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**How I Use the
Bible in Doing
Theology: An
Evangelical
Reflection**

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Introduction

Jamaica is surely one of the countries where the Bible is the compass of many believers for their own life and also for their expectations for the nation. Doing theology in Jamaica in the beginning of the 21st century is certainly one of the most important challenges where there is a beginning of confusion with those who use the Bible for their own expectations or try to justify their sins with a twisted interpretation of the scriptures. Also you have all these modern sciences that can help our understanding of the Bible but also can destroy our relationship with God by an exaggerated relativism.

Carnell defined Protestant orthodoxy as *"that branch of Christendom which limits the ground of religious authority to the Bible."*¹ This major theological pre-

¹E. J. Camell, *The Case for Orthodox Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1959), 13.

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understanding underlies my own approach to and use of the Bible. It means that the Bible is the one and only normative pole of theological information and that the claims of tradition or modernity possess no inner theological relevance. I understand my task to be an explication of the deposit of faith in the Bible leading on to a serious attempt to communicate it in a relevant way to the people of my generation. The quest for relevance, important in itself, can never assume the influential role which only the Bible should have.

It is clear then why the question of biblical authority is so important to evangelicals: belief in the infallibility of the Scriptures is the pillar which supports our theology--without it the edifice would surely crumble. It is the realization of this, plus a sense that the Scripture principle is severely threatened in religious liberalism, which keeps the debate alive among us. Warfield could entertain in theory the possibility of Christianity existing without the Bible, but he would have been the first to stress its indispensability in practice.² I take Scripture to be, on what I think to be good and sufficient evidence, the prescriptive norm and paradigmatic tradition, the canon and rule of faith and practice. It is not enough to receive it as the occasion of an encounter with God (although it is) or as an invitation to join up with God's plan for human liberation (also true) or a host of other redefinitions of the nature of biblical authority. What it means to me to receive the Scriptures as the gift

² B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948), P. 210.

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of God's Spirit to the church is that I subject myself, body, mind, and spirit, to whatsoever the Bible can be shown to teach or advise me according to its own intention. Mine is a stubborn creed when viewed from our age of theological permissiveness in that I am simply unprepared to back down from ascertained scriptural truth on the strength of any extra-biblical ground. Adherence to the Bible for me means acquiescence to all its teachings and a refusal to allow any rival to stand above it, whether tradition, reason, culture, science, or opinion. It leads me (some would say, compels me) to believe a string of truths regularly denied in circles which reject or reduce the Scripture principle: the reality of Satan; the existence of angels; the bodily resurrection and sacrificial atonement of Christ; the historical fall into sin; the deity as well as humanity of our Lord; the certainty of his coming again; and the dreadful judgment of the wicked.

Although my approach is identical to the basic stance of classical Protestants of the past, it is also marked by conscious awareness and opposition to the enormous ideational shift which has occurred in modern theology affecting this and all topics of theology. It is a shift in theological method from locating the basis of authority in the objective written Word of God to placing it in human reason and experience. It was done with the best of motives, a desire to make the gospel meaningful to the modern person but it resulted in a systematic revision of a Christian category and, ironically, an almost total failure to reach the secular person for Christ. Indeed, the most obvious effect of this shift has been the reduction of the faith and the secularization of the churches. In the case of the doctrine of revelation and inspiration the shift meant that the Bible and its teachings came to be viewed as the product of human cultural

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experience, temporally conditioned and relative in authority, and certainly not a suitable cognitive guide to thinking persons today. The shift has created a great antithesis in the church between classical Christians who desire, as I do, to remain faithful to the faith once delivered and religious liberals by whatever name that seems intent on endlessly revising the message until it seems relevant to the modern person. I see no way to bridge this chasm. If we ever get beyond it, I suspect it will be either from the demise of religious liberalism as it follows its course of self destruction or from a failure of the evangelicals to grasp the present opportunity of leadership on account of their refusal to grow up to maturity in various areas. But at the present there is in place a *great reef barrier* put there by religious liberalism in its zeal to "save" Christian beliefs, which stand as the great obstacle to unity in our time and as the reason why the doctrine of Scripture is certain to be debated in the foreseeable future.³

It is obvious that if the Bible is handled as a merely human document, then its claims may be accepted or rejected, its teachings may be in agreement or disagreement with each other, its subject may or may not be found relevant to our belief today. The advantage is that we are left free to follow our own light and opinion; the disadvantage, that we are left with no divine Word to guide us. The

³ These issues are well discussed both by Grant Wacker in "The Demise of Biblical Civilization," in *The Bible in America*, ed. Nathan O. Hatch, Mark A. Noll (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

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significance of the evangelical conviction in this context is that it stands as a granite boulder squarely in the path of liberal revision and therefore attracts a good deal of anger and contempt. It is a serious impediment to theological experimentation and by itself practically rules out most of the precious convictions liberals hold fast to: i.e., the validity of other religions, a purely functional Christology, situational ethics, and the like. A high doctrine of Scripture and theological novelty do not go well together as everyone ought to be aware by now. *Sachkritik* is simply ruled out and this is all very frustrating to theological freethinkers. Therefore this concept of biblical authority is a weapon emplacement which must be destroyed first before the rest of Christian belief can be successfully breached. (Military imagery seems appropriate if we take a full measure of the seriousness of the present conflict.)

I am, of course, aware of a host of objections to my continuing to lean for support upon biblical infallibility. Wacker says it cannot do justice to the historical character of Scripture. Ruether claims she finds mistakes in the Bible. Dunn traces impossible contradictions. Ogden finds the true canon behind the canon. Critical scholarship is supposed to have proven the unscientific nature of belief in biblical authority. It is also held to be immoral and stultifying to restrict the mind in this way. Kelsey even charges that Warfield got his notion of authority from his mother's milk and not, as he thinks, from Jesus Christ and the Apostles. Psychologically, one might say that it represents a childish wish for an oracular authority in order to make sense of the world; or that it jeopardizes the freedom of critical scholarship to play its needful role in theology; or that it forces theology to be just hermeneutical and never constructive; or that it cannot work because it is too optimistic about the classic text in

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terms of its unity and reliability and relevance; or that, inspired or not, the Scriptures still have to be interpreted by fallible persons whose agendas affect the work significantly and contaminate the source. It is quite obvious to me that unless conservative theologians pay more attention to explaining their methodological choice they will not be successful in gaining leadership in the higher levels of theological work, whether their group is numerous or not. The future outlook is not clear. While it seems obvious that the revisionists are steadily surrendering their distinctively Christian identity and thus threatening their enterprise as a Christian one, it is not clear whether conservative theology is going to be able to rise to the occasion and give the answers which are called for. What a fine tragedy it would be if those with the most Christian and promising option proved unable to make good their case against many objections so that the shift away from classical faith continue despite their work and effort.

My first point registers the conviction that the primary hermeneutical principle arises from the decision how to approach the biblical text, whether to view it as I do as God's written Word or to see it in a reduced mode such as is common today. One's pre-understanding of the Bible, either as God's infallible Word or as merely human traditions from which both illuminating and distorting ideas come is critical to one's use of the Bible. I wish there were not a chasm between those who take it one way and those who take it the other; but I fear that there is. I wish we could move beyond this "fundamentalist-modernist" conflict but I do not see how we can.

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Exegetical Excellence

Having accepted the principle of biblical infallibility, the next point to emphasize is exegetical excellence. When I cite the Bible in support of some theological or ethical truth, it is essential that the citation be apt, intelligent, and discerning. I do not want to be sued by the Scriptures for exegetical malpractice. Satan, as Jesus discovered (Matt. 4:6), and false teachers, as Peter noticed (2 Peter 3:16), were quite prepared for and adept at twisting the Scriptures to serve their own ends, and no one is immune from doing the same thing. The fact that the very term "proof texting" has such a bad ring to it is evidence of the frequent lack of exegetical excellence. It is troubling and disconcerting to look up the verses cited by some orthodox theologians only to discover that the proof melts away under closer scrutiny of the meaning and context. Like many of the exegetes of years gone by, we should ground our theology and exposition on careful and sound interpretation.

Evangelicals have no business feeling smug about their Scripture principle. We must stop pretending it is an easy matter to retrieve biblical answers to modern questions from the Bible. It sounds easy if you keep repeating the formula "infallible, infallible," but when you get down to work it is not so easy. What does the Bible teach about gender roles, about wealth and poverty, about violence, about capital punishment, about predestination? Is it not all too common to find people using the Bible as a weapon in their own particular cause quite irresponsibly? And when this happens do we not have to ask whether the Bible is highly regarded for its own sake or because it serves as a means of bathing our traditions in an aura of inerrancy?

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We ought to strive for exegetical excellence and ought not to suppose that it will always make us comfortable.

Lest the reader suppose that only classical authors can be faulted for Scripture-twisting, let me hasten to give an example of it in the most avant-garde liberal theology at the present time. Since Schleiermacher's day there has been a strong tendency to revise Christology in the direction of a dynamic, functional model. A concerted effort has been made to understand Jesus as the embodiment of godliness rather than the incarnation of the eternal Son. In an effort to get the New Testament on the side of the liberal revisionists, exegetes are feverishly reworking their understanding of the old proof-texts for the true deity of Christ in order to undercut the metaphysical approach of the ancient creeds and of the vast majority of Christians. Until recently it was conceded that this revision could not claim the support at least of the fourth Gospel, though a fairly good case could be made for it elsewhere.⁴ But now the final assault is being attempted even upon John's Gospel by J. A. T. Robinson who claims to be able to show that John's Christology too is truncated.⁵ Now we may understand why his early dating of

⁴ James Dunn's point in *Christology in the Making* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980).

⁵ J. A. T. Robinson, "Dunn on John," *Theology*, 85 (September 1982), 332-338.

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John poses no threat to his radical theology as conservatives first thought it must. All I can say here is that such a hypothesis regarding the New Testament, which makes such nonsense of its soteriology (a man who merely reveals God cannot save us in the way the text says he can and does) and which goes against the *prima facie* sense of such texts as Philippians 2:6-9 and John 20:28, cannot long succeed whatever luminaries put their names to it.⁶ It is perfectly clear to me at least that what motivates this "exegesis" is not scholarly objectivity but a desire for what is supposedly apologetic relevance. But with opponents of the high caliber of Dr. Robinson, the orthodox theologian has to keep on his or her exegetical toes.

Regarding this quest for exegetical excellence, I would admit that I have to take care to be more discriminating than evangelicals sometimes are. I have to take a close look at the text in its original context, observe its scope and direction, consider the question it may be answering, and the like. I must consider the strength of its affirmation, its place within cumulative biblical revelation, and its distinctive tone within the symphony of the scriptural choir. Appealing to the Bible for theological norms is a more difficult thing to do than many evangelicals are aware, and I try to be cognizant of that myself. Not to accept these qualifications of

⁶ Leon Morris, "The Emergence of the Doctrine of the Incarnation," *Themelios*, 8 (September 1982), 15-19.

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exegesis is to run the risk of twisting the Bible in the name of conservative thought.

While we are on this subject, how is it that those who take a high view of the Scriptures are known to produce less by way of creative biblical interpretation than those who either bracket the question or treat the text as a human document? One might think that presupposing infallibility would stimulate relatively more productivity rather than less. It might be that the time of the conservatives is taken up in defending the Bible, not leaving them time to expound it. But that does not seem to be true. Quite apart from the inelegance of such a situation in itself, the results in the area of methodology are not full and impressive enough to support this explanation. I suspect the answer is to be found in a less complimentary direction. I think that our preoccupation with the divine side of the Bible has resulted in our neglecting the human side of it. This has misled us into thinking that we have already grasped (and appropriated in our evangelical traditions) the revelation freight which it delivers. We have tended to opt out of critical study of the Bible and left it to others in a spirit of complacency as though the meaning of the Bible were exhausted already. If so, we are guilty of an impiety and may very well live to see the transfer of exegetical wealth from our side to the other.

Theological Integration

In systematic theology we reach for the whole of the scriptural witness and try to comprehend it. Negatively this means that one is not free to leave anything out. Gordon Kaufman, even in his less radical days, could admit that God's wrath played no role in his

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theology of God, even though Jesus often spoke about it, because it falls foul of the reconstructed norm he has created by his own reading of the Bible. Wrath is no part of God's revelation in Christ as Dr. Kaufman sees it.⁷

Obviously I am not free to pick and choose between biblical doctrines as he appears to be. I am not free to perform the theological reduction that marks the shift to humanity in religious liberalism. Nor am I at liberty to do what J. Christian Beker does when he reads Paul in a way that puts the Apostle at odds with much of the Pauline corpus and most of the rest of the New Testament.⁸ It would not be true that I take this stance because I can easily see how to refute his actual argument. (Its weakness would perhaps be in Galatians where the favored apocalyptic theme is marginal, endangering Beker's thesis. A proper refutation will have to be done by the New Testament scholars, not by theologians.) I simply presuppose its falsity on the grounds of my confidence in Scripture, the inspiration of which carries with it an assumption of its unity and coherence. Any hypothesis which postulates the self-contradictory

⁷ Gordon D. Kaufman, *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective* (New York: Scribner's, 1968), p. 154.

⁸ J. Christian Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980).

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character of the Bible is automatically suspect by the evangelical theologian. This frank admission of mine may lead scholars like Kümmel to conclude that objective scholarly work is excluded by such a presupposition belonging to theological orthodoxy.⁹ It would interest me more to learn, however, just how scholarship which does *not* assume coherence in the Scriptures can credibly be called Christian scholarship.

Positively, the quest for the whole picture in the Bible means searching for the doctrinal models and keys which fit its complex locks and opening them up to the reader. Somewhat like scientific theories, dogmas are conceptual gestalts built up reproductively through imaginative attempts to render the biblical phenomena intelligible. The Bible itself is the "foot" which the doctrinal models must fit. As Montgomery puts it: "Science and theology form and test their respective theories in the same way; the scientific theorizer attempts objectively to formulate conceptual Gestalts (hypotheses, theories, laws) capable of rendering Nature intelligible, and the theologian endeavors to provide conceptual Gestalts (doctrines, dogmas) which will 'fit the facts' and properly reflect the norms of Holy Scripture."¹⁰ The language of dogma may be different from

⁹ Werner G. Kümmel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of Its Problems* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), p. 13.

¹⁰ John Warwick Montgomery, *The Suicide of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1970), p. 287.

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the language of Scripture, but the message must be the same. The theologian must strive to duplicate the teachings of Scripture even if the latter is written in ordinary language and the theologians own essays are written in a more academic mode. Both ways of speaking are valid, just as the different ways in which the meteorologist and the person in the street speak about the weather are valid.¹¹

In appealing to the whole of Scripture I do not imagine either that the text is uniformly doctrinally 'friendly' or that it assumes a simple unity of texture and emphasis. The Bible must be used circumspectly with a willingness to respect the kind of norm it is in every place. I try to have regard for the richness and diversity that it offers on all the major topics and not to force it into models dear to my church tradition. On the fall, the person of Christ, or the millennial reign, I seek to assemble the relevant data, not slighting any of it, and let my reflection partake in the inexhaustible richness of the text. This includes not forcing the analysis further than the data will allow. If the New Testament refuses to tell us how Jesus can be both human and divine at the same time (which it does), then I will have to live with that fact and look longingly at the questions I wish we could answer.

¹¹ Peter Toon, *The Development of Doctrine in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), pp. 106-113.

Reaching for the wholeness of Scripture is to read each text in the canonical context, not to see it as an atomic unit all alone but as a member of the divinely willed body of the canon such that the light of every part is shed on all the rest. The doctrine of inspiration implies belief in the coherence, if not tight uniformity, of Scripture and commits us to the quest for canonical wholeness. I am convinced that everything in Scripture is meant to be there and to have value. The challenge is to discover what truth and usefulness there is in it for us.

The Quest for Coherence

In the quest for doctrinal models I also search for interrelationships between the concepts. The proper work of systematic theology is, after all, the search after coherence and intelligibility. I desire to understand not only the religious experience or the time-bound perspectives of the writers but also the system of truth deposited by the Spirit in a particular text. I want to go beyond analysis to synthesis, beyond an understanding of a concept like sin to an understanding of it in relation to the doctrine of Christ and his saving work. Theology, as Millard Erickson points out, is organic in character. The view one takes in one area will affect the interpretation at other points as well. One's view of the atonement will reflect one's understanding of the plight of humanity and what needs to be done to effect human salvation. If one's problem is ignorance, one needs to be informed; if it is fear, one needs to be assured; if it is guilt, one needs propitiation.¹² Just as the numerous

¹² Millard Erickson, *Man's Need and God's Gift* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976), p. 334.

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strings of a piano have to be tuned in relation to each other, so the several truths of the Bible have to be viewed from many angles to determine the meaning of the whole. In doing so I am assuming that, whatever else the unity of the Bible may consist of (e.g., religious experience, overall perspective); it has a cognitive dimension to it which invites reflection on its truth claims.

How then does one find the system of truth which informs the Bible? While aware of the fact that one's denominational tradition provides such long before we seek it out, I contend that we ought to search the Scriptures for it. In the Bible there are, after all, various clues as to the heart of its message. Luther turned to Romans to find the truth of God's plan of justifying sinners through the atonement of Christ. Here the Apostle Paul himself tells us what God is doing for us and saying to us. Luther read it as the heart of the gospel and the center of the Bible.¹³ This is not the only clue and center even in the letters of Paul, not to speak of the New Testament at large, but it is a crucial dimension of it and gives the theologian a marvelous framework for displaying and exhibiting the message of the Bible in relation to the needs of people today. Because the Scriptures are richly textured and inexhaustible, it is important to leave the system loosely drawn in order to allow for new insights and changes of

¹³ Marvin Anderson, *The Battle for the Gospel: The Bible and the Reformation, 1444-1589* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), chap. 2.

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perspective which can always come. It should be seen as an interpretive hypothesis open to revision and useful for the task of proclamation. Given the variety of centers people seize upon (Luther, Calvin, Wesley, Barth), it is important that we be willing to explain and defend the center we have chosen. In particular it is essential to be able to show that the center was chosen not because of contemporary cultural concerns but on the basis of biblical substance. It is all right to be concerned about relevance, but one should not replace revelation with relevance.

The Bible itself places real limits on the systematic work we can do. We cannot go beyond the evidence. We have to respect the practical orientation of much of the text. We cannot invent new data or eliminate any. We have to learn to be content with what we have in terms of our exegetical findings. We may even have to accept antinomies which offend the rational impulse.¹⁴ Our curiosity must often go unsatisfied, and we must be willing to change our minds when the evidence mounts up against our treasured system and unseats it.

Presuppositionless Exegesis?

To be honest, about this I would have to grant that the systematic framework we use is not ordinarily derived from a purely inductive

¹⁴ I4. Cf. D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981).

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examination of the Bible; it is given to us by the Christian tradition which we respect. We read the Bible as Baptists, or Anglicans, or Catholics, or Lutherans, and this fact influences what we read. It forcibly reminds us that the work of interpretation is not done by a single individual or even a single generation but by the Universal Church over time. The system we receive is the product of the reflection on Scripture by countless believers for hundreds of years. As such it deserves respect, but being self-aware ought also to make us self-critical and open to correction. In my own teaching of theology I find it best to use, rather than a single textbook with a single point of view, a reader which presents several angles of interpretation on specifics and on the whole because it forces students confronting a plurality of systems to decide for themselves what the Scriptures say. My own hope is that the whole church would move toward a greater appropriation of its apostolicity, toward "the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood" (Eph. 4:13).

Now let me comment on how I relate to contemporary human concerns in my basically hermeneutical theology. Since I reject critical correlation in which one can critique the scriptural classics out of modern experience, and yet since I have to apply the text to the situation, whatever that situation is, how do I respond to challenges from the side of culture, reason, and tradition? Culture is a factor external to Scripture: how do I respond to the issues it continually throws up? Obviously it involves some swimming against the stream and a forfeiting of some of the liberty enjoyed by constructional theologians.

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Modern theology is characterized by an acute awareness of the historical situatedness of the interpreter and an equal passion to relate to what contemporary people bring to the text. It is as if the awareness of our time-bound condition has made us determined to conform theology to our situation rather than to protect it from possible corruption. I see the current tendency to relate theology to struggles of the present day, while commendable if it were to represent a desire to apply the Scriptures, to be a recipe for Scripture-twisting on a grand scale. The desire to be relevant and up-to-date has caused numerous theologians to secularize the gospel and make it suitable to the wishes of modern hearers (Cf. 2 Tim. 4:3-4). The desire to be relevant has overcome the desire to be faithful to God's Word with the result that a great accommodation is taking place. Non-revelational factors are being permitted to take precedence over revelation norms. Bultman's use of existential categories and Cobb's use of process thought cannot be explained in terms of biblical reflection but must be explained in terms of the influence of secular modernity. Our desire to be politically radical (or correct), or feminist, or gay, or religiously tolerant, or academically respectable-- are just some of the factors moving much modern theology, not God's Word. And we must resist it as resolutely as the Reformers resisted the mistaken human opinions in Catholic theology at the time. Of course, I too am moved by all these pressures. I too would like to think that the Buddhist will be saved by faith apart from Jesus Christ and that the darker picture found in Romans might be overdrawn. But I cannot enjoy the luxury of such speculations when the Bible already indicates its mind on such matters.

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The principle is that what is not revelation cannot be made a matter of theological truth. Only what is taught in Scripture is binding on the conscience. This was always our objection to earlier forms of Roman Catholicism or Protestant Liberalism; we must not add human traditions to the scriptural revelation as if they were binding on the church. We take the same line on religious sects such as the Mormons, Christian Science, and the Witnesses. It is unacceptable to allow the most revered writings or theories men to occupy a place above the Scriptures. The same is true for the writings of Heidegger, Whitehead, Marx, and Freud. In them we find brilliant insights, but not the saving Word of God. From them we derive much useful analysis, but not written revelation. We take our stand against all those who infringe upon the authority of the Bible and the liberty of God's people by imposing on the church their own opinions as if they were final and enjoy a status above God's Word. As Ramm put it, "The encroachment of the word of man upon the Word of God is a danger we should be constantly alert to, and with all our strength we should maintain the freedom of the Word of God from the word of man."¹⁵ Fortunately the inexhaustible richness of Scripture ensures that our loyalty to it does not leave us without a relevant word to say to modern culture but actually unfailingly provides a compelling word to speak into the culture whatever that is.

¹⁵ Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Wilde, 1956), p. 161.

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Let me add that this does not mean that I ignore the influence of culture upon myself as an interpreter. Obviously we are influenced by our place in history in a thousand respects. Yet this is the reason we must not succumb to it but must instead take measures to ensure that bias does not overcome God's truth. Precisely because we tend to be prejudiced (what people politely call "having a pre-understanding") we have to be self-critical and take action against the danger of Scripture-twisting. There is a hermeneutical circle, but it need not be a vicious one. What we need to do is to strive for such interpretation of the Bible which anyone reading the text can see even if he or she does not come with the opinions we hold ourselves. Perfect objectivity is not something we can achieve, but it is an ideal we can strive for by consciously opening ourselves to criticism and correction both by God, speaking through the text, and by the convictions of others.

Toward Theological Integration and Personal Integrity

In relation to reason I have to strive to integrate independently arrived at convictions with Scripture in a biblically faithful manner. Reason may tell me, for example, that if God knows the future exhaustively, then every detail of it is fixed and certain and the freedom most humans believe they have (and which Scripture itself seems to say that we have) is an illusion. Biblical teaching about the divine foreknowledge appears to contradict biblical teaching about human freedom, and it is nigh unto impossible to see how the puzzle can be resolved rationally. The writers simply do not seem to feel that the two notions are mutually exclusive, but instead they place the two ideas in juxtaposition at every turn and seem indifferent to our intellectual dilemma in this regard. This drives us back to a more

precise definition of freedom, to speculations about time and timelessness, to problems of theodicy, to discussions about God's will(s), and the like. The whole issue has been debated practically nonstop for hundreds of years and resists a final word. The lesson we have to learn from this is not to reduce such questions to a simple solution which tampers with the scriptural data. We must not seize the sovereignty pole and block out the human freedom pole, or vice versa, which would violate the Bible's integrity. Theologies which have tended to do this have resulted in really unfortunate positions by way of implication and extension. The biblical balance is what we should strive to maintain in our theology as well. The mark of a wise and sound theologian is to let the tensions which exist in the Bible stay there and to resist the temptation from reason to tamper with them. In this particular case, the metaphysical competence of our reason is humbled. I cannot tamper with the data as regards divine sovereignty and human freedom just because it would be easier if one were at liberty to do so.

As for the area of creation and science, has not reason compelled us to abandon the referential meaning of the biblical texts in Genesis and forced us to treat them in a theological and even mythological way? No, that is not the situation I find myself in. Science has surely forced me to re-examine aspects of the traditional exegesis of the text, but it has by no means had the effect of discrediting the source or forcing me existentially to reinterpret it. Science has raised new questions for the text to answer but by no means has it replaced the Scriptures as the authority. I would want to distinguish between a ministerial and a magisterial role for science in theology, just as for reason in theology. Just as we use insights from archaeology and linguistics to shed light on what the text says, so science sends us

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back to the Bible with new insights that need do no violence to the text but still illuminate it. Upon re-examining the biblical narratives in the light of these insights I find new ways of interpreting them which involve no immoral Scripture-twisting. The polemical characters of Genesis 1 and the symbolic nature of Genesis 2 and 3 are both close to the original intent of those texts and in agreement with certain of the scientific theories now widely entertained. At the same time, scientific thought in all these areas is far from unified or complete, and there is no particular urgency to reconcile every discrepancy at this time. When one finds Fred Hoyle announcing his conviction that evolution cannot have taken place on this planet from scratch in the time available, but must instead have been brought in from outer space, the Bible believer obviously is under no pressure to get into line with the evolutionists whose house itself appears to be in considerable disrepair. New light can arise from science and help us in our understanding, but nothing from that quarter need make us forsake the Scripture principle.

Another scientific objection occurs in the judgment of many against the mighty acts of God recorded in the gospel. It is often maintained that a scientific viewpoint presupposes a uniform continuum of cause and effect which would require us to reject the supernatural and magic. In part, this is a question of people's plausibility structures. Undoubtedly those with a materialist frame of reference do find it impossible to take seriously such a claim as Jesus' bodily resurrection. But, then again, not everybody has this frame of reference. Believers in the living God shape their expectations of the world in relation to this belief so that the question of credibility looks quite different. Besides, in the wider society it is by no means the case that most people accept the narrowly materialist reading.

On the contrary, we see evidence of para-normal beliefs everywhere: in amulets; in astrology columns; in clairvoyance; in mediums; in the quest for healing. Obviously it is an exaggeration to say that the "modern person" can and cannot believe in this area, and it is quite presumptuous to legislate metaphysically what can and cannot happen. While it is true that the scientific method cannot easily handle the category of non-natural objects or events (like the Shroud of Turin), this fact does not say anything about the possibility of miracle. This lack of ability to address miracles may create a problem for apologetic strategy should we want to argue evidentially from miracles, but it really poses no great theological difficulty.¹⁶

Reason is a faculty of great usefulness to theology and exegesis. Occasionally it rises up to challenge Scripture and when it does we ought to put it in its place, its place being a supportive, ministerial, non-legislative one. But for the most part reason serves us well.

The Use and Usefulness of Tradition

In relation to tradition, is this not an extra-biblical factor which affects my use of Scripture and refutes the claim that it is the sole norm? Obviously tradition does color the way I read my Bible. When I, as a Baptist, or my sister, as a Catholic, read the verse "this is my body," a flood of opinions pour out as to the meaning of that

¹⁶ C. E. William J. Abraham, *Divine Revelation and the Limits of Historical Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

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text. These traditions of ours provide contexts in which the search for its meaning has gone on and is going on. In the case of all great classic pieces literature (be it the Bible or Shakespeare), people have pored over them for centuries and placed various constructions and estimations upon these works. All of this together represents a rich comprehension of the original text which guides the new reader's own quest.

Tradition serves me in another way as well. When I confront heretical teachers who advance their novelties in the name of some lost-sight-of exegetical insight (and which of them does not?), the creeds of the church universal, though not infallible, both provide temporary respite by alerting me to the time honored convictions of multitudes of believing persons before my time and make me pause before accepting innovations. Tradition has a way of buying time for me while a proper exegetical response is worked out. The burden of defending the faith is not one we have to carry alone but one which is shared by countless others living and dead. Looking back through the corridors of tradition makes me realize that there is no real danger that the truth of God faithfully witnessed to for millennia will change its shape and wither away.

The biblical faith is never found apart from tradition. It does not exist in pure essence free of historical forms and fallibilities. But the essence and the forms are not identical and must not be equated. The Bible represents within the flow of history the norm and criterion for determining what is permanent and what is changing, what is legitimate and what is not. Tradition never mirrors purely and perfectly the truth of the gospel, and it always needs to be monitored by God's Word. Tradition is a wonderful servant but a poor master.

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It serves the church in many ways. But it does not share the same plane with the Scripture. It can and should be placed beneath the Bible and corrected when necessary by the biblical message when it becomes corrupted or complacent.

Conclusion

The marvel of God's Word is its demonstrated and proven power to speak with fresh power and to reform and renew the church and its theology. We humbly ask the Lord to do it again for us and for our time,¹⁷ because, as Martin Luther declares:

*A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing;
Our helper He, amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing:
For still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe . . .*

*Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing;
Were not the right Man on our side, the Man of God's own choosing:
Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is He . . .
And He must win the battle.*

¹⁷ By far the most important book a position like mine will have to face is Edward Farley, *Ecclesial Reflection: An Anatomy of Theological Method* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982). It represents a devastating critique of the Scripture principle which I try to use and will have to be answered by conservatives. Among other things, I have attempted an answer myself in *The Scripture Principle* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984).

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And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us, We will not fear, for God hath willed His truth to triumph through us: The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for him; His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure, One little word shall fell him.

*That word above all earthly powers, no thanks to them, abideth;
The Spirit and the gifts are ours through Him Who with us sideth:
Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also;
The body they may kill: God's truth abideth still,
His kingdom is forever.*