

The Crisis in Protestant Biblical Theology

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In a very few years we Protestants will celebrate the 500th anniversary of our Reformation. The passing of such a milestone will have our now worldwide community celebrating many astonishing accomplishments. In retrospect it is clear that a virtual fountain of liberty, both spiritual and political, poured forth from the nail-pierced door in Wittenberg. The gospel of free grace was recovered in 1517, resulting in a robust proclamation of spiritual freedom justified by an appeal to Scripture alone. This gospel of liberty was restated by Luther and the Reformers in a message so powerful that many multitudes of Europeans, both in their home countries and later in their many colonies around the world, ascribed salvation from the bondage of sin to the singular work of God, who raised Christ Jesus from the dead in order to make His people free.

The foremost achievement of the Reformation was to give the Bible to the common man.¹ In order to disciple the nations to the teaching of the Scripture, men and women had to be taught to read. As a consequence, schools were founded in Protestant communities in Europe and North America. The resulting increase of popular literacy enabled enlightened and liberal communities to emerge in the wake of the Reformed missionary and in response to the pulpit of the Reformed pastor. Moreover, the Bible gave the Protestant church an eschatological vision which required a teleological understanding of the world and a linear understanding of historical progress. Based upon the affirmation of the rule of reason in the natural order, which such doctrines implied, the natural world was understood to be capable of purposeful progress. Consequently, it was the Reformation that provided new impetus for Western economic² and scientific progress,³ both of which have done so much to relieve the natural conditions of human suffering.

¹ The New Testament was written in the ordinary language of the Greek agora. It was thus originally intended for the common people in a pluralistic Hellenistic culture. In making the Bible accessible to the common man by translating it into colloquial languages, the Reformers were simply following the popular precedent of the New Testament authors themselves. Moreover, the Protestant missionary effort to bring the Scriptures to distant nations and then to teach tribal peoples to read them has proven to be the impetus to giving written form to multitudes of languages and dialects, delivering hosts of remote peoples from the bondage of ignorance and isolation.

² See the classic study by Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. by Talcott Parsons, (New York, N.Y.: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1930). Weber's thesis that Western capitalism resulted largely from Protestant theology has been challenged, especially by Marxist economists. But Weber is certainly correct in bringing into focus the relationship of theology to economic development. While capitalistic enterprise today has moved beyond the Protestant countries of Europe and North America, it is evident that the economic models being copied today in the East had their origin in the West, especially the Protestant West.

³ See Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts, and the End of Slavery*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003). Stark traces the unique origin of modern science to the Christianity of the European Middle Ages. While he does not attribute Western science to Protestantism alone, he acknowledges a tremendous expansion of scientific knowledge in the

Moreover, the Protestant divines announced the doctrine of the universality of the priesthood of the believer,⁴ a commitment which was to tend toward the full legal emancipation of women in cultures informed by Reformation teaching.⁵ Similarly, the Protestant missionary movement, inspired by the Bible's Great Commission, went forth to make disciples of all nations, a charge which inevitably created the conviction of the divine dignity and full equality of all races,⁶ giving impetus first to the abolition of slavery⁷ and eventually to the civil recognition of the equality of all mankind,⁸ made alike in the image of God. The liberty of the gospel preached by the Reformers resulted in the conversion to Christ of many multitudes of people in Europe and North America. That very evangelical message is still going forth powerfully today. The spectacular ingathering of great multitudes to the gospel of grace that is occurring presently in Asia, Africa, and South America is certainly nothing less than an echo of the nails driven into the door of the Wittenberg Cathedral half a millennium ago.

Nonetheless, in spite of these great successes, it is clear that Protestantism must also grapple with great failures, of which two appear to be the most spectacular. First, the individualistic tendency of Protestant doctrine and practice has hindered the ability of Protestant communions to adhere to one another.⁹ Not having a unifying authority or

sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which were largely informed by Protestant theology. Certainly predominantly Protestant northern Europe and North America have been and continue to be foremost among the regions of the earth contributing to the advance of scientific discovery and understanding since the time of the Reformation.

⁴ The impetus of this doctrine was to lead to a civil egalitarianism that would make authentic democratic regimes possible in Protestant countries. Russell Kirk, *The Roots of American Order* (Wilmington, Del.: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2004) p. 236. It is a measure of the loss of an awareness of their own unique history in the early years of the 21st century that American evangelical Protestants would so naively subscribe to the idea that the Iraq War could transplant authentic democratic regimes to feudal and fissiparous Middle Eastern countries with no history of contact with the Reformation.

⁵ See Alexis de Tocqueville on the role of women in the democratic regime of the early American republic. *Democracy in America*, trans. and ed. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop, vol. 1 (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2000) 279.

⁶ Sadly, conservative evangelicals within American Protestantism, those claiming the greatest fidelity to the Scriptures, resisted racial reconciliation long after the more liberal confessions accepted it. The Southern Baptists finally repudiated racism by adopting their "Resolution on Racial Reconciliation" in 1995. The Presbyterian Church in America adopted a similar confession only at the 30th General Assembly, in 2002. But by the beginning of the 21st century, most Protestants worldwide were committed to a full racial egalitarianism.

⁷ The work of William Wilberforce to end the British slave trade was explicitly derived from his Christian faith.

⁸ The work of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King to end racial discrimination in the United States was likewise informed by his Christian faith.

⁹ Protestants have predictably separated into three large polity groups corresponding to the classical formulation of political regimes according to rule by the one, the few, or the many. Monarchical polity is found in Anglican and Wesleyan churches. Aristocratic polity describes Presbyterian and Reformed confessions. Democratic polity informs the most numerous groups, certainly of American Protestantism,

principle, or at least not yet having identified one, a spectacular fragmentation has resulted in many hundreds, at least, and perhaps thousands of various Protestant sects. Second, Protestants have been unable to hold the political culture in established Protestant majority countries past the third and fourth generations. Indeed Protestantism, originally understood to represent liberty *under* the Bible, is now quite generally reduced to representing liberty *from* the Bible both in the Northern European Protestant heartland and in New England, the Puritan center of America.¹⁰

The failure of Protestantism to find a principle of cohesion among its various communions and the failure to found and maintain an authentic Protestant cultural expression are serious challenges to the heritage of the Reformation. In response to these challenges we observe that Protestantism was created by the Bible. Its single doctrine is *Sola Scriptura*. Its single unifying principle can therefore only be the person of Christ Jesus, who claimed, “If I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men to Myself” (John 12:32). If we define the task of biblical theology as articulating the unity of the biblical canon centered in the person of Christ, perhaps a truly christocentric biblical theology will give us a unifying standard within a community of confessions that struggle to cohere. Moreover, the great message of the Scripture is redemption. If a further task of biblical theology is to describe the work of Christ in redemption that is authentic to the human soul,¹¹ perhaps we would find a remedy to the rapid apostasy that has so often

including Baptist, Congregational, and Pentecostal communions. As classical theory would predict, the more monarchical the polity, the more cohesive will be the communion. Correspondingly, the more democratic the polity, the more fragile will be the communion. As predicted, there are hundreds and thousands of the more democratic expressions of Protestantism, especially of the Baptist and Pentecostal denominations.

¹⁰ This problem of apostasy appears to reach beyond the Protestant lands of the Reformation to represent a challenge within modern Christianity itself. The largest communions of the Christian faith are the Eastern Orthodox, historically centered in Russia after the fall of Constantinople, the Roman Catholic, situated in Italy, and the Protestant, originally identified with Germany. In the twentieth century these heartland Christian countries gave expression to the most virulent and tyrannical of regimes: Communist Russia, Fascist Italy, and National Socialist Germany. The Christian churches largely collaborated through various concordats with these anti-Christian regimes to an exceedingly shameful degree. Was such collaboration by ecclesiastics in these countries exceptional, or is there something about effete Christianity that permits the emergence of the tyrant? Were these totalitarian regimes anomalies, or were they precursors of things to come? Much depends upon the answer to these questions.

¹¹ Protestant theology historically subscribes to a forensic justification based on faith without works. But there is no concomitant doctrine of “forensic” sanctification. Indeed, there has not yet emerged a consensus on the doctrine of Christian sanctification among Protestants. Some theorists emphasize the role of the knowledge of doctrine in Christian maturity, a notion which has a remarkable resemblance to Plato, while others suggest “a long obedience in the same direction,” which sounds much like Aristotle’s habituation to virtue.

Nonetheless, popular expectations of mature holiness immediately after conversion have often led to a depiction of the Christian life that does not correspond to the ordinary Christian experience. A popular understanding of sanctification that permits no failure after conversion, or at least no significant one, calls into question the authenticity of conversion itself. This forces us to a kind of self-righteous perfectionism on the one hand or hidden hypocrisy on the other. Once fallen into serious sin, a professing believer is often “marked” for life. This leads to secret guilt or outright rejection, and may be a factor in the rapid apostasy which plagues Protestant communions.

characterized the Protestant experience.¹² Clearly a holistic biblical theology would be helpful to these ends.¹³ But we must begin by recognizing that we have as yet been unable to produce one. Why is this so?

The nature of the human condition is intractably sinful, however, and redemption is a perilous struggle, as the examples of Peter (John 21) and Paul (Rom 7) demonstrate. Luther certainly understood this struggle, and announced the doctrine of *simul peccator et justus*. But most Protestant divines, especially Puritan divines, have not permitted the development of the implications of this doctrine and its radical claims regarding Christian sanctification. Nathaniel Hawthorne's classic indictment of Puritan New England had to do with this very lack of a Protestant imagination with respect to redemption, namely, the inability to understand the presence of ongoing sin in the confessing Christian and the inability to understand a process of sanctification that could make Hester Prynne, an adulteress, into a Christ-figure of redemption. *The Scarlet Letter* (New York, N.Y.: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988). Does the biblical theological theme of the redemption of the whore, which is at least a major theme, if not the grand theme of the Scripture, offer a means by which an authentic doctrine of Biblical redemption might be articulated?

¹² The modernist crisis in American Christianity at the beginning of the twentieth century led to conservative communions emphasizing a doctrinally based evangelism at the expense of works of charity, good deeds that were oftentimes (and sometimes justly) disparaged as mere "social gospel." Protestants, with the emphasis on faith alone justification, are continually at risk of forgetting that good works demonstrate authentic faith. Christ Himself did works of charity (John 13:29) and He requires them of His people (Matt 25:31-46; Gal 2:10). While doctrinal fidelity to a grace alone gospel in evangelism is certainly biblical, it cannot be separated from authentic works of charity and justice-seeking. We cannot radically dissociate the soul from the body of those to whom we carry the good news of Jesus without ourselves becoming psychically disintegrated by our own doctrine. It was against this that the apostle forewarned us (James 2:14-17).

¹³ This task is inevitably political as well as theological. Unfortunately Protestant political thought in America has suffered by the abandonment of the disciplines of classical education and its replacement with "biblical literalism." This departure from both the secular and sacred education of the early Reformers has resulted on the popular level in much political expression that is utter silliness. From the magisterial Christian political theoreticians so prominent among the founders of the American Republic we have devolved into sensationalists obsessed with Middle Eastern wars and apocalyptic speculation. As a consequence we lurch from one candidate for anti-Christ to another. Prophecy conferences keep the people of God in a constant state of agitation and fear. Meanwhile, rapturism and serial date setting for the imminent return undermine the duties required by the Savior's cultural and evangelical mandates. A truly biblical theology would do much to recenter the church upon her Lord, setting forth His goodness, truth, and beauty. Such a profound refocus would have large cultural and political implications. May it be so.

The Precondition to Biblical Theology: Theological Poetics

All theology is poetry.¹⁴ The representation of the transcendent realm of God within the immanent world of man is accomplished by means of metaphor, the most fundamental figure of speech. When the Bible describes God as a Father, or a Good Shepherd, or a Dove, it speaks metaphorically. When we hear about the windows of heaven opening up to pour out the flood of Noah, we must think imaginatively. When Jesus tells us that in His Father's house are many dwelling places, He is prompting us to think logically. But when Scripture speaks of heaven as the New Jerusalem, with foundations of jewels and gates of pearl, we are taught to think analogically. Theology and poetry, it seems, are bound up together in the Bible.

Poetry is fundamental to the nature of man as a creature. In the beginning God created man in His *image and likeness*. It is thus through poetic resemblance that Adam was to understand his relationship to God. He was a creature made in the image of God. He was like God, but He was not God.¹⁵ Poetry requires the ability to distinguish the reality from its image in a proper sense. It is the rational capability to see similarities in difference.¹⁶ It thus requires both logical and analogical capacities. Moreover, it requires not merely mental capacity but also moral imagination. Understood in these terms the first temptation of man by the serpent in the garden was an invitation to believe a false poetry. "You will be like God," claimed the enemy, craftily collapsing the metaphoric distance between the Creator and the creature altogether through a simile not of comparison but of identity.¹⁷ The original sin of man is thus the choice which refuses to

¹⁴ "Poetry" is to be understood in the classical sense of a making (*poesis*) based upon an imitation (*mimesis*). With respect to theology, it can signify any imitation that is a copy of a heavenly reality. In this sense, for example, the tabernacle of Moses was a manufactured "poetic" image of the heavenly tabernacle not made with hands (Heb 8:5). Man is made in the image of the invisible God in his person (Gen 1:26; Col 1:15) and responds by miming God's pattern of six days of work followed by a seventh day of rest (Exod 20:8-11). Water baptism symbolizes the passage from mortality to immortality, while the bread and the wine sacramentally analogize the human participation in the divine life. Faith is the highest poetic capacity through which man lays hold of eternal verities through the faculty of the imagination. Poetry is thus the realm of image making, miming, analogizing, and imagining. It is a way of knowing which stands alongside logical reasoning, according to ancient theory. Both systematic theology and biblical theology are poetic enterprises insofar as they create images of the truth revealed in the Scriptures. Systematic theology sets forth the propositions of faith, creating a rational "image." It is an image, however, that is always subject to Scriptural correction. Biblical theology seeks to demonstrate how the systematic propositions cohere in Christ throughout the entire canon of Scripture. It, too, creates an "image" that must likewise be subject to Scriptural correction.

¹⁵ By way of contrast, compare the introduction of Adam as made in God's image (Gen 1:27) with these introductory depictions of Jesus, the Last Adam: "And the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1), "He is the image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15), and "He is the radiance of His glory, the exact image of His nature" (Heb 1:3).

¹⁶ Aristotle, *Poetics* 1459a. It is inescapable that poetry itself is a rational enterprise. All recognizing of similarities and distinguishing of differences must be subject to the laws of logic.

¹⁷ E. W. Bullinger describes a subtype of simile which is a figure in form but not in substance; that is, the resemblance is one of identity to the very thing itself. He cites many examples, among which are Genesis 25:31 (Heb), Numbers 11:1, Nehemiah 7:2 (Heb), Psalm 122:3, Isaiah 1:9-10, Matthew 14:5, John 1:14,

distinguish between reality and image. From the very beginning, therefore, we are instructed that a robust poetic imagination is required to understand correctly both the Creator and man's proper place in His creation.

The metaphoric depiction of the divine, that is, the "image" by which we envision God, has informed critical flexion points throughout Christian theological history. In the first century Judaism broke with Christianity over the issue of God taking to Himself the image of a man in Christ Jesus, specifically, the image of Christ's body as "living Bread" and His blood as "true drink" (John 6:51, 55). The Jews misunderstood their Messiah, saying, "How can this man give us His flesh to eat?" (John 6:52). In the fourth century the christological controversy of Nicaea turned upon the issue of the "likeness" between the Father and the Son, an issue of identity (*homoousias*) or similarity (*homoiousias*) that nearly divided the empire and bifurcated the church. The sixteenth century conflict over Christ's claim concerning the bread, "This is My body" (Matt 26:26), raised a question of metaphoric likeness or identity which trifurcated Western Christianity over the nature of the eucharist. Europe first defected from its Christian heritage (both Anselmic Catholic and Reformed) after L. Feuerbach's nineteenth century theory that all theological understanding of God is merely the projection of the images of man upon the divine.¹⁸

Clearly poetry, insofar as it requires a metaphoric or analogical imagination regarding the divine, deserves a careful as well as a prayerful study. But as yet there has not emerged in Protestantism a consensus regarding the cruciality of the relationship of poetry to theology. Indeed the opposite appears to be the case.

Protestant Iconoclasm: The Closing of the Poetic Imagination

There is an ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry that has shaped the entire Western tradition of literary criticism,¹⁹ a debate which has inevitably given

Romans 9:32. *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1968) 728-729.

¹⁸ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Elliot, (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1989).

¹⁹ Stanley Rosen, *The Quarrel between Philosophy and Poetry: Studies in Ancient Thought* (New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 1988). Plato writes of this quarrel in *The Republic* at 606bc. He tells us that Socrates recognized the danger of poetry to the political order when he suggested driving out the poets from his purged city (*Rep* 398a). By this gesture, he anticipated the perennial tension between the philosophic censors of the regime and the poets who can so powerfully satirize the rulers and subvert the regime. Moreover, Socrates anticipated the perennial charge that poetic *mimesis* is built upon lies when he depreciated the poetic craft, charging that the poets' images were three removes from the eidetic realm of truth (*Rep* 597e). While the philosophers would only theoretically ban the poets from the healthy city, the poets would actually charge the philosophers with capital crimes. It is the poets who prosecute to the death the philosopher Socrates on charges of impiety and corruption of the young. See Plato's *Apology of Socrates*. Such, then, is the character of the quarrel that sets the advocates of reason and the creators of images of the divine at such enmity.

contour to biblical hermeneutics as well.²⁰ The heart of the dispute in the classical era centered upon the rival claims to wisdom that divide the philosophers (rationalists) from the poets (writers of stories about the gods). The philosopher seeks wisdom by reason alone. The poet claims to understand wisdom by contemplating images of the beautiful. The philosopher reasons toward the eidetic. The poet peers in wonder through the window of the iconic. The philosopher bases his epistemology of truth upon a rational demonstration within the natural order of things. Because his method is to seek all causation within the natural realm, the philosophic tendency is toward skepticism.²¹ Poetry, on the other hand, bases the understanding of truth upon the intuitive. The poet, aware of being moved by his muse,²² embraces the notion of causation beyond the natural realm.

²⁰ “Hermeneutics” is the word most theologians use to describe the science and art of biblical interpretation. The definition of this word is broader than the specific application to the Bible, however, and speaks to interpretation of texts quite generally. It is unfortunate that popular usage in the theological community has largely restricted the term to biblical interpretation. It suggests that there is a specialty of biblical interpretation quite separate from traditional literary criticism. We will argue that this is not the case. The Bible is a sacred text, but it can be understood by the ordinary critical means of interpretation. It requires no arcane science or art to be understood.

²¹ In modernity, classical philosophy has become science, which has found entirely new bearings outside of its Christian and classical origins. Modern science works with reason alone to understand observable phenomena by natural causes. Moreover, in modernity, classical poetry has become theology. Theological poets cast images of God, particularly as the Creator. They appeal to revelation as authority to explain ultimate phenomena apart from natural causation. The ancient quarrel continues today under these different guises. After the Reformation, Darwinism provided a naturalist alternative theory to biblical creationism and set in motion a tremendous clash between the modern heirs of classical philosophy and poetry. The quarrel was inevitable in the Christian West, particularly in the Protestant West, and found decisive expression in the “Scopes Monkey Trial.” John Thomas Scopes, a high school teacher, was convicted of teaching evolution theory in biology class. The charges against Mr. Scopes, predictably, were that he was denying the Creator God and therefore corrupting the morals of his young students. The quarrel between evolutionists and creation scientists continues today unabated. It will continue on, for it is an expression of an ancient and perennial conflict.

²² In George Lucas’ famous movie *Star Wars*, the hero Luke Skywalker faces the climactic battle against the evil Empire with a critical choice. His final battle approach against the Death Star has him with his computer locked onto the coordinates of the only hope for his attack. Just at this decisive moment, however, his Jedi mentor Obewan Kenobe, speaks to him from the unseen world and urges him to fight without the computer. “Use the force, Luke.”

This vivid image from popular culture urges an appeal to the mystical and the unseen realm. The popularity of the Lucas film and many more with similar themes demonstrates that there is a general and perennial sense of something in the universe beyond the material. Poetic writers like J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis are continually imagining and setting before us cities and civilizations in imagery so powerful that they seem to participate in a kind of immortality of their own. These imaginary kingdoms and principates somehow have the power to summon us to a higher realm of human virtue and aspiration than we might have otherwise known within the limited horizons of the merely mundane. The fascination we humans seem to share with the *mundus imaginalis* suggests that there is some realm or “force” that we cannot explain entirely by natural causation. That “force,” perhaps, is the power of poetry. It is inspired by the courage to believe in the possibility of truth that has come down to us from another realm.

The Western tradition after the Renaissance lost its balance and privileged the rational over the intuitive as a means of establishing truth.²³ It is within this historical context that Protestantism has, relatively lately, emerged. Moreover, Protestantism has coincided historically with the Enlightenment emphasis on reason, a fact which reinforces the bias toward reason alone. It would be profitable to consider the context of the Western estimation of images as we examine the tensions between a predominantly rationalist Protestant hermeneutic and poetry. To do so we will have to consider the broadest context of what we are calling “poetic image making” or *mimesis* in the Western tradition.²⁴ There are three forms of image making that appear to set the historical context for our consideration of Protestant resistance to poetic “images.” The first is the long history of opposition to Christian image making of the divine, beginning in the first century, especially plastic or pictorial forms of Jesus. The second is the Christian tension with theatrical mime, beginning with the second century Bishop Tertullian, especially theatrical imitations of comic actions. And the third is the question of the interpretation of figurative images in biblical texts, especially typology and semiotics, which is traceable to the third century quarrel between the schools of Alexandria and Antioch.

Protestant skepticism toward images of the divine has ancient and biblical roots. Indeed, the second commandment specifically forbids making any graven image or likeness of God (Exod 20:4-6). Moses emphasizes the fact that Israel saw no form of God, hearing only His voice in the mount (Deut 4:12).²⁵ But in the New Testament God’s voice comes from the man Christ Jesus, who is the exact image of God’s divine nature (Col 1:15; Heb 1:3), whose humanity is made of flesh (John 1:14), and who can be seen and touched of all (1 John 1:1). The question is thus raised whether the incarnation permits the representation of the divine Word in His human form.

In the Old Testament the Mosaic proscription of divine images was not construed to forbid all plastic images or graven art, so long as images of God were not intended. Indeed there was a magnificent art that adorned the tabernacle and temples of Israel, including the Ark of the Covenant, which represented the throne of the unseen God (Pss 80:1, 99:1). But in the New Testament era it was the widespread practice of the early church to depict images of the divine and incarnate Jesus in churches and catacombs. The art of Eastern Orthodoxy continues this practice through mosaics and icons on the authority of the seventh ecumenical Council of Nicaea. The Latin Church likewise permits plastic art and pictures to depict images of Jesus. Protestants, on the other hand,

²³ Shakespeare’s *Othello* anticipates the tragedy of an Enlightenment world that privileges fact over intuition. In the play the villain Iago plants a handkerchief that falsely incriminates Othello’s beloved Desdemona. Othello knows in his heart that Desdemona has remained faithful, but he suppresses his intuition and so succumbs to what Donald Cowan calls “the myth of fact.” There is something in this fatal choice that anticipates the tragic triumph of “fact” over everything else in modernity.

²⁴ The literary contest between realists and romantics provides another expression of the quarrel between philosophy and poetry. See Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1953) 554-557.

²⁵ God’s people know Him by recognizing His voice, whether in the thunder of Sinai or in the gentle call of the Good Shepherd (Deut 4:12 and John 10:3).

have a long history of religious iconoclasm.²⁶ While Luther was mildly tolerant of religious images, Calvin was not, and the Puritans particularly sought to “purify” the church of all religious art and adornment that was considered to be idolatrous. The consequence of this history is that a residual suspicion toward all imitative portrayals of biblical figures, especially Jesus, whether in plastic form or painted figure, remains quite generalized in many Protestant communities,²⁷ a position which, for better or worse, is in striking contrast to the practice of most of Eastern and Western Christianity, both ancient and modern.

A second expression of Protestant resistance to images has to do with a long history of opposition to the mimetic performances of the theatre. There was early resistance to stage plays by a number of the church fathers, including Tertullian and Chrysostom. Augustine spoke strongly against the temptations aroused in spectators by theatrical performance.²⁸ But medieval Catholicism developed a rich libretto of liturgical drama and passion plays intended to instruct and entertain communicants who were not permitted to read the Bible in their own languages.²⁹ Consequently, among Reformers the theatre was often opposed because it was identified with Rome. This was particularly so in the English Reformation, where the theatre was favored by the royalist court and strongly opposed by the Puritans.³⁰ But the Puritans also appealed to the moral objections to the theatre expressed by the church fathers, even while their special hostility seemed to be directed at the Catholic sentiments of many playwrights and performers. In fact the Puritan disapproval of plays was so intense that the theatre was shut down entirely by the Long Parliament in 1642.³¹

²⁶ Iconoclasm is also one of the distinctive tenets of Islam, based on the instruction of the *Hadith*. Moslems permit no plastic figures or portraits of religious figures, and regularly destroyed Christian church art in lands they conquered. It is interesting to observe that human artistic expression appears to be irrepressible, even under the most severe suppression. Islamic artists developed a highly sophisticated and delicate beauty, both in calligraphy and in architecture, as a consequence.

²⁷ More than a few conservative churches suffer from a perennial conflict over whether to hang religious art in the Narthex or in Sunday School rooms. Moreover, in the most conservative evangelical circles there was opposition to Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* portrayal of Jesus, based upon an appeal to the second commandment. The opposition to Gibson’s movie was reinforced by another Protestant taboo regarding images, however, and that is the Protestant suspicion of the theatre. This rejection, we will see, has deep historical roots as well.

²⁸ Augustine, *Saint Augustine Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1998) 35-38.

²⁹ There were many varieties of medieval Catholic theatre dealing with religious themes, including miracle, mystery, and morality plays.

³⁰ See Edmund S. Morgan, “Puritan Hostility to the Theatre,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 110, No. 5. (Oct. 27, 1966) 340-347.

³¹ The Restoration under Charles II revived the royal theatre, which devoted itself especially to theatrical comedy. Nothing could have aggravated Puritan sentiments more.

There is a large body of literature expressing the hostility of English Protestants to the theatre,³² the most telling, perhaps, being Stephen Gosson's *The School of Abuse* (London, 1579). The Puritan assault on the theatre unfortunately coincided with the greatest achievements of the Elizabethan stage, the theater of William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, and Ben Jonson. Not all Puritans agreed that the theatre and the poetic works performed there were subversive, however. In 1583 the Puritan Sir Philip Sydney wrote a masterful work in response to Gosson entitled "An Apology for Poetry."³³ But the theatre nonetheless was generally subject to the disapproval of the Puritans for its "unchaste affections," "meretricious songs," and "witty obscenities."³⁴ It was suspect as an assembly where "the Bawdes, the Panderers, the Lovers, the Wooers, the Adulterers...are lively represented."³⁵

Puritan opposition to the theatre has had a long history and left a striking mark on Protestant culture. But even more significant than the cultural question is whether shutting down the theatre has constricted the Protestant imagination itself. Does the loss of the theatre compromise the lyric and, most especially, the comedic imagination? The "humor" of comedy is a term derived from the bodily humours, and represents a frank recognition of the ridiculous incongruity of man as both "beast and god," to reconfigure Aristotle. Unlike "wit," which celebrates a cerebral repartee, comedic humor is centered largely on the most private bodily functions, especially sex. Protestant propriety is

³² See William Prynne, *Histrio-mastix: The Players Scourge or Actors Tragedie* (London, 1633) and Jeremy Collier, *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage* (London, 1698).

³³ Reprinted in Hazard Adams, ed., *Critical Theory Since Plato*, (New York, N.Y.: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1992) 142-162

³⁴ William Prynne, *Histrio-matrix: The Players Scourge or Actors Tragedie* (London, 1633) 374-375. The charges leveled against the theatre focused especially on the comedic and lyrical genres, the themes that celebrate romantic love and acknowledge the beauty of the human body. Music and cosmetic adornment were a part of stagecraft, and did not suit the Puritan taste for simplicity. This disposition continues to express itself in some conservative Protestant circles that reject instrumental music and refuse cosmetics as unnecessary adornment or even evidence of moral compromise.

It should be remembered that the rejection of the Elizabethan theatre was a rejection of Shakespeare, whose comedies are capable of being quite ribald. Moreover, other comedies of the time, especially after the Restoration and before the Glorious Revolution, were capable of clear excess, as is wont in so much of the theatre. There is a perennial problem of defining what is or should be obscene. But what are the consequences of shutting down the theatre entirely?

The Athenians recognized the political necessity of tragedy to democratic governance. As Rufus Fears has so cogently observed, the public catharsis was thought necessary for the ruling assembly to deliberate according to reason, unencumbered by the passions of fear and pity that prevent sober political judgment. The medieval Catholic communities similarly permitted carnival to purge the comedic excesses of the people before the fast days of Lent. The question for civil polity is whether the theatre, for all its more than occasional excesses, nonetheless serves as a civil *therapy* somehow to sustain the political order. Must Dionysian frenzy be acknowledged in order to make Apollonian order possible? This question is as old as Euripedes' *The Bacchae*, and raises the fundamental question of the relationship of dramatic poetry to theology as well as politics. Why are the concepts of *catharsis* and *hamartia* so crucial to the poet as well as the theologian? What is the theological significance of the recurring need of the city for a *sparagmos*, as the poets have suggested?

³⁵ William Prynne, *Histrio-matrix: The Players Scourge or Actors Tragedie* (London, 1633) 166.

certainly to be respected in view of the salacious heart of man in his total depravity. But Victorian prudishness that suppresses or even denies the body seems to partake more of the spirit of Socrates than of the sentiments of Scripture. The Bible instructs us that God created the material world, including human sexuality, and called it good. We remember that the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. All of this raises the question as to whether we can find theological instruction in comedy, at least in the formal sense of the term. Nonetheless, comic “imitation” of authentic life has been the bane of many Protestant censors and censorious parishioners.

Classical comedy typically involves a colossal struggle against impossible opposition that is both suddenly and unexpectedly overcome,³⁶ all of which ends in a wedding supper (Gk. *komos*) of renewed life and perpetual joy.³⁷ The contours of classical comedy, as we have just rehearsed them, describe nothing less than the narrative drama and literary genre of John’s *Revelation*. By disregarding or even rejecting comedy, Protestants, we will argue, have been disabled from entering into the drama of the climactic book in the canon. We have isolated ourselves from the celebratory insights of other Christian communions to such an extent that we are often surprised by joy. The rejection of comic *mimesis* has left underdeveloped an entire aspect of our Protestant theological imagination.³⁸ We have foreclosed ourselves from appreciating what Dante

³⁶ J.R.R. Tolkien called comic serendipity the *eucatastrophe*. In writing about the fairy tale ending he said, “it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.” “On Fairy Stories” from *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays* (London: Harper Collins, 1983) 153.

³⁷ The communion “supper” is classically comic with an emphasis on intimacy and joy. These characteristics are intended to be the marks of the eucharist as well as the eschatological banquet. Infrequent celebration of the eucharist, which is not uncommon in Protestant communions, compromises the intimacy and joy of our communal life in the Lord. No less a figure than John Calvin advocated weekly communion in the churches.

Perhaps it is significant in American Protestantism that there is quite generally a sensed need for small groups or house churches that customarily convene over a meal. These gatherings are often justified in order to preserve the intimacy and fellowship that large churches often cannot or do not offer. They reflect, however, the generalized sense that something more is needed than many churches are offering. Further manifestations of a dissociation of soul may underlie the emergent church and seeker-friendly emphases so prevalent today in American Christianity.

³⁸ Classical literary theory since Aristotle’s *Poetics* identified the *mundus imaginalis* of the human soul as constituted of epic, lyric, tragic, and comic genres. These four Greek forms compare quite agreeably to the form critical understanding of Hebrew prosody, namely, epic psalms of praise, lyrical psalms (like 23 and 45) along with the Song of Songs, the tragic aspect of psalms of lament, and the comic character of acknowledgment psalms. The imitative character of poetry, expressing these four fundamental gestures of the soul, suggests an inventory of the human psychic imagination. Clearly the worship cycle of the praise psalms, along with the various experiences of lament, rescue and acknowledgment, constitute the full experience of mankind with God.

Moreover, there appears to be a predominating preference for genre among discrete age groups. The young delight in comedy and the romance of the lyric while the elderly prefer the songs of the tragedians and epic rhapsodes. Could classical literary theory thus help to explain the “worship wars” presently disturbing Protestant communions? Traditional hymnody celebrates the epic grandeur of God as the Creator. Its characteristic minor keys depict the tragic sinfulness of man. Contemporary worship music celebrates the lyrical joy of God as the Redeemer, its characteristic major keys depict the comedic intimacy of life in the garden with the Beloved. While there is arguably much overlapping, these alternative themes,

Alighieri intuited when he captured the entirety of the Christian history of redemption in what he called his *Commedia*, but what the whole world now calls his *Divine Comedy*.³⁹

The third and by far most significant area where Protestant resistance to images has been expressed is in the area of the poetics of biblical interpretation. Modern Reformed exegesis uniformly privileges the *sensus literalis* over the *sensus plenior*, a preference for a literal reading that resists a spiritual interpretation.⁴⁰ This emphasis on the letter rather than the spirit of the text is evident most especially in the generalized Protestant suspicion of and even hostility toward typology⁴¹ and symbols.⁴² This is in

when allowed to predominate, have the capacity to divide the congregation between young and old. Moreover, the separation of epic and tragic from lyric and comic has the capacity to cleave in two the individual Christian soul. A vital and robust appreciation of all the genres would appear to be necessary to a full and robust spirituality.

³⁹ Dante is arguably the greatest poet ever given to the Christian church. Because he predates the Reformation by two hundred years, he belongs to the Protestant heritage as well as that of Western Catholicism. Sadly, Protestants have a deep suspicion of most Christian writers before 1517, and so he is hardly ever read in Reformed communities. We are thus robbed of the richness of the greatest comic imagination, outside Scripture itself, perhaps of all time.

⁴⁰ Scriptural literalists often forget that the Greek word *graphein* means to draw as well as to write. Scripture is imaginatively rich enough to communicate on both the logical and the symbolic or iconic level. Gordon Wenham's display of the chiasmic structure of the flood narrative in Genesis is a case in point. Wenham describes an elaborate chiasm that comprehends the complete narrative from Genesis 6-9. He identifies the pivot point as Genesis 8:1, which states that God remembered Noah, a term of covenant faithfulness. The chiasmic structure superimposed upon the text corresponds to the rising and the falling of the waters of judgment. The rising of the waters corresponds to the rising of the chiasm and the assuaging of the waters corresponds to the decline of the chiasm. The literary art of the text is thus a symbol of the narrative itself. Gordon Wenham, "The Coherence of the Flood Narrative," *Vetus Testamentum* 28 (1978) 336-348.

⁴¹ To reject typology is to miss so much of the beauty, goodness, and truth of Holy Scripture. For example, the Apostle John organizes his entire Gospel as an orderly walk through the tabernacle of Moses in order to show how Jesus tabernacled among us (John 1:14). It is a typological *tour de force*. The most significant piece of furniture in the tabernacle, located in the Holy of Holies, was the Ark of the Covenant, the symbolic throne of the Living God (Psalm 99:1), which represented the presence of God among His people. Sitting above the Ark were the figures of two angels, one at the head and the other at the foot. The two angels bowed their heads in wonder at the mercy seat, the sacred space between them where Israel's high priest would sprinkle the blood that put away the sin of the people. In outlining his Gospel according to the pattern of the tabernacle, John brings us into the "Holy of Holies" on resurrection morning. Mary Magdalene, out of whom Jesus had cast seven demons, stands weeping before the tomb, not knowing where Jesus is. She stoops down (the posture of humility) to peer into the tomb and sees two angels, one at the head and the other at the foot, sitting upon the place where the body of Jesus had lain. Between them are the blood stained burial garments of the Savior, whose death has put away the sin of His people for all time. In other words, John is telling us that Jesus has made His tomb, the place of the uncleanness of corruption, the site where He has set up His throne to rule over death itself. All that the high priests of Israel had seen in type as they had sprinkled the blood of the atonement over the mercy seat, the very reality that they had longed to see, was now beheld by Mary Magdalene, albeit through her tears, for her Joy was standing (the posture of life), as yet unrecognized, beside her (John 20:1-16).

⁴² The Apostle John tells us that Jesus prayed for those who would come to believe in Him through the words (*logoi*) of His disciples (John 17:20). John also tells us that he wrote signs (*semeia*) about Jesus in order that his readers might believe (John 20:30-31). The idea that faith could come through verbal

spite of the fact that a *plenior* reading of the Old Testament is clearly the practice of the New Testament evangelists and apostles⁴³ and, moreover, was widespread among the church fathers, those immediately disciplined by the apostles. This deep rejection of the exegetical method of interpreting the Scriptures that was practiced by Christ, the apostles, and the church fathers is certainly the greatest modern challenge to the possibility of a Protestant biblical theology.

When Jesus asked His disciples who the people thought the Son of Man was, they answered, “Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, others Jeremiah or one of the prophets” (Matt 16:13-14).⁴⁴ Jesus then asked His disciples who *they* understood Him to be, prompting Peter’s confession that He was the Christ, the Son of the living God (Matt 16:16). Jesus commended Peter for this confession, assuring him that his insight was not natural but supernatural, given to him by God the Father from heaven (Matt 16:17). We observe from this passage that there is something about typology that uniquely persuades the heart about the divinity of Jesus. It is a “poetic” insight, the Lord frankly instructs us, which comes from another realm.

Typology itself is an author’s intentional comparison of two (or more) biblical persons, institutions, or events. These comparisons are observed between the type (the original) and the antitype (the after copy). Authorial deliberation behind such comparisons can be demonstrated by the presence of verbal concordance and shared thematic patterns, a literary phenomenon extensively seen throughout the Scripture. Admittedly our confidence in the validity of biblical types is more secure the more

propositions is assumed in Protestant circles. But the idea that faith can come through signs is generally a foreign concept.

Paul tells us that Jesus arose from His throne of divine glory and emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant in His obedience to the death of the cross (Phil 2:5-9). Similarly, John tells us that Jesus arose from supper and laid aside His garments. Taking a towel, He girded Himself and poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to dry them with the towel with which He was girded (John 13:2-5). After Jesus finished washing the feet of His disciples, He told them that what He had done to them was an example (*hypodeigma*); it is a kind of enacted parable (John 13:15). John carefully describes Jesus’ washing the disciples’ feet with seven verbs that trace the entire career of Christ, paralleling what Paul put propositionally in the *kenosis* passage of Philippians. John tells us that Jesus arose, laid aside, took, girded, poured, washed and wiped. These seven verbs correspond the foot washing sign to the entire ministry of Jesus who laid aside His heavenly glory, took upon Himself the form of a servant, girded Himself to the service, poured out His own blood, washed away the soil from His loved ones and dried them with His own raiment. John is thus teaching us the same saving doctrine as Paul, which to be granted the grace to believe, whether by words or by signs, is eternal life and joy.

⁴³ See F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1982) 217-218. In addition to typology and allegory, Bruce notes the non-typological use of allegory regarding the legal command not to muzzle the ox (Deut 25:4), which is appealed to by the apostle to establish the rationale for the support of the gospel minister to come from the gospel (1 Cor 9:8-10). There could hardly be a more analogical statement of the use of the law.

⁴⁴ After the resurrection, Jesus explicitly taught His Emmaus disciples that all of the prophets, beginning with Moses, spoke of His suffering and glory, of His death and resurrection (Luke 24:26-27, see also John 5:39).

extensive the verbal concordance and the more elaborate the thematic patterning between the type and the antitype.

While the occurrence of typology is not limited to the use of the Old Testament in the New Testament, the typology of comparison between the testaments is crucial to the entire apostolic christological enterprise. As practiced by the authors of the New Testament, for example, typology is the method used to show the excellence of Jesus, who surpasses all of the Old Testament prophets, priests, and kings who came before Him. The evidence for these typological comparisons is as pervasive as it is indisputable in the New Testament. How do we demonstrate this?

We begin by noting that the comparison between the Old Testament type and Jesus as the antitype always involves a “heightening.”⁴⁵ Consequently, with respect to Jesus as the antitype, Christ always excels His Old Testament type. This juxtaposition creates a pattern of comparisons, a relationship between type and antitype that appears to be two-fold. Where the Old Testament typical figure is sinful, Jesus, by comparison, is shown to be sinless. Likewise, where the Old Testament type is heroic, Jesus, by comparison, is shown to be *more* heroic. In short, Jesus is *greater*, His ministry is *better*, and His triumph is filled with *more* glory.

Examples of this typology are manifold in the New Testament, as we have said. We are explicitly told that Jesus brings **more** grace than Adam (Rom 5:17),⁴⁶ that He has a **greater** dignity than Abraham (John 8:53). Jesus has a **greater** love than Jacob (John 4:12). He has a **greater** wisdom than Solomon (Luke 11:31), by which He builds a **greater** temple (Matt 12:6). He has a **greater** testimony than Jonah (Luke 11:32). Moreover, Jesus has **more** glory than Moses (Heb 3:3), for He has a **greater** tabernacle (Heb 9:11), offering a **better** sacrifice (Heb 9:14). Jesus has a **more** excellent priesthood than Aaron (Heb 8:6), and administers a **better** covenant with **better** promises (Heb 8:6). And He comes even with a **mightier** ministry than John the Baptist (Matt 3:11, Mark 1:17, Luke 3:16), for He has a **higher** rank of being (John 1:30). If such are several of the exceeding excellencies of Jesus and His ministry, how otherwise could we measure their surpassing excellence but by a typological method that compares the antitype to the type?

Moreover, there is an entire topic of implied comparisons that is likewise typological in character. Death came to all through Adam’s disobedience, but Jesus’ obedience brought many to life (Rom 5:17). The law came by Moses, but grace and truth by Jesus Christ (John 1:17). Moses and Elijah were worthy of honor, but Jesus alone is to be worshipped (Luke 9:30, 35). Joshua gave the people rest, but a greater rest comes through Jesus (Heb 4:8). Moreover, David’s kingdom was great, but David’s Son was to have a greater throne (Mark 12:35-37).

⁴⁵ Leonhard Goppelt called this phenomenon “heightening” (G. *Steigerung*). *Typos: The Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New*, trans. Donald H. Madvig (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1982) 18.

⁴⁶ The words in bold reflect the use of the comparative in the cited NT Greek text.

A further aspect of the comparisons underlying New Testament typology is the new/old contrast between the covenants of works and grace. Hebrews states explicitly that the old covenant had “faults” necessitating a new or better covenant (Heb 8:7-8). Similarly, Paul argues that the old covenant was of the “letter,” and so brought death. The new covenant, however, is of the “Spirit,” and so brings life (2 Cor 3:6). Consequently we see that the new covenant is shown to be superior to the old by the redemptive use of the word “new,” implying a better contrast with the old.

It is against this background that the typological insufficiencies of the old covenant are juxtaposed to the redemptive excellence of the new.⁴⁷ Jesus compares His ministry with that of John the Baptist by contrasting **new** wine and **new** wineskins with old wine and old wineskins (Matt 9:17, Luke 5:37-38). Jesus comes as the Mediator of a **new** covenant (2 Cor 3:6; Heb 8:7, 13), which speaks with a better blood than Abel (Heb 12:24). The New Testament Christian is a **new** creation, the old having passed away (2 Cor 5:7). He is a **new** man (Eph 4:22-24; Col 3:9-10), wears **new** garments (Luke 5:36), has a **new** name (Rev 2:17, 3:12), is given a **new** song (Rev 5:9), obeys a **new** commandment (John 13:34, 1 John 2:8), has the hope of a **new** Jerusalem (Rev 3:12, 21:2) and a **new** heavens and a **new** earth (2 Pet 3:13; Rev 21:1). And in all these things we see that the antitype excels the type, and that the new is better, having a greater ministry, and filled with more glory. In sum, these examples affirm that no approach to understanding the Old Testament offers greater reward in setting forth the all excelling excellencies of Jesus than the typological method of the evangelists and apostles themselves!⁴⁸

If we are to go *ad fontes*, as our Protestant fathers admonished us, the Scripture itself is dispositive of the fact that typology is *the* method of exegesis that Jesus taught His disciples. This fact requires a hermeneutic that recognizes an analogical alongside a logical method of biblical exegesis. It requires the poetic skill to identify similarities in difference, to see how Jesus can be understood not merely as likened to one, a few, or even a number of the prophets, but the fulfillment of all of them. In short, typology leads us to the recognition, with Peter, that Jesus could be none other than the Son of the Living God. It is this aspect of typology that is often overlooked. Typology demonstrates the remarkable coherence of the Scripture, for all the prophets find their fulfillment, by verbal concordance and formal patterns of similarities in difference, in Jesus. But typology is also the realm of revelation. It is a means of grace for those

⁴⁷ The words in bold font which follow reflect the use of the word “new” in Greek.

⁴⁸ There is a large and respected contingent of reformed exegetes who have pursued typology as a part of biblical theology. Among the more notable are Geerhardus Vos, E.J. Young, Meredith Kline, Herman and Ridderbos. Occasionally critics have tried to restrain the discipline of typology altogether, alleging its abuses outweigh its contributions. Generally an appeal is made to “Marsh’s dictum,” an extra-biblical (and thus contra-Confessional, WCF I.9) hermeneutical standard which states that we must “not set forth any typology except that which is explicit in the Scriptures.” Responding to such a view, Edmund P. Clowney, former president of Westminster Theological Seminary, said, “To conclude that we can never see a type where the New Testament does not identify it is to confess hermeneutical bankruptcy.” *Preaching Christ in All the Scriptures* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2003) 31.

blessed ones who are given to understand the true divine nature of Christ Jesus in a revelation given not of flesh and blood, but from their Father in heaven. This poetic means of knowing, although subject certainly to a rational criticism, is not subject at last to the traditional means of falsification. It is validated epistemologically to the believing community,⁴⁹ like the Emmaus disciples, by an inner knowing, a recognition and affirmation of the testimony of the Spirit within responsive hearts (Luke 24:32).⁵⁰

In spite of the practice of the New Testament authors to set forth their gospel in symbols⁵¹ and enacted parables⁵² which provide so rich a texture to the biblical story, most Protestant interpreters have relentlessly sought to divest their exposition of an appeal to the poetic art of the text. Many Protestant seminarians at conservative schools are taught that to take the Bible seriously is to take the Bible literally, that is, according to a “normative” hermeneutic.

Early on the typical Protestant seminary student is taught to dismiss the church fathers because of their emphasis on typology and their penchant for allegory.⁵³ He is

⁴⁹ Luke tells us that Christ “opened” the Emmaus disciples’ eyes (Luke 24:31); He “opened” their minds (Luke 24:45), and that He “opened” the Scriptures (Luke 24:32). This small community of two witnesses recognized the Savior in the symbol of the breaking of the bread (Luke 24:30-31), and they understood what their hearts, burning within them, had signified (Luke 24:32). The inner witness of the heart and the mind thus confirmed what had been “opened up” to their eyes of understanding. This passage clearly teaches that the validation of typology comes as the community of faith recognizes the Savior in their spirits. They are invited to intuit the Lord in the Scriptures and to rejoice in faith as He is recognized in their midst (Luke 24:31).

⁵⁰ Compare also Paul’s appeal to the inner witness of the Spirit, who assures the child of God of the authenticity of his faith (Rom 8:16).

⁵¹ Mark describes a symbolic act of Jesus when the Herodians confronted Him in the temple (Mark 12:13-17). They came with a question about the lawfulness of paying the tribute tax to Caesar. Jesus could have simply asked whose image was on a Roman coin in order to respond to the dilemma they presented. But the Lord specifically asked them to *bring* Him a denarius (Mark 12:15). The point was certainly not missed by the crowd, who would have recalled the gruesome crime of Herod when he presented Herodias with the severed head of John the Baptist on a platter (Mark 6:27-28). By requiring the Herodians to publicly bring Him the coin, with a depiction of the head of Caesar upon it, Jesus was having the party of Herod reenact their crime. He was warning them that God had not forgotten His prophet, and that a similar judgment to that of the Baptist would be exacted from the Idumean king and his Roman sponsor.

⁵² Jesus enacts a parable when He takes a scourge and cleanses the temple, turning over the tables of the dove coats (John 2:16). The dove is the symbol of the Spirit of God (John 1:32). By releasing the doves Jesus is symbolically showing that the Spirit of God is departing from the temple and that the days of vengeance are at hand (cf. Ezek 10:18).

⁵³ One of the best books this author has ever read, and I confess it was for me a remedial reading, is Jean Danielou’s *From Shadows to Reality: Studies in the Typology of the Fathers*, trans. Dom Wulstan Hibberd (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock reprint, 2003). Danielou’s survey demonstrates the richness of the teaching in the early church and its deep spiritual insight into the Old Testament. We have forgotten that the first Reformers were well versed in the church fathers, and cited them extensively. Luther’s understanding of grace had much to do with his reading of Augustine. While the church fathers should certainly be read critically, they should be read!

taught to avoid the allegorizing Alexandrians and to adhere to a “literalist” Antiochene exegetical method.⁵⁴ He is admonished that only heretics like the emasculated Origen or an emaciated medieval mystic could find anything useful in the *quadriga*, or the four-fold method, the eisegetical approach claiming to find allegorical, tropological, and anagogical levels of significance resting upon every literal text.⁵⁵ He is warned that typology is so dangerous that interpretive excess can only be prevented by adhering to Marsh’s “dictum,” which quarantines biblical types to those cited explicitly as such by a New Testament author, and to those alone.⁵⁶ He is sometimes taught that the parables of Jesus can have only one unitary meaning.⁵⁷

Biblical exposition of this kind collapses into a virtual letterism. The seminarian is told that only an expositor who practices the literal method of Scriptural interpretation⁵⁸

⁵⁴ See Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1970) 48-50. Alexandrians like Athanasius, we forget, upheld the divinity of Jesus against the incipient Arianism of Lucian, the founder of the School of Antioch. As we have argued from the Lord’s typological instruction to His disciples (Matthew 16:13-16), it is the analogical correspondence between Jesus and the prophets that establishes His divine claim above all other demonstrations.

⁵⁵ See the balanced critique of the four-fold method by reformed scholar Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999) 107-109.

⁵⁶ There has hardly been a better intended principle of interpretation that has had a more pernicious effect than Bishop H. Marsh’s “dictum.” It was announced in his *Lectures on the Criticism and Interpretation of the Bible* (Cambridge: C&J Rivington, 1828) 373. Marsh’s dictum unwarrantedly presupposed that the New Testament operated with a technical terminology for types. E. Miner has commented, “...the ability to declare typology absent is a kind of proof of sound modern critical method.” See *Literary Uses of Typology*, E. Miner, ed. (Princeton, N. J.: University Press, 1977) 377.

⁵⁷ This exegetical curiosity originated with the liberal theologian Adolf Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, vol. 1 (Freiburg: Mohr, 1899) 169-173. It has found surprising traction in conservative circles, however. John Sider writes, “The one-point theory is the most influential and the most pernicious part of Jülicher’s legacy to a century of interpretation. What every seminary graduate remembers about the parables is that allegorizing is wrong and every parable makes one point. But any informed student of literature knows nowadays that these options are ill-framed...” John W. Sider, “Nurturing Our Nurse: Literary Scholars and Biblical Exegesis,” *Christianity and Literature* 32 (1982) 17-18.

⁵⁸ In conservative circles, hermeneutical literalism is often advocated as the only sure defense for the truth of the Scripture. The Bible, however, clearly teaches that the word of God is also to be understood spiritually, and that a literal reading very often leads to serious theological misunderstanding. We may illustrate the necessity of a spiritual hermeneutic by an appeal to the Gospel of the evangelist John, also the traditional writer of Revelation, the most figurative book in the Bible. Consider the following examples. One of the purposes of the Gospel of John is to teach us that if we are to understand Jesus, we must often understand the Lord’s teaching spiritually. This point is made again and again by the evangelist who shows us that those who took Jesus literally often misunderstood Him. Several of the most salient examples of this principle are the following: The Lord tells the Jews to destroy the temple and He will raise it in three days. The Jews take Jesus to be speaking of the temple of Herod, not understanding that He spoke of the temple of His body (John 2:19-21). Again, the Lord tells Nicodemus that he must be born again. Nicodemus asks how he, being old, can return to his mother’s womb (John 3:3-4). The Lord tells the Samaritan that He will give her living water so that she would not thirst again. The woman then asks for this water, so that she will no longer need to come to the well to draw (John 4:13-15). Jesus offers His

does honor to the Word of God and thus can preach the truth with confidence. Any “spiritualized” reading of the Bible is portrayed as the playground of liberals and heretics. He is thus introduced into the Protestant world of biblical “flatlanders,” the company of those who can no longer imagine anything beyond the literal meaning of a text and are uncomfortable with the claim that there could be a deeper or fuller meaning to the sacred Scriptures.

Moreover, conservative seminary education transpires in a larger context which is far more influenced by skeptical scholarship than is generally recognized. European Protestantism was quickly swallowed up by Enlightenment rationalism. Source criticism arose in European seminaries even as the Reformed belief in the inspiration of Scripture gave way to modernism and rationalism. From these European beginnings, critical scholarship gradually came to predominate in American Protestant seminaries as well. The Bible was no longer understood to be an inspired book.⁵⁹ It was reduced to a mere anthology of ancient religious texts that displayed an evolution of theological development. Such views won the day at the most respected and influential Protestant seminaries and universities. Naturalist and rationalist methods came to dominate theological scholarship.

In such an environment, perhaps it was inevitable that skeptical scholarship would set the contours for conservative Protestants. Respected evangelical scholarship today practices a method that consists largely of an exhaustive survey of theological books and

flesh as bread and His blood as drink, but the Jews cannot understand how Jesus intended to give them His flesh to eat (John 6:50-58). Again Jesus taught the Jews that He was going to the Father, and that they would not find Him. But the Jews wondered where he could go to hide from them in the diaspora (John 7:33-36). And Jesus summoned His disciples to go with Him to Bethany because Lazarus was asleep. Then the disciples protested and said that if Lazarus were sleeping, he would wake up (John 11:11-14). Finally, Jesus told Pilate that He was a king. But Pilate could not understand the spiritual nature of His kingdom (John 18:33-38). Clearly the Gospel of John is teaching us a spiritual hermeneutic. How then can we interpret John’s Revelation solely on a literal level, as many conservative Protestants advocate, without missing its deeper meaning?

⁵⁹ There is a tension in conservative Protestant theology. The absolutely crucial doctrines of inspiration and inerrancy are ascribed only to the original biblical autographs, which are not producible. That fact reduces those doctrines to a mere theoretical confession.

Why would God give us a perfect text and not preserve it for us? The plain fact is that the critical text underlying all modern translations is a confection coming out of modern scholarly laboratories. This textual critical product arises out of a narrow set of questionable presuppositions brought to life by the votes of a scientific committee whose method is arguably worthy of the imagination of Mary Shelley.

The true defense of these absolutely critical doctrines about the verbal and plenary integrity of the Scriptures must come from a literary reconstruction rather than from singular reliance upon random and incomplete manuscriptural witnesses. The doctrines of inspiration and inerrancy are meaningless unless there is a providence that would preserve the authentic Scripture. That providence has to be inherent in the coherence of the biblical manuscripts themselves. The surge in scholarship regarding chiasmic patterns in Scripture, combined with their pervasive occurrence, all with interlocking and overlapping structures, suggests a way forward, a method of identifying interpolations and scribal errata based upon internal evidence along with manuscriptural evidence. See David A. Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1999). This ground, it would seem, is far firmer than dependence upon critical reconstructions from the manuscripts alone.

journals in reference to a very narrowly defined topic. Almost without realizing it, perhaps, evangelicals are researching theological topics from the writings of scholars who are overwhelmingly skeptical toward the faith and critical in their scholarly method. By such devastating predominance, liberal scholarship inevitably “sets the table,” identifying the issues that can be discussed and setting the limits of the “imaginative” horizons of what the text will be permitted to say.⁶⁰

Moreover, we evangelical Protestants have become far too isolationist in our reading, largely unaware of the pre-Reformation or extra-Reformation heritage of the Christian faith. *Sola Scriptura* has evolved into a Protestant isolationism that views pre-Reformation theology as unworthy and the classics of the Western tradition as unnecessary. Large communities of Protestant conservatives have thus taken up residence in a kind of theological cul-de-sac.

This narrowing of our vision is informing Protestant preaching as well. The Reformed pulpit can be justly accused of parsing the Pauline letters to death, while proportionately ignoring the Old Testament, and often reducing the Gospels to episodic treatments rather than striving for a holistic understanding of the unique theology of each of the four evangelists. Revelation is commonly ignored altogether, constructively treated as an apocryphal book, at least in many Reformed churches.⁶¹

Bowing to naturalist and rationalist tendencies, we have largely demythologized the Bible and the Christian life,⁶² thereby losing much of our sense of wonder, the conscious awareness that we are participating in a world filled with miracle, and that the Christian life is a provident pilgrimage filled with the irruption of the supernatural.

It is a measure of just how pervasive this critical tendency has become in conservative Protestantism that evangelical journals and commentaries imitate the descriptive and dispassionate “scientific” style of liberal theological writing, patterned after the scientist who merely describes natural phenomena without looking to or celebrating ultimate causes. How different was the style of Luther, Calvin, and the other great early Reformers! These Protestant fathers wrote with exuberance and joy about the

⁶⁰ This constricted method of research and writing has resulted in the production of exegetical commentaries on identical biblical books that are often quite identical in substance, differing only slightly one from another. We are in jeopardy, it would seem, of a kind of conservative Protestant solipsism.

⁶¹ On the other hand the Apocalypse is oftentimes obsessed over in the more sensationalist dispensational communities.

⁶² Rudolf Bultmann strove for a demythologized New Testament, removing the miraculous story (mythos) from the text of Scripture for liberal Protestants. Benjamin Warfield, while defending the miraculous story in Scripture, responded to the clear excesses of modern charismata claims in such a way that he effectively demythologized the Christian life for conservative Protestants. The result is a kind of Calvinist “deism” in many Reformed communities. Evangelical Protestants have never reconciled the tension between the prevailing cessationism of our systematic theologians and the predominant continuationism of our missiologists. Missionaries regularly return from foreign fields with claims of miracles and charismatic phenomena which authenticate their propagation of the apostolic teaching of Scripture.

goodness of God in His marvelous grace, both in creation and in redemption.⁶³ They extolled the Christian faith, and punctuated their commentary with doxology. In short, they wrote with poetic sensitivity and sheer joy.

This quality of reveling in God and enjoying Him for His sublime and saving perfections, expressed in a style that often breaks forth into poetry, is a remarkable feature of a number of Puritan divines, in spite of their hostility to the poetry of the theatre. Thomas Watson has such a character about his theological writing, and it is no wonder that he was Charles Spurgeon's favorite, for the same may be said of Spurgeon's poetic preaching. We could adduce as well the passionate preaching of John Bunyan and Edward Taylor, among many others. Where are their like today?

We remember that early Protestantism produced the greatest art imaginable. The Reformation gave us Albrecht Dürer, Rembrandt van Rijn, Johann Sebastian Bach, George Friedrich Handel, and Christopher Wren. The Reformation gave us the laureled English poets John Milton, Edmund Spenser, John Donne, and, yes, the lord of our language, William Shakespeare. Where today are our Christian artists, like those of the early Reformation? Where are our image makers? How can we have a theme as immense as measureless grace and remain so silent and cold? What image maker could have a greater hero to celebrate than the Lamb who has slain the great dragon? What poet's heart could remain unkindled when the dove has descended with tongues of fire to set ablaze the imagination of all the Christian world? Where are our theological poets today? We have killed them.

This great Protestant war against poetry is relevant to our thesis respecting the crisis in Protestant biblical theology because the work of the biblical theologian deals with the greatest subject, the Holy Scriptures.⁶⁴ To give Scriptural theology its full expression, then, will require the greatest art as well as the most precise science.⁶⁵ We are seeking nothing less than to portray the image of the invisible God as He has been revealed to us in sacred Scripture through the incarnation of Christ Jesus, the Lord.

Poetics and New Testament Hermeneutics

The greatest crisis in the early life of the apostolic church was clearly the challenge to the gospel of free grace represented by the Judaizers, the controversy which

⁶³ Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia, PA.: Westminster Press, 1970) 53.

⁶⁴ Since the Bible is the most important book, the interpretation of the Bible is the most important study. The task of biblical theology is to create an image that is faithful to the canonical Scriptures as revelation. Defined in this manner, it is a poetic task. Its claim is that to the extent it is true to the divine original in Scripture, it will be validated by the heart response of the believing community.

⁶⁵ Any appeal to revealed truth is not demonstrable by reason alone. While revelation should be rational, it is not subject to philosophic falsification. Biblical revelation cannot be demythologized without losing its claim to truth. Moreover, biblical revelation must give room to mystery, because it speaks of the transcendent within the world of the immanent. Religion, therefore, insofar as it is the realm of mystery and miracle, cannot be validated apart from the presuppositions of faith.

necessitated the first ecumenical council at Jerusalem (Acts 15:1-3). Paul's epistle to the Galatians represents the most urgent and passionate defense of the gospel of grace in all the New Testament. Indeed, the stakes could not have been higher for the infant church in that controversy. Paul is so sobered by the threat of the Judaized gospel, which he calls no gospel (Gal 1:7), that he pronounces a curse (Gal 1:8) and an imprecation upon his opponents (Gal 5:12).

Now it is instructive that when the issue was so decisively drawn with his legalist opponents, Paul, at the climax of his argument, appealed to an *allegory* to refute the gainsayers of grace (Gal 4:24). It seems a fair question to ask our fellow Protestants whether, without the sanction of Holy Scripture, we would ever find the claim that Sarah and Hagar "are two covenants" persuasive. Would it be self-evident to us, as it apparently was to Paul and the Galatians, that these two women appearing in early Genesis dispositively anticipated⁶⁶ the covenants of promise and works?⁶⁷ Would Protestant scholarship today be capable of demonstrating, apart from Paul, the biblical theological bicovenantal theme of flesh and promise as represented by Hagar and Sarah

⁶⁶ Rather than understanding the bicovenantalism of Hagar and Sarah as merely *anticipating* the covenants of works and promise, it seems probable that in the providence of redemptive history Hagar and Sarah are likewise *explicating* the covenants of works and promise first announced to Adam in the garden (Gen 2:16-17 and 3:15). This argument, although inescapably typological, appears to complete Paul's understanding of the twin axes of works and promise (law and grace) that run right through the Scriptures. Paul's syncritical juxtaposition of works and promise in the figures of the two women Hagar and Sarah, who represent the Jerusalem below and the Jerusalem above, is echoed in the Johannine syncritical comparison of Lady Babylon and Lady Jerusalem. There should be no doubt that Lady Babylon is a figure for the Jerusalem below, even as Lady Jerusalem is a figure of the Jerusalem above. See Warren A. Gage, *St John's Vision of the Heavenly City* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Dallas, 2001) 50. John has already identified Jerusalem as a "spiritual" Egypt and Sodom (Rev 11:8). Babylon is the city made infamous in the Bible for having destroyed the temple of God in Jerusalem. Similarly, Jerusalem is the city made infamous for having destroyed the Temple of God in Christ Jesus (John 2:21). In all of this Jerusalem is justly charged with having become a "spiritual" Babylon, the proper contrast as the earthly "Old" Jerusalem to John's depiction of the heavenly New Jerusalem. Thus understood, both Paul and John are setting forth a syncritical juxtaposition of both a heavenly and earthly Jerusalem. Through a paranetic figure of speech, two women are set forth by both apostles to contrast the apostolic and the Judaistic gospel.

⁶⁷ Similarly, we might also ask how it is that Paul could see so clear a contrast between the covenant of Moses and the covenant of Christ in the account of the veil Moses wore after coming down from Mount Sinai, namely the fading glory of the one covenant contrasting with the perpetual glory of the other (2 Cor 3:7-4:6 and Exod 34:29-35)? We may justly inquire whether a normative Protestant hermeneutic today is capable of making and defending such identification apart from an appeal to Paul's apostolic authority alone. Moreover, how are we to demonstrate the truth so evident to the apostle that the Rock in the wilderness was Christ (1 Cor 10:4), that the waters of the Red Sea were baptismal (1 Cor 10:2) and that the "spiritual" bread and drink in the wilderness were communal (1 Cor 10:3-4)? If the Apostle Paul had not announced these truths, which should be self-evident from the Old Testament alone, would a pastor today setting forth such assertions not be scorned for wild speculation and eisegetical excess? And what of a pastor who would imagine that somehow the flood of Noah was likewise baptismal (1 Pet 3:20-21), or that the blessing of Melchizedek, who gave Abraham bread and wine (Gen 14:18) represented a greater priesthood and a greater covenant than the priesthood and covenant of Aaron (Heb 7:1-28). Would such a pastor even pass his ordination exams, much less hold his pulpit? Without a robust typology, is our modern Protestant hermeneutic sufficient for these things?

(Gen 16:5 and 21:2, cf. Gal 4:24), Sinai and Zion (Exod 19:8 and Psa 48:2, cf. Gal 4:24-27), barren Jerusalem and fertile Zion (Isa 49:20-21 and 54:1, cf. Gal 4:27), and the Jerusalem of the second temple and the Jerusalem above (Gal 4:25-26)?⁶⁸

Let's consider the first and most critical part of the question we have raised as to how Paul would have made the identification of Hagar with Sinai, and how such a comparison is defensible within the bounds of the historical-grammatical method. Perhaps the most striking grammatical similarity between the accounts of Hagar and Israel at Sinai is the use of the rare word *tsachaq* (to mock),⁶⁹ found in both accounts (Gen 21:6 and Exod 32:6). The identifying gesture of Ishmael, the son of the bondwoman, was to "mock" Isaac, the son of Sarah who had received the promise.⁷⁰ This "mocking" of Ishmael (Gen 21:6) is what makes Moses' use of the same word so significant when he describes the idolatry of the sons of Israel at Sinai who, like Ishmael, rose up to "mock" (Exod 32:6).⁷¹ Just as Paul would afterwards announce the doctrine that not all Israel is Israel (Rom 9:6), so Moses anticipates the same remnant doctrine when he charges the rebels at Sinai with rehearsing the action of Ishmael (Exod 32:6).

Now with respect to the Mosaic account of the similarity of Ishmael to Israel at Sinai, both Ishmael and disobedient Israel can boast in Abrahamic paternity. Both are circumcised (Gen 17:23; Josh 5:4-5). Yet idolatrous Israel is in jeopardy of not inheriting the blessing due to unbelief *like that of* Ishmael. By the use of a highly significant and rare word, Moses is inviting us to compare the two narratives that juxtapose faithless Israel and Ishmael.⁷² This Mosaic equation of Ishmael and idolatrous Israel at Sinai makes Paul's argument against the Judaizers so probative, for like Ishmael, they too claimed both Abrahamic paternity and covenant circumcision. So with respect to the correspondence between the son of Hagar and Israel at Sinai, we observe a case of verbal

⁶⁸ Paul's entire federal theology depends on the *type* of Adam and Christ (Rom 5:12-14; 1 Cor 15:21-21-22, 45-49). Arguably the entire doctrine of justification by faith alone depends on biblical bicovenantalism, which is based on the *allegory* of Hagar and Sarah (Gal 4:24-27). Protestant dogmatics and poetry are thus inseparably bound together.

⁶⁹ S.V. *tsachaq*, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, F. Brown, S.R. Driver, C.A. Briggs (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1972) 850.

⁷⁰ The name Isaac is likewise derived from *tsachaq*, a point which emphasizes the literary and theological significance of the root within the text.

⁷¹ Moses writes that Israel "ate and drank and rose up" to "mock" (Exod 32:6). While the "mock" language recalls Ishmael, the verbal pattern "ate, drank, and rose up" likewise recalls Esau when he despised his birthright (Gen 25: 34). With but two masterful "brushstrokes," the Mosaic portrait of Israel's disobedience at Sinai is likened to that of both Ishmael and Esau.

⁷² There can be no doubt that such is Paul's point. He explicitly states that the Galatian church is *like* Isaac, children of promise (Gal 4:28) and that the "present" Jerusalem is like the children of the bondwoman, that is, they are *like* Ishmael (Gal 4:29).

concordance and structured similarity that suggests an intentional mirroring (or poetic comparison) of the two accounts by the sacred writer.⁷³

A further clue to the interpretive framework of the Apostle Paul is the syncritical juxtaposition of two women, a common trope both in the biblical texts⁷⁴ and the literature of both the Jewish and the Hellenistic Galatians.⁷⁵ This figure of speech presents two women in order to contrast two ethical possibilities. The book of Proverbs, for example, which is highly exhortative, opens with a warning about the immoral woman (Prov 2:16-19) and ends with an admonition to marry the woman of virtue (Prov 31:10-31). The same admonitory charge is evident in Paul's instruction to cast out the bondswoman of legalism (Gal 4:30) and adhere to the woman of promise (Gal 4:31) as well as the Johannine charge to exercise wisdom in discerning the different destinies presented by Lady Babylon (Rev 17:5-9) and Lady Zion (Rev 21:1-2). To understand Paul's allegory fully requires a familiarity not only with the Bible but with the literature of the original recipients, at least if we are to take seriously the historical component of historical-grammatical exegesis. It is in this area especially that we see great hope as Protestants become increasingly attuned to the contribution of classical⁷⁶ and Septuagintal⁷⁷ study to New Testament exegesis, along with the already quite well established recognition of the value of the study of second temple Judaism.

In sum, the poetics of a Protestant biblical theology requires a rigorous historical as well as grammatical exegetical approach and a disciplined typological method. The method of biblical exegesis we are advocating is wholly consistent with the historical grammatical method of Protestant biblical interpretation. It begins with the Scriptures in their original languages of Hebrew and Greek. We insist that no serious demonstration of biblical theology (or systematic theology, for that matter) is possible apart from the original expression of the texts of Scripture, where many subtleties of lexical and grammatical form are preserved. Structural analysis, such as chiastic patterning, often

⁷³ Moses uses the same word (*tsachaq*) in the account of the Sodomites falsely charging Lot with mocking (Gen 19:14) and Potiphar's wife falsely charging Joseph with folly (Gen 39:17). The incipient disobedience of Israel, which is likened to Sodom and Egypt, is anticipated in Exodus 2:14 and 14:11-12 and finds full expression in Revelation 11:8 (cf. Isa 1:10, Ezek 16:26, 48-49).

⁷⁴ There are several juxtapositions of this kind in Scripture, especially in the patriarchal narratives. Abraham is developed between Hagar and Sarah. Jacob negotiates between Leah and Rachel. Joseph's character is seen between Potiphar's wife and the daughter of Potiphara. Elkanah veers between Hannah and Peninnah.

⁷⁵ An excellent discussion of the *topos* of the two-women in classical and Hellenistic literature is given by Barbara R. Rossing, *The Choice Between Two Women: Whore, Bride, and Empire in the Apocalypse*, Harvard Theological Studies 48 (Harrisburg, PA.: Trinity Press International, 1999) 17-59.

⁷⁶ See for example the use of classical drama to approach the Bible as suggested by a number of scholars and J. Cheryl Exum, ed., *Semeia* 32, Society of Biblical Literature, 1985. Also, J. William Whedbee, *The Bible and the Comic Vision* (Minneapolis, Mn.: Fortress Press, 2002).

⁷⁷ See Karen H. Jobes, "When God Spoke Greek: The Place of the Greek Bible in Evangelical Scholarship" *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 16.2 (2006) 219-236.

turns on words that are rendered too inconsistently in translations to be recognized for their literary significance. We must recover the respect for the original languages that has eroded so seriously in Protestant theological training in the last decades of the twentieth century.

Once the original text of Scripture is in hand, we proceed with a method that first, establishes the text to be interpreted through textual and literary criticism. Second, we identify and study the theologically rich lexical words in the text. Third, we examine the passage grammatically to identify syntactical and interpretive ambiguity. Fourth, we interpret the text, considering structural and chiasmic form, narrational context, and authorial and historical background, where present. Historical as well as grammatical issues must be considered in exegetical statements. This implies a serious familiarity with the literature and history of the ancient Near East as well as a deep familiarity with Hellenistic literature. Fifth, we consider textual interpretation in light of our confessional or systematic theology. Sixth, we consider the textual interpretation in light of our biblical theology, that is, how it proclaims the suffering and the glory of Christ Jesus. The end of the exegetical method is the practical proclamation, by preaching and teaching, of the person and work of the Savior of the world as set forth in the Scriptures.

Moreover, the standards for identifying the probability of authorial intention with respect to typological allusions have been announced by competent students of the Bible, all of them consistent with traditional standards used by literary scholars in general. Dale Allison, for example, provides criteria of certainty beginning with explicit statement (cf. John 3:14), inexplicit citation or borrowing (LXX 2 Kgs 1:8 and Mark 1:6), similar circumstances (cf. Joshua's parting of the Jordan and Moses' parting of the sea), key words or phrases (cf. 2 Kgs 4:42-44 and the gospel accounts of the feeding of the five thousand), similar narrative structure (cf. 1 Kgs 19 and Mark 1), and word order, syllabic sequence, poetic resonance (cf. Gen 1 and John 1). Dale C. Allison, Jr., *The New Moses: A Matthean Typology* (Minneapolis, Mn.: Fortress Press, 1993) 19-20. Greg Beale similarly announces criteria for distinguishing clear allusions from probable allusions and possible allusions. *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999) 78.

J.I. Packer has clearly defined the approach we are advocating:

Biblical theology is the umbrella-name for those disciplines that explore the unity of the Bible, delving into the contents of the books, showing the links between them, and pointing to the ongoing flow of the revelatory and redemptive process that reached its climax in Jesus Christ. Historical exegesis, which explores what the text meant and implied for its original readership, is one of these disciplines.

Typology, which looks into the Old Testament patterns of divine action, agency, and instruction that found final fulfillment in Christ, is another.⁷⁸

The Presuppositions of a Christian Biblical Theology

We have said that the purpose of a biblical theology is to articulate the unity of the biblical canon centered in the person of Jesus Christ. Such a project is not an abstract enterprise for theological scholars. Rather, it is intended to set forth the biblical *kerygma*, or the proclamation of Jesus' suffering and glory. This is so because the people of God, illumined by the Spirit of God, will recognize the Christ of the Holy Scriptures. These claims are based upon several presuppositions that should be clearly stated, namely, the truth of divine revelation, the inspiration of the biblical authors, the unity of the canon of Scripture, the coherence of the canon centered in Jesus Christ, and the recognition of Christ in the canon of the Scriptures by the people of God.

First of all, we affirm the truth of a verbal, plenary divine revelation in Holy Scripture. God, who spoke the creation into being in the beginning (Gen 1:3), likewise spoke through the office of the prophets as well, and spoke at last through his Son, whom He has made the heir of all things and through whom He made the world (Heb 1:1-2).⁷⁹

Second, in order to accomplish the revelation of His word for His people, the Spirit of God moved the biblical writers in such a manner that they faithfully reported all that God intended (2 Pet 1:21). It is this affirmation of divine inspiration that makes the discipline of biblical theology possible in spite of the many human authors who contributed to the sacred writings that the church has called canonical Scriptures.⁸⁰

Third, the doctrine of inspiration implies that there must be an authorial unity of purpose in the Scriptures that can be discovered and displayed (John 5:39).⁸¹ This makes necessary the Christian affirmation of the theological unity in the Bible, the coherence in the canon that can be expressed both systematically and biblically.⁸²

⁷⁸ J. I. Packer, from the Forward, Edmund P. Clowney, *The Unfolding Mystery: Discovering Christ in the Old Testament* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: Navpress, 1988) 8.

⁷⁹ Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1948)11-14.

⁸⁰ D. A. Carson, "Current Issues in Biblical Theology," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* (1995) 27; Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia, PA.: Westminster Press, 1970) 99-107. See also Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1961)13.

⁸¹ This affirmation makes possible the thematic continuity of the Scriptures. For example, Melchizedek's Salem is the same as that of Asaph (Psalm 76:2) and the New Testament apostle (Heb 7:1-2). This continuity in Scripture is the *sine qua non* of a true typology. It makes possible a poetics that explores the divine intent of the entire canon of the Holy Scriptures. It affirms an understanding that God, as the Lord of history, providentially ordained the historical events and persons whose accounts were superintended by the Spirit of God in order to be faithfully preserved by the sacred writers, all written in such a manner as to glorify the Son of God (John 5:39).

⁸² Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999) 48-50.

Fourth, all the Scriptures find their organic center in Jesus Christ (Luke 24:27, Eph 1:17, Col 1:26-28). This center accounts for the narrative unity of the canon, which has its beginning in the creation of the world through Christ (John 1:3), its middle in the earthly ministry of Christ (Luke 24:26, 1 Pet 1:11) , and its ending in the redemption of all things in Christ (2 Cor 5:19).⁸³

Fifth, the people of God, who under the guidance of the Spirit of Truth originally identified the canon of sacred Scriptures, are competent to understand the Christ of Scriptures as they themselves are moved in their hearts by the Spirit of God within them, consistent with the rational faculties revealed through the divine Logos (Luke 24:32, John 16:13, 1 Pet 1:12).⁸⁴

Sola Scriptura! Solus Christus! Soli Deo Gloria!

Semper Reformanda!
September 25, 2007

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⁸³ Willem Van Gemeren, *The Progress of Redemption: The Story of Salvation from Creation to the New Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1988) 25-27.

⁸⁴ That is, by the *analogia scripturae* and the *analogia fidei*, the church will recognize legitimate types and resist infelicitous comparisons.