

THE LONG JOURNEY HOME

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I. WHAT IT MEANS JUST TO BE HERE

Honored to be invited to the Evangelical Theological Society, I bring warm greetings from the postliberal underground. It seems fitting that this be the place to note that this is the one hundredth anniversary of the publication of James Strong's *Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, which has been so often reprinted by evangelical presses and used by evangelical teachers for a century and has served as basis for numerous Biblical helps and textual aids. My office for many years at Drew University is in the very room where Strong's *Concordance* was labored over and where his advanced seminars were held. Few books are still in print after one hundred years. Drew joins with the community of evangelical scholars in remembering the durable contribution of James Strong.

For many decades a steady stream of splendid evangelical doctoral students has sought out the Drew graduate program from evangelical centers like Westminster, Fuller, Gordon-Conwell, Asbury and Regent to undertake doctoral studies, returning to teach in various evangelical institutions. This has greatly enriched the learning ethos in which I teach. Among my predecessors in the teaching of theology at Drew are scholars still being appreciatively read by evangelicals. I think especially of Olin Curtis, John Faulkner and Edwin Lewis. It is now time for my tradition to find its way back into classic Christian orthodoxy after some years of dubious experimentation and fitful wandering.

Basil observed that "the athlete does not so much complain of being wounded in the struggle as of not being able even to secure admission into the stadium."¹ I am grateful for admission into this theological stadium.

Just being here means a great deal to me, a partial bridging of the wide gulf that stormily remains between the two wings of evangelical Protestantism, between the sons and daughters of Dort and the Remonstrance, between Calvinist theology and Wesleyan revivalism. These two evangelical wings are now being called to learn again how to fly in a single rhythm of coordination. Since you have invited me particularly to speak personally, I shall try not to be apologetic about self-reference. I welcome this occasion as a candid moment of self-examination.

* Thomas Oden, professor of theology and ethics at Drew University in Madison, New Jersey, delivered this address at a plenary session of ETS on November 16, 1990, in New Orleans, Louisiana.

¹ Basil *On the Holy Spirit* 3.29 (NPNF, 2/8. 48).

II. SCRIPTURE AS WORD OF GOD

For any who might wonder about my own view of the authority of Scripture, my ministry is grounded in the solemn evangelical confession of the *Twenty-Five Articles of Religion*: "The Holy Scriptures contain all things necessary to salvation; so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man that it should be believed as an article of faith." The Scriptures are "to be received through the Holy Spirit as the true rule and guide for faith and practice" (*Confession of Faith*). These confessional terms are carefully protected from legislative tinkering in my own community of faith.

As a Wesleyan evangelical I have no mental reservations in confessing with the Reformed tradition of Westminster that "the Word of God, which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy" God (*Westminster Shorter Catechism*), this holy writ being "given by inspiration of God, to be the rule of faith and life" (*Westminster Confession*). With the *Second Helvetic Reformed Confession* I heartily acknowledge "that interpretation of Scripture for orthodox and genuine which, being taken from the Scriptures themselves (that is, from the spirit of that tongue in which they were written, they being also weighed according to the circumstances and expounded according to the proportion of places, either of like or of unlike, also of more and plainer), accords with the rule of faith and charity, and makes notably for God's glory and man's salvation. Wherefore we do not despise the interpretation of the holy Greek and Latin fathers, nor reject their disputations and treatises as far as they agree with the Scriptures," for the fathers "with one consent, will not have their writings matched [placed on the same plane] with the Canonical Scriptures," but bid us allow their exegesis only so far as it agrees with Scripture. Such I take to be resonant with the confession of faith of the Evangelical Theological Society.

III. THE THREAD OF LIFE: A PERSONAL WORD OF GRATITUDE

For some who might wonder about my physical condition, I did indeed have coronary artery bypass surgery on July 19, 1989, followed by an infarction and a second open-heart surgery on the same day. But within a month after that ordeal I was walking ten miles per day and, now enjoying my best physical condition for years, I am running twelve miles a week, so no one need be overly concerned. Through this brush with death my awareness has deepened of how God's strength is made perfect through human weakness.

Over a decade ago I began actively writing a three-volume systematic theology. The triune theme that has held this entire project together since its inception is life—*The Living God*, *The Word of Life* and *Life in the Spirit*. How was I to know a decade ago that my own life would be seriously threatened just before the completion of the last volume? I am grateful to have fully recovered and to be coming near the completion of the third volume, which at last count numbered 1,700 manuscript pages.

In this limited time I wish to deal with the method of classic irenic exegesis, how it has affected me personally, and, if time permits, an example of its use.

IV. THE METHOD OF CLASSIC IRENIC EXEGESIS

1. *Modest reaffirmations.* Now toward the end of my journey of spelunking through the cavernous issues of systematic theology, I want to reaffirm solemn commitments made at its beginning: to make no new contribution to theology, and to resist the temptation to prefer modern writers less schooled in the whole counsel of God than the best ancient classic exegetes. I seek quite simply to express the one mind of the believing Church that has been ever attentive to that apostolic teaching to which consent has been given by Christian believers everywhere, always, and by all. This is what I mean by the Vincentian method.²

I have been passionately dedicated to unoriginality. I am trying to take to heart Paul's admonition: "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel *other than* the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we [of the earliest apostolic *kerygma*] had already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted [other than what you received from the apostles], let him be eternally condemned!" (Gal 1:8-9 NIV).³

My steady purpose in this effort has been to set forth the classical teaching of God the Father, Son, and Spirit, on which there has been substantial intergenerational agreement between traditions of east and west, Catholic, eastern orthodox, classical evangelical Protestantism. I have listened intently for the historic consensus received by believers of widely varied languages, social locations and cultures, whether of east or west, African or Asian, whether expressed by men or women of the second or first Christian millennium, whether European or decisively pre-European.

My purpose has not been to survey the bewildering atonalities of dissent but to identify and plausibly set forth the cohesive central tradition of general lay consent to apostolic teaching, not its centrifugal variations but its centripetal centering. I have spent little time trying to knock down others' cherished views. The focus is upon setting forth sound layers of argument traditionally employed in presenting in connected order the most commonly held points of Biblical teaching as classically exegeted by the leading teachers of its first five centuries. I am doggedly pledged to irrelevance insofar as relevance implies a corrupt indebtedness to modernity. What is deemed most relevant in theology is often moldy in a few days.

Theological innovators who still doubt that the Scriptural textuary is the crucial wellspring of Christian existence and reflection will always be

² Vincent of Lérins (LCC, 7. 37-39, 65-76).

³ Italics mine.

disappointed in such an effort. But all who wear this festive wedding garment are warmly welcomed to the feast.

My purpose is not to try to satisfy the finicky appetites of naturalistic skeptics who will always remain hungry. Nor is it to find a clever way of making the way of salvation conveniently acceptable to the prejudices of current psychology. I am pledged not to become fixated upon the ever-spawning species of current critical opinion but instead to focus single-mindedly upon early consensual assent to apostolic teaching of how God the Spirit works to fulfill the mission of God the Son on behalf of God the Father. That the Holy Spirit is consummating the mission of the Son is less an argument than an historical fact. My purpose is not to seek to establish by rational argument that the Son is God and the Spirit is God but rather to show textually that this has indeed been confessed by witnesses of countless cultural settings and times and social locations.

I do not assume that my partners in dialogue already embrace classic Christian teaching. I only ask that each one be willing to give fair hearing to the ways in which classic Christian teaching has reasoned about its own grounding and empowerment. I will not evade or eviscerate the traditional language of the Church or seek constantly to substitute diluted terms congenial to modern ears. The tested language of the Church speaks in its own unrelenting ways to modern minds struggling with the follies and limits of modern consciousness. Deteriorating modern ideologies must now catch up with the ever new forgings of classic Christianity, not the other way around.

Within these premises I have sought to listen to and speak with Baptists without abandoning dialogue with Catholics, with charismatics without losing touch with fundamentalists, with the holiness revival traditions without abandoning eastern orthodox worshipers, with social activists without demeaning pietists. How? By seeking the shared rootage of early exegesis out of which each has grown.

Whether one breathes easiest at a high liturgical altitude or a down-to-earth, socially engaged pragmatic altitude, whether one is awakened more by theoretical or practical interests, whether one enters the fray with eastern or western sympathies, whether one feels more comfortable with an enlightenment or pietistic vocabulary, I hope that each of these varied partners may recognize the best of their own recent traditions as already at home and included within the embrace of classical Christian exegesis. Christian orthodox exegesis deserves advocates who try to do what Rachel Carson did for birds or what Archie Carr did to advocate the cause of endangered sea turtles.

2. *The textuary.* Theological argument does well to view itself modestly as merely an introduction to its annotations. In my systematic efforts I earnestly wish more attention to be paid to notes than text, more to primary sources than my arrangement of them, more to the substance of the references than to the particular frame in which one observer beholds, places, or organizes them. If it is possible for an author sincerely to ask a

reader to rivet radical attention upon the sources to which he points and relatively less to the sequence and structure of his own inventions, I would indicate from the outset that as my true intention. Picture me as on my knees begging you to do just this one thing.

The weighting of references may be compared to a pyramid of sources with Scripture as the foundational base, then the early Christian writers, first pre-Nicene then post-Nicene, as the supporting mass or trunk, then the best of medieval followed by centrist Reformation writers at the narrowing center, and more recent interpreters at the smaller, tapering apex, but only those who grasp and express the antecedent mind of the believing historic Church. I am pledged not to try heroically to turn that pyramid upside down, as have those guild theologians who most value only what is most recent or most outrageous. Earlier rather than later sources are cited where possible, not because older is sentimentally prized but because they have had longer to shape historic consensus. Consent-expressing exegetes are referenced more confidently than those whose work is characterized by individual creativity, controversial brilliance, stunning rhetoric, or speculative genius.

Complaints about proof-texting must not result in ignoring the very canonical text upon which classic Christian teaching thrives. The modern form of historical exegesis that sincerely intends at every step to place every Scriptural reference in its historical context risks becoming a long string of historical excursi on modern commentators so as to inadvertently forget the apostolic text itself. In this way the well-motivated attempt at historical-critical exegesis may take a heavy toll on both catechesis and morality.

The history of Christian orthodox teaching is above all a history of exegesis. It would be absurd to provide references to early exegetes but fail to mention the texts they were exegeting. Most common points of consensual Christian exegesis were reasonably well formulated by the fifth century. Upon these we do well to again train our attention. This is what the classic exegetes did consistently: treat conserving forms of Christian tradition with imagination and imaginative forms of Christian experience with a celebration of their antecedents.

Like Kierkegaard, I reach out energetically only for my one hearer: you. To you I wish to offer the full energy of my life insofar as words can convey it. Like Gregory Nazianzen, I know that "I am a little shepherd, and preside over a tiny flock, and I am among the least of the servants of the Spirit. But Grace is not narrow, or circumscribed by place. Wherefore let freedom of speech be given even to the small,—especially when the subject matter is of such great importance."⁴

I am grateful to have been permitted to live in such momentous times as these, when both Church and university stand at a decisive crossroads, grateful for being given an academic home in a university of the Wesleyan

⁴ Gregory Nazianzen *Letters* 41 (NPNF, 2/7. 450).

evangelical tradition, a place where evangelicals and liberals can meet and engage in dialogue and where issues such as *pneuma*, *ekklēsia* and *eschaton* may be pursued on the premise that they are just as crucial to the university as those of the hard sciences.

Only toward the end of my work on my systematic theology did I become aware of some surprising feedback. Some of my readers tell me that even if they cannot join in the revelatory premises of Christian teaching they nonetheless find it beautiful, esthetically whole, and of immense interest merely as an historical exercise. While I welcome this kind of partner in dialogue, it has been clear in my mind from the outset that my study is addressed primarily to the *ekklēsia*, not to the secularizing culture. If the *saeculum* finds it beautiful or edifying, I can only invite further inquiry into the truth of why.

3. *Defining sources of classic consensual teaching.* Who are those principal consensual exegetes to whom irenic, classic theology so frequently turns? Above all they are the seven leading ecumenical councils received by patristic, medieval, Lutheran, Calvinist and Anglican consent, and supplementary early synods that came to be decisively quoted as effectively representing the mind of the believing Church; and the four great doctors of the eastern church tradition (Athanasius, Basil, Gregory Nazianzen, John Chrysostom) and of the west (Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine, Gregory the Great), as well as others who have been perennially valued for accurately stating certain points of general lay consensus: Cyril of Jerusalem, Cyril of Alexandria, Hilary, Leo, John of Damascus, Thomas Aquinas, Luther, Calvin.

“Classic” in this definition includes classic Reformation sources from Luther, Melancthon and Calvin, through Chemnitz and Ursinus to Wesley and Edwards, and consensus-bearing Protestant formularies consistent with ancient consensual exegesis. I do not hesitate to quote at times relatively nonconsensual writers like Origen, Tertullian and Novatian, but I do so on those points at which they generally have confirmed or articulated or refined consensual views, not on points where they diverge into idiosyncratic thinking.⁵

4. *Whether creeping modern chauvinism also exists among evangelicals.* Modern scholarly habits, fixated upon novelty, often betray an underlying value premise I call “modern chauvinism”—the assumption that old ways are predictably oppressive and that new ways are intrinsically morally superior. Recently I received a surprising letter from a graduate of a leading staunchly conservative evangelical seminary who felt that his professors there considered men “such as Aquinas, Augustine, Calvin, and Luther to be interesting, but not as important as modern theologians. In fact, it appears that contemporary evangelicals are ‘embarrassed’ at the notion of espousing and teaching classical theology. One . . . professor told

⁵ Vincent of Lérins *Commonitory* 17-18 (NPNF, 2/11. 143-145).

me that men such as Aquinas and Calvin were great for their day, but their writings are no longer that substantial. . . . The overall feeling . . . is that students need to spend more time in modern theology. This is a tragic shift that seems to be taking place throughout the evangelical community. Over and over again I have encountered evangelicals who are so enamored by the 'newness' of modern theological ideas that they abandon the real giants whose writings have stood for centuries."

Though this letter took me by surprise, it bears an ominous admonition. When I was attempting to describe modern chauvinism in *Agenda for Theology* and *After Modernity* . . . *What?* I hardly had in mind evangelicals but rather the more obvious secular accommodators. Now I realize that the particular form that modern chauvinism takes among some evangelicals is the tendency compulsively to quote only or mostly recent "historically informed" exegetes to the neglect of classic exegetes of the first five centuries, a hermeneutic just as oriented toward modernity as the guild exegetes of fading liberalism. This is the special form of creeping modern chauvinism that has gained more than a toehold in evangelical institutions—a step backward toward a deteriorating modernity, not forward toward a postmodern inquiry into orthodoxy. Some imagine that one can leap directly as with seven-league boots from the apostle's experience to their own private personal experience without any intervening history of the Spirit's awakening work.

V. THEN AND NOW⁶

In what follows, "then" and "now" have specific autobiographical meanings. "Then" means the period of my personal development before I became immersed in the meeting with and study of the ancient synods and leading ancient consensual exegetes. "Now" means what has been happening since that meeting became a serious matter for me in the mid-1970s and after.

The pivot occurred when my irascible, endearing Jewish mentor, the late Will Herberg, straightforwardly told me what Protestant friends must have been too polite to say: that I would remain densely uneducated until I had read deeply in patristic writers. That was in the early 70s when, with long hair, bobbles, bangles and beads, and a gleam of communitarian utopianism in my eyes, I finally found my way into the fourth-century treatise by Nemesius, *peri physeos anthrōpōn*, where it at length dawned on me that ancient wisdom could be the basis for a deeper critique of modern narcissistic individualism than I had yet seen. If you had asked me then what my life would look like now, I would have guessed completely wrong. It now seems that life is more hedged by grace and providence toward unpredictable outcomes than I once imagined.

⁶ Portions of this section have been published in amended form in *Christian Century* (December 12, 1990) 1164-1168.

Then I fancied that I was formulating unprecedented insights and ordering them in an original way. Later, while reading John of Damascus on the *oikonomia* ("arrangement, plan") of God (in *The Orthodox Faith*) I began belatedly to learn that all my supposed new questions were much-investigated amid the intergenerational wisdom of the *communio sanctorum* and that what I had imagined myself to be just recently inventing had been largely well understood as a received tradition in the eighth century. It was while reading Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho* that the pathos of the recurring Jewish/Christian dialogue came more clearly into focus for me. It was while reading John Chrysostom on voluntary poverty that I realized that Peter Berger's sociological theory of knowledge elites had long ago been intuited. It was while reading Augustine's *City of God* on the ironic providences of history that I realized how right was Solzhenitsyn on the spiritual promise of Russia. And so it went.

Then focused on humanistic psychology, now personal reflection is occurring in the context of the personal reality of the Word made flesh in whom our human personhood is most completely realized. Then blown by every wind of doctrine and preoccupied with fads and the ethos of hyper-tolerance, now I suffer fools less gladly and ask frankly about why long-standing heresies are being blithely embraced.

What has shifted in my scholarly investigation between then and now? Psychologically the shift has been away from Freudian, Marxist and Nietzschean values, especially individualistic self-actualization and narcissistic self-expression, and toward engendering durable habits of moral excellence in covenant community; methodologically away from modern culture-bound individuated experience and toward the shared public texts of Scripture and classic Christian tradition; politically from trust in regulatory power and rationalistic planning to historical reasoning and a relatively greater critical trust in the responsible free interplay of interests on the marketplace of goods and ideas.

Now I experience wider cross-cultural freedom of inquiry into and within the vast chorus of variables of Christian orthodoxy mediated through the life of prayer of diverse Christian voices of other times and places. Now I experience a liberation for orthodoxy in the joyful awareness of the endless flexibility of centered apostolic teaching to address and transform different cultural environments while offering anew the eternal Word of the servant Messiah in each new historical setting. Then I was seeking to live out my life mostly in accountability to contemporary academic peers; now awareness of final judgment makes me only proximately and semiseriously accountable to peers when compared to the final Judge.

1. *From modernity to postmodern paleo-orthodoxy.* Before this spiritual and moral conversion, I had been steadily asking questions on the hidden premise of four key value assumptions of modern consciousness: hedonic self-actualization, autonomous individualism, reductive naturalism, and moral relativism. Now my questions within and about modernity are being shaped by ancient consensual classic Christian exegesis of holy

writ. Then I was using the Biblical text instrumentally, sporadically, and eisegetically to support previously-held, modern ideological commitments. Now the Bible is asking my questions more deeply than I ever could before. Then I was mildly contemptuous of patristic exegesis; now I thrive constantly on patristic commentators, texts and wisdom. Now I am at every level seeking guidance in the written Word as recollected in apostolic testimony and consensually received by the believing Church. Now when I teach my brightest graduate students I have nothing better to offer than the written Word and the unfolding meeting of brilliant and consenting minds in time with that written Word (Athanasius, Ambrose and company). Now I preach less about my own sentiments and opinions and more from testimony canonically received and grasped cross-culturally by the believing community of other times and places, trusting that seed will bear fruit in our time and that the Word will address these hearers directly in its own distinctive way without too much static from me.

It was while reading Vincent of Lérins' fifth-century aids to remembering (*Commonitory*) that I gained the essential hermeneutical foothold in defining generally received teaching under the threefold test of catholicity as "that which has been believed everywhere, always, and by all" (*quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est*). From then on it was a straightforward matter of searching modestly to identify those shared teachings.

I do not mean by "then" that I was wholly alienated from faith in God, but I was lacking in attentiveness to apostolic testimony and the sanctification of time through grace. I do not mean that "now" I have ceased being a modern man or become bored with secularization. The world has become ever more alive to me because of the seed of the Word being planted in this fallow soil of the decaying wastes of modernity. Then I was always on the edge of theological boredom, now no trivial pursuits. Among theological issues most deeply engaging me the past year are sin in believers, the virginal conception of the Lord, providence in history, the holiness, catholicity and apostolicity of the one Church, radical judgment at the end of history, and the rejection of sin by atoning grace.

2. *Liberation for orthodoxy.* What happened between then and now? Then I distrusted anything that faintly smelled of orthodoxy. Now I relish studying the rainbow of orthodox testimonies and happily embrace the term paleo-orthodoxy if for no other reason than to signal clearly that I do not mean once-fashionable neo-orthodoxy. While colleagues are being liberated to share the despairs of modernity, I am being strangely liberated for orthodoxy. Paleo-orthodoxy understands itself to be postlib, postmodern, post-postmodern, post-neo-anything theology, since the further one "progresses" from ancient apostolic testimony to God's Word the more hopeless becomes the human condition.

I sometimes find myself in the amusing position of publicly debating liberal Roman Catholics and suddenly realizing that they are consorting with the old liberal Protestant strumpets of my seedy past while I am

setting forth their own traditional arguments from the *magisterium*. As a Protestant I grow daily more implicitly catholic without experiencing any diminution of myself as evangelical. When my path is strewn with thorny epithets like fundy or cryptopapist or byzantine or (my favorite) "Protestantism's most Catholic theologian," I feel like I just got a badge of honor under fire. I do not mind being charged with drawing either too near to Rome or Grand Rapids, for that only opens up an urgent and significant dialogue.

The shift from then to now is from a fixation on modernity to the steady flow of postmodern paleo-orthodox consciousness. Postmodern does not mean ultramodern. What some call postmodernism is an already dated expression of the last gasps of modernity, an ultramodern phase in its dying throes. We are already living in a postmodern era, but it is not the postmodernity being described by those who love to fly that flag (the unhappy campers following Derrida, Foucault, and the deconstructionist "posties"). The after-deconstructionist good news is that the disillusionment of the illusions of modernity is already being corrected by classical Christian teaching. The return to classic exegesis is the hope of the deteriorating modern situation, the source of its most profound critique, and the practical basis for living through and transcending its identity diffusion, discontent, moral relativism, and frenetic quest for relevance.

The reason I am now trying to write almost nothing that is currently relevant is that tomorrow it will be less relevant. I am seeking to understand what is perennially true, not ephemerally relevant. The social and political events that are affecting my thinking are epic movements of despairing modernity, not discrete day-by-day scandal-sheet items like many of the supposed great media events of the last decade, which pale in significance in relation to the demise of modernity that is never reported or media-interpreted. Give me unedited C-Span, CNN, public television, a remote channel selector, a little shortwave and national public radio, with some heaped-up helpings of classical music and a decent evangelical radio station, and a few journals, and I have enough media blitz any given week without any network television or daily newspapers. Reading Isaiah ten times seems rather more important than reading the *Sunday Times* once.

3. *The study of God as immediate joy.* I have personally lived through a desperate game: the attempt to find some modern ideology, psychology, politics, or sociology that could conveniently substitute for Christianity. That game is for me all over. There is no way to think about modernity except amid the collapse of modernity. I do not despair over modernity. I do celebrate the providence of God that works amid postmodern personal histories.

I want to be permitted to study the unchanging God without something else to do, some pragmatic reason or result. This is what I most want to do theologically, simply enjoy the study of God, not write about it, not view it in relation to its political residue or pretentiously imagine that it will have some social effect. The joy of inquiry into God is a sufficient end in itself and not a means only that needs a practical consequence to be validated.

Some dear old friends say: Why are you merely studying God? Why are you not out there with “our side” on the streets making “significant changes”?—which usually means the dated, imagined revolutions of introverted knowledge elites. Plain theology is wonderful enough in its very acts of thinking-reading-praying-communing, and celebrating the active life of the body of Christ, not for its effects, its written artifacts or its social consequences, though it has social consequences. Spirit-blessed theology is not merely a means to an end of social change, although I can think of no action that has more enduring political significance. The study of God is to be simply enjoyed for its own unique subject: the One most beautiful of all, most worthy to be praised.

I relish those half-days when nothing else is scheduled, when there are no worldly responsibilities but to engage in this quiet dialogue that I understand as my vocation. It is not something I must do or have to do or am required to do, but something I am free to do. If summer is delicious, a sabbatical is a foretaste of the celestial city. Why? Because I can do what I am cut out to do. Not write, but think. The writing is only a means to clarify my thinking.

When there is nothing on my calendar, when I can do what I want to do, I readpray, studypray, “work(so it seems)”pray, thinkpray, because there is nothing I more want to do. Then occasionally my old, pragmatic activist friends say to me, “But why are you not out there on the street working to change the world?” I answer that I am out there on the street in the most serious way by being here with my books, and if you see no connection there then you have not understood my vocation. I do not love the suffering poor less by offering them what they need more.

VI. AN EXAMPLE OF CLASSIC EXEGETICAL REASONING

1. *Spirit as author of Scripture.* In the time remaining I feel especially moved to set forth an example of how classic exegetical reasoning functions systematically, and amid this audience the fitting subject matter to address is the authority of Scripture.

The Paraclete is the Spirit of truth who brings Christ’s words to reliable remembrance and bears witness to him (John 14:16, 26; 15:26). The Holy Spirit not only “subsists and lives” but also “speaks and foretells.”⁷ The list or canon of Scriptural texts was repeatedly received consensually as God’s own address through the Spirit, who bestowed upon the writers the gift of rightly remembering the events through which God became revealed.⁸ In their original form and language, prior to any possibility of copyist errors or glossings, the canonical Scriptures, according to classic patristic teaching, constitute the unadulterated address of God to humanity. The believing Church consents to the premise that the Spirit has so

⁷ Cyril of Jerusalem *Catech. Lect.* 17.33 (NPNF, 2/7. 132).

⁸ Athanasius *Festal Letter* 39 (NPNF, 2/4. 551-552).

reliably protected this recollection and transmission of Scripture that no truth essential to salvation has been lost.⁹

Among the last words of David recorded in 2 Samuel were: "The Spirit of the Lord spoke through me; his word was on my tongue." The NT repeatedly acknowledges God's Spirit as the author of Hebrew Scripture. Jesus regarded Psalm 110 as written by David but given by the Spirit (Matt 22:43). Peter assumed that Psalm 2 had been spoken "by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of our father David" (Acts 4:25; cf. 1:16). Paul told the Jewish leaders of Rome that "the Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your forefathers when he said through Isaiah the prophet" that they were prone to be "ever hearing but never understanding" (Acts 28:25-26; Isa 6:9-10). When the author of Hebrews quoted Ps 95:7-11 he did not hesitate to say, "So, as the Holy Spirit says" (Heb 3:7; cf. 10:15-16). "For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet 1:21). Human agency was being gloriously transfigured by God's own Spirit. Human egocentricity did not interrupt or distort what God sought to communicate.

Just as the dying and risen Lord is truly human and truly God, so the address of God the Spirit in Scripture is truly human in the sense that it is "fleshed out" in human language, in an historical setting by actual persons living finite lives, without ceasing to be truly God's own Word that abides forever (Rom 1:3-4; 8:3; 2 Cor 2:8; Phil 2:2-8).

This does not imply that these apostolic attestors were suddenly made omniscient or morally infallible, or that they were geniuses or possessed extraneous or paranormal powers. The Spirit did, however, find their particular psyches, their intelligence, their language, their social location, their historical placement, amenable to the divine plan and purpose and spoke through them to and for all.¹⁰ Nor does this necessarily imply that the writers themselves always understood fully the import of their own writings. Daniel specifically articulated this ambiguity when he, "exhausted" and "ill," wrote of his own vision recorded in Scripture: "I was appalled by the vision; it was beyond understanding" (Dan 8:27). It was while Balaam was intending to curse Israel that he was inadvertently led by the Spirit to offer Israel a beautiful blessing (Numbers 22-24). Even Balaam's donkey became a useful instrument of the divine address (22:28).

2. *The appeal to Christ and the apostles.* Amid controversy, the precise words of Christ as apostolically attested were the final court of appeal. "Unless I find it in the originals in the gospel, I do not believe, and when I said to them, 'It is written,' they answered me, 'That settles it.'" ¹¹

The apostles repeatedly appealed to Christ's own precise words as having binding authority (1 Thess 4:15; Gal 6:2; 1 Cor 7:10-25; Acts 20:35) and often assumed that their readers would regard their own utterances as

⁹ Origen *Against Celsus* 5.60; Basil *Homily on Psalm 1*.

¹⁰ J. Calvin, *Institutes* 4.8.5-9.

¹¹ Ign. *Phld.* 8:2; cf. Ign. *Smyrn.* 7:2.

having similar binding authority insofar as they were consistent with those of the risen Lord (2 Thess 2:15; 2 Cor 2:9; 7:15).¹²

Already by the time of the writing of 2 Peter the letters of Paul were being read, along with the Hebrew Bible, as comparable with "the other Scriptures" (*loipas graphas*, 2 Pet 3:16). The gospels and epistles were regularly read in services of worship (1 Thess 5:7; Col 4:16; Jas 1:1; 1 Pet 1:1).¹³ Clement of Rome thought that the communications he had exchanged with the church at Corinth had been "written through the Holy Spirit."¹⁴

Augustine acknowledged that the writers brought to bear their own memory, imagination and will in their report of the events of revelation, the Holy Spirit insuring the accuracy of their recollection, transcription and transmission. Augustine made detailed inquiry into seeming discrepancies of the gospel narratives.¹⁵ The commonly received assumption was that the Spirit so guided the writers that without circumventing their human willing, knowing, language, personal temperaments or any other distinctly personal factors God's own Word was recalled and transmitted with complete adequacy and sufficiency.

There is never in Scripture an attempt rationally to demonstrate the inspiration of Scripture, as if rational demonstration might take on more importance than the divine address itself. Rather, it is assumed that God the Spirit is acting sufficiently to guarantee the authenticity and transmission of Scripture.¹⁶

It is the same Spirit who calls forth the canon of sacred Scripture, protects it from distortion, and illuminates the minds of those freely receptive to it by faith.¹⁷ The Spirit gives special gifts to guarantee an adequate and sufficiently reliable conveyance of the divine address (John 16:14).¹⁸ The Spirit continues to sustain the memory of revelation, to "give you grace to preserve that which he has given you to preach" that you "may set forth that one truth which the Spirit himself has taught you, although with divers voices."¹⁹

3. *Called-out people under the norm of canon.* The Church from its beginnings has been shaped by a received tradition of holy writ. By holy writ we mean first the Hebrew Scriptures, and then as the NT became consensually canonized the Church understood itself to stand under the norm of the apostolic proclamation, for apostolicity was the chief criterion

¹² Cf. *Barn.* 9:9 ff.; *Ign. Phld.* 7:1.

¹³ Cf. *Clement of Rome Cor.* 47:1; *2 Clem.* 19:1; *Justin Martyr Apology* 1.67; *Irenaeus Against Heresies* 2.27.2; *Muratorian Canon*.

¹⁴ *Clement of Rome Cor.* 63; *Tertullian Prescription Ag. Haer.* 36.

¹⁵ *Augustine Harmony of the Gospels* (NPNF, 1/6. 73 ff.).

¹⁶ *John of Damascus* (NPNF, 2/9. 89).

¹⁷ *Origen Principles* preface (ANF, 4. 239).

¹⁸ *John Chrysostom Hom. on John* 78 (FC, 41. 338-351).

¹⁹ *Council of Ephesus Letter of Celestine* (NPNF, 2/14. 221).

of the NT canon. Future proclamation must be shaped in correspondence with the testimony of the written Word of Old and New Testaments.²⁰

The definition of the commonly received canon is an act of the consenting Church, in which the Church paradoxically places itself precisely under the authority of the apostolic testimony.²¹

4. *Historical revelation requires a written Word.* Christianity proclaims a Savior who meets us personally. The saving act of God is an event that occurred through the life and death of Jesus in history. Hence the recollection of the salvation event always has the character of historical and personal recollection. This constant historical reference of faith runs counter to a rationalism that seeks to formulate unhistorical ideas or a mysticism that wishes to merge self in God (Origen). Both seek timeless truth, not the truth that is personally made known in time through a personal history.

The reason the *ekklēsia* reveres the canonical list of received Scriptures today is the same reason they were specified in the early centuries: to preserve accurately the apostolic memory through changing historical circumstances. Suppose there were no written Word whatever, but only a remembered oral tradition. Would not the hazards of history soon require that such an oral tradition be transmitted carefully in writing? That is precisely what happened in the middle decades of the first century. It was unimaginable that an oral tradition of such worth would remain forever unwritten. The recollection of the saving action of God in Christ could not be carelessly passed along like other memories. It deals with God's own self-communication through a Person. It recollects a series of events that constitute the incomparable salvation event.

The signs by which the written Word is recognized as God's own Word are the power of the Word to change lives, the moral excellence of its teaching that could not have been invented by corrupted human reason and imagination, the incomparable once-for-all events to which it testifies, and its "mighty effect" upon hearts, as seen in the fact that "twelve Apostles, taken from among poor and unlearned people, of the lowest class, by this doctrine overcame and subdued to Christ the mighty, the wise, and the rich," as the Longer Catechism of eastern orthodoxy affirms.

5. *The Spirit works through the Word in the heart to persuade.* The Spirit both inspires Scripture and convinces the hearer of its truth. The power by which the Word becomes hearable is itself the same power that breathed forth the Scriptural testimony.²²

Two steps are here implied: The Holy Spirit works in the administration of redemption first to speak to the human spirit through Scripture and preaching and then within the human spirit to elicit repentance and faith.

²⁰ Cf. the Decree of Damasus, Roman Synod, A.D. 382.

²¹ Tertullian *Prescription Ag. Haer.* 19-21 (ANF, 3. 251-252); Hilary *Trin.* 4.14-19 (NPNF, 2/9. 75-77).

²² Calvin, *Institutes* 1.9.2; 2.15.2.

The Spirit thus works both externally in bearing the objective testimony of Scripture and preaching and inwardly within the hearts of the resistant as well as the faithful. It is through the work of the Spirit that humanity has come to hear of the work of the Son. The Spirit works preveniently to make the mind receptive, to enable openness to the divine address, to prepare the believer to be unafraid of receiving the truth.²³

This receiving occurs by the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit (*testimonium internum spiritus sancti*), for only God the Spirit can authenticate the Father's own address to the heart.²⁴ Scripture conveys the living Word of God to us only as the Spirit makes one able to hear.²⁵ "For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Heb 4:12).

It is the Spirit of truth who is himself the truth (John 14:17; 1 John 5:7). If now we see dimly as through a mirror, finally we will see face to face (1 Corinthians 13). In the growing experience of the worshipping community "the words of the Lord are flawless, like silver refined in a furnace of clay, purified seven times" (Ps 12:6).

Luther resisted the individualistic notion of a direct, unmediated operation of the Spirit, as if apart from written Word, sacrament, and community. As the Son comes in the flesh within the historical continuum of a particular people, so does the Spirit meet us in community through bodily signs, water, poured-out wine, the heard words of preaching, and the written Word. The Spirit "has determined to give the inward part to no man except through the outward part" (Luther). "And so Paul preached the Word outwardly to Lydia, a purple-seller among the Philippian; but the Lord inwardly opened the woman's heart" (*Second Helvetic Confession*; cf. Acts 16:14). The Spirit's illumination occurs "with and through the word" (*Schmaldecald Articles*).

Through Word and sacrament the Spirit comes to us and operates within our hearts (*intus operans*, Luther) to apply the chief miracle that Christ operates upon the soul: the giving of life. When the Word of God goes out in preaching, it does not come back empty.²⁶ In doing so, the Spirit does not enlarge or add to the apostolic testimony but adapts that word to the individual contextually.²⁷

The Spirit assists the community of faith in accurately remembering, rightly interpreting, and practically applying Scripture (John 14:26; 1 Cor 2:13; 2 Tim 1:5). This is why the clearest and surest expositions of Scripture are to be found in the community of faith guided by the Spirit and not among individualistic inquirers.²⁸

²³ John of Damascus (NPNF, 2/9. 89).

²⁴ Calvin, *Institutes* 1.7.4.

²⁵ Augustine *Spirit and Letter* 28-45 (NPNF, 1/4. 95-102).

²⁶ M. Luther (WA, 2. 112).

²⁷ Athanasius *Against Arians* (NPNF, 2/4. 351-352).

²⁸ Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 5.26 (ANF, 1. 496-497).

Gregory offered a memorable picture of the Biblical exegete in his fond description of Athanasius: "From meditating on every book of the Old and New Testament, with a depth such as none else has applied even to one of them, he grew rich in contemplation, rich in splendor of life, combining them in wondrous sort by that golden bond which few can weave; using life as the guide of contemplation, contemplation as the seal of life."²⁹

²⁹ Gregory Nazianzen *Orat.* 21.6 (NPNF, 2/7. 271).