments, and acts of charity."<sup>7</sup> TIS "can be cast as *rejoining* an enduring conversation to which modern theology and biblical studies gradually ceased to contribute."<sup>8</sup>

In scholarly circles, the recent interest in TIS is a reaction to the "rise of various forms of scientific exegesis from the eighteenth century forward," which "has had the general effect of segregating professional biblical studies from the everyday interpretive practices characteristic of the church, and of disconnecting not only biblical scholarship but often the Bible itself from the theological enterprise."<sup>9</sup> Proponents of TIS push against the notion that biblical interpretation is an end in itself with an aim of uncovering textual meaning.<sup>10</sup> From this one can rightly conclude that TIS is mostly a reinvigorated conversation among professional biblical scholars and biblically minded theologians. Nevertheless, one ought to heed the words of the *Manifesto*: "An understanding of theological interpretation that restricts it to a conversation between systematic theologians and biblical scholars too easily encourages forgetfulness of the church's enduring and persistent attention to Scripture. Indeed, *theological interpretation has never been fully lost in the church.*"<sup>11</sup> Angus Paddison writes more pointedly, "Theological interpretation is not owned by the academy: it is a *practice* sustained by the life and worship of the church."<sup>12</sup>

The drastic changes in the last several decades to how readers engage the biblical texts cannot be overstated.<sup>13</sup> Much of that change is a result of the academic conversations taking place in biblical scholarship, theology, hermeneutics, and philosophy.<sup>14</sup> But the discussion among scholars is a conversation with implications for the teaching, preaching, reading, studying, and reflection in ecclesial contexts. TIS

<sup>7</sup> Bartholomew and Thomas, *Manifesto*, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Bartholomew and Thomas, *Manifesto*, 2.

<sup>9</sup> Green, *Practicing Theological Interpretation*, 4.

<sup>10</sup> Fowl, *Theological Interpretation*, 4.

<sup>11</sup> Bartholomew and Thomas, *Manifesto*, 1. Emphasis added.

<sup>12</sup> Angus Paddison, "The History and Reemergence of Theological Interpretation," in Bartholomew and Thomas, *Manifesto*, 43.

<sup>13</sup> Green, *Practicing Theological Interpretation*, 2.

<sup>14</sup> See William P. Olhausen, "The Role of Hermeneutics and Philosophy in Theological Interpretation," in Bartholomew and Thomas, *Manifesto*, 110–130.

“does not depend on the support of academics for its survival. Nevertheless, disciplined, scholarly attention to interpreting Scripture theologically can only benefit the practice within the church.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, as we move closer to the party, we should be prepared to hear in this “scholarly” conversation language that fits well in the church—indeed, language *of* the church and *for* the church: *theological language*.

The *Manifesto* voices a common sentiment, namely that Barth’s 1919 commentary on Romans “can be seen as the opening salvo in the twentieth-century’s renewed theological engagement with Scripture.”<sup>16</sup> It would be some time before TIS as a distinct conversation would emerge and take its present form. It most certainly was and is, like Barth’s commentary, a reaction to the sterility of the historical-critical method predominant in biblical interpretation. Peter Stuhlmacher might have been one of the first to adopt the term when in 1975 he wrestled with the theological and hermeneutical quandary historical criticism presents. Not to say his *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture* necessarily set the course for the present conversation, but it did put the term front and center, and it considered many of the same issues now at hand.<sup>17</sup> Ten years later the journal *Ex Auditu* was born.<sup>18</sup> Initially from the Frederick Neumann Symposium on Theological Interpretation of Scripture at Princeton Theological Seminary and later from the North Park Symposium on the Theological Interpretation of Scripture, *Ex Auditu* was one of the first platforms for the reemerging conversation.<sup>19</sup> At the close of the twentieth century, there was steady trickle of individually authored books touching on one aspect or another in the burgeoning discussion. To begin a list of them here would turn this into an annotated bibliography.

The conversation begins to gain momentum as more serial, professional, and institutional platforms emerge in the early years of the twenty-first century. In 2000 the first volume of what would

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<sup>15</sup> Fowl, *Theological Interpretation*, 23.

<sup>16</sup> Bartholomew and Thomas, *Manifesto*, 1.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Toward a Hermeneutics of Consent*, trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2003; previously published by Fortress, 1977).

<sup>18</sup> *Ex Auditu: An International Journal for the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick, 1985).

<sup>19</sup> Volumes 1 and 16 are especially pertinent to defining TIS.

become the eight-volume Scripture and Hermeneutics Series was published.<sup>20</sup> The series grew out of the Scripture and Hermeneutic Seminar, a group of scholars that began to meet regularly in 1998 to consider the renewal of biblical interpretation. The *Journal of Theological Interpretation* began publication in 2007, providing articles on theological exegesis of biblical texts, essays on method and reception, and reviews of recent works of interest.<sup>21</sup> Somewhat associated with the current trend of TIS, the *Journal of Scriptural Reasoning* started in 2001.<sup>22</sup> The Scriptural Reasoning Network is an international network of Christian, Muslim, and Jewish scholars who read together their sacred texts. Their journal promotes religious readings of these texts in the academy. In addition to the Scripture and Hermeneutics Seminar and the Scriptural Reasoning Network, the Society of Biblical Literature has a Christian Theology and the Bible section that explores the intersection between the disciplines of Christian theology and biblical studies, and a Theological Interpretation of Scripture seminar, which was formerly known as Theological Hermeneutics of Christian Scripture. Several publishing ventures began in the latter half of the millennium's first decade and continue today. We now have a dictionary, at least four commentary series, two one-volume commentaries, and two book series all dedicated to TIS.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Scripture and Hermeneutics Series, 8 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2000–2007). The *Manifesto* is also a product of the Scripture and Hermeneutics Seminar.

<sup>21</sup> *Journal of Theological Interpretation* (Winona Lakes, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2007).

<sup>22</sup> *Journal of Scriptural Reasoning* (<https://jsr.shanti.virginia.edu/>, 2001).

<sup>23</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, general ed., *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2005); The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005–); The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2008–); Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos, 2006–); *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2011–); Kevin J. Vanhoozer, general ed., *Theological Interpretation of the New Testament: A Book-by-Book Survey* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2008); Kevin J. Vanhoozer, general ed., *Theological Interpretation of the Old Testament: A Book-by-Book Survey* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2008); *Studies in Theological Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2006–); and *Journal of Theological Interpretation Supplements* (Winona Lakes, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2009–).

*Definition*

It may be a fool's errand to attempt to give some definition to the topic. As Sarisky puts it, "Many of today's best theological thinkers are involved in this discussion in some capacity, yet the irony of this is that, for all of the interest in the subject, there is a notable degree of uncertainty about what the subject itself actually is, even on the part of the dialogue's most distinguished participants."<sup>24</sup> Paddison gives further warning: "only in vain will one look for a single definition of what counts as theological interpretation."<sup>25</sup>

TIS is not an interpretive method, a defined approach to the biblical texts, or even a subversive ideological critique of the texts. What gives TIS its identifiable shape is not so much what one does with the biblical texts as it is how one views the text and the Christian's purpose in reading it. Green writes, "Theological interpretation is identified more by certain sensibilities and aims."<sup>26</sup> Of course these sensibilities and aims have something to do with what critical methods one employs in reading scripture, but no one method defines TIS.

There are many questions to ask and more precise fine-tuning to be done, but in general TIS is defined by its answers to questions about the nature of scripture, the telos or aim of reading scripture, and the ecclesial context in which scripture is read. Todd Billings's description of theological interpretation highlights these elements well by defining it as "a multifaceted practice of a *community of faith* in reading the *Bible as God's instrument of self-revelation and saving fellowship* . . . a wide range of practices we use toward *the goal of knowing God in Christ* through Scripture."<sup>27</sup>

TIS has more than anything reintroduced theological language and reflection on the main components of a reading act: the context of the reader, the text being read, the approach and telos of reading, the guidelines of reading, and more. In other words, and recalling famous triads, TIS has often been a conversation about what's *behind*, *in*, and *in front of* the text, or about the *author*, the *text*, and the *reader*. Although influenced by and often employing recent ideas in hermeneutics and philosophy, TIS has nonetheless reclaimed theological

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<sup>24</sup> Sarisky, *Scriptural Interpretation*, 243.

<sup>25</sup> Paddison, "History and Reemergence," 28.

<sup>26</sup> Green, *Practicing Theological Interpretation*, 2.

<sup>27</sup> Billings, *The Word of God*, xii. Emphasis added. See also Paddison's four marks of TIS in "History and Reemergence," 32.

categories, imagery, and language to discuss these various parts of the act of reading scripture. Two of the six books central to the conversation in this essay are in fact theological explorations of specific aspects of scriptural reading; the other four are introductions to the broader topic of TIS. Scott Swain's focus

is upon the theological nature of the Bible and of biblical interpretation. . . . Because biblical interpretation is one dimension of the relationship between God and humanity, sin and redemption, the individual and the church, we cannot properly understand biblical interpretation without considering these topics as well.<sup>28</sup>

Likewise, Darren Sarisky's project is

an effort to explore theologically the situation of those reading Scripture. . . . Depicting the reader and the text in historical terms, is necessary but not sufficient for a satisfactory account of scriptural interpretation. Theological categories are also needed and should become fully operative.<sup>29</sup>

Similarly and more to the point, Fowl claims, "Ultimately, if Christians are to interpret Scripture theologically, the first step will involve granting priority to theological concerns."<sup>30</sup>

For theological interpreters theological concerns are the primary concerns for reading scripture in the first place. Green argues, "Theological interpretation does not measure the distance between Scripture and ourselves primarily or only in historical terms. For us, the question might become not 'How do we span the chasm between 'what it meant' and 'what it means'?' but rather 'Why must we assume such a chasm in the first place?'"<sup>31</sup> Later he states the case with more force: "The issue is theological. What separates us from the biblical text *read* as *Scripture* is not so much its antiquity as its unhandy, inconvenient claim on our lives."<sup>32</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Swain, *Trinity, Revelation, and Reading*, 1, 2.

<sup>29</sup> Sarisky, *Scriptural Interpretation*, 4.

<sup>30</sup> Fowl, *Theological Interpretation*, 16.

<sup>31</sup> Green, *Practicing Theological Interpretation*, 17.

<sup>32</sup> Green, *Practicing Theological Interpretation*, 22.

Billings addresses a common criticism of TIS on this point, namely that it is solipsistic “to take refuge in our own theology rather than encountering the text in itself, the word of God as it really is.”<sup>33</sup> He answers with a sentiment most proponents of TIS support: “Behind this is an assumption that a nontheological approach is, fundamentally, a more adequate approach to Scripture than one that has theological presuppositions. But is there really such a nontheological place where we can stand? What would it mean to stand in a theologically neutral place?”<sup>34</sup> TIS embraces such claims—“it is impossible to interpret the Bible without theological assumptions being operative, a context-free interpretation of Scripture is an illusion”—and rather than try to find ways to keep theological interests and concerns at bay, it employs theological language and categories to think through the reading act.<sup>35</sup> Theological language and categories are not tools picked from a kit and put to use when the job calls for them. Theological language, imagery, and categories are all a part of the context, the world in which theological interpreters are located.

### *Context*

TIS is not about bringing methods into the church. It is not concerned to find ways to make traditional methods of interpretation fit within the church once again. Nor is it concerned to find newer methods that are more at home in ecclesial contexts. TIS is born from within the community of faith. An interpreter without any ecclesial context or interest will not be doing theological interpretation of Christian scripture. The *Manifesto* states, “Because theological interpretation is *from faith* and *to faith*, it is inherently connected with the church.”<sup>36</sup>

TIS recognizes the historical reality of the ecclesial location of Christian readings of scripture, but rather than grapple with that reality as a gap to traverse, a robust ecclesiology informs its consideration of the biblical texts within the church. This theologically informed understanding erases the supposed ditch between the biblical texts

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<sup>33</sup> Billings, *The Word of God*, 11.

<sup>34</sup> Billings, *The Word of God*, 12.

<sup>35</sup> Billings, *The Word of God*, 147.

<sup>36</sup> Bartholomew and Thomas, *Manifesto*, 5.

as ancient documents and the body of Christ that is historically, geographically, and culturally extended. Green explains,

Theological engagement with Scripture takes seriously the claim that the church is “one.” Consequently, the texts that constitute the Bible were traditioned, written, and preserved by the same people of God now faced with the task of appropriating and embodying its message; this is the same community that received this collection of texts as canon; and this is the very community to which these texts were and are addressed. That is, we locate “the meaning” of Scripture not in the distant past in a faraway land, but rather in the community of God’s people—past, present, and future.<sup>37</sup>

In another sense, one drawing from the ideas of philosophical hermeneutics, TIS recognizes with Sarisky, “What the radical tradition has argued in a genuinely compelling manner is that the human subject is situated, that there is no such thing as a view from nowhere.”<sup>38</sup> Billings notes, “All Christians, in fact, read the Bible from within particular traditions. The question is, what traditions are operative?”<sup>39</sup>

The ecclesial context is the water in which theological interpreters swim. That water is comprised of histories, teachings, practices, habits, and more, all of which inform and in many ways set the goal for Christian readings of scripture. Fowl summarizes well theological interpreters’ views on the matter:

The practice of theological interpretation is, at its core, an activity of Christian communities. The triune God, to whom scriptural texts bear witness, call us into such communities. Hence, Christian communities provide the contexts whereby we learn, as the body of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and embody Scripture in ways that

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<sup>37</sup> Green, *Practicing Theological Interpretation*, 126.

<sup>38</sup> Sarisky, *Scriptural Interpretation*, 15.

<sup>39</sup> Billings, *The Word of God*, 49. See also Swain, *Trinity, Revelation, and Reading*, 100: “Christian reading is therefore never an isolated endeavor.”

enhance rather than frustrate our communion with God and others.<sup>40</sup>

### *Text*

Although little energy is wasted any more arguing between the extremes of the Bible as God's dictation and the Bible as purely a human creation, the language about Christian scripture can vary widely among proponents as they reflect on the nature of the biblical texts. For instance, Swain is the only participant among the six who defends an inerrantist position. He writes, "The Bible speaks truth and only truth when it speaks. . . . The Bible is completely without error (or 'inerrant') with respect to everything it speaks. God's word is wholly true."<sup>41</sup> Swain argues little more than what traditional inerrantists have always argued: the Bible does not mislead; diversity is part of divine design and is "symphonic and harmonious"<sup>42</sup>; contradictions can be resolved, but maybe not in the present age; and so forth. Despite these arguments, many of which are rightly made, and the baggage the language of "inerrantist" carries, Swain's work echoes the common baseline principle that scripture is God's communication. Green expresses well this generally held conviction: "Theological reading of Scripture takes as its starting point and central axis the theological claim that 'the Bible is Scripture,' a claim that draws attention to the origin, role, and aim of these texts in God's self-communication."<sup>43</sup>

Self-communication is self-revelation. "God's word is not simply an abstract set of propositions about God, but God 'promises, commands, warns, guides,' and in this way God reveals himself," as Billings states.<sup>44</sup> Swain concurs: "When God speaks through his prophets and apostles, God communicates *himself*."<sup>45</sup> Thus one cannot talk about the Bible as scripture, that is, the Bible as God's self-communication, without appeal to Christian theology.<sup>46</sup> The influence of John Webster

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<sup>40</sup> Fowl, *Theological Interpretation*, 52.

<sup>41</sup> Swain, *Trinity, Revelation, and Reading*, 78.

<sup>42</sup> Swain, *Trinity, Revelation, and Reading*, 80.

<sup>43</sup> Green, *Practicing Theological Interpretation*, 125.

<sup>44</sup> Billings, *The Word of God*, 8.

<sup>45</sup> Swain, *Trinity, Revelation, and Reading*, 36.

<sup>46</sup> Billings, *The Word of God*, 72.

to this aspect of the conversation, especially his book *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch*, is difficult to overstate.<sup>47</sup> Fowl notes,

John Webster points out that doctrines about Scripture must begin with and depend upon doctrines about the triune God. . . . Revelation is directly dependent upon God's triune being and it is inseparable from God's freely willed desire for loving communion with humans. In this light, the written text of Scripture is subsidiary to and dependent upon a notion of revelation that is itself directly dependent on God's triune being.<sup>48</sup>

Fowl's words surface two important and related points for our conversation partners with regard to the nature of scripture. First, as Sarisky is right to recall, "merging the categories of revelation and Scripture, or identifying them with one another in a strict manner, is a mistake that can be explained as the confusion of the thing itself (revelation) with the way in which it is experienced at present by human beings."<sup>49</sup> He and others point to the idea that "scripture is a textual medium that conveys revelation to its interpreters. . . . It is the primary site that mediates divine self-disclosure, the revelation of the one God who is Father, Son, and Spirit. . . . It is not that Scripture *is* revelation."<sup>50</sup> Swain makes a similar point: "Scripture is the supreme literary expression of God's self-revelation in history" and not revelation itself.<sup>51</sup>

Second, in light of the conviction that scripture is not revelation but rather the textual medium conveying revelation, the idea of scripture as a tool or instrument of the triune God is active among the proponents of TIS. Billings is especially fond of such language, calling scripture at various places "the Spirit's instrument by which the living Christ speaks words of power to God's people," "an instrument

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<sup>47</sup> John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch*, Current Issues in Theology (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2003). See also John Webster, *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* (London: T&T Clark, 2012). Webster directed the doctoral work of Darren Sarisky, whose book discussed in this essay is a revision of his dissertation.

<sup>48</sup> Fowl, *Theological Interpretation*, 6.

<sup>49</sup> Sarisky, *Scriptural Interpretation*, 212.

<sup>50</sup> Sarisky, *Scriptural Interpretation*, 212.

<sup>51</sup> Swain, *Trinity, Revelation, and Reading*, 8.

that God uses in the drama of redemption,” and “an instrument in the triune God’s work.”<sup>52</sup> He argues, “The doctrine of Scripture should be seen as an extension of the doctrine of the Spirit, from within a Trinitarian theology of salvation.”<sup>53</sup> Swain sounds a similar note: “Holy Scripture is the divinely authorized literary instrument whereby God communicates Christ and covenant to his people at all times and in all places.”<sup>54</sup>

Scripture then is God’s self-revelation, but is not itself revelation; instead, it is an instrument of the triune God’s self-communication, wielded by the Spirit to communicate Christ to God’s people. This trinitarian-shaped, Christ-centered understanding of scripture has purpose, as Michael Goheen and Michael Williams suggest:

Scripture is not a history of Israel, a biography of Jesus, a source for early church history, or a handbook on science. Moreover, it is not a book of theology, or ethics, or a devotional book of spiritual truths. All of these miss the point: the Scripture is the Word of God because therein the Spirit testifies to Christ as the center of kingdom history and the salvation he has revealed and accomplished. The Scripture’s purpose and role in this story is to lead us to follow this Christ and embody his salvation.<sup>55</sup>

Scripture is both a mediator and tool, announcing the kingdom of God and being used to bring about that kingdom.<sup>56</sup>

Seeing scripture in this way is important for how one interprets it. “What it *is* must determine how we *approach* it and how we *use* it,” Swain argues.<sup>57</sup> TIS is in large part built around such a notion. Theological reflections on the aim and practice of biblical interpretation are grounded in this conviction about scripture’s nature. Fowl summarizes well the discussion of scripture as the self-communication and instrument of the triune God:

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<sup>52</sup> Billings, *The Word of God*, xvii, 80, and 103.

<sup>53</sup> Billings, *The Word of God*, 113.

<sup>54</sup> Swain, *Trinity, Revelation, and Reading*, 61.

<sup>55</sup> Michael W. Goheen and Michael D. Williams, “Doctrine of Scripture and Theological Interpretation,” in Bartholomew and Thomas, *Manifesto*, 58.

<sup>56</sup> Goheen and Williams, “Doctrine of Scripture,” 57.

<sup>57</sup> Swain, *Trinity, Revelation, and Reading*, 4.

If, however, revelation is seen as the triune God's self-communication, an activity that flows from the very nature of the Trinity, an activity that is graciously directed to drawing humanity into ever deeper communion with God and each other, then one can be more relaxed in approaching and analyzing the human process that led to the formation of Christian Scripture. This is because the triune God is not simply the content of revelation, but the one who directs and sustains the revelation of God's very self with the aim of drawing humanity into ever deeper communion.<sup>58</sup>

If scripture is God's self-communication and instrument for drawing readers into deeper communion with God and others, we are still left to wonder what the role of the reader is.

### *Reading*

Swain's words recall a previous point: "The shape of Christian reading is not, strictly speaking, a method."<sup>59</sup> TIS does not necessarily exclude methods, tools, and skills, but it is not defined by them. Rather, and repeating Joel Green again, "theological interpretation is identified more by certain sensibilities and aims."<sup>60</sup> I have noted already several of the sensibilities involved: the *ecclesial location* of Christian reading of scripture, which is both *God's self-communication* and the *Spirit's instrument* for divine self-revelation of Christ's work of salvation. Billings puts well the trinitarian shape of these sensibilities: "For Christians, the Bible is the written word of God, the Spirit's instrument for transforming God's people into Christ's image."<sup>61</sup> This sensibility also draws attention to the need for a robust pneumatology.<sup>62</sup>

If the aim of scripture as a divine instrument is transformation of its readers, then the act of reading for Christians ought to be an approach to "biblical interpretation that refuses the reduction of the Bible to a disparate collection of historical and/or literary documents, reading it instead as a source of divine revelation and an essential

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<sup>58</sup> Fowl, *Theological Interpretation*, 9.

<sup>59</sup> Swain, *Trinity, Revelation, and Reading*, 119.

<sup>60</sup> Green, *Practicing Theological Interpretation*, 2.

<sup>61</sup> Billings, *The Word of God*, 36.

<sup>62</sup> See Sarisky, *Scriptural Interpretation*, 221–222.

partner in the task of theological reflection.”<sup>63</sup> TIS believes not only that scripture has an aim, but that Christian reading of scripture has a direction and goal as well. The *Manifesto* states, “Theological interpretation reads Scripture to hear God’s address, so that the church might be transformed into the image of Christ for the sake of the world.”<sup>64</sup>

TIS is an *expectation to be addressed*. This requires a shift from the position of the reader as a treasure hunter in search of hidden gems in the biblical text. TIS is a theologically informed self-understanding and self-presentation of readers as addressees of scripture.<sup>65</sup> Such an understanding shrinks the supposed historical gap between communities of faith today and those at the time of the writings of the books that came to be scripture. God continues to use scripture to reveal God’s self, to draw humanity into ever-deeper communion, to address God’s people.

With an understanding of scripture in functionally trinitarian terms, the “reading of the Bible comes to be something that takes place, in a profound sense, within the life of God.”<sup>66</sup> TIS is thus also a *missional activity* and has a *moral dimension*. Fowl writes, “For Christians, the ends of reading, interpreting, and embodying Scripture are determined decisively by the ends of God’s self-revelation, which are directed towards drawing humans into ever-deeper communion with the triune God and each other.”<sup>67</sup>

The missional and moral elements raise yet another dimension to TIS, one of *theological formation and discipleship*. Billings writes, “The ideal Christian exegete lives a life of discipleship in community, approaches Scripture with humility and a measure of suspicion about the sinful interpreters (like herself), and seeks nothing less than an encounter with the mysterious triune God via the reading of Scripture.”<sup>68</sup> Green adds, “Theological interpretation locates our practices of engaging with Scripture in relation to our commitments to live faithfully before the God to whom the Scriptures witness. Therefore, dispositions

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<sup>63</sup> Green, *Practicing Theological Interpretation*, 4.

<sup>64</sup> Bartholomew and Thomas, *Manifesto*, 17.

<sup>65</sup> Green, *Practicing Theological Interpretation*, 9.

<sup>66</sup> Billings, *The Word of God*, 89.

<sup>67</sup> Fowl, *Theological Interpretation*, 6–7. See also Bartholomew and Thomas, *Manifesto*, 45: “Theological interpretation has a moral dimension. It has as its end that the reader and hearer grow in their love of the living God and their neighbor.”

<sup>68</sup> Billings, *The Word of God*, 225.

and practices such as attention, acceptance, devotion, and trust characterize theological interpretation.”<sup>69</sup> But formation and discipleship are not things that happen in an instance of any singular reading of scripture. TIS anticipates a reader’s return to scripture not because there is something yet to be uncovered—though that may be the case sometimes—but because scripture reading becomes a spiritual discipline, “a part of our life of participation in Christ through the Spirit, a means by which God nurtures our love of God and neighbor.”<sup>70</sup> This takes time. Theological “readers who approach the text with the right disposition become like God due to their encounter with him in interpretation. While the inspired text mediates God’s presence and brings about divine self-communication, this process does not occur in an instant. A human being’s transition to God’s likeness occurs over time and reaches its climax after death.”<sup>71</sup>

### *Premodern Sensibilities and the Rule of Faith*

“Bracketing off religious beliefs may stem from laudable aims,” Heath Thomas contends, “but it is indefensible in light of the fundamental turns in hermeneutics and philosophy in the past sixty years.”<sup>72</sup> Thus, our look at the conversation of TIS circles back to the idea that it is rejoining an enduring conversation. Proponents find examples of the integration of theology and history by exploring practices of premodern exegetes. But we should remember that even to speak in terms of integration or segregation is a characteristically modern move, as Green reminds us: “the segregation of history and theology was and is predicated on a dichotomy alien to both premodern thinking and to virtually all religions today.”<sup>73</sup>

Sarisky’s project of recovery of Basil of Caesarea for an understanding of the situation of the reader is but one example of the turn to premodern approaches to the biblical text and its interpretation. Sarisky notes, “Basil differs here from paradigmatically modern thinkers, who call for theological beliefs to be bracketed out when

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<sup>69</sup> Green, *Practicing Theological Interpretation*, 126.

<sup>70</sup> Billings, *The Word of God*, 195; see also xvii.

<sup>71</sup> Sarisky, *Scriptural Interpretation*, 214.

<sup>72</sup> Heath A. Thomas, “The Telos (Goal) of Theological Interpretation,” in Bartholomew and Thomas, *Manifesto*, 210.

<sup>73</sup> Green, *Practicing Theological Interpretation*, 51.

considering interpretation and related topics.”<sup>74</sup> While modern biblical critics can point to several historical infelicities in premodern treatments of the biblical texts, Billings is correct to claim, “Premodern exegetes can supplement the work of critical biblical scholarship by showing us how Scripture should be received from within a theological framework that believes God was and is active in the world.”<sup>75</sup>

One of the ways premodern interpreters constructed a theological framework was through the *regula fidei* or rule of faith. Green describes “the emerging Rule of Faith and its codification in the ecumenical creeds of the early church,” as a “relatively stable, narrative shaped set of affirmations that together comprise the parameters of the Christian church as a community of discourse and serve hermeneutically as the pattern by which the church interprets and evaluates its life.”<sup>76</sup> He dismisses the notions that the rule of faith predetermines meaning, or that it is the superstructure to scripture’s substructure, or that it is simply a summary of the Bible. Instead, a more full-bodied understanding of the relationship between the rule of faith and scripture “assumes that unity is not found inside the biblical texts but underneath them, in God’s economy as this is understood in the narrative terms of the Rule of Faith.”<sup>77</sup> The rule clarifies what the scope and limits of the Bible’s message are, but it “is not the sum total of all that a particular Christian believes about God; rather, it is an ecumenical teaching and practice that points us to the center,” namely, “that we find salvation in Jesus Christ, and that we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to walk the transforming road of life in Christ, which leads to a vision of the triune God.”<sup>78</sup>

In arguing that the rule of faith is a truth theological interpreters think *with* and not just *about* as they read scripture, Swain connects the *regula fidei* with the earlier aspect of formation and discipleship. The rule of faith is significant for shaping one’s “horizon of interpretive preunderstanding,”<sup>79</sup> and thus plays a role in the formation of the theological interpreter. As well, TIS recognizes the danger “that Scripture might be used and abused, bent toward human ends rather

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<sup>74</sup> Sarisky, *Scriptural Interpretation*, 9.

<sup>75</sup> Billings, *The Word of God*, 180.

<sup>76</sup> Green, *Practicing Theological Interpretation*, 72.

<sup>77</sup> Green, *Practicing Theological Interpretation*, 80n12.

<sup>78</sup> Billings, *The Word of God*, 23–24.

<sup>79</sup> Swain, *Trinity, Revelation, and Reading*, 111.

to God's aim of addressing his people. The *regula fidei* historically has been a 'shield' to help protect against the abusive or faithless reading practices."<sup>80</sup>

### *Final Comments*

Using exclusively the voices from six recent publications on the topic, I have here tried to introduce the contours of a rather new conversation in biblical studies that is more precisely a recovery of premodern sensibilities about scripture and its reading within communities listening for God's address. It is primarily a conversation among scholars who "have mapped the terrain of this reemerging practice in relation to the antipathy of theological interpretation to historical criticism."<sup>81</sup> TIS is not a shunning of any and all modern critical methods. It is recognition that they "provide neither the first nor final word on how Christians should interpret Scripture."<sup>82</sup> The strict historical-critical scholar need not investigate the Bible as if God is active in history.<sup>83</sup> TIS does not need to exclude other interpretive agendas. In fact, I would say it should not completely shut down the influence of critical methods. But as Green writes, TIS "only insists that reading the Bible theologically as Christian Scripture has its own inherently theological presumptions and protocols."<sup>84</sup> It should not, however, be a conversation isolated to scholars, even ones who have an eye to the church; otherwise, it will remain stuck in ivory towers. "Apart from a much more significant and substantive ecclesial engagement in these issues, theological interpretation will continue primarily to reflect the concerns and the formative power of the academy," Fowl argues.<sup>85</sup> Such a result would seem to work against the description of TIS here given, namely, that Christian reading of scripture is an act of participation in the life of the triune God redeeming the world.

In addition to the charge for more substantive ecclesial engagement, TIS as an identifiable and ongoing conversation within the academy faces other challenges. I end by calling attention to one of these

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<sup>80</sup> Thomas, "The Telos," 212.

<sup>81</sup> Green, *Practicing Theological Interpretation*, 43.

<sup>82</sup> Billings, *The Word of God*, 225.

<sup>83</sup> Michael W. Goheen and Christopher J. H. Wright, "Mission and Theological Interpretation," in Bartholomew and Thomas, *Manifesto*, 101.

<sup>84</sup> Green, *Practicing Theological Interpretation*, 124.

<sup>85</sup> Fowl, *Theological Interpretation*, 73.

challenges. It is not lost on me that I am a white Anglo-American male writing an essay focused on books written by other white Anglo-American males. TIS could do more to engage a host of theologies that offer perspectives uncommon to the majority of its advocates. TIS has so defined itself over against historical criticism, which for the most part has been dominated by people who are from much the same social location, that it overlooks conversations that could enhance or even challenge its aims. It ought to begin to move on from those debates with traditional critical methods and look to broaden the conversation. As something that takes place within the expansive life of God and springs from the practices of the catholic church, TIS could better engage black, feminist, postcolonial, and other theologies so as to reflect the breadth and depth of God's redemptive activity in the world through all of God's people.