

Biblical Hermeneutics and Practical Theology: Method and Truth in Context

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The rise of the discipline of “practical theology” raises afresh the question of how scripture might contribute to theological work. In this piece I argue that the kinds of contextual and self-reflexive awareness that practical theology brings to the pursuit of Christian theological inquiry overlap in certain key ways with the similar contextual and self-reflexive awareness that biblical hermeneutics brings (or should bring) to biblical studies. In particular, this leads to a challenge to the role of method in biblical and theological work, in dialogue with questions about truth and how we pursue it. A secondary thesis then addresses the question of how, if this is so, the Bible might speak into the kinds of questions pursued by practical theologians.

The link between biblical studies and Christian theology has always been a matter of some debate, even when one limits the inquiry to those who pursue one or the other academic focus in the service of the church. Now biblical studies has another disciplinary dialogue partner to contend with: practical theology. Arguably it is a certain dissatisfaction with some familiar academic theological options that has been one key factor in the rise of practical theology as a separate theological sub-discipline in its own right. This is not the place to debate or even rehearse this development. Rather, I intend to pursue the following thesis: that the kinds of contextual and self-reflexive awareness that practical theology brings to the pursuit of Christian

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theological inquiry overlap in certain key ways with the similar contextual and self-reflexive awareness that biblical hermeneutics brings (or should bring) to biblical studies. A secondary thesis then addresses the question of how, if this is so, the Bible might speak into the kinds of questions pursued by practical theologians.

In the interests of full disclosure, and in that spirit of reflexive self-awareness, I admit that I address this topic as both a practitioner and an outsider. I am one who engages with scripture in what I hope to be a practical and indeed theological manner, but I am not, by training nor particularly by temperament, a practical theologian. I have tried to write in a narrative voice that attempts to acknowledge my own embodied and experiential location, accepting that my own account of hermeneutical practices is one possible account among others. In this I am conscious of stepping outside the normal conventions of biblical studies, even under stress as these may be.

However, even such a bald contrast between two disciplines invites a certain amount of self-critique. One might say that hermeneutics as it relates to the handling of scripture is itself a form of practical theology; that hermeneutics might rightly be located in the area of the theological syllabus we now call “practical theology”; and thus that my self-designation as a scripture reader who is not a practical theologian simply reflects the prejudices of a bygone age. Even if that were true in principle, however, it seems that in practice the disciplinary lion and lamb have not yet lain down together (leaving to the reader the discernment of which is which). There remains merit in addressing the topic of how scripture is handled in practical theology, bringing to bear some perspectives that are not perhaps commonly found in the work of practical theologians.

But is such a distinction true in principle? Hermeneutics and practical theology do clearly overlap—this much may be granted. The necessity and inevitability of what Clifford Geertz so felicitously called “thick description” is near the heart of both.¹ Both rightly expend effort in navigating the considerable gravitational pull exerted by one’s presuppositions before, during, and after one’s enquiry. Certainly when one talks of the observer as “the situated self,” one

¹ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3–30. Though it is of interest to note that Geertz culled this concept from the somewhat impractical reaches of analytic philosophy and the work of Gilbert Ryle in particular.

is talking the language of both hermeneutics and practical theology. Hence there is clearly much scope, both potential and in practice, for assessing the overlap between the two disciplines.

They remain at present, however, two largely separate disciplines, for at least a couple of reasons. One reason, speaking theoretically, is that hermeneutics urges us to be cautious (some would say suspicious) of *method*, which tends to loom large in the considerations of practical theologians, as indeed it does in quite a lot of biblical studies too. Another reason is simply that a good deal of practical theology appears in practice to sit quite light to any sort of substantive appeal to Christian scripture.² The present piece is intended in part to start to address that second reason by showing how it might be done. However, the burden of the argument will have to address the concerns of the first point, concerning method, and in particular hermeneutical method.

1. *The Truth about Method*

I begin with an illustration, aware of thereby adhering to one component of the much-vaunted “pastoral cycle” as it is utilized in theological reflection.³ All academics wear many hats, and one of the hats I once wore was to sit in a student-led practical theology seminar and assess it, offering the perspective of a biblical scholar to the topic at hand. The student was addressing a subject along the lines of “Handling Hell in Pastoral Ministry,” by which he turned out to mean the topic of an eschatological hell rather than just the experience of holding a meeting about moving the pews. He was expected to announce his chosen methodology for proceeding through the myriad scriptural and practical issues before him, and he did so more or less as follows: “I am going to use the method of proof-texting, which uses particular verses of the Bible to look at the issues in front of us. This method,” he added, as I recomposed my passive observer’s face, “tends to get an unfair press in academic circles, but is quite well known in church circles.” As I looked around the room I realized that not only was he

² An encouraging sign that things are changing is the thoughtful proposal of Zoë Bennett, *Using the Bible in Practical Theology: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2013), though one may note that she does not in fact offer substantive discussions of any scriptural texts.

³ For one example of a clear explanation of the pastoral cycle, see Paul Ballard and John Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action: Christian Thinking in the Service of Church and Society*, second edition (London: SPCK, 2006), 81–95.

serious, but that nobody in the room—church-goers all—was going to challenge him about it.⁴

The hour that followed was fascinating from various perspectives, not all of which were edifying, but there was nevertheless a certain truth in the student's claim that proof-texting is a well-known approach in church circles. I am convinced that this is a key reason why there is a certain fairly common experience that people have when they come to the academic study of scripture—the sense of liberating light dawning as they learn some kind of controlled critical methodology for addressing the biblical text. Rather than try to launch out directly into a theoretical account of method, à la Gadamer, to whom we will come below, I think it is helpful to tackle the question of truth and method in biblical study with consideration of a particular method, or family of methods, which I will label (with some misgivings) “historically and socio-culturally conditioned critical enquiry into the text.” Labeling it is not uncontroversial, but I hope the phenomenon I am trying to describe is recognizable: it is the phenomenon of learning about the text “in its original context,” as a thing of “then” rather than “now,” concerning oneself with “what it meant” at least as much as, if not entirely instead of, “what it means.”⁵

Such hermeneutical maneuvering is often deployed with 1 Corinthians as a test case. This is the favored text for the standard New Testament 101 introductory course for many reasons: it offers a string of engaging topics right off the bat, allowing the lecturer to discourse on everything from sexual morality to women's participation in church life, as well as (depending on the interests of the lecturer, perhaps) resurrection, or eating halal meat in the light of the discussion of idol temples. Furthermore, these topics line up more or less one after the other with convenient tags like “Now concerning,” which settles the term's syllabus fairly straightforwardly, even if it then becomes

⁴ It is possible that this reaction owed something to the class's prior reading of Roger Walton, “Using the Bible and Christian Tradition in Theological Reflection,” *British Journal of Theological Education* 13, no. 2 (2003): 133–151, an excellent article that stoically lists proof-texting as one approach to the Bible that is indeed commonly used. I surmise that the class had construed this as an invitation to avail themselves of such an approach should it choose to fit the case study at hand. The hermeneutical and indeed pedagogical issues here must await another occasion.

⁵ This approach is often called simply “historical criticism,” which will do as a label as long as it is not pressed too hard, or taken as referring to one thing only. The best irenic defense of its undeniable merits is John Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 31–68.

all too easy to underplay the narrative substructure of 1 Corinthians' march toward resurrection and thanksgiving. Nevertheless, the unforgettable experience of many a beginning theology student is that the age of insight has dawned as one learns to ask: Who wrote this? When? In what context? How did first-century culture and society work and how does this text speak directly into it? Some even learn that fateful motto, that in reading 1 Corinthians we are listening in to someone else's conversation, reading someone else's mail.⁶ The point was never more elegantly made than by way of contrast in Edmund Gosse's startling memoir, *Father and Son*, talking about the "strong and simple" faith of his parents:

Pushing this to its extreme limit, and allowing nothing for the changes of scene or time or race, my parents read injunctions to the Corinthian converts without any suspicion that what was apposite in dealing with half-breed Achaian colonists of the first century might not exactly apply to respectable English men and women of the nineteenth. They took it, text by text, as if no sort of difference existed between the surroundings of Trimalchion's feast and those of a City dinner.⁷

Clearly, the student comes to see, Paul was writing to the Corinthians and not us, the lately-arrived twenty-first century reader(s).

All of this is not entirely untrue. Yet in certain key theological ways it is not straightforwardly true either. Let us explore both sides of this claim, *en route* to setting up the question of how to hold them together.

First, and ironically, this is a point that practical theologians should be quick to spot: no text is just a text. It is always a text accessed in a particular way at a particular time. Hence the above account of reading 1 Corinthians masks the fundamental move that is being made in the critical paradigm deployed: which is to read 1 Corinthians *as* a first-century letter, which of course it is. But it is also, equally, and arguably in some ways more importantly, a part of the

⁶ To misappropriate Paul van Buren's also problematic label for Christian reading of Jewish scripture: Paul van Buren, "On Reading Someone Else's Mail: The Church and Israel's Scriptures," in *Die Hebräische Bibel und ihre zweifache Nachgeschichte: Festschrift für Rolf Rendtorff zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Erhard Blum et al. (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1990), 595–606.

⁷ Edmund Gosse, *Father and Son* (London: Penguin, 1949 [orig. 1907]), 50.

Christian canon—a claim that packs a considerable theological punch once pondered and understood, and the task is taken up to read 1 Corinthians *as* Christian scripture. As a canonical document the letter *is* written to (or at least addressed to) any person of Christian faith, here and now, wherever and whenever it is read. The reader is addressed by God in and through scripture today. When I read it I am not primarily trying to overhear how God spoke to the Corinthians in and through the text from Paul, as if the divine address carried by the text is properly accessed as having once occurred in a distant historical moment. I am trying to hear how God speaks today by understanding the sense(s) in which Paul's address to the Corinthians is (and not just was) part of the Christian canon.

In Brevard Childs's telling terminology, all of this constitutes a canonical approach to scripture, or to the Bible as scripture, or as Christian scripture, or however one precisely characterizes it.⁸ The key word here for our purposes, though, was smuggled in at the beginning of the description: it is an "approach" and not a "method." Childs (rightly) always resisted any such label as "canonical methodology" or "canonical criticism," as a method that could be added to the list of methods interpreters might keep in their toolbox. Rather, this is an orientation within which one then pursues one's interpretative work with whatever methods facilitate the task at hand.

Having said all this, it is undeniable that some forms of this kind of canonical claim in biblical studies today have become exaggerated. In other words, one need not say that NT101 was all a mistake and now we have to start again. The form in which this exaggerated claim currently exists is interesting: it is the claim that the church must go back to so-called "pre-critical" ways of reading scripture, and rediscover the treasures and riches of the ways in which scripture was read by . . . (insert here one's leading lights of choice: Augustine, Aquinas, Athanasius, Hugh of St. Victor, Irenaeus, Bede, Origen—names I am listing with deliberate disregard for chronology or context). This theological turn is big business, in one of the least anticipated publishing phenomena of recent biblical studies—massive commentary series collecting

⁸ Note the key word "as" in the title of Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM, 1979). I have explored the significance of construing scripture *as* something in "Biblical Hermeneutics and Scriptural Responsibility," in *The Future of Biblical Interpretation: Responsible Plurality in Biblical Hermeneutics*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Matthew R. Malcolm (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2013), 51–69.

together highlights of patristic, medieval, or even Reformation commentary in a contemporary version of the great medieval *Glossa Ordinaria*.⁹ In its bluntest terms it represents a call to recognize “the superiority of pre-critical exegesis,” as David Steinmetz once put it.¹⁰ Taking the Bible as Christian scripture, such a perspective might say, is close to writing off the modern critical enterprise as a mistake, and going back, or recovering, the riches of a tradition (or perhaps traditions) which once so nourished the church. Let the critics do what they will, it is to creed and Christology that one should turn. There are exhibits aplenty of such an attitude, some appearing under the heading of “theological interpretation” or “theological commentary.”

Now one may agree that it is not wise to ignore the riches of such tradition. But equally, we should not ignore the insights of the “modern tradition.” In some ways, this overreaction to problems with various reigning critical paradigms in biblical study simply mirrors the overreaction with which modern critics dismissed centuries of Christian (and indeed Jewish) interpretation on the basis of spotting evident problems with it. To make a theological claim, one made by James A. Sanders in articulating his own “canonical method,” the bundle of approaches to the biblical text which loosely gather together under the rubric “historical-critical method” might be understood as “a gift of God in due season.”¹¹

In other words: readers of 1 Corinthians are better off, in many ways, for grasping the socio-cultural dimensions of how Paul’s letter plays into and responds to certain features of life in Corinth, as far as we understand it. Consider it this way: critical paradigms offer insights and perspectives on the text in front of us in ways that have to be sifted and weighed just like all the insights and perspectives

⁹ IVP’s *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* series is probably the clearest example, but see also Eerdmans’ *Church’s Bible* series. On the *glossa* and its revival, see the illuminating collected essays of Karlfried Froehlich, *Biblical Interpretation from the Church Fathers to the Reformation* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Variorum, 2010), esp. chapters II–VIII (note, the book has no continuous page numbering).

¹⁰ David C. Steinmetz, “The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis,” *Theology Today* 37, no. 1 (April 1980): 27–38.

¹¹ Note the title of the festschrift for Sanders: *A Gift of God in Due Season: Essays on Scripture and Community in Honor of James A. Sanders*, ed. Richard D. Weis and David M. Carr, JSOT Supplement Series 225 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996). For an example of Sanders’s own use of the term, see his “Scripture as Canon for Post-Modern Times,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 25, no. 2 (May 1995): 56–63, here 61. To be clear, Sanders’s “canonical method” is indeed a method, unlike Childs’s canonical approach.

one obtains from reading the fathers or the reformers on the same text. This will lead us in due course to the crux of the matter, namely: what is the framework for all that sifting and weighing?⁹ But first we must tease out exactly what the contrast is between the two different approaches we have been considering, which we might oversimplify as the difference between NT101 and traditional theological/ecclesial interpretation.

Notice that the reason that NT101 is experienced as liberating light by the average student is that it is indeed light, and it does indeed liberate, at least from certain kinds of interpretative disarray and darkness. Notoriously, or nobly, depending on one's perspective, it liberates from fundamentalism, with its flat-footed tendency to collapse the complexity of divine address to a timeless point which somehow stretches to encompass both Corinth and California, as if Paul's "to have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you" (1 Cor. 6:7) is the word of God to Hollywood just because those words are in the Bible. Of course, it may be the word of God to Hollywood (as some of his other words about divorce may be too—indeed Hollywood and Corinth seem to have certain things in common that render some of the sayings on divorce somewhat more comprehensible when read in Hollywood than in some less unusual social locations), but God always speaks words in time, in the flux and contingency of human existence, and therefore if God is saying this to Hollywood then that is a second claim, alongside a first claim, which is that Paul said it to Corinth.

One might imagine it like this, considering *A* and *B* as two instances of divine address in time, *A* occurring as Paul wrote to Corinth, *B* as the members of St. Paul's Church, Hollywood read the apostle's epistle in their home group. The fundamentalist thinks *A* and *B* are the same, or at least that any differences between them are irrelevant to their interpretation. The critic armed with historical consciousness can tell that they are separated by many years, in ways that separate out two different contexts for what *A* and *B* might be. Many of the inherent tensions of thinking that *A* and *B* are the same are thereby resolved (which is the phenomenon of the light dawning in NT101). However, students then often draw the conclusion that *A* is at best a historical phenomenon, and that *B* is irrelevant to the careful reading of 1 Corinthians, and before they know it, it is "the meaning of the text" (in the first century) which has become their object of attention, whereas at least some (many?⁹) interesting theological questions

remain regarding how the location of 1 Corinthians in the canon, which helps us to understand what A really is, can contribute to our understanding of B.

Before this example gets any more complicated, I do need to admit that the choice of 1 Corinthians as a test case was not a random choice (as such illustrative choices in discussions of “how to interpret the Bible” rarely are). 1 Corinthians is perhaps the Bible’s strongest or clearest case of a “directed” text, what Umberto Eco called an open text—one which is perforce open to readerly involvement—whose context is sufficiently open to the reader to need to be held in view in order to make sense of the text. Eco contrasted such texts with “closed texts,” where the originating context is more or less lost to view, with the result that the reader has to do the work of supplying an interpretative framework to make sense of the words on the page, and more or less any context will do to generate some reading or other.¹² This terminology has also been deployed entirely the other way round in biblical studies: Anthony Thiselton, for example, takes “closed texts” as closing down contextual reading possibilities, where “the freedom of the ‘receiver’ . . . is severely restricted”; while open ones are open to myriad ways of reading,¹³ while Richard Bauckham’s argument about gospels not being directed texts in the same way as epistles summarizes the point as being that gospels are (“relatively”) open texts.¹⁴ Eco’s handling of the terminology is admittedly confusing, and of course it makes no substantive difference to our point which way round he did it, but given that his name is used in connection with the labels, it is worth clarifying that for Eco the paradigm open text was James Joyce’s *Ulysses*—with its requirement that the reader follow Joyce’s construct in order to have any sense of what is going on—while his paradigm closed text was a typical Ian Fleming *James Bond* novel, which one may read as one likes with—according to Eco—little loss on a literary level. It should be clear that “open/closed” are not genre labels for Eco, but descriptions of kinds of readerly involvement.

¹² Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1984), esp. 3–43.

¹³ Anthony C. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2009), 306, with reference to Eco, though not to any particular text of Eco’s.

¹⁴ Richard Bauckham, “For Whom Were Gospels Written?,” in *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 9–48, here 48, and citing Eco’s discussion.

Since 1 Corinthians is such an open text, few readers can but be drawn into imagining themselves as the addressee of direct discourse except by a strong effort of critically trained will. Hence the light that dawns on our hypothetical NT101 students as they study 1 Corinthians may well not be dawning on them next period in OT101 as they consider whether or not kingship was a “good thing” in 1 Samuel 8 . . . because they have not had the experience of reading 1 Samuel as a directed/closed text that implies them as the reader of the text. Instead they are a little lost in wondering what it means to read 1 Samuel as anything other than an account of history, and hence tend to have prior interpretative horizons limited to “did it happen?,” which is often blurred into “is it true?,” in ways that muddy the hermeneutical waters for years, in many cases. All this to say: there are reasons why NT101 is such a powerfully illuminating experience, especially when 1 Corinthians is a test case, that do not add up to the claim that Bible reading requires critical historical reconstruction of the text’s original context except on an *ad hoc* basis.

To sum up to this point: the truth about method in biblical interpretation is that any method (whether historical-critical or primarily theological) opens up certain angles on the text and fails to allow access to others. If one asks “Who wrote this?” it will shed light on various interesting aspects of the text before us (though not, in my humble opinion, very many outside of the epistles). If one asks, “How does this text work with the concept of forgiveness, or holiness, or love?” then other angles are opened up. You can decide to announce your method up front, and clarify that you are going to explore question *X* using criteria *Y*, but unless you are very lucky, or (more likely) have read ahead and know what is coming in the text under scrutiny, you may end up exploring a matter of rather little interest, or producing a faultless study of minimal existential relevance. To adopt loose anthropomorphic talk for a moment, texts will disclose truth only by being allowed to talk about what they want to talk about. If you tell the text that you want to ask it about sin, for example, and your text is Philippians, you will discover it does not talk about sin. You can draw some hermeneutical conclusions from that (you can even challenge it and ask whether it has other words for sin—though it would remain interesting perhaps that it used those other words and not “sin”—and in fact most likely it does not), but all of this will be somewhat against the grain of the text.

The hermeneutical moral, as per Gadamer's great work *Truth and Method*,¹⁵ which I have been simplifying and assuming all along here, is that if you want truth you must sit light to method, and if you specify method then you *will* end up sitting light to truth, whether you want to or not, and you cannot have them both together. We almost have a hermeneutical Heisenberg principle: if you specify one you lose the other. Fixing 1 Corinthians in time loses its current divine address. Reading it with a rubric of "speak to me, Lord" blurs its historical specificity. Woe is me. Who will deliver me from this impractical theology? From this hermeneutical impasse?

We may now turn to the crux noted earlier: given the wide range of things one can be prompted to think in the thoughtful reading of a biblical text, how does one evaluate all those things? Let us call that the question of "scripture and truth."

2. *Scripture and Truth*

Against what standards does one sift and weigh the multiform insights of the various traditions to which the attentive Christian listens—the textual critics, the philologists, the historians, the sociologists, the theologians classic and modern, and so forth? Suppose that we have accumulated a mass of interesting data about the biblical passage in front of us. How do we evaluate it? Wisdom here consists of navigating between a whole range of pertinent criteria, all of which make claims on the Christian interpreter, and thus on the practical theologian. This may be envisaged as a form of hermeneutical *phronēsis*, or "practical wisdom." We consider some examples.

We measure our insights against scripture itself. We thus look for some degree of coherence between our insights and our readings of other texts. There is obviously a degree of potential circularity in such an endeavor: maybe we are looking overeagerly for the fit, and are unwilling to let other texts disconfirm our insights. There is also the practical observation that we cannot read the whole Bible every time

¹⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1960), translated as *Truth and Method*, ed. and trans. Garrett Barden and John Cumming (London: Sheed and Ward, 1975) and revised as *Truth and Method*, second revised edition, ed. and trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Sheed and Ward, 1989).

we ask an interesting question. Nevertheless some sort of coherence is presumably desirable.

We measure insights against the tradition. It behooves the interpreter to ask: Has anyone else ever thought this? If not, why not? Presumably it is unlikely (indeed theologically unlikely) that we are rapidly uncovering truth after truth about biblical texts that the whole world has missed until we came along.

We measure insights against reason—though perhaps this criterion only operates “within reason,” as it were. Rationality has long been overrated; it is not as self-evident as it used to be what counts as plausible and what does not. Much depends on perspective. In some ways this is the watermark for the qualifying adjective “postmodern”: to understand the force of the postmodern is to recognize that rationality might not be a self-sufficient system to which Christian theology must simply bow the knee. Sadly, among those who do see this, there is sometimes a willingness to take rationality off at the knees and do away with it altogether, which makes for some entertaining diversions within the far reaches of critical theory, and along which lines a good deal can be learned, but in the end degenerates into a kind of academic game about whether one can indefinitely sustain a construal of the world that decries rationalism as a form of imperialist hegemony. My suspicion is that one can sustain it for longer than most people have the will to listen, mainly because most people have pressing daily matters of love and justice, truth and forgiveness, and pain and perseverance to attend to. In short, Christian theology can be by turns reasonable and unreasonable. Not all the claims of hope or expectation need be rational. But this is not a pass-ticket to saying that interpretative claims can be as irrational as one likes.¹⁶

¹⁶ Two early statements of something like this point, both with precisely illuminating titles, are Philip D. Kenneson, “There’s No Such Thing as Objective Truth, and It’s a Good Thing, Too,” in *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World*, ed. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 155–170 and 225–228; and Brad Kallenberg, “The Gospel Truth of Relativism,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 53, no. 2 (May 2000): 177–211. For a lucid up-to-date account, see James K. A. Smith, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church*, *The Church and Postmodern Culture* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2006), and, in the same series, his *Who’s Afraid of Relativism? Community, Contingency, and Creaturehood* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2014).

So far so very Anglican: we are reading scripture itself in the light of scripture, tradition, and reason. My Methodist colleagues will want me to add “experience” as another criterion, to strengthen a hermeneutical Wesleyan quadrilateral. My own view here is cautious, though positive as long as one recalls that experience offers no more an unmediated criterion for judgment than rationality did in the previous paragraph. After all, one need spend only the shortest of times in any church to be struck by the widely differing, sometimes flat-out contradictory experiences people have, which presumably needs some hermeneutical reflection before one could say how experience is to be factored in to the equation. There is also an interesting tendency for an interpreter’s experience to rise rapidly up the list of hermeneutical criteria to attain something of a lynch-pin status around which other factors are made to fit. When it comes to evaluating our experience, we appear to retain considerable capacity for self-justification. I feel about my experience a little like I feel about my Myers–Briggs profile: I know what it is, but I am not wanting to use it as an excuse not to work at becoming a better, deeper, wiser person.

Theologically, however, none of these familiar categories get us to the heart of the matter. One only has to look at the Anglican Communion to recognize that even if the whole world agreed that scripture–tradition–reason is the triumvirate of witnesses against which we measure our reading of the text before us, then that would not get us much nearer to ever agreeing on how to interpret the Bible. The problem is that we have been operating in *formal* categories, rather than substantive ones. So let us take another run at this list, in reverse order this time, with some sort of Christian theological agenda driving the discussion.

We need to judge our insights against our experience of God in Christ. Here biblical interpreters need fellow systematic theologians who will press them to a better understanding of the Trinity, of Christology, and so forth. But it is that kind of theologically-comprehended experience that is relevant to practical theological work.

Rationality too needs to be rationality as understood in deference to the Lordship of Christ. This is not the occasion to explore what that means in any detail, although the path is illuminated by those who have fought to say that Christians do not simply receive their rational terms of reference from somewhere outside the theological

orbit, whether in the manner of Karl Barth's subjection of all human knowing to the self-revelation of God, or John Milbank's critique of the rise of "social theory" as governing the theological agenda.¹⁷ Christian theology need not be postmodern, but it might helpfully remember that is "non-modern," to borrow A. K. M. Adam's helpful attempt at a more neutral term.¹⁸

As for tradition—it is obviously theological tradition that is operative here. The location of the biblical interpreter is always ecclesologically mediated, in some tradition or other of the churches, shaped by creeds and councils, and ultimately by God in Christ, again. (Or the interpreter's work may be mediated and shaped by the rejection of such points.) God might be accessed in a range of ways, and different traditions will emphasize spiritual illumination, or sacrament, and so forth, but while the list will vary between theologians, it should always include Holy Scripture.

This brings us back to the point at issue: we evaluate our readings of Holy Scripture against a whole network of theological judgments and perspectives that are our attempts to do justice to the truth of life and lived experience understood in the light of God in Christ known in and through scripture.

Obviously this formulation would benefit from considerable refinement, and it is easy to see how a range of people would want to word it differently. However, the point is that this is the discussion we need to be having in our work with scripture. As a result, our primary calling as theologians working with scripture is to pursue the vision of God, God in Christ, God in the Spirit in the Christian life, in the church, and in the whole of creation, so that our vision of what the truth is of all these things is seen more and more clearly with every text we work with. But what happens as we do this is that all our practical questions get taken up and incorporated into the outworking of our theological vision of how the God of Christian scripture is bringing about the fulfillment of the great vision of all creation being remade in Christ. Scripture-shaped thinking, in other words, will begin to offer the framework within which we tackle the questions that practical theologians want to ask, be they concerned with "How should one live

¹⁷ See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, especially vol. 1; and John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1990).

¹⁸ A. K. M. Adam, *Making Sense of New Testament Theology: "Modern" Problems and Prospects*, Studies in American Biblical Hermeneutics (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1995).

as a Christian?” in a general sense or more specific questions, such as “How should one handle the topic of hell in pastoral ministry?” or, to reflect on other practical theological discussions I have encountered, “Why are young people leaving our churches?,” “Who and how should I forgive?,” “What does it mean to incorporate sinners into the body of Christ?” (in other words, which categories of sin make a difference?—sexual sinners, financial sinners, substance abusers, and so forth).

This might suggest a short answer to the question of “How should we use the Bible in practical theology?”: we pursue scripture on its own theologically-defined terms, and in the process our “practical questions” are taken up and subsumed into the categories with which scripture wants us to work. To risk simplification: the route to “relevance” is via what might look at first sight like irrelevance, because that “first sight” is not a scripturally-shaped seeing, and we do not know, in advance of our engagement with scripture, what relevance looks like.

3. *Method and Scripture*

In light of this, how is one, practically speaking, to go about using scripture in practical theology? Is there no method at all? Here I offer some examples of what I take to be good practice, in keeping with the conviction that an *ad hoc* approach is what will serve us best here. There are three broad categories within which I have found it helpful to proceed.

a) Start with a practical/pastoral question

Consider again the question: “Why are young people leaving our churches?” What, if anything, could the Bible say to this topic? Furthermore, how does it relate to what a practical theologian might say?

The practical theologian will presumably set to work straightaway refining the question. Is its assumption in fact true? One may note the existence of many churches (not perhaps everywhere, but nevertheless in many places) where there are churches full of young people. So a great deal hangs on identifying the “our,” as one might expect a practical theologian to say. Thus one might refine the question into an analysis of particular churches, particular social classes, and so forth. In the process a couple of things might come into focus: perhaps young people are no longer willing to stay within forms of church that do not speak their cultural language, which raises profound questions about one’s notion of incorporation into the body of Christ, and of

course about the nature of church, which the theologian, practical or otherwise, might consider in a reading of Ephesians, for example. Scripture will also, I suspect, force us to reflect on the ontological status of youth—in other words, what is theologically significant about age and how are relationships between young and old defined and characterized in scripture?¹⁹ In this way biblical scholarship may contribute on several of the defining parameters of the task.

b) Start with scripture itself

More significantly, one can start with scripture itself, with the key being that it is *read by readers who are themselves shaped by practical and pastoral concerns*. This approach finds the point of contact between the Bible and practical theology in the person of the interpreter. It requires whole new ways of theorizing the reader-as-person that are not yet well explored hermeneutically, even by (perhaps especially by) “reader-response critics.” Nevertheless, one may see more or less this approach flourishing in Walter Brueggemann’s hugely influential work on the Psalms: anyone reading the Psalms while engaged in real flesh-and-blood relationships finds that these texts relate in straightforwardly powerful ways to the heights and depths of lived experience.²⁰ In some ways it almost makes one wonder if the teaching of practical theology might not be enriched and focused by starting off with sustained attention to the Psalter. What would one miss?²¹

c) Start with notable theologians’ readings of biblical texts

Arguably a simpler way in to using scripture in practical theology is through other theologians’ readings of biblical texts. In practice this will probably lead to a combination of the best of the first two approaches. Read Bonhoeffer on the Psalms. Read Barth on scripture

¹⁹ Note the stimulating analysis of John M. G. Barclay, “There is Neither Old Nor Young? Early Christianity and Ancient Ideologies of Age,” *New Testament Studies* 53, no. 2 (April 2007): 225–241. The point is that no hard and fast line need separate biblical studies and practical theology.

²⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, ed. Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1995), and various other works, including now *From Whom No Secrets Are Hid: Introducing the Psalms*, ed. Brent A. Strawn (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014).

²¹ If Bonhoeffer is right we would not even miss Christ. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible*, in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 5: Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible*, English edition, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1996), 155–177.

as he talks about sin-as-sloth.²² One striking piece on Christian character even begins with Aquinas on the Red Heifer in Numbers 19 and leads on to the ways this propels us to consider practices of restitution.²³ Systematic theologians have long known that a key way in to their discussions is by way of nuanced engagement with classic readings. Biblical scholars are often slower in this regard, tending to reinvent interpretative options from the text up, although studies of the history of interpretation are beginning to change this.²⁴ When it comes to practical theology, we will probably find that our brightest and best exemplars often come from longer ago in the biblical-theological tradition, but perhaps that will in itself indicate part of the healing of the division of theological sub-disciplines that may be at hand.

Conclusion

We have come full circle, in fact backwards, in a sense: from method, pulling back to truth, pulling further back to scripture, and thus concluding with some reflections on method in right relation to scripture.

Familiar questions about the role of the Bible in theological thought and construction are being reshaped by the rise of practical theology. If Christian scripture has practical import for daily life, which surely it does, then it is important that it is not bypassed by practical theology. The rise of such a theological sub-discipline, with its attention fixed firmly on the daily lives and practice of humans in God's world, affords a new challenge in making sure that scripture's voice continues to be heard. I have suggested that hermeneutics may function as some kind of bridging discipline. Old challenges—and also possibilities—are made new. But although the manner in which it does so continues to adapt, the word of God stands forever.

²² Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 4/2, 478–483, offering a striking reading of Numbers 14 in dialogue with the idea of sloth.

²³ Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., “How the Virtues of an Interpreter Presuppose and Perfect Hermeneutics: The Case of Thomas Aquinas,” *Journal of Religion* 76, no. 1 (1996): 64–81.

²⁴ For a striking and theologically fruitful example, see the light shed on Romans by Charles Raith II, *Aquinas and Calvin on Romans: God's Justification and Our Participation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

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