The SBJT Forum

Editor's Note: Readers should be aware of the forum's format. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Keith E. Johnson, Graham Cole, and Everett Berry have been asked specific questions to which they have provided written responses. These writers are not responding to one another. Their answers are presented in an order that hopefully makes the forum read as much like a unified presentation as possible.

SBJT: As one who has written on the theological interpretation of Scripture, can you summarize what people are saying about it and why it is important for the church?

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Kevin J. Vanhoozer: Philip Schaff began his 1844 inaugural lecture on "The Principle of Protestantism" with the intriguing suggestion that every period of the church and of theology has its own particular problem to solve, and that every biblical book and doctrine has its special time when it first comes into its own. According to Schaff, the Reformation was the time when the principle of *sola scriptura* first came into its own. In the same Protestant spirit, and principle, I wonder whether ours is the time when the theological interpretation of Scripture might come into, or perhaps *return* to, its own.

Defining the individual terms "theological," "interpretation," and "Scripture" presents no special difficulty. However, to paraphrase Augustine on time: if no one asks me what they mean when put together — as in "theological interpretation of Scripture" (TIS) — I know what it is; however, if you ask me, I do not know. While that may be something of an overstatement, it is no exaggeration to say that as many people are confused about the meaning of TIS as are enthusiastic about it. Many are talking; few are cohesive. What are they saying about TIS, and what does it all mean?

A first observation: TIS is presently more a conversation about the nature and function of reading the Bible in and for the church than a unified approach or finished method. One of the first things children learn is how to read. Yet proponents of TIS wonder whether and to what extent general rules of reading apply to the Bible as well. Should we read the Bible "like any other book" (Benjamin Jowett)?

Almost everyone involved with TIS agrees on the inadequacy of reading the Bible merely as a

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document to be picked apart, perchance to be put together again, with the tools of historical criticism. There is a widespread sense that the attempt to reconstruct historical backgrounds, "what actually happened," and the history of the text's composition has more or less played itself out. How much more background do we need to hear the Bible as the word of God and respond accordingly?

The unease is not because the Bible has a historical context or recounts history. No, if TIS has a problem with modern biblical studies, it is rather with the "thin" notion of history assumed by most critics. TIS requires "thick" (i.e., theological) descriptions that plumb the height and depth of history, not only its length. In short: there is a deficiency of theology in modern attempts to read the Bible as a document of the university, like other historically conditioned and ideologically driven classics. The origins of TIS lie in its reaction against those who would let non-Christian concerns and presuppositions (e.g., Deism, naturalism) set the agenda for biblical interpretation.

What, then, does it mean to be biblical? Everything depends on what the Bible *is*. To this query, TIS responds in three broad ways, using theological categories (and doctrines) to describe author, text, and reading process alike. The overarching concern is to let the theological subject matter (God; the gospel) and aims (knowing God; godliness) of the biblical text determine the interpretive method rather than the other way around.

First and foremost, then, TIS views the Bible as an ingredient in the economies of triune revelation and redemption. The Bible is ultimately a medium of God's communicative activity oriented to facilitating the knowledge and love of God. As such, Scripture is both transcript of the drama of redemption and an operative element that advances the action. The Bible is a word spoken by God, about God, and accompanied by God. If we are to approach the Bible as Scripture, then we must not abstract it from the Father who authors it, the Son to whom it witnesses, and the Spirit who inspired and illumines it. The Bible is a word in and through which the triune God has spoken and continues to speak. Hence TIS rejects the methodological atheism of approaches that assume the text to have a "natural history" only.

Second, because TIS views the various books as ultimately the work of a single author, it reads the Bible, Old and New Testaments, as a unified narrative, story, or drama. In this, it resembles earlier biblical interpreters who tended to (1) *focus* on the Bible's final form (2) *figure* (typologically) the parts to the whole and (3) *find* what lies at the center, namely, the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Third, TIS holds that the most important context in which to interpret the Bible is the church. For the Bible most properly serves as God's means of revelation and reconciliation, the covenant charter of the believing community. The church is a creature of the word and fellowship of the Spirit: these are some of the properly theological categories with which to describe the community of readers for whom the Bible is not simply a text but authoritative Scripture.

TIS furthermore assumes that the Spirit has been active in the history of the church: that the same Spirit who speaks with magisterial authority in the Scriptures speaks with ministerial authority through church tradition. TIS urges exegetes not to dismiss but respect the catholic consensus (e.g., the Rule of Faith and the Nicene Creed). Finally, describing the process of reading the Bible in theological terms calls attention to the Bible's God-given purpose: forming readers unto godliness and cultivating communion with God. TIS therefore concerns the whole pattern of theological authority by which God rules and edifies the church via the Scriptures and the history of their reception.

In sum: the nature, function, and aim of the Bible are all properly theological. TIS is no idle investigation into this or that aspect of the biblical text but an earnest straining to hear and respond to the "gospel of God" (1 Thess 2:2). It would therefore be wrong to see TIS as merely one more methodological plaything, one more interpretive interest to add to the hermeneutical basket,

or one more attempt to impose a foreign ideological agenda onto the text. On the contrary, TIS acknowledges the Bible for what it is: the word of God at work in believers (1 Thess 2:13).

Who started it? I am less interested in the movement's genesis (some say "I am of Karl [Barth]" others "I am of Paul") as its exodus: where might biblical interpretation be headed after its liberation from bondage in the academy and wandering in the desert of criticisms?

It is best to view the new interest in TIS in relation to the old task of training ministers of the gospel. If TIS is to have a future, it must stop clearing its throat and preach what it is practicing. The church ultimately needs theological interpreters of Scripture in the pulpit, not just behind the lectern, though education is of course essential to this end. Pastors may well be the ones to show us the way past the debilitating dichotomy of biblical exegesis and doctrinal theology. If the chief end of biblical studies and theology is to minister understanding of God's word, then the pastor-theologian should be evangelicalism's default public intellectual, with preaching the preferred public mode of TIS. The health, not only of TIS but also of the church itself, depends on it.

SBJT: What's new about "theological interpretation" for evangelicals already committed to reading Scripture in light of its ultimate subject matter?

Keith E. Johnson: Although the "theological interpretation" movement represents a welcome development in biblical studies, the call for interpreting Scripture "theologically" may sound no more novel than learning that the Pope is Catholic. What's all the fuss? Haven't evangelicals always read Scripture theologically (i.e., with reference to its ultimate subject matter: the triune God)?

While the theological interpretation movement is diverse, several recurring themes can be found among its proponents: (1) a desire to attend to the subject matter of Scripture (the triune God); (2) a desire to read Scripture canonically as a coherent dramatic narrative; (3) a desire to read Scripture both in and for the church; and (4) a desire to read Scripture under the guidance of the creeds. It is this fourth component—intentionally reading Scripture in light of the Rule of Faith—that merits greater consideration.

"Ruled" readings, of course, are not new. They represent a central feature of Patristic exegesis. Among second and third-century writers, the Rule of Faith represented a concise summary of Christian belief that provided direction for proper reading of Scripture. Thus, if one wonders, "What might a ruled reading look like?" one only need turn to the Church Fathers.

One of the premier theological interpreters in the early church was Augustine. As a test case for a ruled reading, I want to examine his exposition of John 5:19-27 found in his *Tractates on the Gospel of John*. This passage is significant both because it offers insight in key elements of his trinitarian doctrine (both divine relations and trinitarian agency) and because the Rule of Faith explicitly shapes his reading. I explore Augustine's exposition of this passage at length in a recent essay (Keith E. Johnson, "Augustine's 'Trinitarian' Reading of John 5: A Model for the Theological Interpretation of Scripture?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 52, no. 4 [2009]: 799-810). Here I can only briefly summarize my findings.

Augustine's exposition of John 5 is clearly governed by the Rule of Faith. At several points, he identifies interpretive "rules" that must inform a "Catholic" reading of Scripture in its witness to Christ. For example, at the beginning of *Tractate* 18 he explains that the "sound rule of faith" must govern our reading of Scripture. Similarly, in his discussion of John 5:19 he appeals to a "sound Catholic rule" with which his readers would be familiar.

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Before summarizing these "rules," I want to offer several observations. First, the primary focus of Augustine's discussion is the subject matter rendered in the text—namely, the triune God and God's actions in the economy of salvation. Second, although much of his discussion focuses upon what might be described as the "literal sense" of the text, Augustine does not limit himself to the latter. Third, his exposition assumes the unity of Scripture. Fourth, false teaching provides an important backdrop for his discussion. Finally, his reading of John 5 might be described as "redemptive" in the sense that it aims at drawing readers more deeply into the life of the triune God. It should be evident that significant overlap exists between Augustine's concerns and the concerns of those who advocate "theological" readings of Scripture.

At least three "rules" shape Augustine's reading of John 5. The first "rule" concerns a distinction between the Son in the "form of a servant" and the Son in the "form of God." When reading Scripture, we must distinguish between the Son in the "form of God" (i.e., in his deity) and the Son in the "form of a servant" (i.e., in his humanity).

A second rule concerns the inseparable action of the three divine persons (a fundamental axiom of Latin and Greek pro-Nicene theology): "The Catholic faith, made firm by the Spirit of God in its saints, holds this against every heretical depravity: The works of the Father and the Son are inseparable" (*Tract.* 20.3). The Father does not do one thing while the Son does something else. Whatever the Father does, the Son does as well. This is why the Son can do nothing on his own (5:19).

A third rule is brought to bear on passages that speak about the Son as coming "from" the Father: "This then is the rule which governs many scriptural texts, intended to show not that one person is less than the other, but only that one is from the other" (*De trin.*, II.3). Augustine explicitly cites John 5:19 and 5:26 as examples of this second rule: "So the reason for these statements can only be that the life of the Son is unchanging like the Father's, and yet is from the Father [5:26]; and that the work of Father and Son is indivisible, and yet the Son's working is from the Father just as he himself is from the Father [5:19]" (*De trin.*, II.3). Why does the Son's power to work come from the Father (5:19)? Simply because the Son himself is from the Father.

These rules serve important hermeneutical functions: they help the faithful rightly read Scripture in its witness to Christ and protect the church from falling into heresy. For Augustine, these rules do not constitute an independent authority alongside Scripture but ultimately derive from Scripture itself.

One contemporary attempt to read the Gospel of John in light of the Rule of Faith can be found in *Father, Son and Spirit: The Trinity and John's Gospel* (InterVarsity, 2008) by Andreas Köstenberger and Scott Swain. Köstenberger and Swain appeal to the Rule of Faith on the assumption that the creedal affirmations of the church do not represent a corruption of Scripture but rather "constitute mature, exegetically trustworthy pathways into Holy Scripture." For example, Augustine's third rule provides the hermeneutical key to their constructive account of the sonship and divine agency of Jesus (chapter 7). Their work bears witness to the exegetical fruit to be gleaned from reading Scripture in light of the Rule of Faith. While there are pitfalls to be avoided, the theological interpretation movement may stimulate us to consider the benefits that accompany "ruled" readings of Scripture. Augustine's exposition of John 5 not only provides a model for a "ruled" reading of Scripture but it also highlights the benefits of such a reading for those who are committed to wedding biblical exegesis with theological orthodoxy.

SBJT: What is the relationship between the disciplines of biblical theology, systematic theology, and the theological interpretation of scripture?

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Graham Cole: My wife is a fashion designer and college teacher of fashion. To be a good designer you need to listen to the fabric, she tells me. You need to engage the fabric on its terms. You can't stitch leather the way you stitch knits. Biblical theology (BT) likewise is a discipline that seeks to listen to its fabric. The fabric is the Word of God written. In practice this means placing a biblical text or passage in its context in its literary unit or argument in its book in the canon within the flow of revealed redemptive history. Presuppositions are always at work, of course. For a start, evangelical BT presupposes the living God who speaks and acts, the unity of Scripture, inspiration and the canon. Scripture then is not reducible to an anthology of ancient Near East and early church texts but is the inspired—in the strong Pauline *theopneustos* sense (2 Tim 3:16)—Word of God, albeit in human words (*concursus*). Put another way, we try to be good phenomenologists of the text. I like the way the Jewish thinker, Abraham Heschel summed up phenomenology: knowing what you see rather than seeing what you know. I once worked with a Bible teacher who found the same meaning in every text whether in Genesis or Isaiah or Mark: read your Bible, say your prayers, share your faith, have fellowship with other Christians, and give to the work. He saw what he knew rather knew what he saw. Happily what he knew had good biblical warrant, but often not in the texts he was expounding. So as much as lies within us, we seek to see what is actually there in the text before us.

Evangelical systematic theology also appeals to what is there but goes further than the descriptive. It is a normative or prescriptive discipline. Systematic theology (ST) wants to find out what we ought to believe (our head), what we ought to value (our heart) and how we ought to live (our hands and feet) as the sacred text is brought to bear on the broken world in which we live and are to serve. However, to do so responsibly ST needs to know how to listen to the fabric. This is where BT is vital to ST. The traditional way to do ST is to make a claim and supply proof texts (*dicta probantia*) to back it up. For example, take the claim that Christ is God incarnate. The classic proof text is John 1:14: "The word became flesh and dwelt among us." It might appear like this: "Christ is God incarnate" (John 1:14). I am sure many a reader has had the experience of looking up the string of proof texts in a standard ST text and being mystified as to the relevance of some of them to the claim. Now proof texts are needed, since you can't say everything at once. I remember a student in England who had been warned off ST by his pastor who only valued BT. The student was having problems of a practical kind. If he was asked after church about an issue, people simply didn't have the time to take the tour with him from Genesis to Revelation to find out the relevant texts. Some kind of synthesis, some kind of theological shorthand was needed. ST supplies that shorthand.

ST proof texts, however, need to be derived from the application of a sound BT method. Let's return to John 1:14. If I am challenged on appealing to that text as a systematic theologian I would seek to show that it is part of an argument beginning with John 1:1 in eternity, as it were, and ending in time with John 1:14-18. In other words our text is integral to the prologue of John and is the climax of the story of how God seeks to dwell in the midst of his people. This story started in the garden (Eden), continued with Israel (especially tabernacle and temple) and climaxed in Jesus Christ. Incarnation is the zenith of divine presence. To use Brian Rosner's way of expressing it—I am appealing to John 1:14 in the light of the Bible's "overarching narrative and Christocentric focus." BT serves ST another way. Here my example is that great gospel benefit of the forgive-

ness of our sins. Read your standard ST texts and you would not know how important as a biblical motif the forgiveness of our sins is, but Luke-Acts, which constitutes about a third of the NT, is clear. The risen Christ thematizes the forgiveness of sins as the great gospel benefit in Luke 24 (the Great Commission Lukan style), and in Acts we see it held out both to Jews (Acts 2-Pentecost) and Gentiles (Acts 10-Cornelius). In the light of the overarching narrative of Scripture which identifies the God to whom we pray, we can see why this benefit is so important. God is not only love (1 John 4), God is also light (1 John 1). How can a holy God dwell with an unholy people? Sin needs to be addressed. The Word become flesh is the linchpin to that address: his coming, his cross, and his coming to life again. In other words, BT helps ST get the proportions right in its accents. In my opinion there is crying need for an ST text to be written that does just that.

A final question to consider—what has all the above to do with the theological interpretation of Scripture (TIS)? Are BT and the TIS synonymous? I like to distinguish the two tasks. Other theologians appear to treat them more as synonymous (e.g., Brian Rosner and Kevin Vanhoozer). BT on the one hand helps me to know what I see, whereas TIS helps me to know how to serve the church with what I see as I endeavor to bring the text and today together through TIS. For example, John 1:14 viewed through the TIS lens can't merely be described as the climax of a biblical theology of presence, true though that is. TIS also wants to say that John 1:14 tells of a God who so loved the world that he came himself and tabernacled among us. We do not live in a divinely abandoned landscape, adrift in space. The disciplines of BT and TIS are complementary. Both disciplines are indispensible. Put yet another way, when ST uses BT to connect the text and today, ST is engaged in the theological interpretation of Scripture.

SBJT: What are some of the basic benefits that the current academic interest in the theological interpretation of Scripture can offer for the spiritual development of the church?

Everett Berry: Today theologians and biblical scholars openly acknowledge the significant lack of continuity that exists between their disciplines. Reasons for this divide are numerous including the post-Enlightenment disdain for doctrinal constructs, the methodological impact of historical-criticism, the skepticism toward dogmatics fostered by the biblical-theology movement, the postmodern suspicion of authoritative truth-claims, and the fact that biblical and theological studies are so polarized by extreme levels of specialization. However, in recent days these sources of division have resulted in such academic exhaustion because of so many interpretive extremes that many are now expressing interest in the possibility of what is being labeled a "theological interpretation of Scripture." Herein, the dialogue pertains to whether Scripture can be interpreted holistically as a unified canon while maintaining sensitivity to its historical and literary diversity. And if so, can it be done in ways that give proper due to the roles of tradition, reason, and contextualization so as to move beyond the standard criticisms posed by modern and postmodern skepticism.

Indeed such an objective is vast and will take time to flesh itself out as those involved in its development hone their own perspectives. Up to the present though, this discussion has led to many sources of engagement. Books, articles, several new commentary series, and even a journal devoted to the subject have been produced in order to highlight the implications of such an endeavor. Thus far, the criteria and structure(s) of this approach are in the preliminary stages. But one question that needs to be asked by evangelicals who desire to engage this project as it continues to

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evolve is this: how it can possibly aid the church in its mission and calling as God's people. For any discussion that we entertain about hermeneutics and theological method must eventually lead to its ecclesiological ramifications. Consequently, I am inclined to briefly mention two potential benefits and one cautionary observation.

To begin, one tremendous help that this newly forming approach can offer if properly utilized is a means of re-emphasizing the unity of the Bible. For instance when a pastor stands to preach in an evangelical church and asks the congregation to turn to a particular passage, there are at least two general assumptions which typically go unchallenged. One is that the passage is a part of a given book which supernaturally derives from God himself. But in conjunction with this, those who are reading a biblical text and awaiting its exposition also assume the book in which the passage is found is part of a larger BOOK, namely the Bible itself. In other words, the church is aware of an underlying conviction as God's people, which is the canonical symmetry of all of Scripture. And if this general vein of interpretation among evangelical scholars can in some way enforce or undergird this essential part of what it means to be truly "biblical" in one's hermeneutic, then these believers in the academy can discover a new way to serve believers in the churches.

This leads to a second benefit that could possibly come from this emerging methodology which is a means of building bridges between exegesis, theological formulation, and confessional identity. Unfortunately today in many academic settings, these three topics are seen as mutually exclusive. It is perceived as being intellectually dishonest to concede that one can be involved in interpreting biblical texts in their original contexts and at the same time, believe that one's conclusions will align with what a given tradition confesses about those texts. This is why some biblical scholars bemoan the sight of a theologian carrying a Greek New Testament. But be this as it may, the group that loses the most because of this impasse is the church, not the seminary or academy. Nevertheless, if evangelicals can utilize this trend in ways to fashion approaches that bring theological cohesion and exegetical precision together in new innovative ways, then perhaps the church can begin to glean fresh insights both through the pulpit and accessible literature.

Finally in addition to these possible benefits, one caveat should be added regarding a concern with this subject—namely, that in the long run it will prove to offer simply little if any help at all for the church. More specifically, my concern, which is also being expressed by others as well, is that this movement could remain mired in droning about prolegomena and methodology to the point that it never provides any "so what" content for the church to apply. This problem is in no way new. There have been many views that took initial form in academic guilds but became stagnant in debates about theory and praxis. And much of the literature that is being produced on the theological interpretation of Scripture up to this point seems to be creating the climate for another perfect storm of activity which creates a flurry of interest among academics but ultimately dissipates before it reaches the real-world terrain of the church. Yet to be fair, the theological interpretation of Scripture as a source of engagement is in its early stages. So hopefully in time, it will prove to be different.