Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "Hermeneutics And The Theological Task," 1 *Trinity Journal* 12:1 (Spring 1991): 3–14.

Hermeneutics And The Theological Task[1]

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Walter C. Kaiser, Jr.

Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

Biblical interpretation is one of the most determinative fields of study for the theological task. Any improper moves made in the interpretive mission immediately affect the results obtained in theological construction. All too frequently such a dictum has been given lip service, but other concerns have in actual practice been given pride of place, and often with devastating consequences. Biblical interpretation, however, is no cure-all and an open sesame for all of the ills of contemporary theology. In fact, hermeneutics involves both an exegetical and a theological component if it is to be carried through to its completion. The exegetical part of the interpretive process includes grammatical, syntactical, philological, historical, and literary aspects. All of these functions are well known and usually result in our being put in touch with the individual segments of the thought of the writer being analyzed. But these pieces of the puzzle need to be related to the whole structure of a writer's thought. It is at this juncture that the theological component of the hermeneutical endeavor comes to the forefront and usually introduces the often abused concept of "The Analogy of Faith."

I. The Analogy Of Faith

Analogia fidei is a concept that has many advocates but few who carefully define it. Henri Blocher[2] has carefully marked out four distinct meanings for the concept of the analogy of faith: 1) the traditional one as set forth by Georg Sohnius (c. 1585):[3] "the apostle prescribes that interpretation be analogous to faith (Rom 12:6), that is, that it should agree with the first axioms or principles, so to speak, of faith, as well as with the whole body of heavenly doctrine"; 2) the "perspicuity" of Scripture definition, as championed by Martin Luther, in which the sense of the text is to

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[p.4]

be drawn from the clear verses in the Bible and thus issue in the topically selective type of *analogia fidei*; 3) the thematically selective understanding of the analogy of faith, as defended by John Calvin: "When Saint Paul decided that all prophecy should conform to the analogy and similitude of faith (Rom 12:6), he set a most certain rule to test every interpretation of Scripture";[4] and 4) the view held by the majority of Protestants, which may be described as a more formal definition, the *analogia totius Scripturae*. In this view all relevant Scriptures on any topic are brought to bear in order to establish a position that coheres with the whole of the

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[1] This article was an invitational paper read at the Southeastern section of the Evangelical Theological Society, March 9, 1991, in Taccoa Falls, Georgia.

[2] Henri Blocher, "The 'Analogy of Faith' in the Study of Scripture," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 5 (1987) 17-38.

[3] *De Verbo Dei*, as quoted in Otto Ritschl, *Dogmengeschichte des Protestantismus* (4 vols.; Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1908-27) 1.357.

[4] *Institutes*, Prefatory Address to King Francis I of France. Calvin also refers in the *Institutes* themselves twice to the analogy of faith as a theological principle: 4.16.4; 4.17.32 (less clear).

Bible. The analogy of faith on this view is the harmony of all biblical statements where the text is expounded by a comparison of similar texts with dissimilar ones.

It is clear that there is no single definition or formulation of a single methodology for the concept of the analogy of faith. Few theological concepts have been more confusing and without clear development in the history of the church than this concept and the associated themes of *regula fidei*, unity of the Scripture, and κανὼν πίστεως. These terms were used with different meanings and allegedly derived from Rom 12:6—"We have different gifts, according to the grace given to us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it *in proportion to his faith* "—and sometimes 2 Tim 1:13—"What you have heard from me, keep as *the pattern of sound teaching.*" Despite this lack of clarity, these concepts—and especially the concept "analogy of faith"—have been used extensively in theological interpretation since the time of the Reformation.

II. The Alleged Scriptural Basis

The key phrase in the Rom 12:6 passage comes in the midst of Paul's exhortation to each Christian to use his or her gifts "according to the proportion of [the] faith (κατὰ τήν ἀναλογίαν τῆς πίστεως)." A similar phrase occurs in Rom 12:3, where Paul says that each is not to think of one's self more highly than one should; rather each is to think "so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each *a measure of faith* (μέτρον πίστεως)." It may be best, however, not to compare the phrase in 12:3 too closely to the one in 12:6. The two key words in v. 3, μέτρον and πίστεως, are anarthrous, while the two key words in v. 6, ἀναλογίαν and πίστεως, have the article. In 12:3, then, Paul may be referring to "the measure of one's saving faith in Christ."[5]

[p.5]

In Rom 12:6 Paul makes the point that the gift of prophecy must be used "in agreement with" or "in proportion to" the faith. Three of the main ways of interpreting the phrase τὴν ἀναλογίαν τῆς πίστεως are as follows: 1) Cranfield refers the "analogy of faith" to one's personal faith in Christ. Accordingly, the prophet would be prophesying in accordance with the standard of that person's apprehension and response to God's grace in the gospel. The prophet must not say anything that was not compatible with his or her believing in Christ under the guise that he or she was personally inspired to know or say better than what the saving faith in Christ had taught.[6] 2) John Murray argues that Paul is saying that one was not to go beyond what God had given the prophet to speak. Since in classical usage analogia refers to what is mathematically proportional, and since every gift was to be exercised within the limits of faith, the idea would be that the prophet was to speak only within these limits of faith as restricted to its own purpose and sphere.[7] 3) The third view finds Paul requiring that the prophet speak in accord with previously revealed truth found in the Word of God. This would support the often used criterion that a true prophet was never to contradict existing revelation (Deut 13:1–5; 18:20–22; Acts 17:11; 1 Cor 14:37; 1 John 4:1–6). Moreover, since

[5] My student Michael G. Vanlaningham, in a paper he submitted to me on November 27, 1990, strongly argued that "If [this phrase] referred to the body of Christian doctrine, then it is difficult to see how it could be spoken of as something God had apportioned out to each one." So argued John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959, 1965) 2.119. See also C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 438, n. 1.

[6] C.E.B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (ICC; 2 vols.; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975, 1979) 2.621.

[7] Murray, *Romans*, 2.123. See also H.A.W. Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1884) 473.

the Peshitta Syriac rendered ἀναλογία and μέτρον (v. 3) by the same word, it could be argued that the ἀναλογία of v. 6 refers to the same correspondence or agreement with a standard that v. 3 does. Just as Paul urged in 1 Cor 14:26–32 that the prophets be evaluated by some kind of standards of doctrine, so here in 12:6.[8] This appears even more convincing since 12:6 does put the article before πίστεως even though that is not necessarily conclusive.

Each of these three views presents some kind of standard against which the prophecy is being judged. In that sense, then, Paul's use of the phrase "analogy of faith" is not that far from the way that many use it in current hermeneutical practice. Thus, Henri Blocher concluded that

The apostle, when dictating Romans 12:6, barely thought of the technical "comparing Scripture with Scripture"; yet, he concerned himself with the agreement of Christian discourse with the whole body of teaching given by inspiration of God, in its main emphases and overall balance (ἀναλογία), all parts included.

[p.6]

Substantially, his point was not far removed from our conception of the analogy of faith.[9]

III. The Historical Development

Robert D. Preus, in a recent article on the unity of Scripture,[10] traces the nature of biblical unity as far back as he is able. In Preus's view, the early and medieval church used terms suggestive of the unity of Scripture, but there was no formal development of its use as a hermeneutical principle until more recent times.

In the Reformers the concept of unity, with its resulting theme of the "analogy of faith," was based, argues Preus, on four pillars: 1) the fact that Scripture has one single, divine author; 2) the fact that Christ is present in the OT, not only virtually or implicitly, but directly, since the prophets spoke of him (thus the testaments have agreement); 3) the fact that Christ is the center of the Scriptures; and 4) the fact that there is doctrinal unity throughout Scripture. Since the Enlightenment and the advent of the higher-critical method, initiated by Semler, the unity of Scripture has not been considered a viable doctrine or usable hermeneutical feature. Nevertheless, up until about 1960, some vague notion of some kind of organizing principle was assumed by all, including theologians of the Enlightenment, higher critics, classical liberals, and deists. But the ironic fact is that the notion of the Scripture's unity and how this feature operated as a principle of interpretation was taken more for granted than it was worked out by careful definition.

The phrase "analogy of faith" is not at all a common or frequently referred to principle in patristic and medieval writings. Instead, it appears under a plethora of names: the faith, the Catholic faith, the rule of truth, the preaching, the [order of] tradition, the measure of faith, and even the apostolic ecclesiastical or ancient institution of the church. In all of these, Rom 12:6 was appealed to as the basis for what was intended and that text was thought to provide the basis for some type of norm to which interpreters must conform. It was clear, however, that not all the church doctors who appealed to the analogy of faith, or its alternative rubrics, meant the same thing or practiced the same methods of interpretation.

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[8] Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 441.

[9] Blocher, "Analogy of Faith," 28.

[10] Robert D. Preus, "The Unity of Scripture," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 54 (1990) 1-23.

It was only in the time of the Reformers that a formal definition began to emerge. In the first hermeneutics book to come out of the Reformation, *Key to the Scriptures* (1567), the Lutheran, Matthaeus Flacius, gave this analysis of the analogy of faith:

[p.7]

Every understanding and exposition of Scripture is to be in agreement with the faith. Such [agreement] is, so to speak, the norm or limit of a sound faith, that we may not be thrust over the fence into the abyss by anything, either by a storm from without or by an attack from within (Rom. 12:6). For everything that is said concerning Scripture, or on the basis of Scripture, must be in agreement with all that the catechism declares or that is taught by the articles of faith.[11]

Unfortunately, Flacius's definition of the analogy of faith shows that the creeds, catechisms, and the Protestant doctrinal tradition had replaced the Roman Catholic variety that Luther, Calvin, and others had renounced. This same dual allegiance to *sola Scriptura* and to an *analogia fidei* that elevated the subjective prejudices of the theologian can be seen in Luther as well. On the one hand, Luther and the Reformers upheld the simple principle that "Scripture interprets itself." On the other hand, Luther often added an additional statement that some passages can only be understood by a rule of faith. In elaborating on this latter feature, Luther reversed the priorities he professed in statements such as, "One should permit every single word [of Scripture] to stand in its natural meaning, and not abandon this *unless faith compels it.*"[12] In another place Luther explained: "We shall stay with the simple understanding. In fact that is what must be done by all who want to occupy themselves with the Scriptures, namely, that they stay with the simple understanding unless *some article of faith compels otherwise*."[13]

Obviously, Luther and the descendants of the Reformation appear at this point to be in danger of repeating the very error they had objected to in the Roman Church. Luther, however, disagreed. The articles of faith that had a determining influence on the interpretation of Scripture were those that ideally represented the point of view of the total body of Scripture. Church dogma, Luther insisted in theory, was not to be set as a supreme norm over what Scripture said. Hence, the *credo* of the church and the articles of faith were not to be understood in the traditionalist sense, but were those articles gained from and grounded in Scripture alone. Whether this distinction would be maintained would be the problem of those who followed the Reformers.

[p.8]

IV. The Theological Task Of Hermeneutics

So where do we stand at the end of the twentieth century on the use of the analogy of faith? Unity of Scripture? Perspicuity of Scripture? Rule of faith? And Scripture interpreting Scripture? Those who have preceded us in the history of the church clearly thought many of these concepts were important in coming to an adequate understanding of what the text was saying. Yet it is just as evident that, like all of us, they too made some methodological mistakes. How shall we sort it all out?

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[11] Quoted by Daniel Fuller, "Biblical Theology and the Analogy of Faith," in *Unity and Diversity in New Testament Theology: Essays in Honor of George E. Ladd* (ed. Robert A. Guelich; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 13.

[12] Martin Luther, *Genesis Sermon*, 1523, as quoted by Otto Hof, "Luther's Exegetical Principle of the Analogy of Faith," *CTM* 38 (1967) 246, n. 333 (italics mine).

[13] Hof, ibid. See there a number of other similar quotes from Luther.

First, it must be decided whether Rom 12:6 means "faith" in the subjective sense (so F. F. Bruce, John Murray, C. E. B. Cranfield, and most modern commentators) or "faith" in the objective sense. If it is the former, there is little or no connection between this verse and the *analogia fidei.* On this view Paul was encouraging would-be prophets to use pure motifs and attitudes and to prophesy only after they felt confident that they had received a message. Ernst Käsemann, however, adamantly disputes the subjective understanding of the word "faith" in Rom 12:6. To his way of thinking, "[I]t makes no sense at all to suggest that the prophet must judge himself by his own faith… This would open the gate to every abuse and even false teaching."[14] Käsemann's position is echoed by Alphonse Maillot, Heinrich Schlier, E. Schweizer, W. Schrage, Rudolph Bultmann, and Henri Blocher.[15] Indeed, it does appear that the subjective criterion would raise more problems than it solves. In fact, the apostle Paul was no stranger to the concept of πίστις in an objective sense of "the faith" (Gal 1:23; 3:3, 25; 6:10),[16] just to take his earliest epistle. Even before the Pastoral Epistles, Paul expressed the idea of "model" or "pattern" of doctrine (Rom 6:17: "You wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching"). Thus, it would be a fairly simple move to use the word "faith" combined with ἀναλογία to mean much the same thing.

Even Rom 12:3 could be interpreted along the same lines, with "measure" meaning the standard or that by which things are measured. Paul would then be teaching that God had given to each Christian an appropriate function in the body in harmony with (understanding μέτρον as an accusative of reference) the standard of the faith as outlined in the Scriptures. Both vv. 3 and 6 of Romans 12 would, on these analyses, remind Paul's readers that they were to think, act, and minister in conformity with what Scripture had taught. Moreover, NT prophecy, in spite of its wide range of forms, was closely bound to the exposition of Scripture, as

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some impressive studies demonstrate.[17] Thus the close tie with Scripture as a standard or norm would be all the more natural to the point being made.

How, then, shall we rightfully utilize the norm of analogy of faith in theological interpretation? Surely, it is evident to the church that interpretations that are without theological input are sterile, dry, and lifeless. But how shall we use "the Faith" (using Paul's Rom 12:6 phrase in the objective sense) in ways that do not countermand *Sola Scriptura* and the *sensus literalis* of the biblical corpus?

Many are aware of the caveat that this writer raised in the volume *Toward an Exegetical Theology*. It was a warning that if meanings established in texts coming chronologically later than the ones being exegeted were used to *introduce* new meanings unattested by the words, syntax, or grammar of that earlier text, the church should plead guilty to the charge of eisegesis. Furthermore, "all revelation would be leveled out," resulting in the fact that whenever the Bible spoke on any subject, it said everything that the latest revelation included, since in this sense "Scripture interpreted Scripture."[18] In order to avoid the traps of eisegesis and a "flat Bible," this author proposed "The Analogy of *Antecedent* Scripture." In this method, every time an author had quoted a previous text, or alluded to an earlier citation, person, event or teaching, these earlier texts were to be seen as conscious references that

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[14] Ernst Käseman, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 341.

[15] As gathered by Blocher, "The Analogy of Faith," 25, nn. 24, 25, 26.

[16] So argued Blocher, ibid.

[17] Another point made by Blocher, "The Analogy of Faith," 25-26, n. 28. He notes the strong assertions of E. Cothenet, "Prophétisme dans le Nouveau Testament," in *DBSup*, vol. 3, cols. 1280, 1299ff.

[18] Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. *Toward an Exegetical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981) 161.

would increase the theological understanding against which this later passage was being viewed. In other words, the new revelation was being enhanced by the theological depth of meaning that God had already disclosed in the Bible that was available up to that point. This "Analogy of Antecedent Theology" understanding of Paul's "analogy of faith" is all the more impressive when one remembers how closely tied Rom 12:6 and NT prophecy was to the exposition of the texts of Scripture already in hand with the church. *Antecedent* analogy, proportionality, and harmony still should be given the pride of place in the exegete's theological bag of tools.

Toward an Exegetical Theology also argued that the collection of all the relevant data on a biblical topic should be brought to bear *after* the meaning of the passage had been established.[19] This

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[p.10]

understanding of the analogy of faith embraces the typical methodology of systematic theology. In this secondary move of analogy, a consensus is sought from every part of Scripture (similar to Blocher's definition number 4 above).

Of course, a key question remains: "whose analogy of faith will be used?" Calvinists surely have an analogy of faith that is different from Arminians; dispensationalists from covenantal theologians; and charismatics from cessationists. In other words, if the faith used in the analogy is one's own set of confessions or doctrines, then the reasoning is circular. And even if we claim that that faith is radically biblical, who or what principle will tell us which verses are the "clear" ones and which are not (on the principle that clearer passages should interpret the unclear ones)? And what Scriptures should be given the status of being norms or standards for the rest?

Likewise, the doctrine of the perspicuity of the Scriptures never implied that all the Bible was equally clear. It only argued that the basic message of salvation through faith in Christ was so readily understandable that even the most humble and simple of persons could grasp its meaning and act on its invitation. Perspicuity never was intended to be an open sesame for all the teaching or interpretation of Scripture. This same point was made by Bishop Marsh:

Another expression used by our Reformers, namely, "the *perspicuity* of the Sacred Writings," has been no less abused than [other] similar expression[s] [such as "the Bible is its own interpreter"]. When [the Reformers] argued for the *perspicuity* of the Bible, they intended not to argue against the application of Learning, but against the application of Tradition to the exposition of Scripture… No! said our Reformers; we need not the aid of your Tradition; to use the Bible is sufficiently perspicious without it… They never meant to declare, that the Bible was alike perspicious, to the learned and the unlearned. If they had, they would never have supplied the unlearned with *explanations* of it.[20]

How and when should the analogy of faith be used? D.A. Carson decides that it must be used cautiously as a final consideration in the exegetical process rather than serving as a

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[19] Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology*, 140. There I said: "Subsequent development in the revelation of theology … may (and should in fact) be brought into our conclusion on summaries after we have firmly established on exegetical grounds precisely what the passage means." Douglas J. Moo ("The Problem of Sensus Plenior," in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* [ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986] 202-4) misunderstood this point in my work. D. A. Carson ("Unity and Diversity in the New Testament," in *Scripture and Truth* [ed. D. A. Carson and John Woodbridge; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983] 90) also "seems to hit beyond the mark" as Henri Blocher ("The Analogy of Faith," 341) observes.

[20] Herbert Marsh, *A Course of Letters ... In Theological Learning* (Boston: Cummings and Hilliard, 1815) 18 (italics his).

determining factor.[21] Henri Blocher sees Carson's point, but hesitates to restrict the analogy of faith to "a last resort"

[p.11]

hermeneutical device. It "yields precious benefits in shaping over expectation, in stimulating over scientific imagination, in balancing our horizons," even though leaving it to determining the limits is a "safe path" in Blocher's view.[22] Even if Blocher's view is best (and that still seems doubtful), something is still missing. True, no one wishes to be guilty of eisegesis. No one wishes to press the doctrinal standards of a corporate body to such a point that they become a law in themselves equal, or above, the Scriptures from which they were drawn. Such a hermeneutical leviathan ought to frighten all of us. No ecclesiastical interpretation or doctrinal summary of the faith ought to control our reading of Scripture and thus encroach on God's sovereignty over his own Word.

But our generation has lost another vital hermeneutical point in all of our emphasis on detail, on the parts and the minutiae of Scripture. We have not factored in three critically important elements in our interpretation: 1) the coherence of Scripture; 2) the organic nature of Scripture; and 3) the canonical enclosure of Scripture. Blocher is more than justified in his urgent reminder of these factors.[23] Here is the jist of the argument: "If Scripture were a collection of independent sayings, all of them right, but simply juxtaposed, on topics unconnected with one another, how could the analogy come into play? … But Scripture [is] like ordinary speech and even more so."[24]

There is where the analogy of faith enters the process again. Since the mind governing Scripture is one, is it not just as appropriate and fair to God the Holy Spirit, as it is to the thought of a particular secular writer, to gather his total thinking on a particular subject? If communication is assumed, do we not grant that the writer exhibits coherence and unity in his or her thought until proven otherwise? Why must biblical scholars assume less, unless it is a subconscious protest against a simple divine mind behind the entirety of Scripture? This factor, more than any other, has spoiled more and more evangelicals and poisoned them against most discussions of a unifying principle to biblical theology, biblical ethics, or even of the legitimacy of systematic theology. Success in the analytical methods of scholarship has taken evangelicalism away from attention to synthetic types of studies and the teaching of them to our students.

What relevance and bearing do the results of such arguments from coherence have on exegesis? Just this: they may be called "Heuristic evidences." Let me illustrate: a student informs me that my son's wife drove off in a blue car. I know that my son, Jon, has a blue Honda that Susan also drives. A correct grammatical-historical exegesis of that statement would be that Susan drove

[p.12]

away in a blue car. But just as additional evidence can be brought to bear on biblical studies from later biblical books than the one we are studying (or even from atlases, dictionaries, theological wordbooks, et al.) so here I attach more significance to these words than my informant thought I had. You see, I also had heard Susan call my son on the phone and say she was going shopping and that she would leave from campus with two of her girlfriends.

[21] Carson, "Unity and Diversity," 92.

[22] Blocher, "The Analogy of Faith," 37.

[23] Blocher, "The Analogy of Faith," 32-33.

[24] Ibid.

None of this knowledge changed the meaning of the informer's statement. But it surely enhanced it for me, since I had additional "revelation." Notice that this additional revelation deals with the same topic and extended what was seminally present, but unexpressed in the original statement. That is precisely the way that the analogy of faith operates. It is not an exegetical tool. But, given the fact that it uses evidence that belongs coherently to the same subject and contains the same truth—only adding to what was there—it can be used to enlarge on the basic meaning already in hand from the original statement. We propose to call this heuristic evidence, i.e., evidence that aided us in further discovering the implications of the thought.

That is why attention must also be drawn to the *organic* nature of revelation. Within the earlier texts are the germs of the same truths that are often enlarged later on. Thus the seminal nature of Gen 3:15, with its pointing to a male descendant that will come from Eve and who will crush Satan, is clear in the Genesis text itself. (See the LXX translation that deliberately broke the rules of agreement between the neuter form of "seed" and the masculine reference—the only case of almost 150 instances in the book of Genesis almost three hundred years before the Christian era.) Add to this the concept of a canon that has closure to it and the case for the use of a unifying principle in OT and NT biblical theology, for the methodology of systematic theology, and for OT or NT ethics cannot be easily dismissed.

Even Brevard S. Childs's emphasis on the canon is flawed in that the editors, redactors, and so-called canonizers are given more importance than the final form of the text. Childs has, as Blocher remarks, opened up the way to a partial re-discovery of biblical unity, but he wavers between his critical preliminary work and his canonical afterword.[25] But there is a beginning to God's word and there is a completion to that corpus. This wholeness provides an overarching context that completes the picture of what the organizing mind of Scripture envisioned. However, in no case does this totality veto or pull rank on the validity and the integrity of what was said in each individual teaching block within that totality.

[p.13]

V. Conclusion

Will later texts pry loose deeper theological truths ready to be juxtaposed over earlier texts? We think not. Does "Scripture interprets Scripture" mean that there are some norms within the text that act as controls over the hermeneutical process? Yes, to this extent: the *sedes doctrine*, i.e., the so-called "chair passages," or what I prefer to call the largest teaching block of text on each of the doctrines, act as boundary setters for those who ask for some guidance when working on texts that are textually or topically parallel. But notice carefully: it is Scripture, not credos, confessions, or doctrinal statements, that sets the norms.

The analogy of Faith operates in the hermeneutical process in a clarifying role. Thus it is used at the conclusion of the process. The Analogy of Faith operates as a piece of heuristic evidence because of the coherent, organic, and canonical nature of Scripture—especially when it is operating from *sedes doctrinal*, the largest teaching block where a particular doctrine comes to its fullest expression. The Analogy of Faith also combines all teaching on the same topics or which use the same *verba* and thus makes possible systematic theology. If one wishes to use an analogical approach early in the exegetical process, we would still urge that that be restricted to "The Analogy of Antecedent Scripture," where earlier citations, allusions, shared persons and events "inform" and provide the background against which this new Word from God is heard.

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[25] The whole issue of *JSNT* 16 (1980) is devoted to Brevard S. Childs's canonical approach.

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[p.14]

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