

“The Confession of Christ as Hermeneutical Norm”
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As a southern Californian, I’m a sucker for melodrama. So I will begin as the *Didache* begins: “There are two ways: a way of life and a way of death, and the difference between these two ways is great.”

I want to develop an account of two hermeneutical visions: a hermeneutics of life, and a hermeneutics of death. Both reach back through the centuries to the apostolic era, and forward into the biblical practices of American evangelicalism. And the difference between them can be as subtle as it is great.

Confessional hermeneutics. The first hermeneutical vision centers in the confession of Jesus Christ as Lord. I will call it “kerygmatic” or, better, “confessional” (weakening, I hope, the Bultmannian connotations that have attached to the former term). This way of interpretation reads the texts of Law, Prophets, and Writings, and then the texts of the New Testament, fundamentally in terms of the apostolic confession of Jesus of Nazareth as “Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36). Here the *kerygma* – the confession – serves as a hermeneutical principle that norms all other hermeneutical rules. The Church’s commission to interpret Jesus and proclaim his good news drives its strategies for reading its canonical texts. It employs *peshet*, or *midrash*, or allegory, or typology, or narrative as the confession demands. The hermeneutical norm of the Christian Bible is not allegory, nor typology, nor the rules of grammatical-historical

interpretation, nor the standards of “objective” modern historiography, nor the demands of therapy. It is Christology.

Old Testament in the New. Kerygmatic hermeneutics are a characteristic feature of New Testament interpretation of the Old Testament. Where later Jewish biblical practice remains centered on the Tanakh, Jesus’ first disciples re-read the ancient texts for their divine commentary on the Master’s death and life, find the Messiah’s career to have taken place “according to the Scriptures,” and set Christian hermeneutics on its new course as a practice of interpreting Scripture and Jesus in terms of each other (Work 2001).

The overarching “method” of doing this, according to Rowan A. Greer, is simply “prooftexting,” which uses whatever techniques are convenient to make desired points. The various techniques used to relate Jesus to Scripture range from *midrash* to *pesher* to *halakha* to prophecy-fulfillment to typology to allegory. The New Testament uses these techniques inconsistently and eclectically, in a methodological jumble that has left some modern biblical scholars bewildered (Longenecker 1975). But there is a pattern in the apparent chaos: “[T]he decisive feature of Christian interpretation is found not in methods or forms but in the functions of the exegesis.” Early Christians practice Scripture to explain and commend the Christian life, to deny the normative status of Jewish ritual practices, and to prove Jesus is Messiah and God has turned to the Gentiles (Kugel and Greer 1986, 127). Christians read Israel’s Scriptures consistently after all – not in the techniques they both borrow and pioneer, but in the common confession of Jesus they support (cf. Ellis in Mulder 1990, 704-705). The product is what C.H. Dodd calls “the apostolic preaching,” a word centered on the death and resurrection of Jesus that still sees itself as both the same “Kingdom of God” Jesus had originally preached (Dodd 1944, 7-35), and the same canonical words delivered earlier to Israel. Old and new become partners in a dialogical story of salvation: “In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us in a Son” (Heb. 1:1-2).

The Church is so confident that the Scriptures testify to Christ that texts with no obvious messianic referent are subsequently seen to refer to events in Jesus’ career. We only have room for two examples: First, the use of Joel 2:28-21 and Psalms 16, 132, and 110 in Peter’s Pentecost sermon; and second, the puzzling formula quotation in Matt. 2:15 on the fulfillment of Hosea 11:1, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.” The former uses texts from the early Church’s list of biblical “testimonies” in order to understand and preach not only Jesus’ passion but the events on either side of it, in a way deeply typical of and influential for the Church’s evangelistic and apologetic uses of Scripture. The latter is an example of the Matthean typological use of the Old Testament that, through the exegetical school of Antioch, profoundly influenced Christian biblical practice. The two texts are less different than they seem. But show Scripture in its new role as a means of confessing Christ as Lord.

Joel and Psalms in Acts. There is no particularly messianic reference in Joel 2:28-32. Nevertheless Peter applies the passage, which Dodd considers an “apocalyptic-eschatological text,” directly to Jesus. The Pentecost events prefigured in Joel 2:28-29 are evidence of Jesus’ heavenly exaltation (Acts 2:33). Joel

2:30's "wonders above ... and signs below" are the "mighty works and wonders and signs" of Jesus of Nazareth (Acts 2:22). Peter even glosses the Joel text, adding *semeia*, *ano*, and *kato* in Acts 2:19 to make it clearer that Joel speaks of the specific events both before and after Jesus' ascension. Finally Peter latches onto 2:32, cutting off the verse in midcourse in order to identify "the name of the Lord" in the next stage of his sermon.

The answer lies in the Psalms. Peter's interpretation is characteristic of the earliest (and later) Church practice of reading the Psalms in terms of Jesus. Psalm 16's "nor let your holy one see decay" refers to Jesus' death and resurrection, since King David himself remains dead and buried. Psalm 16:8, "the Lord at my right hand" and Psalm 110:1, "sit at my right hand" in Acts 2:33 signify Jesus' ascension, exaltation, and eschatological rule as king, along with Psalm 132:11, recording God's oath that a Davidic descendant will rule forever. Finally, Ps. 110, "until I make your enemies a footstool," refers to God's return to judge on the Day of the Lord, "the great and manifest day (Joel 2:31 in Acts 2:20).

This last text does double duty in the Pentecost sermon. Peter uses it for a final homiletical lunge at his audience. In three prooftexts, his midrash has established that the "name of the Lord" in Joel 2:32 is "Jesus of Nazareth" (Acts 2:22). Now he thrusts: "God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified." The crowd, cut to the heart, asks how possibly to respond, and Peter completes his kerygmatic *coup* with the final phrase of the Joel text he has left hanging: "Repent, be baptized, receive the gift of the Spirit, for the promise is for you and your children" (Acts 2:39, on Joel 2:32b).

Hosea in Matthew. Matthew's use of Hosea 11:1 is a far less straightforward example of kerygmatic hermeneutics. Not only is it less typical of New Testament interpretation of the Old, but it has left interpreters scratching their heads for centuries. Its oddness has led to several common outcomes: First, a warrant for what Robert Grant calls "typology run riot," a strategy characteristic of early figures like Justin Martyr that has sometimes crossed the line separating use and abuse of Scripture (Grant and Tracy, 45). Second, a reaction *against* typology, either in fundamentalistic defenses of the literal historicity of the events portrayed in the formula quotations (Howard 1986, 314-328), or in a scoffing repudiation of Matthew's hermeneutical method (McCasland 1961, 143-148).

My own answer is that Matthew is a creative historian who knows what he is doing. Matthew sees Hosea not so much fulfilled verse by verse, as fulfilled in its entirety.

The obvious referent in Hosea 11:1 is not Jesus, but Israel. But the narrative does not stop at Israel the man; it concerns Israel the nation. God calls "Israel" out of Egypt because of his love. But idolatry leads them astray. So they shall "return to the land of Egypt" (11:5), this time under Assyrian rule. However, God's love will not let him wipe out his people: "How can I hand you over, O Israel" (11:8)! So he will call them back, and "his sons shall come trembling ... like birds from Egypt," to return to their homes (11:11). Hosea 11:1 alone is in no way a predictive, messianic prophecy. But the verse in context provides a different picture. It is not about exodus, but return from exile. It is still not an explicitly messianic text, but it *is* an eschatological, predictive text, like Joel 2:28-32.

God's faithfulness in fulfilling his promise to Jacob has been thwarted, first by famine that sends Jacob's family into Egypt, then by the idolatry that exiles them from Zion. Both times God's mercy reverses the disaster and brings them home. Matthew adds a third twist to the plot: Herod's jealousy (Matt. 2:7-8) puts the promise in jeopardy yet again, on the eve of its final victory. So Jesus is sent away, exiled, back into Egypt. Will this exile of Israel's own king frustrate God's promise? Will Herod's jealousy cut off Israel from God's messianic blessing, as the jealousy of Joseph's brothers had threatened to do? Hosea 11, embodied in its first verse, has already answered. "Out of Egypt I have called my son." The episode is usually referred to as "the flight into Egypt," but its real emphasis, like Hosea's, is *return* from Egypt.

Hosea 11 is eschatological, but it is not messianic. Nevertheless, Matthew can and should treat it *as* messianic. Because Jesus embodies, leads, and represents returning Israel, the nation's salvation-history proleptically participates in Jesus' own.

Matthew's exegetical technique is worlds apart from Acts 2. But the overarching hermeneutical similarities between the passages far outweigh their technical differences. Both advance a dialogue between Jesus' career and his Scriptures that finds each one's ultimate significance in the other. Both are authentic renderings of Paul's "according to the Scriptures." Both are products of the *kerygma* as much as producers.

Ideological hermeneutics. The New Testament's way of biblical interpretation is confessional. However, there is a second way, which I will call "ideological" hermeneutics. This is the practice of reading biblical texts ultimately in terms of *anything besides* the apostolic confession of Christ as Lord. Here the reader embraces one or more generalized principles of interpretation – say, particular exegetical techniques such as *peshet*, allegory, historicism, reader-response, or structuralism – and these norm practice of the text. Or, the reader embraces a fundamentally defective vision of the *kerygma*, one "informed" by foreign philosophical or hermeneutical ideas that distort it.

We find both confessional and ideological hermeneutics at work in several communities that were engines of theological creativity in the patristic and the Reformation eras: Alexandria, Antioch, Wittenberg, and Zurich. We will find them in American evangelicalism as well.

Alexandria rose in prominence as a challenge to the enormous but uneven success of typology in the first two Christian centuries, exemplified in Justin Martyr. Readers had generally

appealed to literal, typological, and allegorical interpretations according to their polemical needs rather than to precise rules (Simonetti 1994, 24-25). (This was true both of Gnostics, who would interpret the Old Testament literally to impugn the God of Israel, and of Catholics.) Such methodological inconsistency and obsession with history were widely disdained in third-century Alexandria, a city surging with Platonism. Here two currents swirled together. The first was a “word-flesh” Christology which maintained that the *logos* who created the cosmos was to be found revealed in the flesh of Jesus Christ, and veiled in the words of Scripture. The second was a respect for allegory and multiple textual meanings that had characterized biblical practice there ever since Philo. Allegory provided a crucial way for Alexandrian “cultured despisers” to hear the Gospel.

This vision sees the Bible offering saving knowledge of God the Word to its Christian readers. How this is accomplished became a focus of Clement, the father of Alexandria’s catechetical school, and came to full flower with Origen. Origen held that the Bible’s point was to reveal “intellectual knowledge” that saves, not accounts of God’s acts in history. His rhetorical analysis distinguished between a text’s literal sense (which was its *literalistic* sense, excluding even figuration and poetry, which Alexandria’s riff-raff would routinely have missed), and its spiritual sense, which could be heard only after considerable education, careful study, and spiritual preparedness. For Origen, salvation is accomplished rhetorically, in the hearing of the spiritual sense that the words of Scripture mediate. To Origen, all Scripture has a spiritual sense, though not all of it has a (sensible) literal sense.

Origen baptized Philo’s method, becoming in the process “the first methodologically consistent Christian exegete” (Greer, 179 in Kugel and Greer, 1986). But Origen finally pursued *theological* rather than hermeneutical consistency. Concerned to anchor the Christian faith in Christ (*i.e.*, in history), he demanded that allegorical meaning be warranted by literal meanings elsewhere, and only denied literal meaning to “a few cases.” What *is* most systematic about Origen’s hermeneutic is its “christological” (not allegorical) interpretation of the Old Testament (Simonetti 1994, 39-48).

Origen's trouble was, among other things, a threefold allegorical scheme grounded in a defective anthropology of body-mind-spirit that envisions an imprisonment of the already fallen soul in human flesh. He justified his techniques according to his Platonic cosmology, his anthropology, and his brilliant but subordinationist Christology. For all its successes, his hermeneutic was finally ideological rather than confessional, and it generated readings of the Scriptures the Church could not recognize as her own.

After Origen, the practice of allegory both proliferated and declined, as people pursued the technique for expedience without respecting its theological warrants (Simonetti 1994, 54). Didymus the Blind displays "total adherence ... to the interpretative methods of the Alexandrian tradition" (79), as well as other Origenist influences (which contributed to his condemnation in 553; Cross 1974, 402).

Others put the technique to more fruitful use. Ambrose affirmed Nicene Christology while reading the Old Testament allegorically, according to his understanding of the dichotomy between letter and spirit (cf. 2 Cor. 3:6). This technique rescued biblical texts that were offensive to Platonistic ears, allowing the young Augustine to accept the authority of the entire canon and the integrity of the Catholic Church. Augustine in turn became the most influential Alexandrian interpreter of Scripture. His decades of work moderating and transforming allegory helped reshape it into a servant, rather than a master, of the *kerygma* (cf. Simonetti 1994, 90, 104).

To this day, Origen's and Augustine's allegorical methods remain popular. But their family resemblances mask a fundamental difference. Henri de Lubac shows that Origen's threefold scheme – historical, moral, and spiritual – draws from an anthropology that is finally foreign to the Gospel. Its popularity of Origen's method has been an engine for Gnostic spiritual elitism. The twofold or fourfold Augustinian scheme – literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical – draws from an incarnational semiotics and a Pauline teleology grounded in the apostolic *kerygma* itself: The letter of Scripture is to be interpreted according to the Spirit, and more precisely the rule of faith, the encouragement of hope, and the law of charity (1 Cor. 12:27-13:13; de Lubac 1998, 90). "What we have here is a theory that, even in its very form, owes everything to this Christian faith, and that, in its content, seeks to give it full expression" (de Lubac 1998, 225).

Cyril of Alexandria made wide use of Alexandrian hermeneutics. His exegesis is heavily symbolic and Christological. Yet his literal interpretation is more developed than any other Alexandrian interpreter, and it frequently stands on its own rather than being accompanied by a spiritual or even a moral meaning. He concentrates on the significance of Israel's history in a way that goes beyond even his hermeneutical rivals in Antioch. Cyril's exegesis was a calculated – that is, confessional – retreat from the (ideological) law in Origen and Didymus that all Scripture has a spiritual meaning (Simonetti 1994, 79-83). But Cyril is not just a pragmatist. His use of allegory and attention to history are confessionally consistent and ecumenically promising, even if – indeed, *because* – they are technically inconsistent. They belong to an incarnational Christology that is far removed from Origen's world (82). We will see Luther's radically Cyrillian doctrine of incarnation authorize even more radical techniques.

Antioch. Confessional as well as philosophical pressures encouraged technical inconsistencies in early Asian interpretation. The area's underlying philosophical materialism promoted literal interpretation, and reaction to Gnostic allegorizing further strengthened literalistic and materialistic protology, salvation-history, and eschatology (25). But this tendency was disciplined by other confessional priorities: Pressures from Jews and Gnostics also pushed Antiochian interpreters towards allegory (26).

Thus Eusebius is hermeneutically inconsistent, allegorizing the Old Testament christologically (57) but reading the New Testament literally, since its literal meaning more straightforwardly proclaimed Christ and edified the Church (55). Similarly with Hippolytus (30-31).

As later Antiochians reacted to Alexandrian allegorical excesses, they became more methodologically consistent, just as Alexandria had once pursued technical consistency in reaction to earlier Asian typological excesses. Against Alexandrian biblical practice, which they

feared had dissolved the historical dimension of salvation, they sought more fully to respect the priority of history (54) and the text's meaning on its own terms (55). Historical and grammatical criticism, asceticism, and reflection sought to discern the saving events of the past and remember them in the worshipping Church. Here too, Christology and hermeneutics went hand-in-hand. Antiochian practice is consistent with Antiochian "word-man" Christology, which concentrated on Jesus' concrete humanity.

Antiochian methodological consistency produced unusual claims. Against Origen, Theodore of Mopsuestia considered the Bible's primary point to be its rendering of God's actions in history, rather than its being a textual means of divine action. So Theodore claimed that all Scripture has a literal sense, but not all has a spiritual sense. He bowed only occasionally even to Old Testament *typology* and prophetic fulfillment (73), and consistently denied symbolic value even in the Fourth Gospel. Furthermore, he maintained that a text only has one, humanly intended, sense.

Thus the prophets must have foreseen the final Christological fulfillment of their prophecies (as Peter envisions David foreseeing Christ in Acts 2). On these grounds, Theodore regarded only four of the Psalms Christologically prophetic (excluding even Psalm 22), and claimed that none of the major prophets had prophesied Christ. Non-prophetic texts like Ezra and Nehemiah he held to be noncanonical.

Antiochian interpretation was pursued more confessionally by Theodore's successors, to more orthodox ends. Antioch's leading interpreter, John Chrysostom, classified Scripture texts into three groups: Texts that are merely literal, texts that are merely allegorical, and texts that are both, and thus typological. (Furthermore, while he is "rigorously literal" in the way he reads Bible texts for his hortatory sermons, his exhortation is usually superficially grounded in the text itself [Simonetti 1994, 74]). Antioch also influenced Jerome: Though Jerome's initial instincts were strongly Origenist (89-90), he moved towards Antioch as Origen fell out of favor (99-100).

The mature Jerome occupies a “middle position,” even an incoherent one, between the two schools (101), one easily criticized from either side (by Augustine from the Alexandrian, by Julian of Eclanum from the Antiochian). In his Vulgate, his historical instincts eventually led him at times to prefer the Hebrew texts over the Greek – to Augustine’s dismay.

As Antiochian heresies faced the Church’s conciliar judgments in the fifth century, Antioch’s retreated from ideological hermeneutics. These judgments “radically transformed the contextual setting” that had encouraged Antiochian consistency in the first place, and weakened its distinctiveness (77). Alexandria, whose Hellenistic allegorical tradition fundamentally changed after Origen and Didymus, had already beaten its own retreat (110). In both schools, the *kerygma* regained the upper hand. Chalcedon’s compromise encouraged later interpreters to mix and match each school’s favorite techniques as they found them helpful, in what became a “medieval synthesis.”

Wittenberg. The greatest hermeneutical development since the hermeneutics of Alexandria and Antioch, in David Tracy’s opinion, is the rise of historical-criticism. Here we see a pattern repeated whose outlines are becoming clear. It begins in a school of interpretation I will call “Wittenberg.”

This school centers, of course, on the revolutionary Martin Luther. Luther inherited that elaborate medieval synthesis of literal, typological, and allegorical interpretation, which by then was collapsing under its own weight. He fathered a whole family of revolutions: a new language for describing justification, a Word-centered ecclesiology, a radical respect for the priority of God’s hiddenness and the centrality of the cross – and two further, related changes: a radically Cyrillian doctrine of incarnation, and a return to the “one, simple, solid sense” of a Scripture

whose divine humanity shares in the saving work of Christ (Luther 7.711 in Althaus 1966, 77; Althaus 1966, 79).

“When I was a monk, I was an expert in allegories,” remembers Luther. “I allegorized everything. Afterwards through the Epistle to the Romans I came to some knowledge of Christ. There I saw that allegories were not what Christ meant but what Christ was” (in Grant/Tracy 1984, 94). The reborn Luther exchanged the allegories of “the rabbis, the Scholastic theologians, and the professors of law, who are always toiling with ambiguities” (Luther 8.209 in Foutz 2000) for the literal sense, “for it alone is the whole substance of faith and Christian theology; it alone holds its ground in trouble and trial” (Luther 9.24 in Foutz 2000).

Luther’s literal sense is not what we might consider literal today. He did not hesitate to apply the words of Paul concerning Jews and Gentiles to the struggles of individual believers (Steinmetz 1995, 20-21), apocalyptic prophecies to the medieval papacy, and so on. David Steinmetz calls readings such as Luther’s treatment of Noah’s drunkenness narrative, theological interpretations rather than literal ones. He “grasps his readers not only at the level of their discursive reason but also at the level of their imaginative participation in their common humanity” (Steinmetz 1995, 109-111). “Common humanity” matters because for Luther, human existence is suffused with divine significance.

Because of the communication of attributes – the transmission of divine qualities to Jesus’ humanity, and vice versa – the preached Word *as such* communicates Christ, creates the Church, and mediates salvation. The Bible conveys the human Christ, and the human Christ is the crucified God.

“Rather than employing theological or philosophical terms to describe the Christocentric dimension of the word, Luther consistently uses Christological terminology” (Foutz 2000). In his 1540 disputation “On the Divinity and Humanity of Christ” he made the link clear:

This is the catholic faith, that we confess one Lord Jesus Christ, true God and man. From this truth of the double substance and the unity of the person follows the communication of attributes, as it is called. So that those things which pertain to man are rightly said of God, and, on the other hand, those things which pertain to God are said of man. It is true to say: This man created the world, and this God suffered, died, was buried, etc.

... [I]t is certain that in Christ all words receive a new signification, though the thing signified is the same. For “creature” in the old usage of language and in other subjects signifies a thing separated from divinity by infinite degrees. In the new use of language it signifies a thing inseparably joined with divinity in the same person in an ineffable way. Thus it must be that the words man, humanity, suffered, etc., and everything that is said of Christ, are new words. Not that it signifies a new or different thing, but that it signifies in a new and different way... (Luther 39.92-121, trans. Brown).

“The Scriptures begin very gently,” Luther says, “and lead us on to Christ as a man, and then to one who is Lord over all creatures, and after that to one who is God. So do I enter delightfully and learn to know God. But the philosophers and doctors have insisted on beginning from above. We must begin from below, and after that come upwards” (in Foutz 2000). This is not Wolfhart Pannenberg’s “Christology ‘from below,’” but an existential encounter with the omnipresent Jesus whom the preached Word mediates. For Luther, “the Incarnation into humanity was also an incarnation into language: just as Christ was hidden for the Jews under the form of flesh, so he is hidden, though also present for us, under the form of speech” (Milbank 1997, 93).

Because the human text *is* the divine text, one finds God the Son in the human Jesus proclaimed there. It does not require elaborate decoding of hidden “spiritual” senses to release the meaning within, but the Word is clear right at the level of the narrative (Althaus 1966, 78). Likewise, the Law and Gospel (which are the *real* letter and spirit of 2 Cor. 3:6; Althaus 1966, 96-97) do not need a thorough knowledge of Greek or Latin, but can be heard in pure, sweet German. So a Christological revolution that sharpened Cyril’s doctrine of the unity of Christ in a new way, accompanied a hermeneutical revolution that overturned centuries of spiritual exegesis.

Like all revolutions, this one had unintended consequences. The first was a crisis of exegetical “literalism.” Luther had to depend on the Bible’s literal sense to make the doctrinal points for which earlier interpreters had relied on spiritual senses (Steinmetz 1995, 109). By relying on what might better be called the *existential* sense of Scripture, Luther usually found what he needed. But he could not make his Catholic, Anabaptist, or Reformed opponents find it too. Overturning the settled canons of interpretation overturned the fragile consensus on which Western Christendom had depended, and inaugurated centuries of hermeneutical chaos.

The warfare, both metaphorical and real, of Europe’s reformations led to the second unintended consequence of Luther’s hermeneutic: The rise of historical-criticism. This child of the Renaissance and Reformation matured under the Enlightenment, a movement intended to

bring epistemological certainty and universal intellectual consensus to war-torn Europe. But it flourished precisely in lands where it was theologically plausible; and it was most theologically plausible in terms of Luther's Christology, even though Luther was only rarely a historical critic (Althaus 1966, 82). Narrative was no longer seen either to correspond with the past, or to function in the present (Goldingay 1995, 247). But since the human Jesus and his historical career *were* the revelation of the hidden God, an "objective" exploration of salvation-history held independently of dogmatic presuppositions would still yield an indubitable foundation for faith (Gabler 1787 in Hasel 1991, 15-16). Existential and historical-critical hermeneutics are to Wittenberg what typology is to Antioch and allegory is to Alexandria.

These have sometimes, but not always, taken over the *kerygma* that originally gave them such theological plausibility. Pannenberg and Althaus even consider the Lutheran shift from a kerygmatic rule to a historical-critical rule to be irreversible (Pannenberg 1970, 1.5f; Althaus 1966, 102). We will see below that such ideologies threaten the kerygmatic principle in evangelical biblical interpretation as well.

Zurich. If Luther is one father of evangelical biblical practice, Ulrich Zwingli is another. His anti-sacramentalism, developed in opposition to Luther's so-called doctrine of consubstantiation, has practically taken over the movement. As Luther correctly saw at Marburg, this is not a minor difference between the two Protestant visions, but goes to the heart of their distinct theologies.

At the root of Zwingli's sacramental disagreement with Luther is the proper application of Cyrillian Christology. "Luther ... consistently stressed the unity of the person," says Timothy George, "while Zwingli emphasized the distinction between the two natures." So Luther saw the divine attribute of omnipresence as communicated to Christ's human nature, while Zwingli could only affirm Jesus' bodily presence in heaven. According to Zwingli, the divine nature is only

present *incorporeally* or “spiritually.” The only physical aspect of Jesus’ presence is in the memory of his worshippers (George 1988, 153).

Zwingli’s doctrine of Scripture inevitably reflects his Christology. Rather than Luther’s quasi-sacramental account of Scripture’s character and work, Zwingli emphasized the *inspiration* of Scripture and the corresponding need for pneumatic *illumination*. “The same Spirit who inspired the prophets and apostles to write the Scriptures must be present to confirm and persuade us of its truth” (George 1988, 128). The immediacy, even individualism, of Zwinglian hermeneutics depends upon Christological remove: Christ is ascended and no longer physically present. For Christological reasons, the hermeneutic shifts radically towards pneumatology.

Luther’s conviction of biblical clarity and translatability and his experiential reading strategies can be easily adapted to Zwinglian eschatology. But his warrant for historical criticism cannot. For Luther, the Gospel that mediates the omnipresent Jesus may be pried away from biblical texts that do not contain it. However, for Zwingli, to criticize “self-authenticating” Scripture may blaspheme the Holy Spirit who inspired and illuminates it. Historical criticism must be justified along different grounds and employed towards different ends (for instance, in the service of rightly identifying the literary genres of biblical writings). This distinction has been hard to see in an age of modern historicism where historical criticism, not the biblical text, is seen as self-authenticating.

Is there a pattern? These stories of Christological and hermeneutical reflection reveal a rough pattern. Early on, the early tradition is confessionally driven, and employs exegetical techniques in a manner consistent with the demands of its contextualized proclamation of Christ as Lord. Then a theological crisis arrives: The Gnostic threat, or the triumph of Origenist exegesis, or Luther’s conversion. Disturbed by this theological force, in what Alasdair MacIntyre calls an “epistemological crisis,” the prior tradition responds with the resources it has at hand (cf. MacIntyre 1988, 361ff). Hermeneutics shift to assimilate or oppose this development: Alexandria

embraces threefold allegory to accommodate Origen's anthropology, or Antioch embraces historicism to oppose Alexandrian anti-historicism.

Crucially, this shift does not necessarily honor confessional priority. The sheer power of the very resources that see the tradition through its crisis may hand over priority to some other ideology. So Alexandria faces a "Gnostic temptation," Antioch a "materialist temptation" (Simonetti 1994, 25), Wittenberg a "historicist temptation," and Zurich a "transcendentalist temptation." Thus the shift may yield *both* kerygmatically disciplined hermeneutics – hermeneutic of life – *and* hermeneutics that undermine or distort the *kerygma*: hermeneutics of death. (Chronology is not at issue here: In ancient Alexandria and Antioch, the kerygmatically disciplined hermeneutics come after the heretical, ideological ones, whereas in Germany, the reverse seems to be the case.)

Finally, such violent bursts of creativity subside, and the tradition settles into a synthetic, catholic, orthodox mode. As the confessional response regains the upper hand, it may consolidate and protect its gains in the rise of a new school (which may be mistaken for a return to the old school). But that school may find its newly regained confessional priority difficult to justify in terms of its surrounding ideologies, some of which it may have pressed into service to fight its battles.

One might see this as a decline into an age of "intolerance and insecurity," and "sterility" in biblical practice, as Simonetti says of late antiquity (111). But it is probably more accurate simply to consider it a less heroic mode of theological inquiry that is appropriate to less dramatic times.

A rough, tentative, sometimes flippant scheme shows the pattern: (See [fig.1.](#))

Evangelical hermeneutics. This brings us to biblical practice in American evangelicalism. Defining evangelicalism is about as easy as nailing Jell-O to a wall. Nevertheless, Robert

Johnston and others have offered a helpful vision of a movement (or movements) with three overlapping centers, whose family resemblances support a shared, reasonably coherent theological ethos. The first is a dedication to the gospel expressed in personal faith in Christ as Lord; the second, an understanding of the gospel as defined authoritatively in Scripture; and the third, a desire to communicate the gospel both in evangelism and social reform (Dayton and Johnston 1991, 252-269).

In the United States, there is also a historical center: Evangelicalism's many American constituents tended to support fundamentalists over modernists at the turn of the last century, even if not all firmly identified themselves with the movement.

According to the pattern above, what are the crises, resources, and corresponding temptations in Colorado Springs? They orbit all three centers of evangelicalism.

First, our dedication to personal, living faith in Christ as Lord faces a "narcissist temptation." The theological pressure of pietism and the cultural pressure of individualism can push us to treat Scripture in terms of the existential demands of our personal careers and devotional lives. The Bible ceases to be a confessional norm, and becomes our horoscope. Its ultimate hermeneutic becomes a relativistic "application" to personal lives. So my *Word in Life Study Bible* is about eighty percent "life" and twenty percent "Word." Small-group Bible studies become exercises in reader-response reflection, and awkward biblical texts (that is, most of them) slide into neglect. The Old Testament becomes a double-columned ocean with two inhabitable islands, Psalms and Proverbs. The Gospels become adventures with Jesus, the epistles self-help manuals, and Revelation a premillennial psychodrama that revolves around *whether I will be left behind*.

Second, our understanding of the ultimate authority of Scripture alone for Christian faith and practice faces a “positivist temptation.” The theological pressure of biblical inerrancy and infallibility and the cultural pressure of modernist propositionalism, absolutism, and atomism can push us to treat Scripture in terms of the scientific and historiographical ideals of modernistic objectivity. The Bible ceases to be a confessional norm, and becomes our storehouse of facts. So the historical-critical method reigns, even among those who prefer it in the form of the historical-grammatical method. My *NIV Study Bible* has 81 charts and maps that synthesize “data” into timelines, lists, parallels, reconstructive illustrations, and apocalyptic decodings; and my students treat these charts and accompanying footnotes as the ultimate arbiters of textual meaning. Furthermore, I face skeptical looks not only when I claim that the issue of Eden’s or Jonah’s historicity is not the sole criterion of its truth, but when I make the same claim of Jesus’ parables! Books proliferate with titles like *The Case for Faith, Evidence that Demands a Verdict, The Reese Chronological Bible, The Life of Christ in Stereo* (a harmony of the Gospels), *Nave’s Topical Bible*, and *Bible Doctrine*, not to mention books of lists of the various “whatevers” of the Bible, “theologies” that are little more than systematic rearrangements of Bible passages, theological dictionaries of the Old and New Testaments, and all kinds of Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias.

Third, our desire to take the gospel to the ends of the earth in evangelism and social reform faces an “imperialist temptation.” The theological pressure of mission and the cultural pressure of American colonialism and world leadership can push us to treat Scripture in terms of the demands of cultural preservation, assimilation, and expansion. The Bible ceases to be a means of transmitting the *kerygma*, and becomes a means of acculturation. The hermeneutical “given” ceases to be the confession of Christ as Lord, and becomes the cultural context or

horizon of the biblical audience. So the first image in my Gideon's *New Testament with Psalms and Proverbs* is an American flag, captioned with Proverbs 14:34: "Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people." (Furthermore, among the nine "well-loved hymns" that precede the text are "The Star Spangled Banner," "Onward Christian Soldiers," and "America.") The Ten Commandments become a prop in courtrooms, and mission fields become target markets. Children upgrade from *The Beginners Bible* to *The Adventure Bible* to *Kids-Bible.com* (this is a book, not a website) to the *Extreme Word* and *Extreme Teen Bible*. Un-extreme adults settle into the *Collegiate Devotional Bible*, the *Life Promises Bible*, *Women of Faith Bible*, and the *Devotional Bible for Dads*. (I am waiting for the *Baby Boomer Pension Fund Meltdown Bible*.) The Church becomes consumerist to win consumerists, and relegates the task of spreading the Good News to its own Bible industry. In doing so, it does not merely respect modern perspectivism, cultural stratification, and commodified divinity, but baptizes or simply endorses them.

The future of evangelical hermeneutics. These critiques can make me sound pessimistic about evangelicalism or alienated from it. I am neither. Let me be clear: Pietism, inerrancy, and evangelism are good, at least in some forms. However, relativism, positivism, and perspectivism are not. They are not the Gospel, but MacIntyre's three varieties of modern liberalism (MacIntyre 1988, 352ff), a doomed worldview that is fundamentally hostile to the Gospel. Like evil twins, these hermeneutics of death superficially resemble the hermeneutics of life that invigorate evangelicalism and make it a profound expression of the Kingdom. Indeed, their resemblance gives them much of their power in evangelical life, and makes us reluctant to see them for what they are, let alone to criticize them.

A comment may be helpful here about the elephant in the evangelical living room whenever matters of Scripture are discussed: The future of the doctrine of inerrancy. To understand the future of the doctrine demands an understanding of the doctrine's past and present. What are our communities *doing* when they affirm biblical inerrancy? My answer: They are insisting as a matter of faithfulness to Christ that in some sense "Scripture" is above reproach.

"Scripture" is in quotation marks because it is so commonly misunderstood in evangelicalism. I take Scripture to be shorthand for a set of traditions that center in and belong to the life of the Church. These include the transmission, translation, correction, interpretation, and evaluation of certain texts. There can be only soft distinctions between these – even between transmission, translation, and correction (Ehrman 1993). We collectively name these traditions "Bible."

The common appeal to "original autographs" as the object of inerrancy demonstrates a confusion over the traditioned character of Scripture (as if the Bible only became traditioned *after* some decisively formative moment, or set of moments, in its history). In appealing to original autographs, evangelicals lift "Scripture" above "tradition" in a way they believe honors the Protestant Scripture principle. But in fact this move neither honors the role the Bible has played and continues to play in the life of God's people, nor respects the rise of the inspired texts in their biblical forms. This and other confusions in the doctrine of inerrancy can make it destructive rather than helpful to Christian practices.

There are clearer ways to understand how inerrancy properly functions in Christian communities. The doctrine of inerrancy claims that the *form* of the Bible (insofar as it is properly practiced) is true and trustworthy, and the doctrine of infallibility claims that the Bible *functions* reliably in Christian faith and practice (again, insofar as it is properly practiced). These claims function differently in different eras. For Turretin, one of the pioneers of the Reformed version of the doctrine, it works as a claim against two-source Roman Catholic visions of authority. For Augustine, a father of the patristic version, it works as a claim against the *ethical* (more than historical) hermeneutic errors of Manichaeism. The doctrine shifts to do different work in different contexts. This demonstrates its essential durability, fidelity, and flexibility – its propriety as a doctrine of the evangelical Christian faith.

The Bible's truth is a reflection of and participation in God's very truth: Christian Scripture accomplishes the will of the Father, through the ministry of the Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit and the humanity of God's people. The Bible — *i.e.*, the Church's Tradition, tradition, and traditions of Scripture — is the set of canonical textual, oral, practical practices created by and constitutive of the community of God's chosen people. As such, it is authored, used, and illuminated by God, and neither fails nor errs (since it thoroughly norms all Church traditions, including itself — even over the objections of communities whose biblical practices are corrupt). Or, for those who like things simple, *the Bible is true* (Work 2001).

There are other doctrines that masquerade as inerrancy: Appeals to positivism or historicism or universal reason as the norming norm of traditions. But these are hermeneutics of death that many *confuse* with biblical inerrancy. These forms of "inerrancy" fail — *err!* — in frustrating biblical scholars seeking to be faithful to the biblical traditions; in imposing interpretive principles on texts whose form and function go

beyond the constraints of these ideologies; and in determining histories and accounts of inspiration and tradition that are other than God's own. They stop ears to what the Spirit is saying to the churches, making us wary of honest inquiry or cynical about evangelical theology rather than better stewards of Scripture.

How important is the doctrine to evangelicalism? Especially in Reformed and Dispensationalist circles, it is sometimes considered the fundamental on which the other fundamentals depend, as if it were the heart of the evangelical witness. But evangelicalism is more than these traditions, as Dayton and Johnston show. Furthermore, the very word "evangelical" suggests the real heart of our movement: the *evangelion*, the Gospel. The Gospel of Jesus Christ, son of Israel and head of the Church, is the life of the Church, the Bible, and the world.

How important is the doctrine in my own theology? My research betrays my answer. The *term* "inerrancy" occupies two paragraphs of my 400-page doctrine of Scripture, in the *afterword*, rather like the place of the doctrine of the Trinity for Schleiermacher. I affirm it, but it hardly says what we *need* to say to appreciate Scripture's role in the economy of salvation. It is a *thin* account of Scripture; and the Bible is *thick* in Christian life and tradition.

Despite its liabilities, the doctrine's modern evangelical form *does* remain useful, especially in teaching people who can only hear in *it* the claim that the Bible is true. For those whose notions of truth demand a choice between "inerrancy" and "errancy," today meaning between fundamentalist modernism and liberal modernism, we may offer the milk of inerrancy, in order to sustain them while we prepare them for the solid food of the Bible's *trustworthiness*, which is God's trustworthiness. (After all, knowledge will cease, but faith remains.) It would be unwise to abandon the doctrine and those who are depending on it, for the strong must bear with the failings of the weak (Rom. 15:1).

This is not the spiritual or intellectual elitism of Corinthian troublemakers, but pastoral deference that is grounded kerygmatically, as it is for Paul, in the apostolic proclamation of Christ's limitless love.

From technique to confession: transforming evangelical hermeneutics. Improving evangelical hermeneutics is a matter of *apotaxis*, a turning from our hermeneutics of death back toward our hermeneutics of life. The ideologies of modernity are woven deeply into the ways of our academic guilds. Modern biblical interpreters belong to communities that call themselves apostolic, but they usually hesitate to adopt the exegetical techniques *of* the apostles. This is because most have been trained to approach the New Testament's use of the Old in terms of *technique*. Scholars painstakingly catalogue ancient examples of *midrashim*, *peshet* exegesis, Hillel's seven exegetical rules, and so on, in order to establish some kind of hermeneutical

pattern with which to compare Christian schools of interpretation with those of the Talmud, or the Qumran community, or Hellenistic Judaism (*e.g.*, Mulder 1990, 691-725; Longenecker 1975). But having catalogued, them, they rarely know what to *do* with them, besides warn us away. They find it hard to reconcile themselves to a tradition built upon exegesis by means of methods deemed “unjustifiable with regard to normal, sober hermeneutical canons” (Hays 1989, 181).

But the apostolic tradition is not built upon *such methods*. It is built upon the apostolic confession that Jesus is risen, Lord, and Christ. The most striking consistency in the New Testament’s use of Scripture is its confessional priority. The texts are read in terms of their value to build up the community, remember the cross, and advance the new creation (Hays 1996), not according to technical hermeneutical canons.

The ultimate cornerstone of early Church exegesis is Jesus, not *peshet* or allegory or literalism or deconstructionism (Eph. 2:20). Gnostics, Alexandrians, Antiochians, and modernists do not err simply in using particular exegetical techniques, for Church Fathers put the same techniques to fruitful use. Their error is in making such techniques prior to the apostolic faith.

When Alexandrian or Antiochian or evangelical reading practices are viewed primarily as functions of exegetical techniques, insoluble problems emerge that distance the Church from its own tradition. Richard Longenecker tries to overcome the problem by distinguishing between the inspiration and authority of the writers’ *conclusions* and their flawed or inimitable exegetical *techniques* (Longenecker 1975, 219). Yet Longenecker’s approach has already made their conclusions depend upon their techniques! He treats the New Testament writers as if they are working syllogistically, using exegetical techniques as their foundational hermeneutical assumptions, not as servants of the rule of faith. He has made exegetical techniques, and the worldviews that render them plausible, prior to the *kerygma*. The fault is hardly his alone;

professional theological and biblical faculties have long been trained to approach exegesis as if it were theologically neutral ground. This is true of fundamentalists as well as modernists, both of whom take modern foundationalist presuppositions for granted. Yet insofar as our biblical practices respect such modern epistemologies, they give Cartesian and Kantian ideologies priority over confessional practice (Murphy 1996).

Modernism's collapse is an opportunity to see our hermeneutics of death for what they are. But postmodernism *as such* is not a solution, for postmodernist hermeneutics will only distort biblical practice in new ways (Vanhoozer 1998) unless they respect confessional priority.

On the other hand, if the most basic hermeneutical assumptions of Christianity's first generations lie in Jesus' life and the faith of his kingdom, then critical and postcritical interpreters *can* still use Scripture apostolically – and without having to return to particular techniques that neither the present-day Church nor the academy finds persuasive. The Church can apply any number of techniques – *peshet*, allegory, literalism, and the “higher criticism” that is condemned in my own denomination – as long as the ultimate criterion remains the apostolic *kerygma*.

Therefore, the future of evangelical hermeneutics lies not in premodern, modern, or postmodern practices as such, but in the recovery of confessional priority as various contemporary communities can practice it (Watson 1994, Newbiggin 1986). Christian confessional priority is often dismissed in the academy, and even in the seminary, as methodological inconsistency, circular reasoning, philosophical naïvete, or nonfalsifiable fideism (Longenecker 1975). When we surrender to such “peer” pressure, our biblical practices deteriorate into methodological conservatism, liberalism, and postmodernism. These fail to

respond to the real challenges facing evangelicalism, and threaten the life of the Church they seek to defend against each other (Monroe 2000).

For centuries our scholars, pastors, and flocks have been trained to see the Bible as a storehouse of experiences, facts, and values. Yet (praise God!) many still understand it *first* as the Church's authoritative witness to its Savior and Lord. Our communities can only be further encouraged as we affirm the confessional principle as truly biblical and apostolic, defend it as intellectually sound, and strengthen it so churchly readers learn to practice it in more disciplined ways.

If we do this, we can expect turbulent times ahead. Confessionally disciplining modern ideologies is bound to change the face of evangelicalism as we have come to know it, for evangelicalism's distinctives may owe more to modernism than to the Gospel itself. It is hard to believe that the resemblance between Johnston's centers of evangelicalism, and MacIntyre's epistemological forms of modernism, is a coincidence. Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and many other "new religious movements" have similar commitments to piety, biblical authority, and mission, yet have "innovated" in confessing Jesus as Lord and Christ. The family resemblances between orthodox and heterodox "evangelical" traditions point to a common influence on our traditions that comes from outside the Gospel: in other words, from the culture.

If evangelicalism is essentially a family of modern forms of Christian faith, then our success in restoring the primacy of the *kerygma* over our unchristian epistemologies is liable to turn us into something besides "evangelicalism" – something better than who we are today, yet still true to the heart of our movement. In fact, the theological distinctives of our different subtraditions are bound to reassert themselves as they emerge from under the false universalism of naïve modernity and the false pluralism of shallow postmodernity. If the glue that holds us

together turns out to be modernity, then without it “we” Wesleyans and Calvinists and Zwinglians and Pentecostals and Baptists and Anglicans may not want to think of ourselves as a family anymore, and our movement may splinter – into something (or things) both better, and consistent with who we are today as authentic communities of living faith. (Get your tenure now, while you still can.)

Scary, isn't it? Well, the alternatives are scarier: culturally comfortable, conservative and liberal hermeneutics of death. Many will take the wide road that ends in destruction. (I already said I'm a sucker for melodrama.) The solution to evangelicalism's hermeneutics of death, whether they be ideologically modern or postmodern, is to return wholeheartedly to the narrow road: to the confession that created, interpreted, collected, and canonized the Christian Bible in the first place: The risen Jesus is Lord *of all* (cf. Newbigin 1986; Wainwright 2000, 335ff).

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