

Toward a Reformed Theological Interpretation of Scripture

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to expound the contemporary discussion on the theological interpretation of Scripture and its relationship to epistemology. The theological interpretation of Scripture is a recent movement, endorsed by key figures such as Christopher Seitz, Stephen Fowl, John Webster and Kevin Vanhoozer, partly in response to the modern bent towards historical-criticism in biblical exegesis. It is also stemming from the desire to read Scripture with and for the church while rediscovering the merits of pre-critical methods of reading. This paper, specifically, will suggest that the theological interpretation of Scripture is epistemically justifiable if one adopts the Reformed epistemology of Alvin Plantinga, and that it is the obligatory method if one is committed to a Presuppositional (or Covenantal) epistemology, as held by Cornelius Van Til. It is thus fruitful to rethink the relationship between philosophy, theology, and exegesis in light of this observation.

Roadmap

This paper will begin by expositing the two epistemological commitments of Van Til and Plantinga, and will henceforth exposit the project of the theological interpretation of Scripture. I will then show how the epistemological commitments (or parts of their epistemological frameworks) of Van Til and Plantinga have direct implications to hermeneutics and argue that a theological posture (and not merely a historical posture) towards hermeneutics and the reading of Scripture is a posture that is obligatory once one adopts Van Til's epistemology and justifiable if one adopts Plantinga's epistemology. It is in this latter section that I will focus on one particular proponent of the theological interpretation of Scripture, John Webster, in connection to Van Til's thought, which might give us insights on the possibility of reconciling Van Til and Karl Barth. As one shall see, even though the work of Van Til and Plantinga differ in some important aspects, insights from both influential scholars are significant to this discussion.

Cornelius Van Til: Presuppositionalism - An Ethics of Epistemology

A significant starting point for Van Tillian Epistemology is the commitment to doing all things under the Lordship of Christ. 2 Corinthians 10:5 demands that the Christian is obligated to take every thought captive to the obedience to Christ. This means one's every thought must be subsumed and subordinate to and under the criterion of God, His Word, and his Lordship. The Lordship of God implies obvious ethical oughts. Humans ought to obey the commands of God, so humans ought to be holy, and love others as one love themselves. However, it is rarely suggested that the Lordship of God also implies several "oughts" in Epistemology. Epistemology is the branch of philosophy that deals with questions regarding knowledge. As such, it is an epistemological concern when one asks how one ought to gain knowledge, and what rules shall he use to gain knowledge, and where the foundation for knowledge is. For a Christian, as sinner-servant of God, he or she must see God's Word as his or her authority for knowledge. What God says, the Christian must believe. Humans have no right to test his word, or to pit his authority to another as if some other source could be an equal authoritative source. They must obey his word. Thus all human philosophizing and all of his intellectual work must be done in submission to God's Word. This is why Van Til and his intellectual descendants put epistemology under the category of ethics.¹ So Frame:

Ethics deals with norms, or laws, for human life in general. Epistemology deals with the norms that govern thought. By seeing epistemology as a branch of ethics, we remind ourselves in the most vivid way that knowing is not autonomous; it is subject to God's authority, as is all of human life.²

The Christian's fundamental epistemological starting point must thus be the Word of God. And because the Bible is Scripture, it is the Word of God. The text of Scripture is not merely a collection of historical records that testifies to the acts of God in history, but as a collection of pneumatologically sanctified texts, and the ordained means by which God speaks to the people whom He had covenant himself to. Scripture's ontology is thus to be described in overridingly theological (and Trinitarian) categories. It includes in that description the primacy of the divine authorship of Scripture, and the self-disclosure of the Triune God to His church. This Christian commitment ought not be suspended when one desires to know, read, reason, or interpret. He is in a covenantal relationship with the Triune God, and this covenant must thus make him both epistemologically and

¹ So much so that K. Scott Oliphint, Professor of Apologetics and Systematic Theology in Westminster Theological Seminary, Pennsylvania, would argue that the term "presuppositionalism" carries with it too much philosophical baggage. In an attempt to bring to light the theologico-ethical dimension of this doctrine, he seeks to reframe it under the theological category of "Covenantal" epistemology or apologetics.

² John Frame, *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God: A Theology of Lordship* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Co., 1987), 63.

morally self-conscious. As one shall see, one's hermeneutical method, then, must be consistent with the theological ontology of the biblical texts and his covenantal obligations to the God who addresses her through his Word.

Van Tillian Transcendental Method

A presupposition is defined as "a belief that takes precedence over another and therefore serves as a criterion for another."³ Van Til recognizes that the Christian's presuppositions are radically different from those of the non-Christian. The non-Christian (say, the atheist and contemporary Evolutionist) presupposes that the ontology of the world is grounded in random chance while the Christian argues that its ontology is found in the Triune Godhead. Thus, when a Christian meets with a non-Christian, a clash occurs between two worldviews; a spiritual battle between persons who hold opposing epistemic norms. The Christian will argue that Scripture is the main foundation for knowledge, while the non-believer does not. Van Til's suggestion in addressing the non-believer, then, is to show why the Christian's presuppositions of the Triune God and His Word are necessary to know anything at all about the world. In his own words: "We must rather reason that unless God exists as ultimate, as self-subsistent, we cannot then know anything; we could not even reason that God must exist, nor could we even ask a question about God,"⁴ and thus "Human knowledge ultimately rests upon the internal coherence within the Godhead; our knowledge rests upon the ontological Trinity as its presupposition."⁵

The transcendental method was a term borrowed from Immanuel Kant, seeking "to uncover what must be the case (or alternatively, what we must take to be the case) in order for various kinds of intentional operation (e.g., individuating, predicating, perceiving, knowing) to be possible."⁶ For Van Til (and as he would argue, Scripture itself), the fear of the Lord, the work of the Spirit, the acceptance of the theological ontology of the biblical texts; that the Triune God exists, that He has revealed Himself and is communicating to His church today, faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, are necessary pre-conditions for one to attain true knowledge. Indeed, "It is the firm conviction of every epistemologically self-conscious Christian that no human being can utter a single syllable, whether in negation or affirmation, unless it were for God's existence."⁷

In this way, then, Van Til takes seriously Scripture's claims that in Christ "all things hold together," (Col. 1:17); thus without presupposing Christ the non-

³ Ibid., 45.

⁴ Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1974), 102.

⁵ Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 23.

⁶ James Anderson, "If Knowledge, then God: The Epistemological Theistic Arguments of Plantinga and Van Til," *Calvin Theological Journal* 40, no. 1 (2005): 53.

⁷ Cornelius Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1969), 11.

believer will have no basis to reason that all things indeed hold together. Van Tillian epistemology emphasizes Proverbs 1:7 that “the fear of the Lord is the *beginning* of knowledge.” Without fear of God, then, there is no knowledge, and thus the Christian who seeks to suspend his Christian presuppositions when desiring to know or reason is actually abandoning *the very reason knowing is possible at all*. The Christian faith is not to be established from a general theory of what is ultimate or an autonomous criterion of knowledge. It is the Triune God, in Christ, that must be presupposed, and it is this starting point that establishes and norms every other discipline. One shall see below, how, by extension, these beliefs are also pre-conditions (necessary presuppositions) for one to interpret the Bible rightly. Indeed, knowing the theological nature of the Bible as the Word of God (or, a commitment to the “rule of faith”) is a necessary starting point for one to interpret it rightly.⁸

Alvin Plantinga: Reformed Epistemology - Theistic Belief as Properly Basic

Seeing problems in both Classical Foundationalism and Coherentism as cogent theories for epistemic justification, Plantinga proposes that epistemic justification (or warrant) must come elsewhere. For Plantinga, a belief has warrant for some person P if and only if cognitive faculties that properly function according to God’s design plan produced that belief. In his own words:

In setting out to create human beings in his image, then, God set out to create us in a way that we can reflect his capacity to grasp concept and hold beliefs. Furthermore, he proposed to create us in such a way that we can reflect his ability to hold *true* beliefs. He therefore created us with cognitive faculties designed to enable us to achieve true beliefs with respect to a wide variety of propositions – propositions about our immediate environment, about our interior life...and about himself.⁹

Given that this person’s properly functioning cognitive faculty is living under proper, normal circumstances (circumstances that are necessary for his cognitive faculties to properly function), perceptual beliefs about the world are epistemically warranted for him. On this epistemological framework, beliefs about the world could be held with warrant even with the absence of evidence and could thus be *properly basic* beliefs.¹⁰ This is not all, for “the full panalogy of Christian belief – “the great things of the gospel”: Trinity, incarnation, resurrection, atonement, salvation, eternal life, etc. – is also (or can be) “properly

⁸ See Van Til’s *Defense of the Faith* for full explication of his arguments for this conclusion.

⁹ Alvin Plantinga, “Epistemic Justification,” *Nous* 20, no. 1 (March 1986): 15.

¹⁰ A belief P is basic for S if and only if it is a belief that is not inferred from any other belief that S holds. A belief P is properly basic for S if S holds P in the basic way, and P is an epistemically justified belief for S.

basic” for believers.”¹¹ Plantinga contends that theistic belief is much like perceptual belief. A person will spontaneously believe that he is hearing a loud whistle the moment he hears a loud whistle. He does not believe this on the basis of some argument; he simply just comes to believe it. As long as his cognitive faculties are functioning properly, he can hold that such a belief was warranted for him even when he has no evidence for it. Theistic belief can be held in that same way; for Plantinga, one can believe that God, through His Spirit, is currently speaking to him, or that the Trinity exists and hold such a belief in a properly basic way. The Holy Spirit, then, is just as valid of a source of knowledge as is the science of archaeology. Both are, for the Reformed epistemologists, possible producers of belief in the properly functioning person.¹²

Therefore, the Christian can believe in God, and be epistemically warranted in his belief about God without succumbing to the non-believer’s epistemic convictions about how a belief is justified. When one is committed to Plantinga’s Reformed Epistemology, she does not need to succumb to the Classical Foundationalist’s (whether in the form of Evidentialism or Rationalism) demand that a basic belief is justified or warranted only if it is grounded in some good argument or incorrigible evidence. In other words, the Reformed Epistemologist need not ascribe to their prescribed method. One is committed to a different method, and it is, indeed, a valid one. This will also have implications for one’s hermeneutical approach.

Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Description of the Movement and its Project

Now that I have surveyed briefly Van Til’s and Plantinga’s epistemological frameworks, I will proceed to explain the movement of the theological interpretation of Scripture¹³ (hereafter, TIS), and will show how their epistemology has bearing on the TIS discussion. Though a distinct and precise definition of TIS is hard to grasp, one could identify common strands of thought among its proponents. A sketch will be attempted here. As we shall see, though it could be arguable that Plantinga’s Reformed Epistemology could be broadly applied to the proponents of TIS, the same, it seems to me could not be said with Van Til’s work. Thus, a specific proponent of TIS – John Webster – will be focused on later below. It is my own suspicion that Webster’s dogmatic works on

¹¹ Thomas H. McCall, “Religious Epistemology, Theological Interpretation of Scripture and Critical Biblical Scholarship: A Theologian’s Reflections,” in *Do Historical Matters Matter to Faith? A Critical Appraisal of Modern and Post-Modern Approaches to Scripture*, ed. James K. Hoffmeier and Dennis R. Magary (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 38.

¹² Plantinga, interestingly, thinks that a non-theist could also employ his proper functioning model for epistemic justification.

¹³ Advocates of this movement include Francis Watson, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Stephen E. Fowl, Walter L. Moberly and Christopher Seitz, and John Webster.

theological interpretation and the ontology of Scripture could be most compatible to Van Til's reasoning, and to the extent that suspicion is right, is to the extent towards which, perhaps, Van Til and Karl Barth are on the same page in their critiques of the possibility of impartial or autonomous human reasoning in the claims of critical scholarship and their demand for the Christian to begin their reasoning presupposing distinctly Christian claims. More on that below.

TIS is a recent movement that has sprung from a dissatisfaction of recent trends in biblical studies and theology that tends towards historical critical methodology and the search for the "objective" historical meaning or development of the text.¹⁴ A seismic philosophical shift towards rationalism and a distrust towards the Bible's character as Scripture has "the vast majority of biblical scholars [learning] how to separate their public historical research from their private beliefs."¹⁵ Historical categories, following the principles of Ernst Troeltsch, become the assumed framework through which one must come to interpret the Bible because it supposedly "brackets or prescind[s] from what is known by faith and aims to proceed 'scientifically', strictly on the basis of reason."¹⁶ However, because of serious philosophical problems, the claims of historical-critical scholars to objectivity is now seen as hopelessly naïve and as a "myth"¹⁷ for it is just as loaded with theological (or anti-theological) presuppositions as the Christian's.¹⁸ This realization has led Christian scholars to deny the need for an exclusively historical reading of the Bible, realizing that historical categories is just as abstracted away from the Bible¹⁹ as theological categories are, causing in them the desire to read once again read the Bible theologically "and get on with interpretation in relation to the church and Christian doctrine."²⁰

¹⁴ Richard S. Briggs and Joel N. Lohr, *A Theological Introduction to the Pentateuch: Interpreting the Torah as Christian Scripture* ed. Richard S. Briggs and Joel N. Lohr (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 10-12.

¹⁵ Stephen Fowl, "Theological and Ideological Strategies of Biblical Interpretation," in *Scripture: An Ecumenical Introduction to the Bible and its Interpretation* ed. Michael J. Gorman (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2005), 166.

¹⁶ Alvin Plantinga, "Two (or More) Kinds of Scripture Scholarship," in *"Behind" the Text: History and Biblical Interpretation* ed. Craig Bartholomew, C. Stephen Evans, Mary Healy, Murray Rae, vol. 4 of *Scripture and Hermeneutics Series* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 19.

¹⁷ Craig Bartholomew, "Introduction," in *"Behind" the Text: History and Biblical Interpretation* ed. Craig Bartholomew, C. Stephen Evans, Mary Healy, Murray Rae, vol. 4 of *Scripture and Hermeneutics Series* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 9.

¹⁸ More on this, below.

¹⁹ "The assumption, widely shared, is that correct interpretation depends upon correct understanding of the originating context... The problem is that the best we can do here is to offer hypotheses that try to make the most compelling sense of the evidence... Thus while the 'originating context' may be a helpful interpretive framework to consider, there are often going to be *several* such contexts, some of them more determinable than others." – Briggs and Lohr, 9. Emphasis mine.

²⁰ Bartholomew, 11.

TIS presupposes the necessity of acknowledging the character of God and Scripture to be able to interpret it rightly. It demands that Scripture must be read according to the “rule of faith” and that a neutral reading of it is impossible. It acknowledges that the Bible is distinctly Christian Scripture. Thus, because of the unique character of Scripture, it cannot be read just like any other book, or as if it was just a mere historical book.²¹ History does not make a claim upon our lives. Scripture does. From the very beginning, when one comes to read the Bible one is immediately encountered by Yahweh, a God who demands total allegiance to Him. Scripture calls us to repent, to believe in Jesus Christ who was raised from the dead and to be baptized. It is authoritative for our lives in a way that mere historical books are not precisely because TIS presupposes that the author of Scripture is still alive and present with the reader as he reads. Indeed, “Scripture makes unique demands of the reader as it is God who stands behind them.”²²

Thus, TIS argues that Scripture is the living and active Word of God. When one reads the Bible, he encounters the living Triune God. So much so that Scott Swain would prefer to call God, as communicating himself through the Bible, not as the divine “author” but the “Divine Rhetor.”²³ Indeed, “though grounded in the past, the divine self-communication continues. The written Word is in no sense a substitute for a speaking God; rather, it is the place and the means of God’s continued speaking.”²⁴ Similarly, Mark Alan Bowald argues that “reading Scripture bears a stronger analogous relationship to the event of rhetorical speech than to reading books.”²⁵

For TIS, the primarily locus of meaning is thus in the context of the divine author and his intentions for the reader, instead of that of the mind of the historical author and his context. It does not negate the meaning of the historical author²⁶ or the helpfulness of historical-critical reading²⁷, but it demands that, “because God is the ultimate author of Scripture, a passage may have several

²¹ “We must not think about Scripture – again, at least not for very long – apart from its divine author and central subject matter. Nor must we think about hermeneutics – about interpreting Scripture – apart from Christian doctrine or biblical exegesis.” Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture and Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 10.

²² Mark Alan Bowald, “The Character of Theological Interpretation of Scripture,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12, no. 2 (2010), 172.

²³ Scott Swain, *Trinity, Revelation and Reading: A Theological Introduction to the Bible and its Interpretation* (New York, NY: T&T Clark International, 2011).

²⁴ Francis Watson, “Hermeneutics and the Doctrine of Scripture,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12, no. 2 (2010), 127.

²⁵ Bowald, 173.

²⁶ So, Watson: “the acknowledgment of the Bible’s divine origin was never intended to deny the corresponding reality of its human origin.” In Watson, “Hermeneutics and the Doctrine of Scripture”, 125.

²⁷ On TIS: “It is the interviewating of concerns both traditional and modern, which may be both theologically orthodox and robustly critical, but all the while alert to the fact (a social as well as theological fact) that these texts have remained sacred Scripture for many centuries.” Briggs and Lohr, 4.

meanings within its literal sense.”²⁸ Scripture is God’s word addressing His multi-generational and culturally diverse church. Therefore, to take a particular book in the Bible in its “integrity” and to interpret it aright is to interpret it in light of its final form, within the Canon.²⁹ The Canon in its unity, is after all, the collection of texts that God had decided to be the vehicle through which He communicates to His church. In this way, TIS reflects much of pre-critical ways of reading the Bible. Iain Provan helpfully states that medieval exegetes “regarded the meaning of Scripture in the mind of the person who first uttered it as only one of its possible meanings. It might not be, in certain circumstances, even its primary or most important meaning.”³⁰

Therefore, proper interpretation of Genesis, for example, must put priority on the entire Canon as the means by which one reads the book. Thus, though historical sources or ancient near eastern literature contemporary to Genesis might be helpful to read the book, it does not get primary attention for it is not a part of the Canon and is therefore uninspired.

TIS also emphasizes the need to interpret the Bible with the Church. Just as a historical-critically bent interpreter of the Bible will want to take Genesis in isolation from the Canon and use Ancient Near East parallels as the standard or tool to interpret Genesis, proponents of TIS demands that Church theologians and interpreters – those who have been chosen by God, empowered by the Spirit to read the Bible, and have been raised by God for the purpose of teaching and influence – are necessary sources to read Genesis aright. The Church is, after all, Scripture’s primary intended audience, and one cannot read the text aright without heeding to how the audience have received and interpreted the text.³¹ As such, TIS presupposes a dogmatic understanding of the Trinity and His active work in the Church in a sovereign effort to “make friends with us.”³² What TIS does for the act of reading the Bible is that it “begins less as an act of isolated and desperate textual archaeologists but more as one of spiritually hungry and thirsty creatures who are confronted with the abundant and bountiful gospel in the living speech of the very embodiment of life and truth himself.”³³

For TIS, then, reading of the Scriptures is not primarily to discover what Paul meant to the Corinthians, or what Moses meant to the Israelites, or what Luke meant to Theophilus. The task of exegesis certainly must include a basic reconstruction of what they might have meant, but theological exegesis demands

²⁸ Fowl, “Theological and Ideological Strategies of Biblical Interpretation”, 171.

²⁹ “The “final form of the text” is the way in which God has so commandeered that history as to the vehicle of the text’s final form, as a canonical approach seeks to comprehend and appreciate that.” Christopher R. Seitz, *The Character of Christian Scripture*, Studies in Theological Interpretation (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 43.

³⁰ Iain Provan, “How Can I Understand, Unless Someone Explains it to me? (Acts 8:30-31): Evangelicals and Biblical Hermeneutics,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 17, no. 1 (2007): 30.

³¹ “If God is the Bible’s author, the Bible’s audience was the Church of many centuries, including our own and yet future centuries.” Richard Swinburne, *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy*, 2nd ed. (New York: NY: Oxford University Press, 2007), 255.

³² Swain, 60.

³³ Bowald, 182-183.

that the exegetical task remains incomplete unless one understands what the Triune God has communicated to him and the church through the text. The text is not to be seen as some “window” to an event; the reader is to look, as Vanhoozer suggests, not at Scripture but *along it*.³⁴ The reader (or listener of the Divine Rhetor) is to be shaped by his reading, corrected and illumined. In this way, the task of theological exegesis is for the purpose of calling the reader to participate in the story of God in which he is a part of, and to play his role well.

The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative and Historical Critical Exegesis

One can now already see how the movement of TIS is a direct response to historical-critical exegesis (hereafter, HCE), and is, in a fundamental way, adopting a different epistemological framework than the proponents of HCE. Thus, some comments regarding the differences between HCE and TIS would be worth considering for the purposes of better understanding the movement.

Many theological interpreters reap on the fruits of Hans Frei's³⁵ observations. Kevin Vanhoozer comments how Frei “demonstrated, how biblical critics came to interpret the Bible with frameworks of meaning and criteria of truth that were derived from science, history, and philosophy rather than from Scripture and Christian faith.”³⁶ In this way, Vanhoozer notes how HCE reflects “modernity's two privileged epistemological criteria – reason and experience.”³⁷ For HCE, then the authority and guidance of “tradition, magisterium, creed, or ‘external’ epistemic authority” is ruled out and seen as invalid contributors to the task of exegesis and interpretation.³⁸ They deny, then, that Scripture should be read with the belief that the primary author of the Bible is God, that the Bible is a trustworthy guide or that the whole of the 66 texts speak of one subject matter.

Furthermore, they demand that the suspension of these distinctly Christian beliefs is *normative* to the task of interpretation. Those who employ purely HCE methodology as their hermeneutic inherently distrusts the canonicity of the bible and its authority and sees this move as necessary to develop a good hermeneutic. They are “more interested in providing an account of the development of the texts as we now have them, rather than engaging with the resultant theological conceptualization once the texts have reached their final form.”³⁹ Thus, if Christians adopt this ‘general’ hermeneutic, then they have just put a chasm between their ultimate commitment to the Bible as God's living and active word

³⁴ Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, 15-43.

³⁵ Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974).

³⁶ Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: WJK, 2005), 10.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

³⁸ Plantinga, “Two (or More) Kinds of Scripture Scholarship”, 27.

³⁹ Briggs and Lohr, 12.

and their scholarly attempts to exegete the text well. HCE's aim in interpretation is not the aim of the Christian. Tragically,

We have also come to see just how secular much of modern biblical studies and theology have been. Exegetes read the Bible 'like any other book' (Benjamin Jowett); theologians, meanwhile, were busy recasting theology in terms of this or that philosophy. In short, nontheological frameworks determined the agenda for theology with fateful results. Scripture dwindled into human history; tradition shriveled into human experience.⁴⁰

In sum, a robust theological interpreter of Scripture seeks to make biblical hermeneutics a task designed for the Church and by the Church. The interests and methodology of HCE is overriding for the Academy. Proponents of TIS are appreciative and are open to learn from the fruits reaped by pure HCE (indeed, many of them are deep in historical-textual critical studies - Brevard Childs comes into mind), but they contend that such a reading is not yet a Christian reading along with its convictions that the biblical text is God's revealed Word. The "human" aspects of Scripture, so to speak, are to be investigated, as it reveals the reception of the texts in its historical setting and uncovers the origins of the text's writing. These investigations are neither useless nor abrogated by a robust theological interpretation. It is the epistemological frameworks behind them that is to be replaced if an overriding Christian and ecclesial reading is to truly take place. This is where Plantinga and Van Til makes some fruitful contributions to the discussion.

Alvin Plantinga's Reformed Epistemology and TIS

It should thus be obvious that, according to Plantinga's insights, one needs not adopt the epistemology assumed by the HCE paradigm to be deemed as good interpreters of Christian Scripture. Why think that the Christian has to take away his belief in the testimony of the Spirit-led Church and the conviction that the Bible is Scripture to read it well – as if the Christian does not have warrant for such beliefs? The Christian has warrant for receiving the Bible as Christian Scripture, and in fact, his worldview demands that he does not read the Bible as if it was just another book of mere human origins. The pay-off in understanding Plantinga's Reformed Epistemology is that *those who do not share the epistemological frameworks of HCE need not succumb to HCE's methodology as the norm for reading the Bible*. Therefore, TIS is just as valid as a methodology for reading the Bible as is the methodology of HCE, given the Christian paradigm from which it functions.

⁴⁰ Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 10.

The implications of epistemological commitments to one's hermeneutical commitments and exegetical goals are clear and significant. Thomas H. McCall has helpfully fleshed out the positive contributions that Plantinga's Reformed Epistemology serves for Christians as a response to the claims of HCE's conclusions and methodological naturalism. Proponents of HCE deny the role of the Holy Spirit as an authority and valid source for knowledge and also deny that the locus and primary context of meaning lies in the Canon of Scripture as the Word of God. They also deny the unity of the Bible, smuggling in presuppositions of naturalism and evidentialism in their exegetical work, and thus proving that their claims to neutrality is neither possible nor veracious. McCall then observes that "the claims of metaphysical naturalism should have no hold on historians who are Christian believers."⁴¹ By extension, then, those who do not share the presupposed naturalism or evidentialism (or any other epistemological commitments) in HCE will be free to do exegesis presupposing that the Bible is Christian Scripture. McCall's observations are worth quoting extensively here, as he contrasts Reformed epistemology with those holding to a more foundationalist or coherentist framework in response to HCE—note that HCE is represented by McCall by the abbreviation CBS (critical-biblical scholarship).

The believer who holds to Reformed Epistemology is in a position to conclude that while the declarations of CBS might be important and interesting, they do nothing to touch grounds for beliefs that are not reliant upon such methodology. Such a believer may – through he need not – ignore the conclusions of CBS. The classical foundationalist (or the coherentist) on the other hand, may be in a very different situation. To be clear, he is in a difficult epistemic place, but he is not necessarily in that place. The classical foundationalist who takes CBS to be finally authoritative on the matters in question will likely face a dilemma, as will the coherentist.⁴²

Of course, those, as McCall later notes, epistemic foundationalists and coherentists who take HCE (or CBS) to be finally authoritative can, on their own grounds, show that the claims of CBS should not be of a concern in order to justify their hermeneutical commitments and exegetical goals of adhering to the voice of God – but this is simply a step that becomes unnecessary for the proponents of Plantinga's Reformed Epistemology. Therefore, Reformed Epistemology allows Christians to formulate an interpretive methodology that is unmotivated by merely answering the claims of higher criticism, but instead motivated by their doctrine of Scripture and thus a theologically constructive hermeneutic.

The result, thus, is a healthy conscience and a freedom for "the discipline of biblical theology [from being] inordinately concerned with images of

⁴¹ McCall, 27.

⁴² Ibid., 43-44.

boundaries and separations designed to keep constructive theological concerns at bay until some more properly historical work can be done by the biblical theologian”⁴³, and to simply proceed to read the Bible theologically and for the church. Indeed, what distinguishes modern biblical interpretation is that the priority is granted to “historical concerns over theological ones,”⁴⁴ when “there is no reason to orient ourselves towards one side to the exclusion of the other as if a matter of principle is at stake.”⁴⁵ For the Christian, the belief in the unity of the Bible, indeed “the great things of the Gospel” could be seen as properly basic beliefs. The properly functioning Christian acknowledges faith, the Spirit and the church as sources of warranted knowledge. Given that the Christian has warrant for these beliefs, there is no reason why the Christian should set these convictions aside when they come to the Christian Scriptures. For the Christian, the Bible is not just a historical text given to an ancient audience. For the Christian, the Bible is *their* Bible. He does not need to give an evidentialist argument for this claim, for the Christian does not believe this on evidentialist grounds. He does not need to use evidentialist (or rationalist) methodology to interpret the Bible either for their framework is elsewhere.

Van Til’s Presuppositional Epistemology and TIS

If a fruit of Plantinga’s Epistemology is that TIS becomes a viable methodological option of interpretation for the Christian, the main fruit that comes from Van Tillian epistemology is that the Christian is *obligated* to read the Bible theologically – both in obedience to God and to read the Bible aright. Presuppositionalism is right in showing how one’s presuppositions will determine the way one reasons and the norms one uses in the activity of reasoning, and it is the same way in interpretation.⁴⁶ For Van Til, the Christian’s starting point, and authoritative foundation for knowledge must be the Word of God itself. Thus, epistemological starting points must be critically assessed, and it is the conviction of Van Til that there are certain necessary starting points for the Christian to adopt in order to obey His God and to begin fruitful interpretation. One must thus begin with the commitment that the Bible is Divine Scripture and the self-disclosure of the Triune God to His people. Prolegomena itself must be guided by Scriptural as authority – to put aside down one’s theological commitments and adhering desire to obey the authoritative *Viva Vox Dei* is not an option for sinner-servants of God. For, in doing this, Van Til would claim that the Christian is thus not only disobedient, but *suspending the very reason why the Christian can engage in the act of interpretation rightly at all*.

⁴³ Stephen Fowl, *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1998), 17.

⁴⁴ Fowl, “Theological and Ideological Strategies of Biblical Interpretation”, 164.

⁴⁵ Watson, 142.

⁴⁶ Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 40-46.

The unique character of the Bible as Christian Scripture must be acknowledged when one comes to read the Bible. This is arguably equivalent to arguing that presupposing the right genre of a text is necessary to read the text properly. The non-Christian, who denies the existence of the primary author of the text, and who refuses to submit under the Lordship of the Divine Rhetor cannot be expected to *know* what the meaning of the Scriptures is. Just as the reader who opens a letter without knowing well its author, intended purpose or audience, or that the text he is reading is indeed a letter, cannot be expected to understand the message of the letter. The non-Christian who denies the systematic theology as confessed by the Christian church thus cannot read the Bible as it was intended. Thus, the question of hermeneutics cannot be set aside as pre-theological and autonomous from the Christian's confessional norms. It, too, must be a task that must be subsumed under the Lordship of Christ, assimilated into and under the theological confessions of the church. These are necessary presuppositions and theological invocations the reader needs to yield and affirm to read the Bible aright. Therefore, because of the nature of the Bible as theology and Scripture, the late E.C. Hoskyns concludes that the Bible "can reveal its meaning only to those who regard it as the Word of God."⁴⁷

Thus, the Christian reads the Bible as under God's authority, seeking to be mastered by God's Word. He reads the Bible and anticipates the Triune God to address him, for he is commanded to do exactly this. The Bible must be described in distinctly theological categories, and it will not be subsumed by an alien criterion by the name of reason or human experience. Christopher Seitz profoundly comments that this will cause the Bible to become our "adversary" for: "What has emerged...is a text undomesticated and able to speak a word – even 'our adversary,' witnessing to the work of the Triune God who occasioned the speech about himself – and equipping us, by the Holy Spirit, to hear the divine word afresh in our generation."⁴⁸ In doing this, the ideal interpreter no longer sees himself as the subject trying to master the text, stripping it and judging what may or may not be true for himself, but finds that he himself "has become the object as much as the subject of analysis and interpretation."⁴⁹ Only in this way, argues presuppositionalism, will the interpreter understand the proper meaning of the Scriptures for the interpreter is thus reading the Scriptures according to its intended purpose: "for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." (2 Tim. 3:16-17) Drawing from the insights of Van Til, Graeme Goldsworthy notes that "the more consistently evangelical perspective would be that submission to a divine author should be the norm. It is not that we add something to general exegesis, but that secular modernism subtracts the vital element from all its deliberations."⁵⁰ In short,

⁴⁷ As quoted in: Markus Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study*, Studies in Theological Interpretation (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerAcademic, 2006), 158.

⁴⁸ Seitz, 70.

⁴⁹ Bockmuehl, 146.

⁵⁰ Goldsworthy, 206.

Christians must read the Bible theologically because “their identity as Christians compels them to do so.”⁵¹

John Webster

Van Til’s sensitivities, it seems to me, are strikingly similar to the concerns of John Webster, a particular proponent of TIS. Webster emphatically denies that a neutral reading of Scripture is an open option for the professed Christian. Instead, for him, the proper description of the event of Christian reading is one in which the living voice of God is addressing the people of God in order to generate faith and obedience. Thus, a theological construal of the Canon and its use is to be defined, for Webster, as “that means of grace through which the revelatory self-presence of God in the form of sanctified texts reaches the obedient and attentive community, which responds to that presence by an act of assent and acknowledgement.”⁵² Discourse regarding the Bible and the Canon as that collection of sanctified texts must thus not be construed in a pre-doctrinal or pre-confessional manner, but must be located within the dogmatic categories of soteriology, ecclesiology and pneumatology.

Therefore, the point of exegesis is for the purpose of interpreting the text for divine discourse. Thus, to read the Bible aright requires the reader to be a particular sort of reader. The reader must come in a prayerful manner, with a desire to be humbled and reformed by the Word – a desire to be mastered by the Word and not to master over it. In this way, he commends Francis Watson’s work for “its refusal to allow theological language to be relegated to mere abckground status and by its positive deployment of theology (particularly the doctrines of the Trinity and the church) in both describing and norming the activities of interpretation.”⁵³ Hear, again, that this is a direct response to the HCE’s desire to suspend theological doctrine in order for “proper” exegesis to proceed. Presupposed in such a view is the “conviction that the invocation of theological doctrine is an impediment, since questions of interpretation are [seen as] pre-doctrinal, to be settled prior to entry into the sphere of the *Credo*; a presupposition that the world of the Bible is a *problem*, since we both pre-exist and transcend that world, entertaining an attitude of distance towards it.”⁵⁴ Webster suspects that such tendencies stem from the divorce between general theistic prolegomena and the distinctive claims of the Christian confession made in the pre-modern era. Specifically, it is the thought Christian dogmatics is in need of a pre-amble that justifies its existence; a pre-amble that stems from philosophical foundations. Stated in another way, it is the view that minimal theism could and should be “determinable by philosophical reason without reference to faith,” that has led to the pressing of “theology to construct its account of the identity of God out of

⁵¹ Fowl, “Theological and Ideological Strategies of Biblical Interpretation”, 168.

⁵² John Webster, *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics*, (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, 2001), 42.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 56-57.

metaphysical resources independent of the religious experience of Israel and the Church”⁵⁵ that has led to the repudiation of distinctly Christian categories to be assumed at the start of biblical interpretation. Such a divorce and the relegation of theology to autonomous reasoning is the very option unavailable to the one in covenant with God.

Webster’s desire to avoid at all costs autonomous human reasoning apart from the content of the Christian faith leads to a rejection of rationalist or evidentialist apologetics, which is often functionally divorced from the content of Christian doctrine, for it assumes “that [Christian dogmatics] can be defended by showing its compatibility with a generic theory of what is ultimate.”⁵⁶ For the Christian, God, in Christ is the only one who is ultimate and absolute. Indeed, “thinking of Jesus Christ cannot be classificatory, a matter of assigning him a place in an existing order of objects, whether material or spiritual. Rather, he is that in terms of which all other reality is to be mapped.”⁵⁷ One could see some of the same concerns coming out of Van Til’s own critique of popular modes of apologetics and autonomous human reasoning. To start apart from God in order to conclude with His authority is to deny the conclusion in our method and starting point and thus to functionally reject his Lordship in a particular area of life.

A Point of Contact between Van Til and Barth?

Webster ultimately commends Karl Barth as one of the prime examples of someone who sought to live and work in consistency with the theological principles identified above, and distinctively so in the realm of exegesis. In the Calvin lectures, Webster observed that Barth offered “an account of interpretive activity in which Scripture is understood not merely as a natural entity to be investigated as a historical or religious artifact, but as the textual ingredient of a process of divine self-manifestation.”⁵⁸ Barth sought to reorient himself in a way that respects the nature of the reading-event as a divine-human encounter in which divine speech is to be heard and obeyed. Webster saw himself as being heavily indebted to Karl Barth, and I have argued throughout the paper that Van Til’s thought could make positive contributions to the movement of TIS. Furthermore, I have argued that Webster’s work is distinctively similar to Van Til’s own reasoning and his interests are compatible with the same. But how can this be the case, since Barth is the influence behind Webster, the theologian that Van Til famously repudiates?

There are, of course, some serious differences in the two theologian’s claims in other areas of theology. Perhaps, however, it is this particular area that the two theologians can be reconciled – both regarded the Bible’s authority as a function of its dogmatic location in revelation, theology proper and soteriology,

⁵⁵ Ibid., 129.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 119.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 116.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 94.

and both saw theological categories as necessary presuppositions in the act of interpretation. Kevin Vanhoozer suspects the same and laments that the two theologians have been commonly seen as opposites.

Given Van Til's well known presuppositional apologetics, it is highly ironic that a faulty presupposition underlies, and hence undermines, his reading of Barth. Van Til reads Barth as being committed to a critical (i.e. Kantian) philosophy. Van Til seems to not have grasped the possibility that Barth may have had other, more properly theological, reasons for his dialectical approach. It has also been suggested that one reason behind Van Til's "Barthian animus" is the *apparent similarity* between Barth's theology and Reformed orthodoxy. *Might it not also be because of a strong point of similarity between Barth and Van Til himself?* Many would place both thinkers together on the spectrum of contemporary theology: both were biblical fideists; both were uncompromising about their respective starting points; both made the doctrine of the Trinity their key presupposition.⁵⁹

One could quibble that Van Til or Barth could be rightly described as fideists, but if my suspicion is right, as Vanhoozer seems to concur, then perhaps the Van Til and Barthian divide should not be seen as widely as it is today. Such a distinct similarity also strengthens the point of this present paper – If the proponents of TIS sees Barth as a positive influence to their positions, and if Van Til's own thought could be seen as similar with Barth's in this specific area, then Van Til, too, could be a positive contributor to the present discussion on the theological interpretation of Scripture.

Final Exhortations and Other Implications

There is still much more to be said, however, all in all, I believe I have sufficiently explicated how both Van Tillian Presuppositionalism and Plantinga's Reformed Epistemology should motivate, if not obligate, the Christian who adopts these epistemological frameworks to interpret and read the Bible theologically. In my view, these epistemological frameworks are merely ways of knowing prescribed by the Bible itself.

1. *Exegesis as a much larger task*

Exegesis is thus never completed when the interpreter has arrived to the intentions of the historical author or in the achievement of some historical reconstruction

⁵⁹ Kevin Vanhoozer, "A Person of the Book? Barth on Biblical Authority and Interpretation," in *Karl Barth and Evangelical Theology: Convergences and Divergences*, ed. Sung Wook Chung (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerAcademic, 2006), 30. Emphasis mine. Vanhoozer, therefore, also laments that not enough work have been produced to compare the similarities between the two self-consciously Presbyterian and Reformed theologians.

regarding the formulation of the text and behind-the-text events. The purpose for exegesis is not merely historical description but theological application. Indeed, this study has shown that because the goal of interpretation is ultimately to be formed and shaped by the Word of God under the Lordship of God, one must be able to apply God's Word and obey it in one's particular situations.

2. *Consistency in Obedience*

The Christian is to maintain being God's servant in a covenantal relation in all areas of life, and this pertains even to the task of exegesis. One cannot shift to become a functional Deist when doing his exegesis and then come back to Christianity when he has "moved away" to now begin doing theology. His exegetical work must be distinctly Christian-theistic, serving ecclesial purposes.

3. *The Need for Competence in Dogmatic Theology and Church History*

The ideal interpreter is thus an astute student of dogmatic theology, especially in the character of God and the doctrine of the Trinity, since the Triune God is the primary author of the Bible.⁶⁰ The ideal interpreter must also be deeply interested in church history and historical theology, as he seeks to interpret the Scriptures with the church, seeing how the primary audience of the Bible has responded to God's Word through the centuries. The divide between biblical Studies and theological studies is therefore a false dichotomy, as the best biblical studies scholar must also be a robust theologian.

4. *The Continuity between the Two Testaments and Its One Subject Matter*

Because the Bible was written by One author, the whole of the Scriptures are intended for the whole Church and is testifying to one subject matter: Jesus Christ. The ideal interpreter is thus to interpret the Bible as One story; she is to read the Old Testament as Christian Scripture because God has written to the Old Testament to the Church; she is to read and see how that the whole of Scripture speaks of Jesus Christ. As such, the main locus for meaning is in the Canon's "final form."⁶¹ The Christian is not to feel "distant" from the Old Testament as if it was far removed from her or isn't addressing her. God speaks continually to the Church through both Testaments.

⁶⁰"...But, someone may say, this is circular. How can we know God except by what he says and does? And how can we properly understand what he says and does unless we already know him? Well, how do we come to know another human being? In both cases there is a certain "theoretical" circularity. But in fact, it is more like a spiral, because earlier incorrect impressions may be corrected in the process of seeing and hearing more from a person." Vern Poythress, "Divine Meaning of Scripture," *Westminster Theological Journal* 48 (1986): 245-253.

⁶¹Iain Provan provocatively argues that Satan was good in historical grammatical exegesis, and was still deftly wrong because he failed to interpret biblical passages in the context of the whole Canon. Provan, 34.

5. *A Good Conscience*

The Christian is thus able to read the Bible theologically and she is to do so with a good conscience, along with the conviction that this is both intellectually and theologically warranted.

6. *Scripture as the “Norming – Norm”*

Because Scripture is the Word of God and our authoritative foundation for knowledge, it establishes itself as the norm for all things. In this way, I am merely affirming that God’s voice is always true and it judges the truth of all other things, including the products of autonomous human reason and attempts at historical reconstruction. So Swain:

To be sure, Scripture’s authoritative teaching will always find confirmation and affirmation in the faithful teaching of the church, the right functioning of human reason, the responsible work of the historian, and the well-formed conscience of the believer. But these subordinate authorities do not establish or judge the authority of Scripture, any more than science establishes or judges the laws of nature! Scripture establishes and judges these subordinate authorities.⁶²

7. *Rendering the Word of God Alive*

Finally, this study should give Christians the motivation to read the Bible for themselves in worship and in truth. No longer will he be stuck in the worry that the Word of God is outdated or irrelevant. No longer will he be worried that he hasn’t spent numerous years in the rigorous study of Ancient Near-Eastern literature. He is to expect the Triune God to speak to him. This should cause the Christian to have the freedom and ability to read the Bible devotionally, open to knowing that God could and will reveal something afresh to him upon every reading. Thus, to conclude with the words of Mark Alan Bowald and Vern Poythress:

If we believe that God is present and active, in, with and under our frail attempts to hear and respond to his Word, then we can have confidence that we are not trapped in a closed hermeneutical circle, but that the same Trinity who creates and sustains our hermeneutical circles and practices also breaks into them, speaking: both confirming in us that which is true and pleasing and good, and correcting that which is violent and oppressive.⁶³

⁶² Swain, 75.

⁶³ Bowald, 182.

God continues to speak today. When we read the Bible aware that it is God's word, we understand that he is speaking to us now. We are constrained to obey, to rejoice in him, and to worship.⁶⁴

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⁶⁴ Poythress, 279.