

# Theological Interpretation of Scripture and Evangelical Systematic Theology: Iron Sharpening Iron?

Daniel J. Treier and Uche Anizor

**D**ESPITE THE HUBBUB in academic circles about *theological interpretation of Scripture* (TIS), discerning a succinct definition remains

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DANIEL J. TREIER is Associate Professor of Theology at Wheaton College. He received his Ph.D. from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Dr. Treier has written many articles and served as editor for several books. He is the author of *Virtue and the Voice of God: Toward Theology as Wisdom* (Eerdmans, 2006) and *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Baker, 2008).

UCHE ANIZOR is Assistant Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies at Talbot School of Theology, Biola University, and a doctoral candidate at Wheaton College.

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somehow difficult, and implications for evangelical church life may not be readily apparent. The first goal of this essay is therefore to clarify how TIS as a general perspective seeks to help theology be more biblical, and biblical studies more theological. Secondly and more specifically, we can then address the usefulness of TIS for evangelical systematic theology (ST) in seeking to serve the church(es). Beginning descriptively is appropriate since one of the present authors has already worked to map the relevant terrain.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, since ST is arguably the most

theologically integrative disciplinary nexus for both the evangelical academy and church, it serves as a fitting point at which to provide general orientation to TIS. Focused on what we should say about God, God's works and God's will today, ST elicits special reflection on the end results desired by evangelical practitioners of TIS. After all, as evangelical systematic theologians, both of the present authors interact with all other theological disciplines in order to bear coherent, contemporary witness regarding divine self-revelation in Scripture.

Accordingly, the first section of this essay provides an overview, before the second section probes the value of TIS under the rubric of "iron sharpening iron," examining various relationships of concern to evangelical ST. The suggestion here will be that TIS might strengthen the bonds of intellectual friendship between these various spheres—by encouraging their participants to

offer each other constructively critical, yet loving and supportive, dialogue.

## **(RE)INTRODUCING THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE**

Because of the confusion noted above, we open our story of TIS by offering a summary definition. The theological interpretation of Scripture is *the reading of biblical texts that consciously seeks to do justice to their nature as the Word of God, embracing the influence of theology on the interpreter's enquiry, context, and methods, not just results.*<sup>2</sup> An expansion of that definition follows as this section tells the story of the recent recovery of TIS, thus detailing the principal aims and internal tensions of this “movement,”<sup>3</sup> which finds initial unity in raising questions about so-called historical criticism.

### **RESPONDING TO HISTORICAL CRITICISM**

Under the influence of the Enlightenment and the founding of the modern university, biblical interpretation became newly “critical.” For interpretation of the Bible to result in real knowledge, it had to be *wissenschaftlich*, that is, scientific—focusing on the historical cause-and-effect relationships behind human events and actions to the exclusion of the indiscernible divine mystery. This meant that proper biblical interpretation was “objective”—focused on the times and places of the texts’ production as well as their historical references, without involving the scholar’s personal commitments or perspectives. Yet, in the end, such “objectivity” excluded interpreting the Bible as Scripture, as unified divine self-revelation. Craig Bartholomew describes the disastrous state of affairs well when he writes that

biblical criticism has been philosophically in the extraordinary position of refusing to allow theological/Christian influence on its enterprise while making room for traditions and ideologies often antithetical to Christian belief. The results are then to be understood as truth falling where it may and theologians being compelled to work

with *this* data for their theological constructions.<sup>4</sup>

This was largely the state of affairs in biblical and theological studies as academic guilds during most of the twentieth century.

### *Karl Barth: Theological Criticism?*

Karl Barth (1886–1968) served as a pioneer for theological criticism of the hegemony of this “historical-critical” tradition. During his break from liberalism, he rediscovered the Bible. In 1917 his lecture entitled “Die neue Welt in der Bibel” (The New World in the Bible)<sup>5</sup> challenged the prevailing paradigm of biblical interpretation by asserting that the Bible confronts *us* (not vice versa), providing what we seek yet do not deserve: grace.<sup>6</sup> There are only two responses to the Bible: belief and unbelief. Attempts to read merely historically (or morally or religiously) are sinful pursuits of a third way, to escape the situation in which readers are placed by Scripture.<sup>7</sup> With the publication of his Romans commentary (*Der Römerbrief*), famously labeled a “bombshell dropped on the playground of the theologians,” Barth built on the aforementioned lecture, while clarifying his basic commitments vis-à-vis biblical interpretation. First, Barth focused on the subject matter of the text—the being of the eternal God—as having hermeneutical control.<sup>8</sup> Second, he held that we must participate in the meaning of Scripture by responding to divine gift.<sup>9</sup> Third, one must read the Bible with love and attention unlike mere historical critics.<sup>10</sup> And, fourth, he insisted “upon a reading of the Bible that is more in accordance with ‘the meaning of the Bible itself.’”<sup>11</sup> In the end, though Barth did not entirely jettison historical criticism, he viewed it as servant, not master—preparatory, but not comprehensive, for interpretation.<sup>12</sup>

Although Barth is not the sole model, he inspired many who are eager to recover theological exegesis for the church and academy. For modern biblical criticism, historical distance is thoroughly problematic, to be overcome, while at the same time critical distance must be main-

tained for the sake of objectivity. For Barth and others who would follow after him, true objectivity comes via God's sovereign gift of freedom received in the church.<sup>13</sup>

*"Mainline" Protestants, Evangelicals, and Roman Catholics: Together?*

Meanwhile, the battles between evangelicals and "liberals" in the early twentieth century culminated in the relative exclusion of the former from the academy and, thus, from critical biblical scholarship.<sup>14</sup> Since TIS is initially a movement largely within the academy, to a degree its initial relevance concerns "mainline" Protestants more than evangelicals. Its fortunes parallel those of so-called postliberalism, a reaction against liberal neglect of Scripture and tradition, along with a recovery of Christian distinctiveness, which is frequently associated with Yale.<sup>15</sup> Hence some mainline scholars and institutions that have been pervasively affected by historical-critical assumptions and practices are now at the center of discussions about reclaiming the Bible as *Scripture*.

The relationship of evangelicals to TIS is more complicated. Evangelicals have traditionally practiced certain aspects of theological exegesis, such as interpreting Scripture by Scripture, reading the Bible canonically, and using typology or even forms of "spiritual" interpretation—all this in the face of modernity. At the same time, however, the rise of evangelical biblical scholarship has coincided with increasing evangelical acceptance of certain presuppositions of historical criticism. Evangelical scholars, for example, almost unanimously embraced the distinction between a text's "meaning" as single and determinate and its "significance" or "application" as plural and context-specific.<sup>16</sup> Hence the popular wisdom of evangelical biblical hermeneutics accepted that, before arriving at the text's application to a current situation, critical distance must be established in order to achieve the objectivity necessary for discerning the text's meaning. Likewise, with the passing of time many Roman Catholics have embraced, and

now ardently defend, certain assumptions and practices that some mainline Protestants have begun to shed. In response, other Catholics and some evangelicals view forms of TIS as both true to their respective heritages and a potential source of renewal in dealing with contemporary trends. Evangelical reviews of TIS literature will therefore continue to be mixed, and given its complex origins that is understandable. Yet evangelicalism has resources for making a serious contribution to TIS, as well as reasons for learning from the conversation. If nothing else, we may applaud the desire among less conservative scholars to recover the Bible as Scripture for the church.

*The "Postmodern" Impetus: Theology and Community?*

In addition to Barth-inspired post-liberalism and evangelical/Catholic scholarly renewal, a third impetus for TIS involves modest appropriation of certain themes labeled "postmodern." Three recurring ideas highlight this influence, and partially fund the postliberal riffs on Barth's motifs. First, there is suspicion regarding the actual "objectivity" of modern critical methods and assumptions. In this light, some seek to rehabilitate pre-critical approaches to interpretation. Second, and related, postmodern critics highlight the impossibility of neutrality in any inquiry. Every investigation must begin with the acknowledgment that presuppositions are operative. Regarding biblical interpretation, perhaps, rather than simply obscuring the text, Christian doctrine can also help readers to see what is truly present by overcoming tragic elements of historical distance. Thus, third, because an interpreter's perspective is limited, reading Scripture must occur within the church, the community called by God to embody the teaching of the sacred writings over time. These three concerns—critical vs. pre-critical approaches, the presuppositions of Christian doctrine, and the place of the church—occupy us more specifically in the next three subsections.

### **RECOVERING PRECRITICAL EXEGESIS**

Over the past two decades there has been increasing interest in the ancient church. Of particular interest is how the classic fathers interpreted the Bible. Whole commentary series are now explicitly or implicitly devoted to their interpretative practices, presupposing that this doctrinal tradition can reliably ground and guide contemporary exegesis.<sup>17</sup> For some, recovering theological interpretation demands that we imitate pre-critical Christian exegetes in spiritual reading of Scripture. David Steinmetz presents the case poignantly:

How was a French parish priest in 1150 to understand Psalm 137, which bemoans captivity in Babylon, makes rude remarks about Edomites, expresses an ineradicable longing for a glimpse of Jerusalem, and pronounces a blessing on anyone who avenges the destruction of the temple by dashing Babylonian children against a rock? The priest lives in Concale, not Babylon, has no personal quarrel with Edomites, cherishes no ambitions to visit Jerusalem (though he might fancy a holiday in Paris), and is expressly forbidden by Jesus to avenge himself on his enemies. Unless Psalm 137 has more than one possible meaning, it cannot be used as a prayer by the church and must be rejected as a lament belonging exclusively to the piety of ancient Israel.<sup>18</sup>

Steinmetz advocates an approach that accords with the nature of the text. Because of divine authorship, the “meaning” of Holy Scripture is not exhausted by the literal or historical sense. Instead, a passage may have multiple “meanings” that come to the surface in light of other interpretative factors, such as (1) whether or not a reading involves Christian piety, (2) how it relates theologically to Christ and his church, and (3) how it informs Christian practice. In Steinmetz’s example, then, the question is how Christians can read and pray Psalm 137 in a way that encourages love for God and humanity. He claims that the

modern theory of a single, determinate meaning simply cannot handle these issues well, often providing only “spiritually barren” interpretations in comparison with the classic fourfold sense of Scripture.<sup>19</sup> Although one does not need to go as far as Steinmetz or others in the wholesale appropriation of ancient modes of interpretation, our pre-critical forebears offer the challenge of reintegrating Scripture reading with piety—orienting the Bible to Christ and enriching our theology via participation in the realities of which Scripture speaks.<sup>20</sup>

### **READING WITH DOCTRINAL RULES**

Recovering pre-critical exegesis further involves acknowledgment of the positive role Christian doctrine might play in the interpretation of Scripture. A particular version of this theme is the recovery of the Rule of Faith (*Regula Fidei*) as a guide toward properly Christian readings, guarding against those that are not.

In the writings of Irenaeus, Tertullian, and other ante-Nicene fathers, the Rule of Faith refers to “the sum content of the apostolic teaching,” formulated as a “confession of faith for public use in worship, in particular for use in baptism.”<sup>21</sup> Although the Rule was not fixed in one written form, its basic content can be discerned in the Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds. In countering heretics who used Scripture to pit the OT God of Israel against the NT God revealed in Jesus Christ, for example, Irenaeus posited that the proper reading of Scripture requires a key like a mosaic (or, today, a puzzle) would. This key—the Rule of Faith—enables one to arrange and assess the various pieces of Scripture properly, to obtain an accurate sketch of the gospel narrative and its ontological implications.<sup>22</sup> Such a Rule also invites creative interpretation, within its limits. In a widely cited essay, David Yeago illustrates that Christian dogma can indeed illuminate Scripture and lead to proper exegetical judgments.<sup>23</sup> Against those who argue that dogma distorts biblical Christology, Yeago establishes that in Phil 2:6–11 Nicaea’s

*homoousion* best accords with what Paul is doing in the text. Early Christians worshiped Jesus and included him within the identity of the one true God of Israel identified in Isa 45:21–24. Therefore the very judgments made by Paul and the early Christian community regarding Jesus are made by the Nicene theologians in different conceptual terms addressing challenges of their day. These were challenges the church would inevitably face, and the language of *homoousion*, or indeed much post-biblical theological reflection, alerts us to what is already in the biblical text.

What should follow from discussion of the hermeneutical role of the Rule of Faith is the broader question of how doctrine generally serves biblical interpretation. To a degree, theological concerns are ingredient in any approach to the Bible. If, in fact, it is impossible to read the Bible “objectively” in a purist sense, then by God’s design it may also be undesirable in certain ways to try.<sup>24</sup> Doctrine does not preclude careful, critical scholarship or require naively foisting predetermined ideas onto the biblical texts. At issue are the questions we ask, not simply the answers we ensure, for Protestants committed to *sola Scriptura* anyway. Doctrinal questions may turn out to be anachronistic, but critical scholars cannot legitimately rule them out *a priori* in favor of their own subtle presuppositional frameworks, and on many occasions such questions lead to answers in the text that we would otherwise miss. The pragmatically necessary division of labor between biblical studies and theology must not ossify into a fundamental separation of the two. In earlier eras theologians freely exegeted Scripture as an integral part of their dogmatic enterprise. But then “biblical scholars” and “theologians” as such did not exist. Yet a theologian making exegetical claims in today’s academic climate frequently incurs the ridicule or even ire of biblical scholars. Against this reality, doctrine challenges readers of Scripture to recognize their assumptions and revise them in light of the church’s efforts to understand the Bible as a whole. Moreover, recovering doctrine’s ruling

function could push theologians toward return engagements with scriptural texts themselves, thus addressing a legitimate concern of biblical scholars regarding the neglect of Scripture by theologians.

#### **READING TOGETHER WITH THE SPIRIT**

A concomitant facet of the recovery of theological exegesis is increased interest in Christian community. With the modern growth of opportunities for lay Scripture reading comes a potential pitfall, that biblical interpretation might become ever more individualistic and idiosyncratic. Medieval exegesis, at worst, sometimes displayed these characteristics even without proliferation of Bibles and democratization of Bible reading. However, if we are to recover theological interpretation, it is necessary to form an understanding of how the Holy Spirit leads members of the Christian community to be believer-priests. Part of that understanding must involve catechesis, as the Rule of Faith suggests and as the Protestant Reformers clearly held. Another part of that understanding involves communal reading practices and formation of virtues.

#### *Virtue Catalysts*

George Lindbeck’s *The Nature of Doctrine*, though controversial, brought community to the fore in how the church understands Christian doctrine.<sup>25</sup> The book contrasts three basic understandings of doctrine: (1) “cognitive-propositional” (doctrine as truth claims about reality); (2) “experiential-expressivist” (doctrine as expression of religious experience); and (3) “cultural-linguistic” (Lindbeck’s proposal). Borrowing from Wittgenstein’s concept of “language games,” Lindbeck proposes that the Christian religion is like a culture with its own particular symbols and signs. Doctrine provides “second-order” rules, like grammar, for speaking within and inhabiting the faith of the church as a culture. Lindbeck proffers an “intratextual” approach to theology, in which Scripture’s language and narrative world provide the categories through which the church inter-

prets its own experience as well as the surrounding culture(s).<sup>26</sup>

The strength of such a proposal, usually seen as seminal and representative for “postliberalism,” is its emphasis on the church as a culture with its own distinctive language system. Another important figure with communal concerns is Stanley Hauerwas, who stresses that the story shaping the church’s self-understanding should also shape the character of its members.<sup>27</sup> He argues that development of virtue determines our faithfulness in reading Scripture which, in turn, shapes the way we imitate Jesus. These themes have more direct importance for TIS through the work of Stephen Fowl.

### *The Church as an Interpretative Community: Stephen Fowl*

Arguably the most influential contemporary thinker regarding community and biblical interpretation, Fowl argues that interpretation “needs to involve a complex interaction in which Christian convictions, practices, and concerns are brought to bear on scriptural interpretation in ways that both shape that interpretation and are shaped by it. Moreover, Christians need to manifest a certain form of common life if this interaction is to serve faithful life and worship.”<sup>28</sup> Fowl presents three ways to understand biblical interpretation and notions of meaning—determinate, antideterminate, and underdetermined. He characterizes the first approach, most characteristic of conservative interpreters, as follows:

- (1) Determinate interpretation aims to “render biblical interpretation redundant.”
- (2) “Determinate interpretation views the biblical text as a problem to be mastered.”
- (3) “Determinate interpretation sees the biblical text as a relatively stable element in which as author inserts, hides, or dissolves (choose your metaphor) meaning.”
- (4) Determinate interpretation assumes “that matters of doctrine and practice are straightfor-

wardly determined by biblical interpretation and never the other way around.”

(5) Determinate interpreters “trump others” by demonstrating that “opponents have allowed theological concerns, prejudices, or preferences to determine their interpretation, rather than rigorously mining the text for its meaning and then letting that meaning shape their theology.”

(6) Determinate interpretation goes hand-in-hand with “method” and this tends to place the Bible in the care of specialists, while taking it out of the hands of laypeople.

(7) Finally, determinate interpretation always ends in “question-begging” to support its theory of meaning.<sup>29</sup>

Fowl argues that since there is no “general, comprehensive theory of textual meaning that is neither arbitrary nor question-begging,” one cannot justify privileging authorial intention or any other construct as fully constitutive of meaning. Since the term “meaning” can be used in so many ways, there is no point in wrangling about which theory trumps all others.<sup>30</sup> In Fowl’s “underdetermined” approach, instead of concerning ourselves with “meaning,” we acknowledge and pursue various interpretative aims and practices. If one is interested, for example, in the author’s communicative intention, that is acceptable as long as this one interpretative interest is not heralded as the only valid theological option.<sup>31</sup> Christians are to bring the moral, doctrinal, political, ecclesial, and social concerns of their everyday lives to the biblical text, to shape and be shaped by biblical interpretation.<sup>32</sup> Within a community that engages in particular Christian practices (or “means of grace”), believers develop the virtue of *phronēsis* (practical reason), enabling them to bring appropriate interests to Scripture and make wise judgments about how Scripture speaks to their circumstances—ultimately for the sake of developing the virtue of charity. Therefore, Fowl is not advocating interpretative anarchy, in which one can do with the biblical text whatever one wishes. Instead, he

believes, if Christian communities are serious about fostering virtues, “violent” interpretations of Scripture will become less likely.<sup>33</sup>

In various ways Lindbeck, Hauerwas, and Fowl reflect the “postmodern” motifs mentioned earlier. Without accepting Fowl’s characterization of determinate interpretation or his proposal for underdetermined interpretation, we can acknowledge his insight that often the academy is a more formative context regarding how some Christians read the Bible than is the church. Accordingly, we can learn from this focus on the church as a community of character formation, urging the priority of Christian aims in biblical interpretation and fostering the virtuous practices necessary for pursuing those aims.

#### **RESPONDING TO ONGOING CHALLENGES**

Despite Fowl’s apparent demurrals, questions about general hermeneutics—critical reflection on the nature of human understanding, especially regarding texts—in biblical interpretation are unavoidable, and reflect the first of some important ongoing challenges within the TIS discussion. The triad of author, text, and reader inevitably appears as even the most theologically careful account somehow encounters language from general hermeneutics.

Many evangelicals still see Hirsch’s author-centered approach as the most adequate account of textual interpretation. More recently, Kevin Vanhoozer offers an author-centered theological hermeneutics that addresses text and reader more fully, making selective appeal to speech-act philosophy within a Trinitarian framework. His *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* suggests that we can learn from biblical interpretation about the nature of all textual interpretation, while his subsequent work pursues the unique aspects of biblical interpretation even more specifically and theologically.<sup>34</sup>

Yet Fowl objects to large-scale use of speech-act philosophy, believing that this would involve submitting the church’s interpretative interests to a general hermeneutical theory. Further, in his view

speech-act philosophy originated not as a universal theory of meaning, but rather as a way to solve local problems of interpretation.<sup>35</sup> John Webster offers another thoughtful objection to sustained interaction with general hermeneutics in biblical interpretation, namely, the anthropological presumption of an isolated self who is able to make independent judgments. Thus hermeneutics does not adequately take into account the effects of sin and the necessity of regeneration. This concern leads Webster to stress the priority of divine action in the reading situation.<sup>36</sup>

A second challenge, beyond general hermeneutics, concerns the relationship of TIS with biblical theology (BT), not least because the latter is often seen as a bridge discipline between biblical studies and ST. Among advocates of TIS, there is considerable disagreement about what this relationship entails. These tensions exist primarily because of competing conceptions regarding the nature of BT, whether it is an academic discipline or a churchly practice or somehow both.<sup>37</sup>

Some scholars maintain a basically evangelical understanding of progressive revelation, tied to redemptive history, as the way to engage BT. This approach engages critical claims about diversity in the biblical canon, sometimes concluding that such claims are legitimate regarding the diversity of expression found within overarching scriptural unity, while at other times defending the historical and conceptual integrity of Scripture by demonstrating that influential claims of critical scholarship are in error. Among the potential problems for this tradition are occasions when biblical diversity seems to go farther than complementary variety, and sometimes evangelical scholars appear to be defensive or excessively apologetic if they assume that scriptural coherence must adhere to modern logical standards. A related problem might be that ST in this tradition can appear to be nothing more than rigorously descriptive BT “contextualized,” translated into contemporary language. Some within this tradition therefore see TIS largely in terms of such BT, whereas others are

suspicious of TIS. Still, for all this complexity, the value of this scholarly tradition for those holding to an evangelical doctrine of Scripture cannot be gainsaid.<sup>38</sup>

Another approach to BT, putting hermeneutical focus on the text more than the author, is labeled “canonical,” associated with Brevard Childs. Historical-critical study of textual production remains, but is oriented toward understanding the theology of the final textual form(s) as offering early trajectories for understanding the material. The final form is canonically authoritative and gives parameters for engaging both the textual prehistory and subsequent theological readings, including selective use of pre-critical exegesis. Church-centered, methodologically flexible, and creedally orthodox, such a reading strategy has important elements to commend it, yet it often accepts—almost as taken for granted—critical results that are inconsistent with most evangelical understandings of Scripture. It is also not always clear by what criteria we should move from the text we now have to a theological pre-history, unless we make certain assumptions about textual clues, which may wind up only recognizing such a pre-history when an editor is clumsy—and, of course, it is tricky to discern what should count as clumsiness in leaving clues.

Still others see a renewed BT as a complex interdisciplinary program by which to accomplish the goals of TIS.<sup>39</sup> For the moment, the larger point is that both general hermeneutics and BT generate mixed reactions among advocates of TIS, and among others regarding TIS itself. Evangelical advocates of TIS will not adopt either general hermeneutics or stances toward BT that deny the unity or historical integrity of Scripture. Nevertheless, TIS literature may challenge evangelicals to consider how these commitments regarding the nature of Scripture generate certain tensions with business-as-usual in the guilds of biblical studies, given how oriented large sectors continue to be toward modern conceptions of “history.”

In addition to general hermeneutics and BT, a

third challenge likewise highlights the situatedness of academic biblical studies: globalization, both economically and religiously with the rapid acceleration of Christianity in the global South, has not been addressed very much in TIS literature. But if TIS is to serve the church, then its hermeneutical reflection will need to catch up with what God seems to be doing in the world. In the second major section of this essay, we now suggest some ways in which TIS might contribute to ST serving that divine mission. As our introduction proposed, TIS can enhance Christian intellectual friendship by fostering forms of constructively critical, yet loving and supportive, dialogue. Such dialogue, between Western evangelicals and various others among whom God is at work, may increase the church’s theological faithfulness.

### **IRON SHARPENING IRON?**

Of course, not just any dialogue will do, if scriptural faithfulness is our aim. Apparently the central challenge facing evangelical ST today concerns simultaneous needs for greater creativity and greater fidelity to core tradition—which may simply mean that we need greater clarity about what our core tradition is, now that evangelical ST is following the lead of evangelical biblical scholarship into broader academic engagement in various forms. With such scholarly enterprises come opportunities and obstacles for faithfulness. Those with whom we come into contact may be shaped by the new interaction, but they will also shape us in return. The importance of academic life stems in part from making obvious—and, Lord willing, subject to rational scrutiny and biblical wisdom—certain differences and processes of change that are at stake all the time.

Proverbs 27:17 can help to guide our response to this challenge: “Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another.” The goal of such friendship, the metaphor suggests, is to retain legitimate differences while reforming each other through constructively critical, charitable interaction. Our suggestion in this essay is that TIS can guide evan-



gelical ST to grapple with issues of creativity and tradition through an iron-sharpening-iron process in four spheres of relationship. The first two relations concern the nature of “evangelical”; the last two concern the nature of “systematic theology.”

#### **EVANGELICALS AND NON-EVANGELICALS**

First, it was apparent above that much TIS literature arises from mainline Protestant circles, while other contributors are Roman Catholic. This reflects the reality of Christian participation in ST as an academic discipline, a reality with which evangelicals in other disciplines—biblical studies, philosophy, history, and so forth—have already become well acquainted. Certainly it would be unhelpful if intellectual friendship across these theological boundaries simply drove another wedge between various evangelicals in the post-Christian West or further fragmented the already-weakening integrity of our theological traditions. Yet, if on the other hand we gain more accurate understanding of other traditions along with deepened appreciation for the scriptural contours of our own, then such academic encounters with churchly others are a precious gift.

Furthermore, the academy presses upon us issues we would prefer to avoid, but need to feel more poignantly and engage more directly. For instance, evangelicals have undertaken relatively little scholarly work on religious pluralism in general or Judaism in particular. The Scriptural Reasoning project,<sup>40</sup> with which a few who speak of TIS are engaged, highlights the significance of such issues, as do the questions regarding Christian interpretation of the Old Testament and the Rule of Faith that have dominated large segments of TIS discussion.

#### **EVANGELICALS IN THE WEST AND CHRISTIANS IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH**

Second, as previously noted, evangelical ST must address the ascendancy of Christianity in the global South—or, perhaps better, the recent Western recognition of this phenomenon that had

already been transpiring. In one respect TIS literature contributes little direct help regarding these questions. However, the TIS preoccupation with canon, creed, and culture offers important lenses through which to assess what is happening in the global South and how God calls upon Western churches to respond.

For instance, canon and creed highlight the importance of catechesis. Christian believers, whether in America or elsewhere, need basic training regarding how biblical texts should be read within Scripture’s overall story-line, and how that story-line is summed up in the Trinitarian economy of salvation to which the Rule of Faith points. Evangelical traditions vary regarding how they do or do not formally appeal to creeds, but to the degree that they are truly “evangelical,” they embrace the gospel of the Triune God that the church discerned from Scripture. Nevertheless, as the rise and recurrence of ancient heresies demonstrate, Bible reading without such catechesis may endlessly proliferate unhealthy aberrations.

Meanwhile, attention to culture can restrain Western temptations to confuse catechesis with theological colonization. It is all too easy to maintain a stranglehold on the machinery of “contextualization,” in the name of theological integrity insisting that non-Western Christians must become exactly like we are. TIS literature can encourage us to develop and exercise charity in the reading of Scripture so that we foster the healthy growth of the body of Christ rather than the replication of the same body parts in a way that treats ourselves like the church’s head.

#### **CHURCH AND ACADEMY**

Third, turning from the nature of the adjective “evangelical” toward focusing on the noun “systematic theology,” we suggest that TIS can assist both the church and the academy in improving their often tense relationship. Whether or not most church members or even pastors will engage the theoretical apparatus of TIS literature, such a hermeneutical framework can support churchly

concerns. If TIS were to foster more explicitly scriptural discourse in contemporary ST, then that discipline would be more accessible to lay Christians who frequently feel alienated from discussions that lack scriptural vocabulary. TIS is concerned to prevent the creation of a “Protestant papacy,” resisting the ways in which the guilds of biblical scholars might operate magisterially rather than ministerially. Focusing on how the Holy Spirit works in Christian communities through practices that shape virtuous readers of Scripture, TIS provides an emphasis on lay and pastoral reading of the Bible along with a framework to guide such reading appropriately, via the biblical and creedal catechesis just mentioned.

Yet TIS is concerned for the church without being naively submissive to whatever “the church” wants or cavalierly dismissive of what the academy contributes. Scholars may not be the only contemporary form in which God sends “prophets” to confront his people, but they do serve as one potential corrective. Just as ancient heresies stimulated the church to pursue the necessary work of doctrinal development, so today non-evangelical scholarship provokes valuable Christian study in response. Moreover, evangelical scholars faithfully serve their churches, even despite lack of consistent ecclesial support; these scholars are necessary not only as resources to provide what the church asks for, but also as reformers who sometimes proffer what the church truly needs. In this respect TIS contributes a hermeneutical language with which to develop and defend what evangelical biblical scholars and theologians are already doing. This TIS language can call upon such thinkers to “excel still more,” while encouraging the church to listen to its scholars because their orienting voice is to be grounded in Scripture itself.

#### **BIBLICAL STUDIES AND THEOLOGY**

This brings us to a fourth, and very central, relationship in which TIS ought to foster iron sharpening iron: dialogue between biblical scholars and

theologians. Earlier generations of evangelical scholarship tended to reflect an almost pre-modern reality in which the boundaries between these fields were very fuzzy. Relatively few evangelical professors had the title “theologian,” while many biblical scholars taught courses in Christian doctrine. Moreover, evangelical ST heavily invested not only in scriptural citation but even in exegetical argument.

The scholarly integrity of modern evangelical biblical scholars, beginning around the 1960s or so, and theologians more recently, required the development of specialist expertise and distinctive forms of discourse. Furthermore, evangelical ST of former generations frequently lapsed into “proof-texting” of an indefensible sort, in which passages or even minor details of passages were yanked out of context in support of the theological positions possibly preferred on other grounds.<sup>41</sup> Evangelical biblical scholars are right to be wary of such misuse of Scripture, while evangelical theologians are right to worry that many other elements of theological construction—such as historical or philosophical theology—were neglected or pursued poorly in such a context.

However, at the same time, accompanying increased disciplinary specialization is potential tragedy. At worst, we replace proof-texting ST with new mutual recriminations between biblical scholars and theologians, rather than collaborative expertise. At best, by contrast, TIS offers academic justification and encouragement for offering our respective gifts to each other and thereby to the church(es) via the writings we produce and the students we teach. After all, pre-critical “theological exegetes” sought rightly to prove doctrine from Scripture, and did not necessarily cite biblical texts in the ways that modern people have come to expect when they hear of evil proof-texting. Instead of decontextualized citation, the better instincts of classic exegetical theologians brought forth canonically contextualized doctrinal connections. On this basis we pick up and draw together certain hints already dropped about the

contemporary needs of post-critical evangelical ST.

First, evangelical ST needs to continue following the trajectory of evangelical biblical studies into robust academic engagement, producing first-rate scholarly articles and monographs. This can be done faithfully in a range of ways, but TIS offers a possible specialty that can keep some evangelical theologians attentive to Scripture in their published scholarship. As a vocational framework TIS can also creatively orient evangelical theologians to Scripture in the rest of their intellectual judgments.

Second, evangelical ST needs to engage non-evangelical theologians and others more accurately and generously, non-Western Christians more intentionally and equally, and churchly concerns more focally yet critically. We have detailed earlier the resources TIS might provide for achieving these ends.

Similarly, third, evangelical ST needs to engage Scripture both more and less—more in terms of truly grounding its conclusions and generating fresh thought, yet less in terms of unhealthy proof-texting. It is tempting to say that evangelical theology would be more scriptural if it cited biblical texts less. Yet that is only partly true; evangelical theologians also need to invest the embarrassment of riches provided by recent generations of biblical scholarship. This must be done while retaining the critical distance to develop and preserve the integrity and norms of their own discipline—a point at which TIS can be useful.

Fourth, therefore, in reflecting on those disciplinary norms, it appears that evangelical theology needs to become more holistically biblical. One simple example concerns the relative dominance of Pauline categories and concerns in the conceptual structures of most evangelical theologies. To varying degrees the Catholic epistles, the Gospels, and the Old Testament are neglected because many of their literary forms do not translate as easily into conceptual structures familiar to Western theological discourse.<sup>42</sup> TIS has no corner on

literary methods, but it certainly is one arena in which their broader approaches to exegesis generate interest and have potential to flourish.

## **CONCLUSION: CREATIVITY AND CORE TRADITION**

This reflection on the biblical aspects of ST suggests that evangelicalism needs both greater creativity and greater clarity about core tradition. On the one hand, to integrate a wider range of biblical material and conceptual/literary models, along with the theoretical needs in the academy and the practical needs of the church in the world, requires the synthetic faculty of imagination.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, as evangelical traditions—especially the non-Reformed—increase their scholarly presence and historical awareness, already-complex evangelical identity becomes even more contested. While the primary concern should not be labeling, the practical reality at stake in “evangelicalism” is biblical faithfulness and thereby a healthy form of Protestant ecumenism. TIS offers resources for enhancing creativity without costing particular traditions their integrity or evangelical theology its integrity as a discourse rooted in biblical language. In other words, we need to get beyond unhealthy proof-texting without getting beyond the commitment to prove theological claims vis-à-vis the Bible; we need *scripturally-formed* imagination. TIS can alert evangelical ST to the latent power of its own resources: it need no longer be merely a passive recipient of material from biblical studies, but neither should it ignore the theological potential of such scholarship; it need no longer justify its existence with respect to history, philosophy, and the like, but instead it should learn how to develop creatively through opportunistic interaction with the problems of such external disciplines. It is sad but true that Karl Barth may model this more distinctively in his engagement with modernity than many evangelicals do; it would be better moving forward if, rather than being either unduly fascinated by Barthianism as such or obsessed with its pitfalls, evangelical theo-

logians would learn the broader lesson about how to engage theological culture with biblical creativity—or, what may amount to the same, engaging contemporary culture with theological creativity.

Evangelical theologians serve the church by being theologians and not something else. It is difficult to cultivate and achieve historical responsibility without being historians, philosophical responsibility without becoming philosophers, pastoral responsibility without remaining full-time pastors—and scriptural responsibility without focusing narrowly on either critical exegesis or contemporary praxis. Or so it initially appears. But this is precisely the mandate of the evangelical theologian and, when it comes to scriptural responsibility in particular, of the pastor and even the lay Christian. TIS arises not to reject the gifts of biblical scholarship, but to receive them within the body of Christ wherein everyone must faithfully contribute their distinctive gifts.

Iron sharpening iron recognizes an element of identity between both sides in each of the aforementioned relationships, as in the friendships built on the common humanity addressed by the proverb. But we must maintain the integrity of differences as well—otherwise we lose the sharpening. To put this in New Testament terms, we are concerned about speaking the truth in love (Eph 4:15). TIS can help evangelical ST to develop its own mature voice, in order to fulfill its coordinating intellectual function in the body of Christ (Eph 4:13, 16), so that we may speak truthfully of God today. This voice should be charitable, not shrill, when interacting with various others. Still, if we are to grow to maturity without being tossed to and fro by waves of alternative doctrine (Eph 4:14), then that voice must creatively speak God's Word rather than simply mouthing the latest opinions. Thus we need *theological* interpretation of *Scripture*.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Therefore portions of this essay constitute a summary of Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpre-*

*tation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), with use here permitted kindly by the publisher.

<sup>2</sup>This is a modified version of the definition offered by D. Christopher Spinks, *The Bible and the Crisis of Meaning: Debates on the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (London: T & T Clark, 2007), 7. See also R. W. L. Moberly, "What Is Theological Interpretation of Scripture?" *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 3 no. 2 (2009): 161–78.

<sup>3</sup>In an unpublished lecture delivered to the Theological Hermeneutics of Christian Scripture group at the Society of Biblical Literature (Boston, Nov 2008), Markus Bockmuehl raised helpful concerns about the term "movement." The term is not used in a technical sense here, nor should it suggest levels of coherence that internal disagreements (mentioned below) would belie. For further reflection on the history and theological status of TIS language, see Daniel J. Treier, "What is theological interpretation? An ecclesiological reduction," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12, no. 2 (2010): 144–61. Bockmuehl's own disciplinary analysis and proposal are insightful, appearing in his *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study* (Studies in Theological Interpretation; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).

<sup>4</sup>Craig G. Bartholomew, "Uncharted Waters: Philosophy, Theology and the Crisis in Biblical Interpretation," in *Renewing Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Craig Bartholomew, Colin Greene, and Karl Möller; Scripture and Hermeneutics, vol. 1; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 25.

<sup>5</sup>The English translation is published as "The Strange New World within the Bible," in Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (trans. Douglas Horton; London: Pilgrim, 1928).

<sup>6</sup>Donald Wood, *Barth's Theology of Interpretation* (Barth Studies Series; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 7–8.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>8</sup>Richard E. Burnett, *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis: The Hermeneutical Principles of the Römerbrief Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), chap. 3.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, chap. 4.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., chap. 5.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 221.

<sup>12</sup>On the importance of historical criticism see, e.g., “The Preface to the Second Edition,” in Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (6th ed.; Oxford: Oxford University, 1968), 6–7.

<sup>13</sup>Barth attempts to overcome claims of radical historical distance dogmatically—by presenting human history as a unity in which all human beings are closely related, standing under the judgment of God and justified by grace through faith in Christ. Barth’s critique of historical critics concerns failure to acknowledge their solidarity with figures of the past. Remaining content to emphasize distance alone is a moral-spiritual failure, not merely or even primarily a methodological one (see Wood, *Barth’s Theology*, 12–18).

<sup>14</sup>For a helpful account of this clash and its effect on evangelical scholarship see Mark A. Noll, *Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship, and the Bible in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986).

<sup>15</sup>On these parallels and the tenuous identity of “post-liberalism” see Treier, “What is theological interpretation?” which also contains reflection on the ecumenical elements of TIS.

<sup>16</sup>Many align themselves with the views of E. D. Hirsch, Jr., who made such a distinction in his *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967). A related distinction regarding biblical theology, between “what the text meant” and “what it means,” was famously articulated by Krister Stendahl, “Biblical Theology, Contemporary,” in *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (ed. G. A. Buttrick; 4 vols.; New York: Abingdon, 1962), 1:418–32.

<sup>17</sup>At least three series are of note: The Church’s Bible (Eerdmans), the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (InterVarsity), and the Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Brazos).

<sup>18</sup>David C. Steinmetz, “The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis,” in *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (ed. Stephen E. Fowl; Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 26–38 (28).

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 37. Steinmetz clarifies the relationship of literal and spiritual senses: “The literal sense of Scripture is

basic to the spiritual and limits the range of possible allegorical meanings in those instances in which the literal meaning of a particular passage is absurd, undercuts the living relationship of the church to the Old Testament, or is spiritually barren” (29).

<sup>20</sup>For fuller evangelical analysis of Steinmetz’s claims, see Daniel J. Treier, “The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis? *Sic et Non*,” *Trinity Journal* 24 NS (2003): 77–103. On “participation” see Matthew Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis: A Theology of Biblical Interpretation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2008).

<sup>21</sup>Kathryn Greene-McCreight, “Rule of Faith,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 703. The *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation* is the major representative reference work for TIS so far.

<sup>22</sup>See Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I.8.1.

<sup>23</sup>David S. Yeago, “The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma: A Contribution to the Recovery of Theological Exegesis,” in *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, 87–100.

<sup>24</sup>See Trevor Hart, “Tradition, Authority, and a Christian Approach to the Bible as Scripture,” in *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology* (ed. Joel B. Green and Max Turner; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 183–204 for an extensive argument to this effect.

<sup>25</sup>George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984).

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 113–24. For related considerations see Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University, 1974).

<sup>27</sup>See Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1981); idem, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church’s Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001).

<sup>28</sup>Stephen E. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation* (Challenges in Contemporary Theology; Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 8. For a

brief, more recent introduction to Fowl's thought see his *Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009).

<sup>29</sup>See Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, 32; 32; 34; 34; 35; 35, for items (1)–(5) and (7); for (6), see e.g., 47, 60, 74.

<sup>30</sup>For a summary of this argument see Stephen E. Fowl, "The Role of Authorial Intention in the Theological Interpretation of Scripture," in *Between Two Horizons*, especially 78–82.

<sup>31</sup>Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, 56–61.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, chap. 3.

<sup>34</sup>Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998); *idem*, *First Theology: God, Scripture and Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002); and *idem*, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

<sup>35</sup>Fowl, "The Role of Authorial Intention," 76.

<sup>36</sup>John Webster, *Word and Church* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001). See also John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Current Issues in Theology; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2003), chap. 3; Mark Alan Bowald, *Rendering the Word in Theological Hermeneutics: Mapping Divine and Human Agency* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007).

<sup>37</sup>Further detail on this subject appears in Daniel J. Treier, "Biblical Theology and/or Theological Interpretation of Scripture? Defining the Relationship," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 61 (2008): 16–31.

<sup>38</sup>Probably the most articulate representative of this approach is D. A. Carson, most recently in "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 89–104.

<sup>39</sup>Brian Rosner represents a virtual equation of BT and TIS among evangelicals pursuing a redemptive-historical approach, whereas Francis Watson—an early and important TIS figure along with Fowl and Vanhoozer—presents a more complex and robustly theological version of interdisciplinary BT as TIS;

Charles Scobie seems to fit somewhere between these two. See, e.g., B. S. Rosner, "Biblical Theology," *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 3–11; Francis Watson, *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); Charles H. H. Scobie, *The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

<sup>40</sup>See David F. Ford and C. C. Pecknold, eds., *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning*, Directions in Modern Theology (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).

<sup>41</sup>For reflection on both the necessary and the negative elements, see Daniel J. Treier, "Proof Text," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation*, 622–624.

<sup>42</sup>On the array of favored (and non-Pauline!) biblical texts in cultures of the global South, see Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (New York: Oxford University, 2006).

<sup>43</sup>See briefly Trevor A. Hart, "Imagination," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation*, 321–323; more extensively, Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, who emphasizes the variety of Scripture's literary forms as maps of different aspects of reality, each helping to foster elements of faithful living.