Divine Transcendence and the Reading of Scripture

Michael Allen, Wheaton College, Illinois

I. READING AND REVEALING—IMPASSE?

Recent discussion regarding the reading of Scripture has suffered from much confusion.[1] Many evangelicals (and Protestants more generally) have pleaded for the primacy of divine action in revelation. For their own part, many catholic-minded theologians have noted the necessity of human activity, particularly in its ecclesial form. Both accounts have much for which to be commended and leave much to be desired. The bipolar nature of the debate, however, bespeaks the confused nature of doctrinal formulation in these days. Both sides have assumed that their emphasis competes with the concerns of the other side—such an assumption may seem politically savvy, though I shall argue that it fails to sit well with the traditional doctrine of divine transcendence.

A dogmatic argument for God's transcendence will be shown to necessitate discussion of both divine and human action. According to classical Christian doctrine, God's transcendence and otherness allow for creaturely activity. God is divine; humans are not. God is his own existence. Humans exist as God's own. For humans to be free to act is not to take causal authority away from God. Rather, God's fullness provides for and grants existence to creaturely causal agency. At least since the rise of nominalism in the high middle ages, Christian theology has begun to sense tension between the existence of divine and human action.[2] Com-

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[1] A revised version of a paper delivered at the seminar for the Theological Interpretation of Scripture at Wheaton College in December 2005 and later at the 'Going Beyond the Bible Biblically' conference at Grand Rapids Seminary in March 2006. I am most grateful for the attention, care, and generosity given me by respondents in both venues and especially by Stanley Hauerwas, Stephen Spencer, and Daniel Treier.

[2] The link between a competitive view of divine and human action and the rise of nominalism cannot be defended in this paper. In short, the nominalist consideration of God and humanity under the umbrella of a common concept of 'being' allows for a competitive view of causality. Whether or not this competitive view and the tension that it creates between Scriptural and doctrinal affirmations of both divine sovereignty and human responsibility can be tied to the rise of nominalism will not be discussed here. The tie of nominalism to the persons of Duns Scotus and William of Ockham cannot be discussed

petitiveness between divine and human activity is not necessary, traditional (in Christian doctrine), or gospel-centred.

A 'thick description' of the reading of Scripture will be offered which takes account of both divine and human action.[3] To further this description, the recent work of Stephen Fowl and John Webster will be utilized to note the human and divine activities which, respectively, go into Christian reading of Scripture. Neither account can stand alone. My argument will proceed in several steps: (1) a sketch of the apparent opposition between these two modes of theology—Christian pragmatism and dogmatic theology; (2) summary and critique of John Webster's account of the holiness of Scripture and scriptural reading; (3) summary and critique of Stephen Fowl's account of Christian reading of Scripture for ecclesial formation; (4) dogmatic discussion of the doctrine of divine transcendence; (5) cautions related to the need for a magisterium, the presence of indwelling sin, and the need to avoid an over-realized eschatology and pre-emptive assumption of interpretive closure; therefore, 'thick description' is necessary to a Reformed-catholic theology. The necessity of 'thick description' in depicting theological reality will be demonstrated dogmatically by engaging the doctrine of divine transcendence and found to be particularly fruitful in discussing the reading of Scripture. A Reformed-catholic account of scriptural reading, tying Word to Spirit and noting the particular role of the ecclesial location of Scripture, will be shown to circumvent many of the wrong turns that have plagued recent reflection on Scripture and hermeneutics.[4]

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here either—controversial as this may be. In brief, the author finds the many studies of Catherine Pickstock, Henri de Lubac, and David Burrell to be helpful on the whole regarding the role of Scotus (and later appropriations of his work) in the push towards competitiveness, tension, and nominalism. For recent studies on this issue, see the fascinating debate in *Modern Theology* 21 (2005), pp. 539-661; for introduction, see William Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996).

3 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 93-4.

4 Matthew Levering describes the plague as such: '[P]resumptive nominalist metaphysics has limited the ability of many modern biblical exegetes, and thus also of many modern theologians, to read Scripture in the ways required by the Scriptural revelation of divine providence as the order of divine gift' Matthew Levering, 'Participation and Exegesis: Response to Catherine Pickstock,' *Modern Theology* 21 (2005), p. 597.

2. THE APPARENT OPPOSITION

Before examining the works of Webster and Fowl in some depth, a few initial remarks regarding their apparent disjunction will be helpful. By plotting Webster and Fowl within the current hermeneutical debate, the disjunction will be adequately highlighted.

Current hermeneutical debate, at least within Christian circles, revolves around questions regarding the ontology of texts, the structure and genre of texts, and the possibilities for reading. Textual ontology relates to the role of authors in the life of the text beyond the initial speech-act: do author's intentions or motives define meaning? Can such a thing as either an author's intention or an author's motive be discovered within a text?[5] Structures of texts receive much discussion, particularly by those who have answered these two questions with a 'no'. If meaning is not lodged primarily within some notion of authorial action, the particular structure of a text may be the key to adjudicating meanings of words and phrases.[6] Finally, if authorial action and textual structure do not result in crystal-clear meaning, readerly action must pick up the slack. Some continue to posit that readers can apprehend authorial action; however, many now argue that readers' interpretation, in some degree, change the speech-act and help create meaning (to some degree or another).[7] These three questions might be helpfully related to three movements within literary theory: Romanticist theory, New Criticism and post-structuralism.[8]

Fowl advocates a hermeneutic which emphasizes the role of readerly activity in the interpretative process. Fowl explicitly argues for the possibility of apprehending some type of authorial intention in the text. But this is not *the* meaning of the text, though it may be quite helpful at times. Fowl is most interested in backing the debate up beyond the question of readerly possibilities to question the particular ends for which Christians interpret Scripture and the effects such reasons ought to have. Theory takes a backseat to questions of teleology. In short, Fowl advocates an *underdetermined* notion of interpretive pluralism as the best means by which Christians might flourish in interpreting Scripture.

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5 Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the reader and the morality of literary knowledge.* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1998), ch. 2.

6 Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, ch.3.

7 Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, ch.4. See also Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), esp. pp. 72-5.

8 Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, pp. 25-9.

Webster comes at the debate from a different vantage point: that of dogmatic theology in the Reformed tradition. Previously known as an able interpreter of Barth and Jüngel, Webster has recently given much attention to the notion of holiness, particularly as it relates to Scripture. If we notice nothing else about Webster's project, we must notice the priority given to describing divine action in revelation, sanctification, and inspiration. Webster fears the equation of human action (even the human action of the ecclesia) with divine action, and he emphasizes the continual need to discuss reading as receptive of divine action (rather than being inventive).[9]

Webster and Fowl, then, are two strange bedfellows. The dogmatic theologian and the Christian pragmatist do not seem to have much in common. Both will be found to be correct (at least in their major assertions), however.[10] To note the particular payoff in a project of bringing these two into conversation, another dialogue must first be discussed: this one between Webster and another British theologian, David Ford.

David Ford has published a highly-innovative work, entitled *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed.*[11] Webster offered an extended review which called into question Ford's entire conversational approach to theology.[12] Whereas Ford had engaged ideas and thinkers as disparate as Levinas, Ricouer, Jüngel, the Paulinist's letter to the Ephesians, the eucharist, Therese of Lisieux, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his monograph on human flourishing, Webster called for a more thoroughly dogmatic theology, centred around discussion of traditional *loci* such as election, justification, etc. Ford, in response, noted the particular value of the type of *theological theology* for which Webster has been calling.[13] Ford noted the occasional need for both dogmatic and conversational modes of theol-

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9 Webster, *Holiness*, pp. 54-7.

10 This broad agreement with Fowl and Webster should not be taken as comprehensive agreement. Both have certain weaknesses, some more pertinent than others, which will not be dealt with here unless necessary for my argument.

11 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

12 Webster, 'David F. Ford: *Self and Salvation,' Scottish Journal of Theology* 54 (2001), pp. 548-59. Ford has elsewhere noted the 'conversational mood' of recent British theology to be its distinctive strength, by which theologians mediate their doctrinal concerns through topics of historical revision, feminism, economics, pluralism, etc. See 'Theological Wisdom, British Style,' *Christian Century* 117 (2000), pp. 388-91.

13 John Webster, *Theological Theology: An Inaugural Lecture delivered before the University of Oxford on 28 October, 1997* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997); repr., *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II* (London: T & T Clark, 2005), ch.1.

ogy, even as he notes the necessity (but not sufficiency) of Webster's style of dogmatic theology.

The Christian doctrine of creation seems to necessitate that all sources of thought be taken seriously. The planting of the *imago Dei* within each and every human, both before and after the entrance of sin into the world, necessitates a thoughtful engagement with whatever form of divine attestation may be found in various discourses and sources (be they Christian or not). Such cross-disciplinary concern will grate on the modern institutional sensibilities of specialized professionals and the secular mindset which fears ideological mutation of objective data. A dogmatic account of creation will not allow for such restraint, although such an account will provide for a stringent caution against naively receiving the plunders of the Egyptians. Though the Christian *polis* must bring in guest lecturers from every part of the globe, consideration of such propaganda must be Word-centred and, therefore, distinctly Christian. This is not a pragmatic concern apart from its dogmatic foundation: the Spirit blows where he wills, but the Spirit is the Spirit of the Son and, therefore, attests to the Son's glory wherever it may blow (albeit more or less explicitly). Distinctly Christian engagement of disciplines and concerns distinguished from theological study (in modern times, though not classically) is mandated by the doctrine of creation.[14]

The "linguistic turn" has, if nothing else, demonstrated that theological use of language will necessarily demonstrate affinity with other socio-cultural uses of language. Theology cannot testify to the gospel in culture apart from use of cultural terminology—classically, language from philosophical discourse. Webster's project, if it is seeking a dogmatic theology free of philosophy, must be doomed to failure.[15] At best, one can offer a plea for the primacy of distancing engagement with philosophy from the theological task or for emphasis upon traditional areas of dogmatic inquiry (as opposed to current philosophical debate). Such a

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[14] See, e.g., the intent of 'Radical Orthodoxy' to be 'more mediating and less accommodating' in John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (eds.), *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (Radical Orthodoxy; London: Routledge, 1999), p. 2. I have noted my own concerns elsewhere about Radical Orthodoxy as a dogmatic proposal, amidst a deep appreciation for their fine work in cultural exegesis; see my 'Putting Suspenders on the World: Radical Orthodoxy as a Post-Secular Theological Proposal or What Can Evangelicals Learn from Postmodern Christian Platonists?' *Themelios* 31, no. 2 (Jan. 2006), pp. 40-53.

[15] See the polemics especially in Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. II.1: *The Doctrine of God*, transl. T. H. L. Parker et al, eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957).

concern might be prophetic in our day, when more and more theological monographs fail to engage traditional dogmatic concerns at all.[16] John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock have also pled for the overcoming or consummation of philosophy.[17] Such concerns tend to be tied to historical judgments regarding the effects of particular philosophical commitments to the freedom in which Christian theology can attest to the gospel and ought to be read in that context.

Webster's plea ought to be charitably read as a plea against the broad retreat of theologians into doing *mere* philosophy, sociology, hermeneutics, or seemingly anything other than distinctive Christian doctrine. Barth argued against the *analogia entis* and the captivity of theologians to philosophy in its neo-scholastic and Kantian permutations. Barth never sheds the engagements and use of philosophical terms, categories, and interests, however.[18] Milbank and Pickstock have shown little restraint in their polemic regarding nominalism and its modern and neo-scholastic bastards.[19] No reader could ever claim that in so doing they leave philosophy behind. In fact, Milbank's epoch-making book, *Theology and Social Theory*, is notably subtitled, *Beyond Secular Reason*, rather than behind social theory or sociology.[20] Milbank continues to be chock-full of sociological and political concern and has no desire to leave such disciplines

16 For example, Jürgen Moltmann wrote an entire 'systematic contribution to theology' on Christology without once mentioning the Council of Chalcedon [*The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions*, transl. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994)].

17 John Milbank, 'Only Theology Overcomes Metaphysics,' in *Word Made Strange: Language, Theology, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), ch. 2; Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Challenges in Contemporary Theology; Oxford: Blackwell, 1999).

18 Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997). McCormack notes the continual use of a somewhat chastened Idealism in Barth's developed theology.

19 Milbank, Pickstock, and the 'Radical Orthodoxy' movement tie the 'false humility' of theology to its embrace of the univocity of being and nominalist metaphysics and tie this decline to the influence of Duns Scotus, in particular, argued most recently by Catherine Pickstock ['Duns Scotus: His Historical and Contemporary Significance,' *Modern Theology* 21 (2005), pp. 543-73]. Etienne Gilson predated this claim in his *Jean Duns Scot: introduction à ses positions fondamentales* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1952).

20 John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Signposts in Theology; Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

behind *en toto*. Rather, Milbank attempts to get beyond a particular secular version of social theory by use of Augustinian metaphysics.[21]

Hyperbolic language, as found in Webster, Milbank, and Barth, ought to be read within its particular polemical context. Milbank wants to move theology beyond a 'false humility', because 'once theology surrenders its claim to be a meta-discourse, it cannot any longer articulate the word of the creator God, but is bound to turn into the oracular voice of some finite idol, such as historical scholarship, humanist psychology, or transcendental philosophy.'[22] At the end of the day, however, such hyperbole cannot stand alone. Christian theology must engage other disciplines. Such engagement must and should take various forms, categories, and moods.[23] Though Webster's concerns regarding the danger of losing truly *theological* moods of doing theology must be heeded, Ford persuasively noted the need for multiple architectural designs in the theological city.[24]

Having noted these concerns tied to the doctrine of creation and the necessary multiplicity of theological forms, it will now be demonstrated that the theological designs erected by Webster and Fowl mutually complement one another and, when taken together, go a long way towards a theological depiction of the task of reading Scripture.[25] Webster's dogmatic project provides theological space for description of human reading, and Fowl's depiction of readerly activity requires a theological account of divine action as related to the notion of vigilant or intrusive reading.

3. WEBSTER AND THE PLACE OF REVELATION

Webster has offered an account of the ontology of Scripture as a means of interaction with recent hermeneutical discussion in modern theolo-

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21 Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, chs.11-12.

22 Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, p. 1.

23 That such multiplicity is not mere submission to historical necessity may be evidenced by the existence of the four-fold gospel witness in Scripture (each of which engages various cultural terms and categories—imperial cult, Greco-Roman religion, etc.); see William Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God: Christ, Theology, and Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), ch.4.

24 David F. Ford, 'Salvation and the Nature of Theology: A Response to John Webster's Review of *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed.*' *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54 (2001), pp. 560-75.

25 Much more would need to be said about the inspiration of prophets and apostles, the affirmation of the canon, and the perfections of Holy Scripture. I am limiting my discussion here to the *reading* of Holy Scripture construed as a theological act.

gy.[26] Both fundamentalism and liberalism have fallen prey to a common problem: lack of a theological ontology.[27] Current hermeneutical theory, likewise, suffers the fate of anemic discussion of ontology.[28] The danger of ontological discussion will be the tendency to slip into phenomenological depiction of readerly activity tied to a flawed metaphysics; therefore, a distinctly *theological* ontology will be necessary.[29] Such a concern leads Webster to deny all attempts which begin by constructing a general hermeneutic to, then, apply to the reading of Scripture.[30]

Webster outlines four points that must be made in discussion of Christian reading of Scripture: (1) God is present and communicative in Himself as Word to us; (2) the Bible is primarily an instrument of divine action and, only secondarily, a text-act; (3) the primary modes of being human are having faith, hearing, and obeying (creatureliness precedes creativity); (4) such description must be description of the *church's* reading (as *creatura Verbi divini*).[31]

Such a theological ontology requires that primacy be given to Trinitarian description.[32] The uniquely *self-manifesting* revelation of God, an ingredient part of the Trinitarian life, commands attention.[33] God's self-communication is free, sovereign, and spiritually-purposeful. Webster notes that the term 'Word of God' is a good deal preferable to 'revelation', as it denotes the particular presence of Jesus which commissions our reading in the Spirit.[34] The presence of Jesus, in fact, demonstrates the incarnational principle of *sacramentum*, the hallowing of creaturely reality for divine purposes, which Webster will apply to Scripture.[35]

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[26] Most pertinent to Webster's hermeneutical discussion will be *Holy Scripture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); idem, 'Hermeneutics in Modern Theology: Some Doctrinal Reflections', in *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001), pp. 47-86; idem, Holiness.

[27] Webster, *Holy Scripture*, p. 21.

[28] Webster, 'Hermeneutics in Modern Theology', p. 49.

[29] Webster, 'Hermeneutics in Modern Theology', p. 58.

[30] Webster, 'Hermeneutics in Modern Theology', pp. 58-9.

[31] Webster, 'Hermeneutics in Modern Theology', p. 64.

[32] Webster, 'Hermeneutics in Modern Theology', p. 65.

[33] Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 13; idem, 'Hermeneutics in Modern Theology', p. 66.

[34] Webster, 'Hermeneutics in Modern Theology', pp. 68-70. Stanley Hauerwas has suggested to me in correspondence that talk of revelation 'constantly threatens to become an epistemological category, which it plainly is not.' Webster avoids this by witnessing to divine antecedence.

[35] Webster, *Holy Scripture*, pp. 17-8, 21.

The Bible must then be placed within the life of the Triune God. Webster notes, again and again, that in moving from depiction of the Triune God to that of the Bible, one has not left the doctrine of God behind. In fact, 'Christian theology has a singular preoccupation: God and everything else *sub specie divinitatis*. All other Christian doctrines are applications or corollaries of the one doctrine, the doctrine of the Trinity.'[36] The Bible is an instrument of divine action, best described by the categories of revelation, sanctification, and inspiration.[37] The sacramental depiction allows both the divine and human action of the Scripture to be discussed by taking particular note of the *indirect* nature of God's 'real and effective' agency.[38] The Bible, then, is both dynamic and partially determined; therefore, meaning is never final.[39] God remains free to speak continually through the particularly human conventions of the text-act in fresh ways. By noting that the Bible's holiness is due to God's hallowing of it, objectification of the text-act is avoided.[40] More importantly, the instrumental nature of Scripture distances it from the *Logos*, avoiding immanentist and incarnational depictions of Scripture which fail to do justice to the unique nature of the *Logos ensarkos*.[41] Christology, particularly affirmation of the unique lordship of the God-man, retains precedence to bibliology, precisely because Christ is the Word of God in a personal sense which surpasses the identity of Scripture as 'word of God'.

The being of Holy Scripture is its reference to revelation, using textual visibility to witness to the *viva vox Dei*.[42] In short, Webster articulates (though not in so many words) that 'the being of Holy Scripture is in becoming'.[43] Throughout his discussion, Webster 'relativizes the Bible, because to talk of the text as an instrument of divine action is primarily to say something about God, not about the text.'[44] Dogmatic theology can only address Scripture as being within the economy of salvation, an as-

36 Webster, *Holy Scripture*, p. 43.

37 Webster, *Holy Scripture*, ch.1.

38 Webster, 'Hermeneutics in Modern Theology', p. 74.

39 Webster, 'Hermeneutics in Modern Theology', p. 72.

40 Webster, *Holy Scripture*, p. 30-34.

41 Webster, *Holy Scripture*, p. 23.

42 Webster, *Holy Scripture*, pp. 49-50.

43 Bruce McCormack, 'The Being of Holy Scripture is in Becoming: Karl Barth in Conversation with American Evangelical Criticism,' in V. Bacote, L. Miguelez, and D. Ockholm (eds.), *Evangelicals and Scripture: Tradition, Authority, and Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), pp. 55-75.

44 Webster, 'Hermeneutics in Modern Theology', p. 73.

pect of creaturely reality set apart by God for his particular purposes at particular times.[45]

Webster chastens the hermeneutical discussion by referring to interaction with the Scriptural texts as 'reading' rather than the more pro-active term 'interpretation'.[46] In fact, 'reading Holy Scripture is "faithful" reading: exegetical reason caught up in faith's abandonment of itself to the power of the divine Word to slay and to make alive.'[47] Readers do not actualize the text, nor do they finish its text-act (at least not in an ultimate sense). Rather, readers demonstrate true humanity by means of faith, hearing, and obedience.[48] Webster continually brings in language of mortification and vivification to describe the effects of consensual reading, noting a particular danger of radical reader-response criticism.[49] The particularly *intrusive* nature of mortification seems to rule out any theory which states that readers have an unchecked ability to construct textual meaning.[50]

Likewise, in limiting the creaturely ability to manipulate the text-act, Webster also limits the need for the elite to decipher the text-act. The clarity or perspicuity of the text is a divine quality bestowed upon the text so that it might be termed 'self-interpreting'.[51] As he puts it, 'Scripture's clarity is neither an intrinsic element of the text as text nor simply a fruit of exegetical labour; it is that which the text becomes as it functions in the Spirit-governed encounter between the self-presenting saviour and the faithful reader.'[52] While 'reading Scripture cannot but involve the acts which are part of all reading: construing words, grasping their relationships, following a narrative or argument, and so on,'[53] much more is going on than human ingenuity. Graciously, the 'Spirit has been and continues to be given to illuminate the reader, and so exegetical reason may trust the promise of Christ to lead us into the truth by the Spirit's presence and power.'[54] The divine role in human reading is, obviously, emphasised in Webster's account of the receptive posture of faithful humans before Scripture.

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45 Telford Work, *Living and Active: Scripture in the Economy of Salvation* (Sacra Doctrina; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

46 Webster, *Holy Scripture*, p. 86.

47 Webster, *Holy Scripture*, p. 86.

48 Webster, 'Hermeneutics in Modern Theology', p. 82.

49 Webster, 'Hermeneutics in Modern Theology', pp. 80-1.

50 Webster, 'Hermeneutics in Modern Theology', p. 84.

51 Webster, *Holy Scripture*, pp. 93-5.

52 Webster, *Holy Scripture*, p. 95.

53 Webster, *Holy Scripture*, p. 91.

54 Webster, *Holy Scripture*, p. 91.

Finally, Webster notes the particularly *ecclesial* nature of reading Scripture. The reading of Scripture requires certain 'dispositions and skills which are deployed by the wise Christian reader' and can only be cultivated within the church.[55] Webster's contribution to discussion of the corporate nature of interpretation/reading lies in his warning that talk of the 'corporate aspects of Christian reading...not allow theological language about the church to dissolve into generic language about "forms of life", "sociality", even "ecclesiality".'[56] The church, the elect community of the intrusive grace of Christ, requires distinctly theological description at the communal level.[57] As with the individual, 'the church, if it reads well, always reads against itself.'[58] Ruled behaviour will provide the type of skills and structures in which proper receptive reading might take place to chasten and exhort the community of God's electing work. The witness of the Spirit in the church ever points to the Word, requiring distinctly Christian explication.[59]

John Webster has articulated the place of Scripture within the economy of God's saving grace. At each step, he has articulated all actions *sub specie divinitatis.* Human action, while not denied or ignored, is accorded a secondary role in theological description of reality. Such an account provides theological space for description of human action in the activity of reading and will be quite incomplete apart from such depiction. Webster's account must precede that of Fowl, for divine action precedes (prevenes) and provides for (creates) creaturely activity. The doctrines of creation and election necessitate intellectually-rigorous attention be directed at the particular human means by which God reveals himself; such leads us to the need for an account of human interpretation and its provision by the work of Fowl, considered secondarily and *sub specie divinitatis.*

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55 Webster, 'Hermeneutics in Modern Theology', p. 85.

56 Webster, 'Hermeneutics in Modern Theology', p. 85.

57 Such is the danger of interacting with much postmodern theory: that Christians would be content merely to depict their existence (individually and/or corporately) in merely socio-cultural terms with non-ecclesial carryover. The warnings of George Lindbeck to allow the text to absorb the world, while one-sided, provide a helpful supplement to such secular jargon [*The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984)]. See George Hunsinger, 'Postliberal theology,' in Kevin J. Vanhoozer (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge Companions to Religion; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 42-57.

58 Webster, 'Hermeneutics in Modern Theology', p. 86.

59 Webster, *Word and Church*, ch.7.

4. FOWL AND FAITHFUL READING

Stephen Fowl has written a book quite different from those of Webster. Four points provide a rather helpful path through his picture of theological interpretation of Scripture: (1) access to authorial intention is plausible, albeit in a chastened form; (2) human authorial intention is not *the* exclusive meaning of Scripture; (3) theological interpretation has as its goal the cultivation of virtue and excellence amongst the people of God; and (4) an *under*determined theory of interpretation will provide a more helpful manner for talk of meaning. In short, Fowl's account of readerly activity supplements Webster's account of activity and, in fact, requires something like the account of divine action provided by Webster to account for the vigilance and mortification present in Christian reading of Scripture.

First, Fowl has revived the author by positing that her intentions can, in fact, be evident in texts and apprehended by readers.[60] Intentions and motives must be distinguished, avoiding tying intentions to psychological factors involved in the writing of the text, which answer the question, '*Why* is the author doing this?' Rather, intentions answer the question, '*What* is the author doing here?'[61] Finitude and sinfulness limit the author's self-knowledge, thus making the quest for motives perilous for the author and even more so for the reader.[62] Intentions, in contrast to motives, are present in the grammatical, linguistic, and rhetorical features of the particular text and, therefore, can be apprehended by the conscientious interpreter.[63] Such intentions can be spoken of in a 'coherent and constrained way'.[64] Fowl, in short, has argued for the possibility that one might encounter the author's intentions in the reading of a text.

Second, Fowl places great emphasis upon the need for interpreters to note the plurality of interpretive interests and, therefore, resists claims to exclusivity with regard to meaning.[65] Fowl continues to note the plausibility of referring to the author's intention as a meaning of the text; however, it is simply *a* meaning and may not be the most useful meaning

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60 Fowl, 'The Role of Authorial Intention in the Theological Interpretation of Scripture,' in Joel B. Green and Max Turner (eds.), *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 73-7.

61 Fowl, 'The Role of Authorial Intention', p. 74.

62 Fowl, 'The Role of Authorial Intention', p. 73.

63 Fowl, 'The Role of Authorial Intention', p. 75.

64 Fowl, 'The Role of Authorial Intention', p. 73.

65 Fowl, 'The Role of Authorial Intention', pp. 77-82; see also Stephen Fowl, *Engaging Scripture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), ch.2 (esp. pp. 33-40).

at any given time or place.[66] Any attempt to limit meaning to human authorial intention is question-begging, for the definition of meaning is exactly what everyone seems to disagree about.[67] Fowl notes the lack of 'a general, comprehensive theory of textual meaning that is neither arbitrary nor question-begging.'[68] Not only is 'any attempt to tie a single stable account of meaning to authorial intention' theoretically problematic, it also places Christians in an 'awkward relationship to the OT'.[69] Fowl also notes that, even in the robust medieval fourfold interpretation of Scripture, the so-called *determinate* meaning (*sensus literalis*, or literal) was anything but single and static. He demonstrates that advocates of tying meaning exclusively to human authorial intention have to write off centuries of Christian interpretation as methodologically skewed and theologically misleading.[70] In summary, Fowl has argued that for theoretical, theological, and historical reasons, human authorial intention can and should only be one of several meanings of Scripture.

Third, Fowl has noted the particular ends for which Christians are to interpret and embody Scripture.[71] Christians are to read Scripture so as to live faithfully before God and deepen communion with God and others in their present context; therefore, varying contexts will require various styles of reading.[72] 'Theological interpretation of Scripture therefore

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66 Fowl, 'The Role of Authorial Intention', p. 86. As I note in fn. 110, Fowl's movement beyond the human authorial intention may be nuanced by interaction with the practice of typological and/or figural reading by the post-Reformation Reformed orthodox theologians.

67 Fowl, 'The Role of Authorial Intention', p. 79; idem, *Engaging Scripture*, p. 35.

68 Fowl, 'The Role of Authorial Intention', p. 79.

69 Fowl, 'The Role of Authorial Intention,' p. 80. To note the difficulty of tying meaning solely to human authorial intention , see David Steinmetz, 'The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis', in Stephen E. Fowl (ed.), *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p. 28.

70 Fowl, 'The Role of Authorial Intention', pp. 82-5; see also Eugene Rogers, 'How the Virtues of the Interpreter Presuppose and Perfect Hermeneutics: The Case of Thomas Aquinas', *Journal of Religion* 76 (1996), p. 65. Rogers notes that, while the *sensus literalis* is that which the author intends, Thomas understood God to be the primary author of Scripture. Such a divine view of Scripture's authorship led Thomas to emphasize the diversity of literal meanings.

71 In addition to 'The Role of Authorial Intention' and *Engaging Scripture*, see also Fowl and L. Gregory Jones, *Reading in Communion: Scripture & Ethics in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), esp. chs.1-3 and 7.

72 Fowl, 'The Role of Authorial Intention,' pp. 86-7.

needs, ultimately, to advance these ends for which Christians are called to interpret Scripture.'[73] Following Alasdair MacIntyre, Fowl notes the particularly canonical (or text-based) focus of communal argument which fosters creativity in faithfulness to the tradition.[74] The practical necessity of embodying Scripture for all Christians necessitates a theory of interpretation that renders the Bible accessible to all Christians, avoiding a magisterial elitism. Fowl, drawing on the trenchant historical work of Eugene Rogers, finds such a theory in Thomas's notion of the *sensus literalis*, a diverse 'plain sense' of Scripture.[75] As noted above, many texts in the OT cannot minister to the people of God now apart from a creative re-reading in light of later revelation.[76] The particular ends for which Christians read Scripture necessitate diverse methods of reading at particular times and places, leading Fowl to argue for a pragmatic theory of meaning which acknowledges a plurality of methods as useful.[77]

Finally, Fowl advances what he calls an *underdetermined* theory of interpretation which will posit some manner of determinancy without ty-

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73 Fowl, 'The Role of Authorial Intention', p. 86.

74 Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, pp. 6-7. Note that Fowl emphasizes the functional authority of Scripture in the church. Such a non-ontological argument, of course, is not necessarily contradictory to an ontological description of Scripture's authority (as in Webster's argument for Scripture's *holiness*); see also Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (2nd ed.; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

75 Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, pp. 38-9; Rogers, 'Virtues', pp. 65-74.

76 Fowl notes the French monk who must preach Psalm 137 in the fourteenth century, the famed example of Steinmetz in his, 'Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis', p. 28.

77 Here Fowl's argument is particularly weak in that he fails to offer broader salvation-historical parameters within which the OT may be re-appropriated by the people of God after the ascension of Christ. His lack of interest in salvation-historical movements paves the way for his errant reading of Acts 10-15 regarding parallels to the full inclusion of practicing homosexuals into the church. For all his interest in the history of biblical interpretation, Fowl has failed to notice that interpreters as diverse as Origen, Augustine, Thomas, Calvin, and Barth all value the necessity of salvation-historical development for Christian reading of Scripture (obviously in different ways, as seen in comparing Origen to the others). Such is the hermeneutical problem best expressed by Fowl's dogmatic weakness: a tendency to sever the witness of the Spirit from the ministry of the Word; see Katherine Greene-McCreight, *Ad Litteram:How Augustine, Calvin, and Barth Read the 'Plain Sense' of Genesis 1-3* (Issues in Systematic Theology 5; New York: Peter Lang, 1999), ch.1.

ing meaning solely to the human authorial intention.[78] Fowl attempts to navigate between two foils: (1) those who tie meaning solely to authorial intention; and (2) those who attempt to deconstruct any and every attempt to read a text. Fowl, while noting the benefits of acknowledging the unfinished work of interpretation, finds deconstructive theorists to be guilty on three accounts: (1) limiting interpretation to professional readers, who have the wherewithal to find determinate meaning and overthrow it;[79] (2) poor historical narration of the metaphysics of presence;[80] and (3) exalting text *qua* text to the point of denying the possibility of interaction with the other (author) apart from violence.[81] By noting the determinate nature of texts, with certain formal limits (i.e. grammar, rhetoric, etc.), Fowl argues that the meaning of Scripture will, for a Christian, fall within a certain field or matrix allowed by the *regula fidei*.[82] Christian accounts of the Triune God and his engagement with the world in the story of Israel and Christ provide limits to the range of meanings which may be drawn from the canonical Scripture. Where other meanings may be drawn out by Marxists or Muslims, such readings will not be Christian readings unless they conform to this *regula fidei*. Meaning must make sense of the words. Careful attention to the particular textual features cannot be avoided. But meaning may be quite diverse and, oftentimes, will enjoin supplementation of human authorial intent, precisely within these ecclesially-noted (and we might add: biblically sketched) limits.[83]

Fowl has argued that Scripture ought to be interpreted for its *underdetermined* meaning—without adherence to one particular method, but with a constant eye to the *regula fidei* and the ends for which Christians are to interpret Scripture, particularly the cultivation of virtue and faithful-

78 Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, pp. 56ff.

79 Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, p. 47.

80 Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, pp. 48-52. Fowl makes particular note of the manner in which Catherine Pickstock demonstrates the ways in which to avoid finality in interpretation without overthrowing the entire Western metaphysical tradition. See Pickstock, *After Writing*.

81 Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, pp. 55-6.

82 Fowl, 'The Conceptual Structure of New Testament Theology', in Scott J. Hafemann (ed.), *Biblical Theology: Retrospect and Prospect* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), pp. 232-5.

83 Fowl, 'The Role of Authorial Intention', p. 85. By adding the phrase 'biblically sketched,' I mean to affirm that Fowl's account affirms the pluriform nature of meaning (oftentimes) at the expense of singular canonical unity about the *res* of Holy Scripture. While noting the discontinuities in revelation at various stages of redemptive history, a deeper appreciation for the biblical-theological continuity of the covenant of grace would be instructive.

ness. Webster's discussion of receptive reading and the communal task of virtuous listening resounds with clarity in Fowl's depiction of charitable conversation with fellow readers present and past within the church. The mutual inherence of both accounts is only rendered possible by a classical account of divine transcendence which provides for a non-competitive account of divine and human action and allows radical immanence of the wholly other Lord who speaks.

5. GOD TRANSCENDS CREATION: JOSEPH, COMPATIBILISM, AND NON-COMPETITIVENESS

In this attempt to draw on the strengths of both Webster and Fowl, differentiation of modes of discourse must be sustained. These theologians are not doing the same thing; however, that does not mean that they cannot be describing the same thing in different ways or genres. The doctrine of divine transcendence, characterizing the categorical distinction between God and world, must be articulated to account for the diversity of human reports on the event of scriptural reading.

At this point, it would be helpful to remember the climactic statement uttered by Joseph, 'As for you, you planned evil against me, but God planned it for good' (Gen 50:20). Use of the same verb, *hasab*, to denote the actions of both his brothers and God demonstrates that Joseph sees one action (or series of actions) from two perspectives. Human actions have been described in the preceding 13 chapters (and accurately so). Only now (with the sole exception of Joseph's statement in Gen 45:5-9) are these very same events articulated as properly *theological* events, divine actions.[84] Such multi-perspectival description of action occurs throughout the Scriptures,[85] demonstrating the simultaneous work of God and

[84] The narrator, of course, knows that the dream recounted in Gen 37 has been at work all along; however, the theological characterization of the actions of Joseph's brothers is only now presented in hindsight for pedagogical purposes (i.e. comfort). See Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Interpretation; Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), pp. 370-74; for similar judgments regarding the larger context of Genesis, see Murray H. Lichtenstein, 'An Interpersonal Theology of the Hebrew Bible', in Alice O. Bellis and Joel S. Kaminsky (eds.), *Jews, Christians, and the Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures* (SBLSS 8; Atlanta: SBL, 2000), pp. 61-82.

[85] Victor P. Hamilton notes the later parallels to the multi-perspectivalism present in the Joseph-story in the stories of Daniel, Esther, Ruth, and (most explicitly) Judas [*Genesis* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 707]. The most extreme example of multi-perspectival rendering of an action is the Petrine interpretation of the crucifixion in Acts 2:23—noting the divine action of delivering Christ to death, and the sinful action of the humans who

humans in the events of history. The hermeneutical point to be taken is this: both modes of discourse are appropriate and correct and, at the same time, entirely inadequate apart from each other. A dogmatic argument such as this entails discussion of the divine attribute of transcendence, a characterization of the distinction between God and world. Philosophers have attested to such a distinction in the articulation of various *compatibilist theories* regarding the relationship of divine and human action, which require that one encourage description of both divine and human action as it pertains to Scriptural reading. Without endorsing such philosophical accounts *as is*, the particular import of a doctrine of transcendence can be sketched by articulating the pay-off of compatibilism.

A *compatibilist theory* commonly entails that 'determinism does not undermine freedom and responsibility'.[86] Without entering into the quagmire of debate regarding degrees of determinism, definitions of liberty and responsibility, or the applicability of the term 'determinism' to the Trinitarian interaction with human history, it must be said that something approximating the *compatibilist* commonality would necessitate the assignment of intellectual effort to description of both levels of action—divine determination or action and human action or responsibility. Applied to the current hermeneutical discussion, two currents of thought must be present: description of revelation (a divine action) and reading (a human activity). Both descriptions must be attempted and not played off against one another; chastening one another without calling one another's right to exist into question. There is no tension.

Perhaps the best way to characterize such a *compatibilist* theory of interpretation would be as an attempt to offer a 'thick description' of human and divine action centred on the readerly interaction with the canonical texts of the Church. Dogmatic reflection on the gospel requires one to centre such an account on the traditional doctrine of divine transcendence. God is wholly other than creation, so the tradition has argued. God's activity, therefore, cannot be competing with human activity. Rather, God's activity actually enables humans to live, move, and have our very being. Applied to scriptural reading, such an account must take note of the manner in which God uses human texts to reveal Himself to others, without neglecting the human activity of reading to hear God's speech.

The doctrine of divine transcendence, undercut for too long by the

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brought about his murder. This was the greatest act of love and the greatest sin.

[86] Ishtiygue Haji, 'Compatibilist Views of Freedom and Responsibility', in Robert Kane (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 202.

univocity of being, has found recent prominence in the writings of Kathryn Tanner.[87] Tanner has emphasized the gift-giving which is at the heart of the gospel—the Triune God granting life and freedom to creation.[88] Classic accounts of transcendence are mined from the texts of Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin, who are found to hold to the non-competitiveness of divine and human action in the most thoroughgoing manner.[89] A 'god of the gaps' would find no place in such an account, for Tanner and the classical tradition suggest that creational activity accounts for all events. Obviously, epistemic limitations will limit humans from ascertaining such causality in varying degrees with regard to different events. But the causality of created beings remains total—extending to all occurrences.[90] Renaissance humanists were right to attempt to account for the immanent causes of natural events. The classical account provides for the broadest account of creational agency and freedom on the market: God gives life and agency to created beings.

But the secular naturalists went wrong in assuming that their accounts, insofar as they link natural causes to observable effects, negate the simultaneous agency of the Triune God. A Christian account of divine transcendence will remind us that God is completely other, veiled beyond our sight and fluid beyond our categories of conceptuality. God cannot be accounted for by Newton or Einstein, for he is utterly different from composite, created beings. God is spirit and utterly free to move and be. God's fullness is the very fount of creaturely freedom, for 'the fuller the giver the greater the bounty to others'.[91] God's freedom and completely actualised existence allows God to bless others with God's overflow of actuality. The breadth of divine sovereignty and actualisation allows for human agency, rather than creating any perceived tension between two agents.

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87 Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988); idem, *Politics of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992); idem, *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001); idem, *Economy of Grace* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005).

88 Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity*, pp. 1-2.

89 Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity*, p. 3; see also Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology*, pp. 105-19.

90 Miracles, traditionally called supernatural events, are the exceptions to the rule. But the traditional account of divine transcendence treats miracles as a subcategory of broader divine engagement of the world. Whether such a distinction is merely epistemic or also ontological remains a topic for debate.

91 Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity*, p. 3.

The incarnation, when the Son of God took upon himself human form, represents the most intense example of this relationship between Creator and created. Two levels of agency, in contrast to all *monothelite* and *monophysite* tendencies, are within one person, this Jesus of Nazareth. Christ's divine agency, as judge and eternal Son, in no way undermines the genuine human agency of the obedient Nazarene. 'Most generally, Jesus is the one in whom God's relationship with us attains perfection. In Jesus, unity with God takes a perfect form; here humanity has become God's own.'[92] Perceived tension between the humanity and divinity of Christ fails to note the categorical distinction between these two levels of existence, Creator and created. Precisely because they are so distinct can they be so close: transcendence provides for immanence.

A dogmatic account of divine transcendence which provides for radical immanence is a necessary prerequisite to any account of human action. Without such an account one will drift towards Pelagianism, with its faulty ontology and inadequate doxology; or into Stoic fatalism, with its inadequate account of the doctrines of creation and election. In short, a non-competitive understanding of divine and human action is essential to provide for an extensive theological account of any event within salvation-history.

John Webster has recently articulated this dogmatic distinction between divine and human existence in terms of God's immensity: 'in theological usage, transcendence, like infinity, is non-comparative: its content cannot be reached either by the magnification of creaturely properties (so that immensity is mere vastness) or by their negation (so that immensity is simply lack of spatial limitation).God's immensity is his qualitative distinction from creaturely reality, and can only be grasped on the basis of its enactment in the ways and works of God...immensity is thus not quantitative disparity but a "differential of quality".'[93] Webster has yet to articulate the effects such an account should have upon the actual task of dogmatics: the freedom of God to create necessitates co-extensive accounts of covenantal agency at both the human and divine levels.[94] Such a dogmatic account, with broad rhetorical similarity to philosophical accounts of compatibilism, must be in place for theological discussion of the reading of Scripture.

Christian interpretation of the OT requires mention at this point, for

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92 Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity*, p. 9.

93 Webster, *Confessing God*, p. 94.

94 See his forthcoming 2007 Kantzer Lectures for greater specificity in this regard: *Perfection and Presence: God with Us according to the Christian Confession* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming).

it is such textual interaction that has necessitated much of this debate. 'Thick description' of such reading will not fail to include historical-critical study of what God did through the original writers and compilers (as Jewish text *qua* Jewish text); however, it will also and essentially pay attention to the present appropriation of these texts as locales for God's speech to the church today (as Christian text *qua* Christian text). God does not speak to us the same way he spoke to Hosea and Joel. Yet God does not speak to us apart from how God spoke to Hosea and Joel.[95] As history has developed, moved forward, the people of God have the benefit of a history of listening. Present-day believers may hear the words God spoke to our ancestors, an inheritance to be ignored only at our peril. However, God continues to speak and requires constant attention. Scriptural reading in each context finds fresh meaning in the text, demonstrating God's faithfulness to speak to generation after generation in its own time and place. The origin of Scripture itself requires complex description, as divine and human action. However, the divine use of created reality to reveal Godself continues even now and, therefore, contemporary readerly activity requires multi-perspectival description as well.

In these varied instances of reading with their diverse range of meanings granted, humans are reading. At the same time, God is revealing: granting existence, providing proper cranial functioning, removing the fog of sinful limitation in some measure, and providing at least a hint of the *visio Dei*. Both God and creature are busy about their work. The task of theological reflection upon such an event cannot shortchange either agent's activity. All these elements will fit into what might be called a 'thick description' of God's revelation in Scripture.

6. DOCTRINES OF SIN, ESCHATOLOGY, AND ECCLESIOLOGY: REFORMED AND CATHOLIC EMPHASES

Who knows which type of reading may be more or less helpful at various times and places? Whatever style of reading is adopted, the dogmatic account of divine transcendence and its radical provision for non-competitive divine-human relations provided here allows sufficient theological foundation for sustained reflection on both levels of agency (and, therefore, allows the conjoining of Fowl and Webster's accounts of the reading of Scripture).

Something like figural or typological reading of Scripture is certainly necessitated to account for the plurality of ways in which God has made

[95] John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate concerning the Supernatural* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), p. 58.

use of Scripture to perpetuate the flourishing of the church.[96] The purpose of Scripture is human flourishing,[97] according to the famed statement in 2 Tim 3:17: Scripture is inspired for usefulness in the church, 'so that all God's people may be thoroughly equipped for every good work'. The immediate objection to such an underdetermined theory of interpretation accuses it of 'baptising social readings' and endangering the church by opening the door to false, self-deceptive teaching.[98] Such a concern is most appropriate, given the immediate turn from the above-quoted statement regarding the purpose of Scripture to the warnings about false teachers in 2 Tim 4:3ff.: 'the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine'. The ultimate cure for such a danger is not adoption of a particular methodology (either historical-criticism or reader-response), nor is it the work of some magisterium (either the New Testament Ph.D. or the Roman Pontiff). Rather, the only cure for such danger will be the direct vision of God. That is, danger will only be dispelled by eschatological fulfilment and cannot be foreclosed by adoption of any method. Modern promises of closure and peace have been shown false and require deconstruction by dogmatic accounts of sin and eschatology.

The tendency of Christians to find comfort in the rules of method or magisterium resides in an over-realized eschatology which fails to understand the lingering effects of sin and finitude. If deconstructionists have demonstrated nothing else, they have pointed out the lunacy of claiming interpretive closure.[99] The Christian life, in all components, will undoubtedly be dangerous—by avoiding the segmentation of Scripture reading from the rest of Christian existence, one can gain a healthy appreciation for the place of danger in such reading. A dogmatic account of

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[96] David Steinmetz, 'The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis', p. 37; see also Daniel J. Treier, 'The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis? *Sic et Non*', *Trinity Journal* 24 (2003), pp. 77-103. The 'figural reading of Scripture' is a more Christ-centred hermeneutical theory than the four-fold medieval approach (see Westminster Confession of Faith I.9), though this comparison of figural, allegorical, and four-fold readings of Scripture would take this essay way beyond my limits here; see David Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002).

[97] Ellen Charry utilizes the language of 'human flourishing' in *By the Renewing of Your Minds: the Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[98] Willie J. Jennings, 'Baptizing a Social Reading: Theology, Hermeneutics, and Postmodernity', in Roger Lundin (ed.), *Disciplining Hermeneutics: Interpretation in Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), pp. 117-127.

[99] Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, pp. 52-4.

the tie between Word and Spirit aids in such a caution. The Spirit has been left for our comfort and enlightenment. But the Spirit testifies to the Word and comforts us *in the Word's absence and until the Word's return.* The very ministry of the Spirit throughout creation must always be tied to the doctrine of ascension (the distance between the Word and the creation) and eschatology (the promised return of the Word for closure). Shy of the *parousia*, reading of Scripture (and all human activity) will be flawed. The comforting ministry of the Spirit will never move the church beyond coping with its lamented distance from Christ (prior to his return). A Reformed emphasis upon the indwelling effects of sin must ever chasten our attempts to account for the practices of the church, in particular the reading of Scripture.

Such danger must be countered by the communal emphasis upon ruled reading and regeneration of readers. Both Fowl and Webster have articulated the need for virtue as a prerequisite to proper reading of Scripture. Reading requires patience, care, and compassion in attending to the oftentimes tedious and taxing nature of texts. Such virtue, of course, is not a form of nicety or uncritical affirmation, but a particular focus upon seeing Christ as the glue holding all together. Webster, in particular, has noted the danger that discussion of human activity might fail to take particular note of the distinctiveness of Christian virtue and community.[100] Needed is not mere virtue, but divinely-wrought righteousness; not mere community, but the church in the economy of grace. This is one example of the chastening of discussion of human action by description of divine action; the election of the church and individuals by God requires *distinctive* description of those individuals (and their reading) as supplementation to the terms provided by a more creationally-based sociology. Enough with Christian use of the term 'community'—we need the church and language to suit it.[101]

Adequate virtue will not be acquired by all, resulting in the need for communal rules to note when and where someone's reading has gone wrong. Such rules will not deny that person's interpretation the claim to have found a 'meaning'; rather, they will note that it is not a 'Christian meaning'. Fowl makes particular note of the way in which the *regula fidei* was developed to do just this in debates with early heretics.[102] The 'rule of faith' does not specify a particular reading method or strategy. The 'rule of faith' does not seek to define the term 'meaning'. Rather, the 'rule of

[100] Webster, 'Hermeneutics in Modern Theology', pp. 85-6.

[101] John Webster, 'Christ, Church, and Reconciliation', in *Word and Church*, pp. 211-30.

[102] Fowl, 'Conceptual Structure of New Testament Theology', pp. 232-5.

faith' articulates a particular meta-narrative within which all Christian interpretation must find its home.[103] All objections which find the interpretive program of Fowl to promote unchastened pluralism are answered by the use of the 'rule of faith' within the life of the Christian community. Things certainly become more complicated when one asks the truly difficult questions, such as those regarding the application of the 'rule of faith' in judgment upon certain interpretations of Scripture. However, the difficulty must be noted to lie, not in the pluriformity of interpretations, but in the differentiating of whether any of them are, in fact, contrary to the 'rule of faith'. The Reformed emphasis upon indwelling sin and its necessary thwarting of all pre-glorified human activity must be held in union with a catholic emphasis upon the Spirit's presence within the whole body of Christ, which chastens the readings of individual Christians or congregations.[104]

At this point, earlier comments regarding the tendency to turn towards a magisterium might have seemed hasty; however, the eschatological nature of interpretive agreement and accuracy must not be forgotten. While some notion of a magisterium does seem to be a healthy manner of applying the 'rule of faith', it cannot be assumed to provide eschatological presence or immediacy. Nicholas Healy has noted the need to move away from idealized conceptions of the church *in via*.[105] In short, bureaucratic vision (even of the holiest sort) must not be allowed to replace the need for beatific vision. We cannot theorize beyond our sinfulness and brokenness. While communal discussion seems essential to survival (much less flourishing), magisterial infallibility falsely enslaves the church to modern considerations and inevitably leads to an escalation of the Spirit's work beyond mere comfort and testimony. Thus, any magisterial authority—be it a creed or confession, a presbytery or an elder—functions only in a ministerial or instrumental (and, thus, irreducibly contingent) role in the life-giving works of the self-revealing God.

Others might object that any credence given to Fowl's program carries

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[103] Paul M. Blowers, 'The *Regula Fidei* and the Narrative Character of Early Christian Faith', *Pro Ecclesia* 6 (1997), pp. 199-228.

[104] It is the Spirit's presence which maintains what the Word taught in his life and, particularly, in the time between his resurrection and ascension. For the ministry of the forty days and the development of the *regula fidei*, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *Acts: A Theological Commentary,* Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), excursus on the post-resurrection teaching ministry of Christ in Acts 1:2-3.

[105] Nicholas J. Healy, *Church, World, and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

with it the adoption of a non-realist position.[106] Such an objection, if true, would be devastating. At this point, however, objections which might apply to certain pragmatists (e.g., Stanley Fish, Jeffrey Stout, and Richard Rorty) do not apply to those who supplement their epistemic pragmatism with ontological realism (as demonstrated here by the supplementation of Fowl's work with that of Webster, a move which Fowl may or may not himself support). While human actions require pragmatic description, their interaction with divine action allows epistemic pragmatism to coexist with a strong account of ontological realism.[107]

Such an equation of pragmatism with non-realism has also led to the objection that *underdetermined* theories of interpretation cannot account for the transforming nature of Scripture.[108] Such repentant reading is, in fact, humanly impossible apart from the divine gift of freedom. But God does elect and remain faithful to his chosen people: opening eyes, replacing hearts of stone with hearts of flesh, placing the law within them. Divine effulgence provides for creaturely obedience. The particularly *intrusive* nature of Scripture flows from the lordly appropriation of human texts for divine purposes and regeneration of human readers for holy reading.[109]

The examples of sinful appropriation of Scripture to underwrite sinful practices which can be so easily culled from history have no theoretical impact on a dogmatic account of Scripture which maintains a Christian doctrine of sin and eschatology. Sinful readers will read sinfully, and the sinful readings of such readers will continue until the consummation of God's reconciling work in Christ. Tidiness is not an option, nor must it be sought apart from its divinely-appointed medium—the presence of Christ. Again, the Spirit's work in method and magisterium (used *ad hoc* by the church) cannot replace the promise of consummating divine action of the Word. The Spirit acts, providing freedom for our action. But such human agency will not attain final perfection apart from the re-entry of the Word himself into the creaturely realm.

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[106] Anthony Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), pp. 549-50.

[107] For a similar response to similar objections aimed at the postliberal project of George Lindbeck, see Bruce Marshall, 'Aquinas as Postliberal Theologian', *The Thomist* 53 (1989), pp. 353-402; see also Andrew Moore, *Realism and the Christian Faith: God, Grammar, and Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[108] Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, p. 549.

[109] Webster's discussion of regeneration as a primary category for discussing Scripture, in his *Holy Scripture*, pp. 89ff, where he notes that proper reading requires rebirth.

7 'THICK DESCRIPTION' OF SCRIPTURAL READING

The reading of Scripture is a complex activity, with two subjects (divine and human) acting in regards to one object (canonical text) all at once, which requires a 'thick description.' To that end, the dogmatic project of John Webster has been utilized to offer description of divine action in revelation and has been supplemented by the pragmatic, *underdetermined* theory of interpretation of Stephen Fowl as a depiction of human readerly activity. While neither theologian might approve of such a union, the benefits of such conjoining have been seen to include matters epistemic, ontological, ethical, and ecclesial.[110] Above all, the eschatological nature of human understanding reminds us that, in this time of spiritual and (even) interpretive suffering, the church ought to gather together often for exhortation lest any fall away from the truth. However such perseverance might be managed, the temptation to fight uncertainty and sinfulness with method or magisterium must be chastened by calls to patience, strength, and courage.

A Reformed-catholic account of human agency will note the fallenness of human activity between the entrance of sin into the world and the return of Christ as well as the necessity of ecclesial reading for the purpose of forming faithful Christians. A dogmatic account of divine transcendence and non-competitive relations between human and divine agency, articulated in the co-inherent work of Word and Spirit, provides the conceptual framework for such a Reformed-catholic theology and witnesses to the gospel freedom provided by our free, other, and graciously near Triune Lord.

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[110] For historical examples of such a multi-perspectival account of the reading of Holy Scripture, inclusive of both divine and human action in a non-competitive relation, see Richard A. Muller's sketch of the Reformed orthodox doctrine of Scripture, in his *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, vol. 2: *Holy Scripture: The Cognitive Foundation of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), esp. ch. 7. The orthodox theologians of the post-Reformation era have much to teach us formally, as well as materially, about the manner in which to hold together affirmations about divine self-manifestation through Holy Scripture and rigorous theoretical and practical reflections about exegesis and doctrinal elucidation. Furthermore, Reformed orthodox reflections about the nature of typological and/or figural reading are particularly helpful, in as much as they specify and hone the earlier reformers' critical appropriation of medieval and patristic exegetical practices. In this regard, Fowl's proposals might be nuanced by assessment from a distinctly Reformed approach to construing the history of redemption and its concomitant parameters for figural and/or allegorical reading of certain texts.