

Evangelical Review of Theology

EDITOR: DAVID PARKER

Volume 27 • Number 1 • January 2003

*Articles and book reviews reflecting global
evangelical theology for the purpose of
discerning the obedience of faith*



Published by
PATERNOSTER PERIODICALS

for
**WORLD EVANGELICAL
ALLIANCE**
Theological Commission

The Holy Spirit, Hermeneutics, and Transformation: From Present to Future Glory

Gary L. Nebeker

Keywords: Christocentric, role, illumination, application, divine image, renewal, truth, teleology

Introduction

Throughout the history of the Protestant Church, the role of the Spirit in interpretation has been subsumed under discussions of the doctrine of illumination.¹ In the past quarter century, the topic of the role of the Spirit in hermeneutics has made its way into a small but significant number of books, journal articles, and scholarly essays.² As a rule, discussions in the literature have focused on two principal inquiries: Does the Holy Spirit aid in the interpretation of the text, or Does the Holy Spirit aid an interpreter in the

application of the text? This article proposes a third more nuanced alternative. Because 'truth' can be understood as that which is christocentric and transformational in character, the role of the Holy Spirit in hermeneutics must be understood in a similar way. The Spirit's role—or goal—in interpretation is to allow the interpreter to understand the text in such a way that the text transforms the interpreter into the image of Christ. While this may appear as a

Gary L. Nebeker (PhD, Dallas) is Otto and Mildred Kotouc Professor of Theology at Grace University in Omaha, Nebraska. He has had articles recently published in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, *Trinity Journal*, *Journal of Biblical Counseling*, and *Fides et Historia*. Dr Nebeker currently serves on the steering committee of the Dispensational Study Group in the Evangelical Theological Society in North America. His areas of specialization and interest include soteriology, anthropology, eschatology, and Pauline theology.

¹ For a helpful overview, see James P. Callahan, 'Claritas Scripturae: The Role of Perspicuity in Protestant Hermeneutics', *JETS* 39 (1996), pp. 353-372.

² Along these lines, several recent works bear mention, Millard J. Erickson, *Evangelical Interpretation: Perspectives on Hermeneutical Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), pp. 33-54; David J. McKinley, 'John Owen's View of Illumination: An Alternative to the Fuller-Erickson Dialogue', *BSac* 154 (1997), pp. 93-104; and Daniel B. Wallace, 'The Holy Spirit and Hermeneutics', 1-6 [cited 24 April 2002] Online: <http://www.bible.org/docs/soapbox/hermns.htm>

foregone conclusion, transformation as the Spirit's role in hermeneutics, surprisingly enough, has not been a focal feature in the literature on this topic.³ This exploratory essay, then, will attempt to explicate the relationship between textual interpretation and the transforming work of the Holy Spirit.

The Christocentric Character of Truth

In a host of instances in the NT, the word 'truth' refers to statements that are absent of falsehood, or statements that stand in contrast to lying or deception.⁴ However, to limit our understanding of 'truth' only to this, puts us into a framework of thinking of 'truth' only as 'propositionally correct' statements about God.⁵ In one important instance in the Johannine literature, 'truth' is regarded not only as statements absent of falsehood, but 'truth' is equated with a person, Jesus Christ: 'the way, *the truth*, and the life' (John 14:6). As the

revealed reality of God, Jesus Christ is truth incarnate. Thus, 'sentences and beliefs about him ... depend on the action of this person—or, more precisely, on his distinctive role in the unitary action of the Father who sends him and of the Spirit whom he gives'.⁶ While 'truth' certainly has to do with cognitive convictions or beliefs about God that are not false, 'truth' must also be understood as that which is *personal* and *relational* in character. With Jesus as the personification of 'truth,' as the 'truth' to whom we relate, 'truth,' we could also argue, is he who transforms us into his image. Hence, there is an aspect of truth that is personal, relational, and transformational in nature: 'to know the truth is to be known by the truth.'⁷

From the Pauline perspective, transformation into the image of Christ is both now and not yet. Paul regarded the future restoration of humankind's fallen moral dignity (Rom. 5:2; 8:18, 21, 30) as something that begins with union with the exalted Christ, who is the giver of eschatological life through the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45; 2 Cor. 3:17). By virtue of identification with the exalted Christ, 'glory,' is restored *already in part* and is a *present real-*

³ While transformation per se is not his specific focus, see the discussion of spirituality and exegesis in Bruce K. Waltke, 'Exegesis and the Spiritual Life: Theology as Spiritual Formation', *Crux* 30 (1994), pp. 28-35.

⁴ Anthony C. Thiselton, 'Truth', in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 3:883-894. Drawing upon the correspondence theory of truth, Nicole correctly concludes that, 'The full Bible concept of truth involves factuality, faithfulness, and completeness.' Roger Nicole, 'The Biblical Concept of Truth', in *Scripture and Truth*, eds. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), p. 296.

⁵ Alister McGrath, *A Passion for Truth: The Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1996), pp. 177-78.

⁶ So, Bruce D. Marshall, '"We Shall Bear the Image of the Man of Heaven": Theology and the Concept of Truth', *Modern Theology* 11 (1995), p. 107.

⁷ Søren Kierkegaard, *Unscientific Postscript* (London: Oxford, 1941), pp. 169-224. While we appreciate this insight, he overstated the case by insisting that truth was not so much an objective body of veracious convictions as it was the transformation of one's life that occurs as a result of personally appropriating the truth.

ity through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. This process occurs, as the believer gazes upon the glory of Christ: 'all of us ... seeing the glory [moral perfection] of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image [of christlikeness] from one degree of glory [present moral dignity] to another [future christlike moral perfection]; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit' (2 Cor. 3:18). The *not-yet* of present glory is consummated at the resurrection when the physical body is 'raised in glory' and 'raised in power' (1 Cor. 15:43; Philp. 3:21).

Beholding the moral perfection of Christ in the 'not yet' consists of a spiritually informed concentration upon the christocentric witness of Scripture. The christocentric witness of the Bible is seen in Jesus' words in John 5:39, 'it is they [the Scriptures] that testify on my behalf.' This is also implied from Jesus' self-disclosure to the disciples on the road to Emmaus: 'Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to *them the things about himself in all the scripture*' (Luke 24:27). This christocentric testimony of Scripture serves as one of the effectual means of the believer's moral transformation into the image of Christ. With Kline we concur that, 'Man's reception of the divine image from Christ, the Glory-Presence, is depicted as a transforming vision of the Glory and as an investiture with the Glory.'⁸ By 'transformation' we refer to the con-

sequent, lasting spiritual and ethical effect that the text has upon our lives, transformation that begins with the renewal of our minds (Rom. 12:2a cf. Eph. 4:23).

To illustrate further this christocentric understanding of truth, let us consider Paul's words to the Gentile Christians of Ephesus. He reminded them of the futility of their former way of living, and then makes the point, 'But you did not *learn Christ* in this way, if indeed you have heard him and have been taught in him, just as *truth* is in Jesus' (Eph. 4:21). For the Ephesian Gentiles to 'learn Christ' meant being taught the tradition regarding Jesus. Paul's Colossian parallel is worth noting in this connection: 'As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught ...' (Col. 2:6, 7). 'Learning Christ' (Eph. 4:21) also meant being spiritually transformed 'by the living Christ who was the source of a new way of life as well as of a new relationship with God'.⁹ When Paul asserted that 'truth is in Jesus', his words can be taken to mean that the truth of the gospel tradition finds its summary in Jesus, in his words, his deeds, and the validity of his witness.¹⁰

The christocentric and transforming nature of truth is also seen in Paul's perplexity over the Galatians' reversion to righteousness based on externals: 'I am again in the pain of

⁸ Meredith G. Kline, *Images of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), pp. 28-29.

⁹ Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*. Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1990), p. 280.

¹⁰ Thiselton, *NIDNTT*, 3:892; Lincoln, *Ephesians*, p. 280.

childbirth until *Christ is formed in you* (Gal. 4:19). An important part of the Galatian Christians' transformation into christlikeness, we might surmise, was a fuller, more correct understanding of the gospel, specifically, how the Galatians would find their acceptance with a righteous God through the sufficiency of Christ's completed work (Gal. 2:5, 14; 4:16; 5:7).

Paul draws a parallel between the christocentricity of the gospel and its transforming effect in the New Covenant ministry of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 3:1–4:18). Having their spiritual blindness removed, those who hear the gospel, in a manner of speaking, behold the glory of Christ. And, 'as though reflected in a mirror, [those who behold the glory of Christ] are being transformed into the same image [of Christ] from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit' (2 Cor. 3:18). From Paul's understanding of the gloriousness of the New Covenant, we can posit that to understand the gospel aright is to understand Christ aright; to understand Christ aright is to understand 'truth' aright.

The Teleology of the Spirit in Interpretation

Having thus considered this aspect of truth as that which is christocentric, relational, and transformational in character, then our understanding of the Spirit's role in interpretation must be understood in a similar way. The Spirit's role—or goal—in interpretation is to allow us to understand the text in such a way that it trans-

forms us into the image of Christ. It is sometimes stated that the role of the Holy Spirit is connected to the *application* of a text more so than its *interpretation*. However, given the intricate interrelation between interpretation and application, we should not be forced to choose between an 'either—or' in this matter.¹¹ Moreover, since the notion of textual 'application' is rather general in nature, I am inclined to speak of a more specific role of the Holy Spirit, namely, transformation. This transformation, as we have noted, is a work in process that is both already and not yet. Finally, one may also wonder if 'doing' something the Bible commands necessarily leads to transformation into christlikeness. At times, it seems that a distinction can be made between behavioural modification and transformation into christlikeness.¹²

Christlikeness, I submit, consists of the virtues of faith, hope, and love (1 Cor. 13:13) as well as the other spiritual virtues enumerated in the NT. Drawing from the terminology of a correspondence theory of truth, followers of Christ are in a relationship of correspondence to Jesus. As Marshall puts it, 'It is a relation among persons in which one person [Christ] joins numerous others [believers] to himself by [their] faith hope, and love, and in that way makes them like himself It is thus a relation of

¹¹ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, N. J.: P & R Publishing, 1987), pp. 81–85.

¹² For the classical explication of this distinction, see Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale, 1959).

subject [believers] to term [Christ] in which the subject can, in an unpuzzling sense, be like—correspond to—the term.¹³ All of this means that the Spirit not only aids us in a correct understanding of the text, but aids us in such a way that this understanding is consequently followed through by life change.

Perhaps we have too often assumed that the Holy Spirit helps us to come to 'propositionally correct' understandings of Scripture. That is to say, the Holy Spirit guides us so that our interpretations of the Bible do not contain falsehood or doctrinal error. While on the one hand we do not demur from this, on the other hand, is it not true that even non-Christian interpreters can understand the Scriptures correctly—if only in piecemeal fashion?¹⁴ Perhaps we should suggest that non-believers can at times 'understand' the text, but they do not regard what they understand as 'truth' that is personally relevant. Personal relevance, we submit, is something that can be achieved only through the 'assessment' or 'appraisal' of the Holy Spirit. This seems to be the upshot of Paul's words in First Corinthians 2:14 when he wrote, 'Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God's Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.'

When Paul speaks of being transformed by the renewing of our minds

(Rom. 12:2a cf. Eph. 4:23), there is a sense in which we become whom we know.¹⁵ Thus, the role of the Holy Spirit in hermeneutics is (1) aiding our understanding of who Christ is, and (2) effecting our transformation into Christ's image. The work of the Holy Spirit in hermeneutics involves both the former and the latter—not one to the exclusion of the other. Of course, the challenge that comes with this proposal is that it is difficult at times to measure spiritual transformation—difficult perhaps, but not impossible.¹⁶

Another matter merits consideration. If God has a desired priority, result, or goal for what occurs when his people read or hear his Word, what might that be? Admittedly, we could offer several different responses to this end (e.g., obedience, confession, repentance, thanksgiving, or worship, to name a few). However, given Paul's understanding of God's restoration of the fallen image of God in humankind through Christ, can we not affirm that God's overarching desire is that his people be created to be like him in true righteousness and holiness according to the image of their creator (Eph. 4:23-24; Col. 3:10)? Can we not also aver that God has effectively predestined our conformity to Christ (Rom. 8:29; Eph. 1:5)? In conceding these points, then, one of the means whereby God accomplishes our transformation is through the gaze

¹³ Marshall, 'Bear the Image,' pp. 110-111.

¹⁴ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), pp. 255-56.

¹⁵ Ellen T. Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Doctrine* (New York: Oxford, 1997), p. 26.

¹⁶ In this connection, a work such as Edwards's *Religious Affections* serves as a competent guide.

that the believer brings to bear on the christocentric witness of the Word of God. This transformation, we maintain, is attainable only through the Spirit working in conjunction with our hearing and reflection upon the scriptures. This renewal spans from 'one degree of glory,' our present moral dignity, 'to another,' our future christlike moral perfection (2 Cor. 3:18c).

Does the Holy Spirit continue to transform an interpreter even if he has misunderstood a text? I am willing to answer this question with a qualified 'yes' if we can concede that transformation occurs with not only the interpretation of one biblical text, but through a collection of biblical texts. Sometimes textual misunderstanding occurs when a person incorrectly reads something from another biblical text into the biblical text that is under consideration. Lay people and even scholars may read other biblical texts and themes into a given text when the text under consideration is actually stating something else. Hence, what they are saying may be true from the fuller biblical picture, but their interpretation is not what the text under consideration is stating.¹⁷ Depending, of course, on their level of hermeneutical skills, interpreters will acquire a collection of correct textual interpretations over the course of time. Because of this, and because of a prayerful dependency upon the Holy Spirit, an interpreter may expect the continual transforming work of God

in her life. Because we have acquired a larger framework of many correct textual interpretations, transformation into christlikeness will continue even if we have misinterpreted some texts. This reinforces Paul's truism that our present knowledge of God is indirect and as a consequence, partial (1 Cor. 13:12a). Yet, he holds forth the certainty that one day ('then,' 1 Cor. 13:12b) our knowledge of God will be direct, free from the limitations of our present finitude and moral taint.

Conclusion

Looking back on my days as a college and seminary student, I always appreciated those professors who strove for a healthy balance of scholarship and spirituality in the classroom. Still, I have wondered if the transformational dimension of exegesis and theology was stressed enough in my education. In light of this, I have had to re-evaluate my role as a theologian and an educator. I recognize that theology was once regarded as the 'queen of the sciences,' and that there is a degree of scientific methodology that attends this discipline. At the same time, I have come to regard my vocation more as a narrative art that has spiritual transformation into the image of Christ as my principal didactic goal. I want to emphasize to my students that knowledge of scripture must translate into a relational knowledge of Christ. Such knowledge of Christ is not merely a 'scientific' understanding of Christ as an 'it', but a relational knowledge of Christ as a 'thou'. Such knowledge is

¹⁷ Vern S. Poythress, 'The Divine Meaning of Scripture,' *WTJ* 48 (1986), pp. 275, 278.

not knowledge for knowledge's sake, but is a knowledge that indelibly imprints our soul with the beauty and magnetism of Christ himself. Perhaps an appropriate question to ask ourselves after we have exegeted a text is: 'How will this passage lead to a greater conformity to Christ?' When asking this question, we must also remember that transformation into christlikeness will require a willingness or readiness on our part to experience anxiety or difficulty. To be sure, transformation can bring acute discomfort to our lives.

Concerning this relational-transformational knowledge of Christ, it is crucial that we take our cues from Paul's Ephesian correspondence. In that letter he states that our knowledge of Christ is something that is already possessed (Eph. 4:3-6), but is not yet fully attained (Eph. 4:13). Along with 'unity of the faith,' Paul affirms that one of the goals of Christ's gifting of the church is to bring her to 'the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ' (Eph. 4:13). If one of the eschatological aims of Christ's gifting of the church is the maturity of his people, perhaps transformation into the image of Christ should be a principal goal in the interpretive and theological enterprise. At first blush, this objective might seem overly basic or

even trite.¹⁸ Yet, humility should tell us that there is always room for growth in spiritual maturity for the people of God—even for learned scholars, pastors, and theological educators.

For those of us who are theological scholars, is seasoned, transformed insight or sapience cherished as much as is scholarly competence or notoriety? These are not mutually exclusive, but they can be. At times, skilled interpreters can correctly understand the text, but the transformational effect of the Holy Spirit may not be taking hold in our lives because of undetected or unconfessed sin. Lest we think of ourselves more highly than we ought, it ought to be remembered that exegetes and theologues are especially vulnerable to lust for recognition, arrogance, vain assertiveness, hasty defensiveness, incredulous denial, provincialism, egotistical opportunism as well as other subtleties of the flesh. In short, spiritual maturity as the teleological work of the Spirit in hermeneutics must never be regarded as methodological naïveté or a banal appeal to piety.

It is important to add that the hermeneutical aim of spiritual matu-

¹⁸ On the ethical function and goals of hermeneutics, see Roger Lundin, Anthony C. Thiselton, and Clarence Walhout, *The Responsibility of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), p. 9. Regarding theology's contribution to christlikeness through Christian wisdom, see, Charry, *Renewing of Your Minds*, pp. 3-32; and Kevin J. Vanhoozer, 'The Voice and the Actor: A Dramatic Proposal about the Ministry and Ministry of Theology', in *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method*, John G. Stackhouse, Jr., ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), p. 90.

rity (à la transformation into the image of Christ), is applicable not only individually, but corporately as well. Interpretive communities and the gifted interpreters therein must have not only correct understanding of the text as an intended goal, but the spiritual maturity of their interpretive community as well. Too often, we limit spiritual maturity to that which the Holy Spirit effects individualistically. Given the corporate implications of the 'new man' language in the letters to the Ephesians and Colossians,¹⁹ it is altogether appropriate to speak of spiritual maturity in a collective sense as well. This applies to the local church, to denominations, to para-church ministries, and the broader theological heritages to which we belong. Our prayer and confident expectancy must be that our churches and

institutions, as expressions of the corporate Christ, bear greater resemblance to Christ with the passing of time.

In future discussions of the role of the Holy Spirit in interpretation, it will be necessary to underscore the correlation between hearing the text, understanding it, and allowing the text to change us not only individually but corporately as well. Therefore, in keeping with Paul's urging, as we read the text, as we gaze upon Christ, 'we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ' (Eph. 4:15b). Yet, humility and commitment must accompany this hermeneutical endeavour. 'Humility is called for by the interpreter's awareness that final truth may not always be in his grasp. But commitment signifies that the interpreter never give up in his quest to find the truth.'²⁰ This quest for truth, as I have maintained, is a quest for Christ.

¹⁹ See, Darrell L. Bock, 'The "New Man" as Community in Colossians and Ephesians', in *Integrity of Heart, Skillfulness of Hands: Biblical and Leadership Studies in Honor of Donald K. Campbell*, ed. Charles H. Dyer and Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), pp.157-67.

²⁰ Winfried Corduan, 'Humility and Commitment: An Approach to Modern Hermeneutics', *Themelios* 11 (1986), p. 83.

Living the Kingdom

*Let us hear again the kingdom stories,
Of a future-past revealed in Christ.
Impacting on our present, this was-is-will be time
confronts us,
With a history that is anticipated and created now;
In our flawed, but consecrated humanity.*

Verse by Garry Harris, Adelaide, South Australia
(used with permission)