

LOST IN INTERPRETATION? TRUTH, SCRIPTURE, AND HERMENEUTICS¹

KEVIN J. VANHOOZER*

I. INTRODUCTION: STORIES OF TRUTH AND INTERPRETATION

Biblical interpretation is the soul of theology. Truth is the ultimate accolade that we accord an interpretation. Christian theology therefore succeeds or fails in direct proportion to its ability to render true interpretations of the word of God written.

They asked for a plenary paper on truth and interpretation. It took me some time to figure out what they meant. Only when I put it in canonical context—the ETS program book!—did I realize that I had to discuss the use of the Bible in theology, because systematic theology was not otherwise represented as such in the other plenaries. My focus is thus on *doctrine*, the main product of theology's interpretation of Scripture, and hence the linchpin between biblical interpretation and theological truth.

1. *Pilgrim's egress: setting out.* There has been too much wrangling over whether evangelicalism is a matter of doctrine or piety, the head or the heart. Those who see the essence of evangelicalism in pietistic terms tend to see the Bible primarily as a means of spiritual sustenance. Those who see the essence of evangelicalism in doctrinal terms tend to see the Bible primarily as a means of propositional communication. It is neither necessary nor advisable to take sides in this debate.² Indeed, to do so is to reduce, and so distort, the very concept of biblical and doctrinal truth. Let no one put asunder what God has joined together. Far better to see the Christian life as a way where head and heart come together to get the feet moving. Evangelicals need to put feet on the gospel, and on our doctrine. Evangelical theology should provide direction for walking the way of truth and life.

John Bunyan knew this long ago. His *Pilgrim's Progress* pictures Christian as a wayfarer directed by a Book on a way to the city of God. Christian's

* Kevin Vanhoozer, research professor of systematic theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2065 Half Day Road, Deerfield, IL 60015, delivered this plenary address at the 56th annual meeting of the ETS on November 19, 2004 in San Antonio, TX.

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² For further development of this theme, see Stanley J. Grenz, "Concerns of a Pietist with a Ph.D.," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 37 (2002) 58–76.

neighbor, Pliable, asks him if the words of his Book are certainly true. "Yes verily" Christian replies, "for it was made by him that cannot lie." Evangelist then leads Christian to the Wicket Gate where, he says, he will "receive instruction [doctrine] about the way." In Bunyan's words, "[Evangelist] told him that after he was gone some distance from the gate, he would come to the House of the Interpreter, at whose door he should knock; and he would show him excellent things."

2. *Why are they saying such awful things about truth and interpretation?* Fast forward to the twentieth century: "All this stuff about hermeneutics is really a way of *avoiding* the truth question." So spoke *homo Tyndaliens*, Tyndale man, to be precise, a NT Ph.D. student at Tyndale House, Cambridge, in 1984. My immediate reply: no, all this stuff about truth is really a way of avoiding the *hermeneutical* question. What I now want to say to my erstwhile colleague is this: all this stuff about hermeneutics is a way of *facing up to* the truth question: "Hermeneutics has become a bogey with which to frighten the children, and yet . . . its message is really rather simple. Appropriating ancient . . . texts [and not ancient only!] requires an effort of understanding and not just philological skills."³

Contemporary evangelicals had best face up to *both* questions. The temptation of conservative evangelicals is to play the propositional truth card in order to trump interpretation; the temptation of what we might call "emergent" evangelicals is to play the interpretation card in order to trump propositional truth. Neither move is ultimately satisfying, nor edifying.⁴

3. "*Lost in interpretation*": *how hermeneutics complicates "Bible and theology."* In what sense are we "lost in interpretation"? I mean (at least) four things by this phrase (apologies to Walt Kaiser and other single-sense folk!).

a. *The author is lost in interpretation.* There is a tendency in certain contemporary approaches to interpretation to lose the author, either because the author is historically distant or because the author has drowned in the sea of linguistic indeterminacy. This lostness is a loss, a death, and with the death of the author goes what may be the last best hope for a criterion of validity.⁵

³ Aidan Nichols, *Discovering Aquinas: An Introduction to His Life, Word, and Influence* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 181.

⁴ Attempts at historical one-upmanship are similarly inconclusive. There are now on the market a number of genealogies each of which purports to demonstrate the ancient (or not) pedigree of the doctrine of inerrancy (see Thomas Buchan, "Inerrancy as Inheritance? Competing Genealogies of Biblical Authority," in Vincent Bacote, Laura C. Miguélez, and Dennis L. Okholm, eds., *Evangelicals & Scripture: Tradition, Authority, and Hermeneutics* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004] 42–54). However, to believe that demonstrating historical provenance is equivalent to demonstrating a position's truth is to succumb to the genetic fallacy. One can neither prove nor disprove the truth of a position by showing where it came from.

⁵ I document both the death and the return of the author in my *Is There a Meaning in this Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998).

b. *The subject matter is lost in interpretation.* “Lost in interpretation” also means lost in translation: something of the text’s subject matter fails to get through. Some forms of historical criticism lose the theological substance of the Scriptures. Some forms of literary criticism lose the history of Israel.⁶

c. *Truth is lost in interpretation.* Third, in the context of philosophical hermeneutics, the truth itself is often lost in interpretation. Gianni Vattimo notes that hermeneutics has “become a sort of *koinē* or common idiom of Western culture.”⁷ He further observes that the notion of interpretation has become so broad in the work of philosophers like Gadamer and Ricoeur that it virtually coincides with every kind of human experience of the world: “That each experience of truth is an experience of interpretation is almost a truism in today’s culture.”⁸ Truth is lost when there are no facts, only historically located interpretations.⁹

d. *The interpreter is lost in interpretation.* The last thing lost in interpretation is the reader. The Ethiopian eunuch was lost in interpretation. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asks. “How can I unless someone guides me?” (Acts 8:31). To be lost in interpretation is to know neither the “where” nor the “way.” Having the right methods takes us only so far; biblical interpretation is less a matter of calculus than it is good judgment. The most intractable problems of interpretation are a function not of semantics but of *spiritual* direction. I have therefore decided that the genre of a plenary paper is as much pastoral as it is professional. Better: it is a pastoral word to theological professionals. To the hermeneutically complacent, I bring a word of challenge; to the hermeneutically distressed, I bring a word of consolation. But we begin by clarifying the current situation.

II. TRUTH AND INTERPRETATION: THE CURRENT SITUATION

1. *“You are here”: postmodernity and the situated interpreter.* In our garden we have a stepping stone that reads: “You are here.” But where, pray tell, is “here”? We are in a crisis situation, in a labyrinth of language, at the crossroads of truth and interpretation. To paraphrase Barth: as Christian theologians, we *must* speak of truth; as denizens of the twenty-first century post-Enlightenment west, we *cannot* speak of truth.

Context is vital for establishing textual meaning. This much is well known, and agreed on. Yet today the context or location of the reader has become more significant for biblical interpretation than the context of the author. In the 1950s, Bultmann asked whether exegesis without presuppositions was possible. By the 1980s, we were being told that it was impossible

⁶ See Iain Provan, V. Phillips Long, and Tremper Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003) 79–81.

⁷ Gianni Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation: The Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997) 1.

⁸ *Ibid.* 5.

⁹ Vattimo himself notes the self-contradictory nature of this claim: if philosophical hermeneutics is the discovery of the “fact” that there are different perspectives on the world, then this would be a *fact*, not an interpretation, and would contradict the very point they are trying to make.

for exegetes to transcend their ideological locations. Postmodernity is the triumph of situatedness—in race, gender, class—over detached objectivity.

Some follow Nietzsche and conclude that there are no facts, that it is interpretation all the way down. Never mind the balm, is there no *bedrock* in Gilead? Postmoderns typically think of interpretation as a political act, a means of colonizing and capturing texts and whole fields of discourse. Where have we come to? I knew where I was—in trouble!—when my doctoral students at Edinburgh University accused me of oppressing them with my truth claims (no charges were filed). There is some truth in the observation that raw power often appears as an angel of truth. What postmodernity teaches is ultimately a negative lesson, one moreover that we should have already learned from the biblical prophets, namely, that we are situated, limited, contingent, and have a disposition towards idolatry. While God's word is infallible, human interpretations are not. God is in heaven; we are on earth. Situated between heaven and earth, we lack the knowledge of angels.

What, then, are our options? (1) Hermeneutical relativism: embrace the interpreter within you and live as they did in the period of the Judges where everyone did what was right in their own eyes (so long as you don't hurt anyone, presumably!); (2) take the road to Rome and the safety of numbers; (3) join an independent church, where right reading is a function of one's local interpretive community. None of these options inspires confidence. I propose a fourth possibility: that we set out like pilgrims on the way indicated by our book; that we employ whatever hermeneutical tools available that help us to follow its sense; that we pray for the illumination of the Spirit and for the humility to acknowledge our missteps; and that we consult other pilgrims that have gone before us as well as Christians in other parts of today's world.

What we must *not* do is postpone setting out until we have resolved all interpretative questions. What we see practiced all too often in the academy is a "hermeneutics of procrastination"—"always reading and never coming to a knowledge of the truth" (cf. 2 Tim 3:7), and never walking truth's way. This is what Derrida implies when he speaks of meaning "endlessly deferred." Kierkegaard was well-acquainted with this phenomenon, and he saw it for what it was: a spiritual rather than an intellectual condition. Imagine a country in which a king issues a decree and his subjects set out to interpret rather than respond to it. "Everything is interpretation—but no one reads the royal ordinance in such a way that he acts accordingly."¹⁰ Ours too is a "culture of interpretation" where the business of interpretation is busy-ness. The hermeneutics of procrastination is motored up, but the motor is not in gear, only idling. The solution: a "hermeneutics of *activation*" that engages the matter of the text. But how?

2. *Truth and other interpretative interests: postmodernity and the next Reformation?* Some in our midst believe that we should embrace our new

¹⁰ *For Self-Examination* (trans. Edna and Howard Hong; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1940) 36.

cultural and intellectual situation. Carl Raschke has recently argued that postmodernity provides an opportunity for evangelicals to reclaim their Reformation heritage, especially the notions of *sola fide* and *sola scriptura*.¹¹ Raschke and other “emerging” evangelicals contend that their conservative counterparts have co-opted the notion of biblical truth to modern theories of language and knowledge—in a word, to secular philosophy. The notion of objective truth leaves these interpreters cold: “The strictly theoretical seems inert.”¹² Far better to read in order to meet people’s needs, promote justice, and transform the world. (It was Marx who said that the point is not to interpret the world, but to change it. Pity an evangelical didn’t say that!)

Far better still, say emerging evangelicals, to enter into a personal relation with God characterized more by trust than by reason. The interest that governs emerging evangelicals’ biblical interpretation is salvation—not doctrinal formulation, not system-building. Note well: Raschke does not pit postmodernity against truth (he lays relativism and skepticism on the doorstep of modernity). On the contrary, postmodernity is at its root an insight into language that privileges its *vocative* rather than descriptive function. With Levinas, Raschke views the word not as a sign that indicates a thing but as a *call* from an other. Emerging evangelicals posit the priority of relations (interlocutions) over predications (locutions), the priority of personal over propositional reality.¹³ “Truth and interpretation” in the context of emergent evangelicalism is about *faces*, not facts.

People read the Bible today, then, with a wide variety of interpretative interests—saintly, scholarly, and otherwise. Some have an interest in the state of the Hebrew or Greek language at the time a particular text was written or in filling out the historical background of the text; others have an interest in the text’s literary structure, in chiasms, or the way it achieves its rhetorical effects; still others have an interest in the way a text expresses a particular understanding of human existence, or in the way a text envisions women, or in the effect a text may have on matters of social justice. These are all legitimate interests, to be sure. But how should one interpret Scripture if one’s primary interest is in the text’s theological *truth*? More pointedly: is the truth of Scripture personal/relational or propositional/doctrinal? The future of evangelical theology may well depend on how it answers this question.¹⁴

¹¹ Carl Raschke, *The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004).

¹² Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor, *A Matrix of Meanings: Finding God in Pop Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003) 301.

¹³ Raschke, *The Next Reformation* 119.

¹⁴ And on how it understands the nature and function of doctrine. Hence the purpose of the present essay: to reflect on the links between biblical interpretation and doctrinal truth. For a constructive proposal on the nature of doctrine, see my *The Drama of Theology: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, forthcoming 2005).

III. TRUTH AND INTERPRETATION: THE STANDARD PICTURE

1. *“Mining the deposit of truth”*: *The Hodge-Henry hypothesis*. For large swaths of the Western tradition, the task of theology consisted in mining propositional nuggets from the biblical deposit of truth. The Pauline shaft in particular was thought to contain several rich doctrinal lodes.

a. *Thomas Aquinas*. According to Thomas Aquinas, Scripture contains the science of God: the unified teaching from God about God. The operative term is *teaching*. Doctrine is essentially sacred teaching, a divinely revealed informative proposition about an objective reality.¹⁵ In the words of one commentator, revelation for Aquinas “is an intellectual event”: a communication from the mind of God to human minds.¹⁶ Theology is a theoretical and practical science that infers truth of things by considering them in the light of the sacred teaching contained in Scripture.¹⁷

b. *Charles Hodge*. In a different context, 19th-century Princeton, Charles Hodge and B. B. Warfield laid the groundwork for conservative evangelical theology by insisting on the importance of propositional truth, not least as a counter to Schleiermacher’s liberalism, in which doctrine is merely religious feeling set forth in speech.¹⁸ As with Aquinas, the Bible is the deposit of revealed truth. The manner in which theology is a “science” of Scripture, however, is noticeably different. Hodge bases his understanding on the inductive method that dominated the natural sciences of his day. The Bible contains revealed data, not only soteric data (e.g. gospel truths of salvation), but scientific, historical, and geographic data as well, not only because these too are the words of God but also because the gospel is inextricably intertwined with real events in the world. Everything thus depends on getting the Bible right through a process of empirical observation and logical deduction: “The Bible is to the theologian what nature is to the man of science. It is his storehouse of *facts*.”¹⁹ The theologian’s duty is to ascertain, collect, and combine the biblical facts.

c. *Carl F. H. Henry*. Carl F. H. Henry’s magisterial defense of propositional revelation follows in the same tradition. He defines a proposition as

¹⁵ This description of Aquinas is similar to what George A. Lindbeck calls the “cognitive-propositionalist” type of theology (*The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984]). Lindbeck identifies Aquinas with a “modest” cognitive-propositionalism (p. 66).

¹⁶ Aidan Nichols, *Discovering Aquinas: An Introduction to His Life, Work, and Influence* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 21. Though Aquinas speaks of theology as a *scientia* or “science,” we would do well to recognize its peculiar nature: while doctrine involves a certain participation in God’s cognition (e.g. thinking God’s thoughts after him), such participation—faith—is a gift of grace. See John I. Jenkins, *Knowledge and Faith in Thomas Aquinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) esp. 66–77.

¹⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1a, 1, 4. Aquinas distinguishes theology from other sciences by pointing out that its first principles are the articles of faith, not something derived from reason or observation.

¹⁸ Avery Dulles treats “conservative evangelicalism” as exhibit number one of the tendency to see revelation as doctrine (*Models of Revelation* [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983] ch. 3).

¹⁹ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols., 1.18.

“a verbal statement that is either true or false.”²⁰ The Scriptures, says Henry, contain a divinely given body of information actually expressed or capable of being expressed in propositions. Those parts of the Bible that are not already in the form of statements may be paraphrased in propositional form.²¹ In Henry’s words: “Christian theology is the systematization of the truth-content explicit and implicit in the inspired writings.”²²

In what we may call the Hodge-Henry (H-H) hypothesis, doctrine is the result of biblical induction and deduction, a capsule summary of the meaning of Scripture “taken as a set of propositional statements, each expressing a divine affirmation, valid always and everywhere.”²³ Propositionalist theology tends to see Scripture in terms of revelation, revelation in terms of conveying information, and theology in terms of divine information-processing.

2. *Correspondence as a picturing relation.* The H-H hypothesis is heavily invested in a particular theory of language, meaning, and truth. Language according to the H-H hypothesis is primarily concerned with stating truth, which in turn is a function of describing reality, representing the world, or recording a series of events. Meaning here becomes largely a matter of ostensive reference, a matter of indicating objects or states of affairs. The biblical text is a mirror of nature, history, and even eternity to the extent that it can state universal truths about God’s being. Moreover, Scripture is not like those fun house mirrors that distort reality, enlarging heads in grotesque fashion or (which is better) making the stout appear thin. No, the biblical text pictures reality as it really is. Hence “truth” is a correspondence relation in which language (and thought) accurately reflects, mirrors, or pictures reality. It is worth noting that this concept of truth lives off a visual metaphor: to “see” with the mind’s eye is to obtain theoretical truth (*theoria* = “to behold”).²⁴

Emergent evangelicals are not the only ones who wonder whether this theory of language, meaning, and truth owes more to philosophy than to the Bible.²⁵ Raschke, for example, charges conservative evangelicals with shoring up their commitment to biblical authority with a metaphysical theory of truth that is neither biblical in its origin nor plausible in the contemporary

²⁰ Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, vol. III (Waco, TX: Word, 1979) 456. Note that Henry, unlike other evangelicals, conflates sentences and propositions. For a further development of this point, see my “The Semantics of Biblical Literature,” in D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, eds., *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995) esp. 57–59.

²¹ Henry comes close to what literary critics call the “heresy of propositional paraphrase” when he suggests that the truth expressed in literary forms such as poetry and parable may be expressed in “declarative propositions” (*God, Revelation & Authority* 3.463). Even speech acts such as promising and commanding can be “translated into propositions” (p. 477). Such paraphrases and translations are necessary for Henry because “the primary concern of revelation is the communication of truth” (p. 477).

²² *God, Revelation, and Authority* 1.238–39.

²³ Dulles, *Models of Revelation* 39.

²⁴ See David Alan Williams, “Scripture, Truth and our Postmodern Context,” in *Evangelicals & Scripture*, ch. 12.

²⁵ Roger Nicole and others have demonstrated that the biblical concept of truth emphasizes reliability, not mirroring.

context. He rejects the notion that theology is a best conceived in terms of subjects (theologians) “seeing” objects (biblical propositions).²⁶ Postmoderns no longer believe in the innocent eye, even—nay, especially!—when it is the mind’s eye.

The H-H hypothesis bears a certain resemblance to the early Wittgenstein’s “picture theory” of the proposition where words refer to objects and sentences refer to empirical facts.²⁷ Words and propositions are the atoms and molecules of a language that is mainly pictorial. But *texts* are not simply bundles of propositions, but new kinds of entities altogether with new emergent properties. Just as one cannot account for everything in a biological organism with the categories of physics and chemistry, so one cannot account for everything in a text at the level of what we might call “molecular hermeneutics.” The main problem with the picture theory, then, is that it seems singularly inadequate to explain *textual* meaning.

There are further problems with the picture theory of meaning and truth. First, and most importantly, it fails sufficiently to recognize that we use language to do other things beside referring. And it is far from clear that all reference to the real is best thought of as “picturing.” Second, and relatedly, it ignores the role of circumstances, context, and *use* for determining meaning (e.g. what we are doing with language). According to David Clark, a proposition is an abstraction that captures the informative content of a statement but strips away “all the dimensions of the statement that do something other than tell how things are.”²⁸ And third, in seeking propositional restatements of Scripture it implies that there is something inadequate about the Bible’s own forms of language and literature. The early Wittgenstein makes a similar complaint about ordinary language: “Language disguises thought. So much so, that from the outward form of the clothing it is impossible to infer the form of the thought beneath it.”²⁹ Evangelicals should resist the implication that there is something improper about the final form of Scripture.³⁰ Is there not a better way to conceive of the relation of meaning and truth?

3. *Is inerrancy a hermeneutic?* The moral thus far: views of meaning and truth have serious consequences for the way theologians handle Scrip-

²⁶ To enter into a genuine faith relation with God “we must set aside the dualism of subject and object that has overshadowed the tradition of Western thinking” (Raschke, *The Next Reformation* 212).

²⁷ So Ludwig Wittgenstein: “A proposition is a picture of reality” (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961] 4.01).

²⁸ *To Know and Love God: Method for Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003) 358.

²⁹ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus* 4.002.

³⁰ There are other types of precision or clarity than the scientific. It has been said, for example, that poetry is “the best words put in the best order.” Similarly, because we are dealing with the Bible as God’s word, we have good reason to believe that the biblical words are the right words in the right order, though as I shall argue below, we need to work hard to recognize the variety of literary orders that exist in Scripture. Part of the answer to emergentists like Raschke is to acknowledge that there are other orders in Scripture than the logical-propositional. Related to this is the further point that each of the Bible’s literary forms may have its own “logic” or rationality, that is, its own way of making sense (and truth).

ture. Carl Henry was right to worry that some theories of interpretation serve to “neutralize” inerrancy.³¹ This leads naturally to our next question: is inerrancy itself a hermeneutic? Our preliminary response must be, “Yes and no.” Positively, inerrancy assumes the ultimate unity of the Bible, a crucial hermeneutical premise. On the other hand, simply to assume the Bible’s truth is not yet to say what it *means*. Even Paul Tillich could affirm that the Bible’s message was “grounded in reality,” since for him its message concerns the Ground of our Being! Fully to do justice to the topic of truth and interpretation, then, requires us to do two things: to understand what inerrancy means and to understand what it means in particular for biblical interpretation.

a. *Inerrancy and the bearers of truth.* At this point it would be helpful to distinguish the truth of the text from our interpretations of it. Believe it or not, another Cambridge doctoral student once asked me, “Aren’t our evangelical interpretations inerrant?” Perhaps I lead a sheltered life, but I found, and continue to find this sentiment shocking. If nothing else, it has helped me to clarify a distinction between different bearers of truth. We need to distinguish the *text* as a truth-bearer from the *interpretation* (or the interpreter) as a truth-bearer. The Bible’s witness to its subject matter is always true; the interpreter’s witness to the text, by contrast, suffers from various forms of existential short-sightedness, confessional tunnel vision, and cultural myopia. Yet the vocation of the interpreter is to be nothing less than a witness to the truth of the text and hence to the subject matter that it attests.

b. *Inerrancy as underdetermined hermeneutic.* Back to our question: is inerrancy a theory of interpretation? As we have seen, the assumption that the Bible exhibits a unified truth, while a vital hermeneutical presupposition, nevertheless underdetermines the exegetical results. Just as inspiration does not tell us what the Bible means or how it functions as an authority in theology (this was the moral of David Kelsey’s *Proving Doctrine: The Uses of Scripture in Modern Theology*³²), so inerrancy—the belief that the Bible speaks truly in all that it affirms—does not necessarily generate interpretative agreement even among those who hold to it.

Truth may be the correspondence of “what one says” to “what is,” but it falls to interpretation to discern *what* it is that the biblical authors are affirming, and whether there is more than one way of *saying something* about it: “The issue . . . is not *whether* Scripture is ‘inerrant’ nor certainly whether the God who speaks therein is ‘inerrant,’ but the *nature* of the Scripture that the inerrant God has given us.”³³ It is one thing to posit the Bible’s truthfulness in all that it affirms, quite another to say what the truth of the Bible *is*. Inerrancy alone, then, is not yet a full-fledged hermeneutic. For many Church fathers, the entire truthfulness of Scripture was compatible

³¹ Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority* 4.175.

³² Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999.

³³ Peter Enns, “Apostolic Hermeneutics and an Evangelical Doctrine of Scripture: Moving Beyond a Modernist Impasse,” *WTJ* 65 (2003) 280.

with allegorizing. Contemporary evangelicals, by contrast, are more likely to equate truthfulness with historicity.

c. *Inerrancy in Chicago*: “Just the facts, ma’am.” Well, why not? Why not stick with the “facts”? Because critics of propositionalist theology charge it with selling out to modernity (and to secular philosophy) by assuming that biblical meaning and truth are functions of historical reference and empirical actuality. Raschke argues that the traditional notion of infallibility “was never intended to guarantee a precise, literal ‘factual’ truth of every single biblical sentence.”³⁴ Is inerrancy really the bastard child of evangelical faith and modernity? And has a modern distortion or reduction of truth proved inimical to evangelical theological interpretation?

In this regard it is interesting to compare the two Chicago Statements. The Statement on Biblical Inerrancy is in my opinion by far the more successful of the two. Interestingly, one looks in vain in that statement for the terms “fact” or “factuality.” The Statement speaks instead of the truth of Scripture in “all matters” it addresses (Art. IX, XI). The Statement acknowledges the presence of diverse literary styles (Art. VIII, XVIII) and figures of speech: “So history must be treated as history, poetry as poetry, hyperbole and metaphor as hyperbole and metaphor . . . and so forth.” The key claim for our purposes comes in Article XIII: “We deny that it is proper to evaluate Scripture according to standards of truth and error that are alien to its usage or purpose.”

In contrast, the second Chicago Statement, on Biblical Hermeneutics, takes back with its left hand what the former offers with its right. On the one hand, Article X affirms “that Scripture communicates God’s truth to us verbally through a wide variety of literary forms.” And Article XV helpfully adds that “[i]nterpretation according to the literal sense will take account of all figures of speech and literary forms found in the text.” These gestures are overwhelmed by other articles, however, where the language of “fact” and “factuality” takes over. Article VI: “We . . . affirm that a statement is true if it represents matters as they actually are but is an error if it misrepresents the facts.”³⁵ Article XIV goes on to affirm that the biblical record of events, “though presented in a variety of appropriate literary forms, corresponds to historical fact.” Finally, Article XXII affirms that Genesis 1–11 “is factual, as is the rest of the book.” It is difficult to read these affirmations together so as to preserve a healthy tension rather than a contradiction

³⁴ Raschke, *The Next Reformation* 122. For similar criticisms, see Henry H. Knight III, *A Future for Truth: Evangelical Theology in a Postmodern World* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997) ch. 5: “The Inadequacies of Propositionalism”; Stanley J. Grenz, “Nurturing the Soul, Informing the Mind: The Genesis of the Evangelical Scripture Principle,” in *Evangelicals & Scripture*, ch. 1; Nancey Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism: How Modern Philosophy Set the Theological Agenda* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996). Raschke blames the Princetonians for turning biblical authority into an epistemological principle. For a slightly different account, see William Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998).

³⁵ One problem in moving to “statement” too fast is that one overlooks the nature and purpose of the particular authorial discourse. Strictly speaking, sentences do not refer; rather, authors use sentences to refer (or not). We shall return to the notion of authorial intention below.

between them. While the second Statement does not actually make shipwreck of biblical interpretation, it does incline the good ship Hermeneutics to list rather dangerously.

Dangerously? Yes, to the extent that it risks imposing extrabiblical categories and standards on biblical narratives. History is not simply a matter of reporting facts, at least not if by “fact” we mean the kind of data that can be verified empirically apart from a fiduciary interpretative framework! That way positivism lies.³⁶ Evangelicals must not let a particular theory of truth and factuality determine what the author of Genesis 1–11 is proposing for our consideration. It is the text, not some theory of truth, that ought to determine what kind of a claim is being made. To begin with a theory of truth and argue to a particular interpretation is to put the factual cart before the hermeneutical horse. This was Bultmann’s mistake: he assumed that the Bible’s truth was existential and then set about demythologizing it. Let us not make a similar mistake and run rough-shod over authorial intent in our haste to historicize.

IV. TRUTH AND INTERPRETATION: A PROPOSAL

1. *Gospel and truth: beyond “cheap inerrancy.”*

a. *Will the real people of the book stand up?* Today the status of evangelicals as a “people of the book” is in jeopardy, and perhaps not without reason. In the good old days, the dividing lines were clearly drawn: the liberals revised the faith in light of modern learning and culture, while conservative evangelicals stood guard over the deposit of truth. Then a stranger came to town and stood up to the theological outlaws. It was high noon on modernity, and Karl Barth was riding again, this time with a postliberal posse. It is sobering to reflect that it was second-generation Barthians like Hans Frei and George Lindbeck, not evangelicals, who were largely responsible for the demise of liberal theology and for the rehabilitation of “biblical” as a respectable theological label. Of course, the crucial question—and not only for our topic of truth and interpretation—continues to be, “What does it mean to be biblical?”

In the big geothepolitical picture, postliberals and evangelicals are allies: postliberals are generously orthodox, trinitarian, and christocentric. But they are not so sure about us. Hans Frei, for example, worries that Carl Henry is a closet *modernist* because of his commitment to truth as historical factuality. For Frei, it is the biblical narrative itself, not its propositional paraphrase, that is the truth-bearer. Whereas for Henry doctrines state the meaning of the narratives, for Frei we only understand the doctrine by understanding the story.³⁷ Emergent evangelicals have similar questions

³⁶ Positivism is the quintessentially modern philosophical position that recognizes as facts observable phenomena only and strives for objective knowledge of the facts untainted by emotions, values, or faith.

³⁷ So George Hunsinger, “What Can Evangelicals & Postliberals Learn from Each Other? The Carl Henry-Hans Frei Exchange Reconsidered,” in Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, eds., *The Nature of Confession* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996) 142.

about their conservative counterparts. Raschke, for example, says, "Inerrantism amounts to the rehellenizing of the faith and a retreat from the Reformation."³⁸

Conservative evangelicals are not the only people of the book, nor the only people of the gospel. Other theological traditions too profess the truth of Jesus Christ. The issue, then, is twofold: *what kind of truth* does Scripture have and *how does it speak* truth? Each of these questions has a bearing on the nature and purpose of Christian doctrine.

Carl Henry was absolutely right to stress the cognitive content of Scripture and doctrine over against those who sought to make revelation a non-cognitive experience. Is it possible, however, that in so focusing on biblical *content* he, and other conservative evangelicals, have overlooked the significance of biblical literary *form*? We shall return to this point below. The immediate point is this: of all theological traditions, evangelicals must respect the nature of the biblical books they interpret. It is no service to the Bible to make a literary-category mistake. At least on this point, I agree with James Barr: "Genre mistakes cause the *wrong kind of truth values* to be attached to the biblical sentences."³⁹ The dialogue between conservative and emergent evangelicals could be helped by a recognition of the cognitive significance of Scripture's literary forms.

To interpret the Bible truly, then, we must do more than string together individual propositions like beads on a string. This takes us only as far as fortune cookie theology, to a practice of breaking open Scripture in order to find the message contained within. What gets *lost* in propositionalist interpretation are the circumstances of the statement, its poetic and affective elements, and even, then, a dimension of its truth. We do less than justice to Scripture if we preach and teach only its propositional content. Information alone is insufficient for spiritual formation. We need to get beyond "cheap inerrancy," beyond ascribing accolades to the Bible to understanding what the Bible is actually saying, beyond professing biblical truth to *practicing* it.

b. "*The gospel according to . . .*": *an evangelical definition of truth*. How can we understand the Bible according to a standard of truth that is not foreign to its purpose? Here we do well to recall C. S. Lewis's distinction: "truth is always *about* something; but reality is that *about which* truth is."⁴⁰ So what is the Bible about: eternal truths, historical facts, morals, God, us? There are repeated textual clues. Take, for instance, this title: "The gospel according to . . ." The Bible is more than a system of philosophy or moral truths. It is good news. The instinct of cognitive-propositional theology is sound. The gospel *is* informative: "he is risen." Without some propositional core, the church would lose its *raison d'être*, leaving only programs and pot-lucks. At the same time, to reduce the truth of Scripture to a set of propositions is unnecessarily reductionist. What the Bible as a whole is literally

³⁸ Raschke, *The Next Reformation* 131.

³⁹ James Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World* (London: SCM, 1973) 125.

⁴⁰ C. S. Lewis, "Myth Became Fact," in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) 66.

about is *theodrama*—the words and deeds of God on the stage of world history that climax in Jesus Christ.

“The Gospel *according to Matthew*” (or Mark, Luke, and John) . . . To speak of the *evangel* is to focus on the truth of the subject matter of this apostolic discourse; to mention the evangelists is to focus on the truth of authorial discourse. It is not insignificant that most books in the Bible bear the names of their reputed authors. This is because the Bible is largely testimony: someone saying something to someone about what one has seen and heard. To affirm the truth of the gospel (“He is risen”) is to view truth as the correspondence between the *author’s discourse* (not the words taken out of context!) and the way things are.⁴¹

c. *The orthodox gospel: a catholic criterion of truth.* Affirming truth as correspondence (“truth is always *about* something”) takes us only so far. We still have to determine what the Bible means (“that *about which* truth is”). The ancient Rule of Faith specifies what the Bible’s truth is ultimately about: the creative and redemptive work of the triune God. To counter heretical interpretations that fundamentally mistook “that about which the gospel is,” Irenaeus and Tertullian put forward the Rule of Faith as the necessary interpretative framework for understanding Scripture correctly. Inasmuch as it specifies what the Bible is *about* and how it is *unified*, the Rule of Faith serves as a crucial principle for true interpretation.

Theology should be catholic, not in the Roman sense of according magisterial authority to the official tradition of the institutional church, but rather in recognizing what we might call the ministerial authority of the consensus tradition of the church as it is extended through time and space. Catholicity is the antidote to the tribalism and parochialism that infects Christian thinking that never leaves its ghetto. When each interpreter lives in his own house the result is a destructive factionalism (“I am of Piper”; “I am of Dobson”; “I am of McClaren”).

2. *Truth as theodramatic correspondence: doctrine and the unity of divine action.* To interpret the Bible we need to do more than grasp a few isolated truths; we need to be able to grasp the whole, and to situate the parts in the whole. The unity of the Bible is neither that of a philosophical system nor a system of moral truths. On the contrary, the unified sum and substance of the Bible is *theodramatic*: it is all about God’s word and God’s deeds, accomplished by his “two hands” (Son and Spirit) and about what we should say and do in response. It is because theology’s subject matter is theodramatic that it must do more with the Bible (the script) than squeeze out its propositional truth. The Bible is not just our authoritative script; it is one of the leading players in the ongoing drama, interrupting our complacency, demanding its reader’s response. The biblical texts were not written merely

⁴¹ I have a very flexible notion of “things.” The things about which the Bible speaks do not all have to be empirically verifiable. Many of the things of which the prophets and apostles speak are eschatological: “already” actual but “not yet” fully actual. Clearly, eschatological statements burst the old wineskins of modern positivist theories of language and reference.

“to be objects of aesthetic beauty or contemplation, but as persuasive forces that during their own time formed opinion, made judgments, and exerted change.”⁴² To focus on propositional content only is to fail to recognize the Bible as divine communicative action, a failure that leads one to *dedramatize* the Scriptures. The result: a faith that seeks only an abbreviated understanding that falls short of performance knowledge.⁴³

Doctrine is an aid to faith’s search for understanding. In the first place, doctrine helps us to understand what God has done in Jesus Christ. This is the indicative, “already” aspect of doctrinal truth. Yet there is a second, imperatival aspect of doctrine that directs us to demonstrate our understanding by joining in the action. What God is doing in Christ is not simply something past but ongoing. Genuinely to understand the theodrama, then, means participating in it now. To become a Christian is not to become a subscriber to a philosophy; it is to become an active participant in God’s triune mission to the world, following Jesus in the power of the Spirit to speak and act in ways that fit the new created order “in Christ.” This is the imperatival dimension of doctrine: do the truth; become what you are. Doctrine, then, is theodramatic instruction; or to continue the theatrical metaphor, doctrine is *direction for our fitting participation in the drama of redemption*.

Doctrinal truth thus becomes a matter of *theodramatic correspondence* between our words and deeds and God’s words and deeds. Theodramatic correspondence means life and language that is *in accord with* the gospel and *according to* the Scriptures. We speak and do the truth when our words and actions display theodramatic “fittingness.”

Theodramatic correspondence yields an “enlarged” sense of truth and interpretation alike. Doctrine is “according to” the Scriptures when it displays, as my dictionary puts it, “harmonious correspondence,” a rich agreement of pitch, tone, and color. And it does so without leaving the proposition behind. It is crucial not to miss this point. I have come neither to praise nor to bury the proposition but to incorporate it into a larger model of truth and interpretation. I regret that the proposition has become despised and rejected of theologians. I affirm that there is propositional revelation in the Bible. But I also believe that there is more than propositional revelation that demands our attention as theologians. God is a dialogical agent who uses propositions to perform many kinds of speech acts—commanding, promising, and yes, asserting—speech acts that are just as much concerned with establishing covenantal relations as they are with conveying information.

Note that it is just as big a mistake to treat all the Bible as narrative as it is to reduce it all to propositions. Here, too, the paradigm of drama proves helpful, for many kinds of communicative acts co-exist within a single play. A play may include moments of recitative, where narrative predominates, as well as aria like passages where song and poetry may come to the fore. And

⁴² G. A. Yee, “Introduction: Why Judges” in G. A. Yee, ed., *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 11–12.

⁴³ I develop these themes at much greater length in *The Drama of Doctrine*.

let's not forget how dialogue structures many biblical books; both Job and John actually resemble playscripts.⁴⁴

3. *Truth as cartographic correspondence: doctrine and the plurality of testimony.* The notion of correspondence stems more from an intuition—not least, an intuition about what a confession of the gospel requires for it really to be good news—than a fully worked out theory. Aristotle says that truth is what you get when you say of “what is that it is.” I think Aristotle’s intuition is sound. We have seen that the content of evangelical truth, *what* it is about, is theodramatic. Yet Aristotle’s intuition does not help with the inevitable follow-up question: *how* does one say “that it is”? Is there only one right way to say “that it is” or may we say of truth what Aristotle himself says of Being, namely, that it may be said in many ways?

I have already mentioned the drawbacks of the mirroring or picture theory of correspondence. The map of the Paris métro corresponds to the Paris métro, but *not* as a picture or mirror corresponds. For one thing, the “language” of the map is not representational; the tracks in the metro are not actually purple, red, and orange! Nevertheless, I believe the metaphor of the map can help us to chart a way forward with regard to truth and interpretation. While “script” captures the theodramatic unity of Scripture, “atlas” catches the irreducible plurality of Scripture, the many ways the theodrama is rendered. The Bible is a literary atlas: a collection of book-maps that variously render the way, the truth, and the life. Note that both “script” and “map” are texts that provide directions. And this is the ultimate purpose of Scripture: to direct us to Christ, the way of truth and life.

Truth is the fit between text and reality, between what is written and what is written about. But maps remind us that there is *more than one kind of fit*. We can map the same terrain according to a variety of different keys and scales. A road map need not contradict a map that highlights topography, or a map that highlights historical landmarks and points of scenic interest, or a plat of survey that shows where properties begin and end. Each type of map reflects a certain interest.

Propositionalist theology, by contrast, risks reading Scripture as if one size fits all, as it were, or rather, as if there were only one kind of *fit*. Yet the Spirit has not seen fit to inspire one kind of text only. We need, therefore, to acknowledge “breathing space” as it were between the biblical discourse and the subject matter of that discourse.⁴⁵ When we do, we will see that there is more than one way to “map” reality. The proof: there is no such thing as a universal all-purpose map. A map is actually an interpretative framework, not a mirror of nature. Maps highlight what they want their readers to

⁴⁴ See Jo-Ann Brant, *Dialogue and Drama: Elements of Greek Tragedy in the Fourth Gospel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004).

⁴⁵ The notion of “breathing space” comes from Hans W. Frei, “Conflicts in Interpretation: Resolution, Armistice, or Co-existence,” in George Hunsinger and William C. Placher, eds., *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 162.

know. Some maps tell you about the borders of various countries; others tell you where to find buried treasure.

It is one thing to ascribe inerrancy to a map, then, quite another to know how to interpret it. To understand a map, you need to know its conventions. For example, you need to know the scale. You also need to know the key that explains how to read the various symbols used by the cartographer to represent places like rivers and cities. Finally, you need to know the legend, which is a way of imagining the world. The Bible is composed of different kinds of literature, each of which maps the theodrama in a distinctive way. Yet all the maps are reliable: they correspond—in different ways!—to this or that aspect of what is really the case. They are not only compatible but complement one another. Maps are no good, however, unless you are oriented. The Rule of Faith serves as a kind of compass in this regard, reminding us that all the biblical maps ultimately point in the same “Christotelic” direction.⁴⁶ The canon is a unique compass that points not to the north but to the church’s North Star: Jesus Christ, the alpha and omega of the whole theodrama.

V. TRUTH AND INTERPRETATION: THE PROCESS

The Bible is discourse (what is written) on a marvellous matter (what is written about). Faith seeking understanding means attending to the evangelical (canonical) discourse about the evangelical (Christological, ultimately) subject matter. Interpretation is the process of discerning the truth of the matter from the discourse. At what stage in the process of interpretation do we arrive at truth? Doing justice to this question means espousing a three-dimensional view of truth that does justice to the world behind, of, and in front of the text; and this means preserving the ties that bind history, literature, and Christian faith.

1. *Truth behind the text: historical excavation (history as truth-bearer).* In the first place, the theodrama involves the words and acts of God in history. But this does not mean that theological interpretation of Scripture should come to resemble an *archaeological dig*.

The text is not simply a means to an end. We err in treating the text merely as evidence with which to reconstruct “what actually happened.” On the contrary, our focus as interpreters must be on the biblical witness. God’s word is *in* history but not *of* it. What we know of the historical context (which includes what we know of the state of the Hebrew or Greek language at a given time and place) serves as corroborative evidence for determining what the author is saying. Historical reconstruction is helpful when it helps to clarify the authorial discourse (e.g. what the author was doing in tending to or using just these words in just this fashion). Historical reconstruction becomes problematic when recreating “what actually happened” becomes more important than attending to the biblical witness. And it is distinctly

⁴⁶ The term comes from Enns, “Apostolic Hermeneutics” 277.

unhelpful when the desire for historical accuracy causes us to miss what the biblical authors are actually doing with their texts.

Take, for example, the urge to harmonize apparent historical discrepancies. Modern harmonizations seek to fit the events recounted in the four Gospels into an exact chronological sequence. The very attempt begs the question as to whether the evangelists were primarily interested in chronology. Interestingly, Calvin wrote a *Harmony of the Gospels*, too, but he admits that chronological precision was not the goal of the authors.⁴⁷ He is content to display the differences between the accounts. It is a true harmony where the voices sing, not in unison, but take different parts in order to weave a richer, fuller texture.

History, strictly speaking, is a form of literature; it is someone's *testimony* to the past: "That which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes . . . and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life" (1 John 1:1). Biblical narrative is a species of theodramatic history: history told with the confessional purpose of highlighting the divine word and the divine deed. Unlike chronology, which simply lists events in succession, history *narrates* events, selecting and ordering and highlighting in order to make sense of the succession. It follows that *literary understanding is a necessary condition of historical understanding*.⁴⁸ The historical truth claims of the Bible "will never be rightly understood unless the *literary* mode of their representation is itself understood."⁴⁹ The narrative form of history is not just packaging; it is a form of understanding, what Ricoeur calls "explanation by emplotment." And what is true of history is true, I believe, for all subject matters on which the biblical authors discourse as well. In short: our access to the referent of the text is *through* the text.⁵⁰

2. *Truth of the text: textual exposition (literature as truth-bearer)*. The second, textual dimension of biblical truth is the crucial one, for both authorial discourse and subject matter are textually mediated. The truth of the text is not divorced from history; it is the royal, or should I say prophetic and apostolic, road *to* history: not to history behind the text, as if we could detach the meaning of the events from their confessional framework, but to history as seen (rightly and truly, I might add) *through* the text.

a. *Discourse on matter: how authors do things with biblical texts*. Though it is pious and understandable, it can be misleading to insist that every "word" of the Bible is true. Strictly speaking, words alone are neither true nor false; they don't mean anything until someone uses them in a stretch of discourse to say something. This claim has an enormous bearing on our

⁴⁷ See Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke in Calvin's NT Commentaries* (trans. A. W. Morrison; ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 1.155.

⁴⁸ Provan, *Biblical History* 81.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ See Mary E. Healy, "Behind, In Front of . . . or Through the Text? The Christological Analogy and the Lost World of Biblical Truth," in Craig Bartholomew *et al.*, eds., *"Behind the Text": History and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003) 186.

subject because it directs our attention as interpreters not to isolated words but to larger literary units. To speak of truth in interpretation, then, is to put the focus squarely on discourse. Discourse is *someone saying something about something to someone*, and hermeneutics is the art of discerning the discourse in written works.

The Chicago statement affirms the truth of Scripture “on all matters” that it addresses (Art. IX, XI). As we have seen, there is no one uniform way in which the biblical authors address their subject matter. We therefore need to add another phrase to our definition of discourse: what someone says *in some way* about something to someone. “In some way.” We read in Hebrews that God has spoken in former times in diverse ways, but now he has spoken by his Son. I submit that in Scripture God continues to speak to us in diverse ways—to be precise, in and through different forms of discourse and different literary forms. The present section will focus on discourse, the next on literary forms.

The Lausanne Covenant (1974) and the Chicago Statement (1978) use similar formulations to define biblical inerrancy, the one saying the Bible is “without error in all that it affirms,” the other that “it is true and reliable in all matters it addresses” (Art. XI). Strictly speaking, however, “it” neither affirms nor addresses; *authors* do. Interestingly, Carl Henry worries that too great a focus on authorial intention detracts from inerrancy, since “some commentators seem to imply that the biblical writers need not always have intended to teach the truth.”⁵¹ For example, does the author of Josh 9:13 intend his statement about the sun standing still to contradict a heliocentric world view? Was Melancthon right to attack Copernicus for suggesting that it is the earth, not the sun, that moves?⁵²

Everything hinges on the notion of “affirming” and “addressing.” Joshua *mentions* the sun standing still; but is this what the narrative *affirms*? Is not Joshua rather affirming, in a manner that his readers could understand, that God supernaturally intervened on behalf of Israel? The point is that he is employing phenomenal language (e.g. everyday language about the everyday world) in order to communicate. To press Joshua 9 into the service of Ptolemaic science would be an odd use indeed of the passage. Why? Because the point of the passage lies elsewhere. To be precise: it is a theological and, yes, historical (but not astronomical) point.

This example signals the importance of the distinction between locutions and illocutions. A locutionary act is the act of saying something by uttering or writing words; an illocutionary act is what one does *by means of* such locutionary acts. For example, the locutionary act sets forth propositional content (e.g. “sun”; “standing”; “still”); the illocutionary act *does* something with it (e.g. asks, states, promises, commands: “Is the sun standing still?”; “The sun stands still,” “Sun, stand still!” etc.). What the author is *doing* in Joshua 9 is narrating history in order to display how God has made good on

⁵¹ Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority* 4.176.

⁵² See the discussion in Kent Sparks, “The Sun Also Rises: Accommodation in Inscripturation and Interpretation,” in *Evangelicals & Scripture* 112–32.

his promise to Israel to bestow the Promised Land. As in other instances of God making himself known, here too we would do well to employ Calvin's notion of "accommodation": the story of the sun standing still is an example of God using baby-talk, adapting his communication in order that it be intelligible to finite, historically-conditioned creatures.⁵³ God *stoops* to speak and show.

The biblical authors did not intend every one of their sentences to be an assertive statement. To return to Joshua 9: the author's use of phenomenal language is merely background scenery for what really matters, the theodramatic assertion about the act of God in history. Some draw from examples such as Joshua 9 the inference that God accommodates fallen (and thus errant) human interpretative horizons and then conclude that Scripture "contains" error even if it does not "teach" it.⁵⁴ But we need not go so far if we distinguish locutions from illocutions, what one says from what one is *doing* by means of one's words.

Such a distinction would also have helped Carl Henry to integrate authorial intention into his understanding of inerrancy. As indicated above, Henry was leery of suggesting that the biblical authors did not always intend to teach truth: "Does not the appeal simply to authorial intention leave us with no criterion for distinguishing within any biblical writer's communication when and where he inerrantly teaches factual truth or merely inerrantly transmits an errant content?"⁵⁵ Yet as we have seen, the task of the interpreter is precisely to discern the authorial discourse in the written work, as Henry himself later tacitly acknowledges when he explains that inerrancy implies that truth attaches itself not only to the theological teaching of the Bible "but also to historical and scientific matters *insofar as they are part of the express message* of the inspired writings."⁵⁶ "Express message" is a somewhat circuitous way of talking about authorial assertives.⁵⁷ In treating "truth and interpretation," then, it is crucial to acknowledge that authors can do more than one thing with their texts. In particular, we must be careful not to confuse *using phenomenal language* (locutions) with *affirming the phenomena* (a specific illocution).

b. *The cognitive contribution of literary forms: the literal sense is the literary sense.* The Bible proposes things for our consideration not just via individual assertions but in "many and diverse ways" that derive from its diverse literary forms (as well as from its diverse illocutionary forces, as we have just seen). The form of what Scripture says is not merely incidental to its truth. I am thus a modified propositionalist. I recognize the cognitive significance not only of statements and propositions but of *all* the Bible's figures

⁵³ Note that the very fact that Scripture is written in Hebrew and Greek is already a kind of accommodation.

⁵⁴ So Sparks, "The Sun Also Rises" 128–31.

⁵⁵ Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority* 4.181.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 205 (emphasis mine).

⁵⁷ Henry also appeals to authorial meaning as only norm of valid interpretation, the sole antidote to what he terms "hermeneutical nihilism" (*God, Revelation, and Authority* 4 ch. 13).

of speech and literary forms. Yet I resist the temptation to dedramatize—to de-form!—the biblical text in order to abstract a revealed truth. My approach to theology—call it “postconservative”—does not deny the importance of cognitive content, but it does resist privileging a single form—the propositional statement—for expressing it.⁵⁸

It is Scripture that reveals God, not a set of detached propositions. Revealed truths are not abstract but canonically concrete. This is our evangelical birthright—truth in all its canonical radiance, not a diluted mess of propositionalist pottage. In my more optimistic moments, I wonder whether the recovery of the Bible’s literary forms might galvanize a new reformation as did the recovery of the original languages of the Bible.

The Bible speaks truly in all that it literally affirms. It is an egregious mistake, however, to identify the literal with the literalistic sense of Scripture, that is, with the empirical object or state of affairs to which it refers. The literal sense of Scripture as a whole is the theodramatic sense—God’s words and acts, especially as these coalesce in Christ—but *the way the Bible is about these acts* is not always narrowly historical, literalistic, or analytic.

That the *literal* sense is the *literary* sense has important consequences for inerrancy. What, after all, is an error? Simply to speak of a factual mistake does not get us very far. What are mistakes and how do we recognize them? What in one context might count as an error is another person’s best estimate. Errors, then, are relative to the kind of claim being made. But we can only assess success and failure if we know what kind of claim is being made.⁵⁹ This is precisely where literary forms become important. Our expectations as to what kind of claim is being made in a text must line up with what kind of claim the text is making. If a text makes no claim to chronological accuracy, then chronological inaccuracy is no error. Different kinds of texts aim at different kinds of precision. Poetry is precise—it demands just the right word in just the right order—but its precision is of a different nature than the precision we expect in modern history or science. If biblical narrative is primarily interested in recounting key scenes in the theodrama, we should exercise caution before rushing to the assumption that the biblical authors worked with the same standards of historiography as reporters at the *New York Times* (bad example!).

In championing literary form, I am not saying, “choose this day whom you shall serve, history or fiction.” Don’t confuse my position with that of Marcus Borg who defines taking the Bible seriously but not literally in terms of the ability to hear the biblical stories once again as true stories, even as one knows that they may not be factually true and that their truth does not

⁵⁸ By “postconservative” I understand an approach that, while recognizing the propositional component of speech acts, does not reduce language to reference or the cognitive dimension of theology to propositional statements. A postconservative theology affirms a *plurality of normative points of view in Scripture*, each of which is authoritative because each discloses a particular *aspect* of the truth.

⁵⁹ I learned this valuable lesson from my former theology teacher, John Frame. See Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987) 221.

depend on their factuality.⁶⁰ By contrast, I believe that taking the Bible seriously requires us to take the Bible literally, that is, in its *literary* sense.

c. *Doctrine and the role of the canonically-formed theodramatic imagination.* Even philosophers who previously had nothing but disdain for figures of speech have recently come to appreciate the cognitive significance of metaphors, narratives, and other literary forms. Martha Nussbaum, for instance, says that “[l]iterary form is not separable from philosophical content, but is, itself, a part of content—an integral part, then, of the search for and the statement of truth.”⁶¹ Narratives do more than convey propositions; they configure the past in a certain way and say “look at the world like this.” They do not merely inform, they train us to see the world in certain ways, theodramatic ways. And this brings me to the role of the imagination in interpreting biblical truth.

For too long evangelical scholarship has given the imagination a bad rap. To be sure, there are vain imaginings. But this no more disqualifies the imagination *per se* from theological service than logical fallacies disqualify reason. A false picture of the imagination as the power of conjuring up things that are not really there has for too long held us captive.

By imagination I mean the power of synoptic vision—the ability to synthesize heterogeneous elements into a unity. The imagination is a cognitive faculty by which we see as whole what those without imagination see only as unrelated parts. Stories display the imagination in action, for it is the role of the plot (*mythos*) to unify various persons and events in a single story with a beginning, middle, and end. Where reason analyzes, breaking things (and texts) up into their constituent parts, imagination synthesizes, makes connections between things that appear unrelated.

The purpose of exegesis is not to excavate but to explore canonically-embodied truth by becoming apprentices to the literary forms, and this involves more than mastering the propositional content. By learning imaginatively to follow and indwell the biblical texts, we see through them to reality as it really is “in Christ.”

As C. S. Lewis knew, stories too are truth bearers that enable us both to “taste” and to “see,” or better, to experience as concrete what can otherwise be understood only as an abstraction. What gets conveyed through stories, then, is not simply the proposition but something of the reality itself. For example, the biblical narrative does not simply convey information about God but displays God’s triune identity itself as this is manifest through the creative and redemptive work of his two hands. One can state “that God is good” in a proposition, but it takes a narrative to “taste and see that the Lord is good.” Similarly, to see the church as the body of Christ is a rich cognitive insight, but it cannot be paraphrased propositionally without something vital getting lost in interpretation.

⁶⁰ See Marcus Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously but Not Literally* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2002).

⁶¹ Martha Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) 3.

The theological interpreter inhabits the world of the biblical text—not some cleverly devised modern or postmodern myths, but true myth, myth become redemptive history, myth become—dare I say it?—fact. But we only get to the fact through the forms of its literary incarnation. And what literary genres communicate is not simply propositional content but ways of processing this content into meaningful wholes: ways of thinking, seeing, and even experiencing this content. Theological interpretation involves nothing less than the ability to see/feel/taste the truth borne by Scripture’s literary forms.

The truth of God’s word is not merely propositional, then, but *richly* propositional. Scripture summons the intellect to accept its rendering of reality, but it also summons the imagination to see, feel, and taste the goodness of God. We need the diversity of biblical genres fully to understand the theodrama and our part in it. When we learn to see, feel, think, and indwell the biblical texts, interpretation becomes a matter not only of information but of personal formation: of learning how to speak and act in a way that accords with the real “in Christ.”

3. *Truth “in front of” the text: engaging the matter (reader as truth-bearer).* To speak of the truth in front of the text is to focus on the reader’s engagement with its subject matter. It is here that emergent evangelicals have something to contribute, not by way of a replacement but by way of a corrective to the conservative evangelical emphasis on propositional truth.

a. *Truth is (inter)subjectivity: covenantal correspondence.* Kierkegaard famously commented that truth is subjectivity. He was not espousing relativism, only calling for individuals to commit themselves passionately to the truth. Objective truth denotes “what is” regardless of one’s relation to it; what Kierkegaard calls subjective truth, by contrast, denotes how “what is” has an existential bearing on the life of the one who commits to it. Kierkegaard well knew that the NT is easy enough to understand (in theory), but difficult to understand in practice, for the latter requires obedience.

Stated differently: the correspondence that ultimately counts in biblical interpretation is not simply that of sentences but of oneself. The truth of the Bible lays claim not only to our heads but to our hearts and our hands. To come to Scripture is to be confronted with a truth that is both objective and rational on the one hand and personal and relational on the other. Emergent evangelicals are right to remind us that “[t]he idea of God as an entity knowable by propositional analysis is metaphysical, a survival of heathen philosophy.”⁶² But they are wrong to suggest that a personal, relational, and covenantal knowing of God *excludes* a propositional component. Indeed, to say, “We must treat Scripture not as facticity but as address”⁶³ is to invoke just the kind of stultifying binary hierarchical opposition from which postmodernity was supposed to have liberated us! Surely the way to break down the dividing wall of methodological hostility between conservative and emer-

⁶² Raschke, *The Next Reformation* 119.

⁶³ *Ibid.* 143.

gent evangelical is to recognize that each side has a valid point. God's word is both personal *and* propositional: the Bible is a book of speech acts through which the divine authorial agent personally relates to readers precisely by doing things with propositions (e.g. commanding, asserting, promising).

God is the paradigmatic communicative agent, and his word is true because it is absolutely reliable. There is a correspondence between what he says, what he does, and who he is. Jesus Christ is the truth because he is God-keeping-his-word; as God's "kept" word, Christ not only bears but is the truth, a personal bearer of the way God is. Truth in the context of theological interpretation must never be merely theoretical (a mere correspondence relation) but practical, transformative, and relation (a *covenantal* relation). We enter into the covenantal relation of truth when our words, thoughts, and deeds conform to the image of the one who is the truth incarnate.

b. *Creative understanding: interpretative traditions as bearers of truth?* It is the interpreter Spirit who illumines readers to discern the true subject matter of Scripture and who enables covenantal correspondence, establishing cognitive and relational contact between the reader, what is written, and what is written about. The Spirit guides the church into all truth. Just as redemption has a history, so perhaps we can speak of the progress of illumination, and identify it with church tradition. Tradition is a means of nurture, but it cannot be our final norm; Scripture itself performs this role. We do well to recall Augustine's warning: "If we are to look back to long custom or antiquity alone, then also murders and adulterers, and similar persons can defend their crimes in this way, because they are ancient."⁶⁴ Calvin, likewise, reminds us that truth cannot be determined by long-standing custom only, for this is just "the conspiracy of men."⁶⁵

Truth is one, yet there are multiple interpretative traditions. Is there one true interpretation for all time, one true way only of witnessing to biblical truth? If doctrine gives direction for our fitting participation in the theodrama, then we need to have local as well as biblical knowledge in order to know what to say and how to act in particular situations when confronted with problems not explicitly addressed in Scripture. Andrew Lincoln expresses the tension well in his splendid book, *Truth on Trial*, a study of the trial narrative in the Fourth Gospel: "These two interrelated aspects of witnessing—the requirement of attesting to a reality that is beyond oneself but also the ability to do this only in terms of one's own contextually conditioned perspective—are a reminder of the dialectical nature of theological interpretation."⁶⁶ The task, in short, is to give faithful *and* creative witness to biblical truth, *to make judgments that fit with our script and with our situation*. It takes many interpreters and interpretative traditions fully to appreciate and understand the divine discourse, just as it takes four Gospels fully to render the reality of Jesus Christ.

⁶⁴ Cited in Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of Council of Trent*, Part 1 (trans. Fred Kramer; St. Louis: Concordia, 1971) 307.

⁶⁵ Calvin, "Prefatory Address," section 5, *Institutes*.

⁶⁶ *Truth on Trial: The Lawsuit Motif in the Fourth Gospel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000) 476.

c. *Truth as eschatological correspondence to the already and not yet.* I am attempting to broaden our sense of truth as correspondence for the sake of enriching the ministry of doctrine and of reorienting our theology towards wisdom rather than mere information and knowledge. The wise person is the one who understands and participates fittingly in the created and redeemed order. We get wisdom by letting the biblical texts train our imaginations to see how things fit together theodramatically. The purpose of sound doctrine is to enable pilgrims to make covenantal contact and to live in theodramatic correspondence with reality.

It only remains to add that theodramatic truth is ultimately a matter of *eschatological* correspondence. Doctrinal truth is what corresponds to or “fits” the already/not-yet contours of the theodrama. On the one hand, doctrine displays an “already-correspondence” to what God has done in Christ. On the other hand, doctrine is about what God is now doing in the Spirit, namely, making all things new in Christ. Doctrine captures this not-yet aspect of truth by directing us to *become* what we already are.

Theodramatic correspondence is an eschatological affair, in the sense that most of the key scenes of the theodrama have *already* been played, though some (including the ones we play next) are *not yet* concluded. Doctrine directs disciples to speak and act in such a way that those scenes which have “not yet” been performed correspond to those that have been performed “already.”

To interpret the Bible in Spirit and in truth means following doctrine’s direction, in both senses of the term: theatric and cartographic. The point is to practice as well as preach doctrinal truth, to walk the way of Jesus Christ, to continue the theodrama into new scenes, and so embody Christian wisdom.

VI. CONCLUSION:

TRUTH AND INTERPRETATION—THE NEXT STEP

1. *At home with the interpreter.* So: what did Christian actually see in the House of the Interpreter? He saw the virtue of Patience extolled. Truth is the daughter of time, it has been said, and this is a good argument for attending to catholicity, the tradition of interpretation passed on through the centuries. Sometimes the desire for certainty can be a form of impatience for the truth.

Christian also saw what should be a sobering sight for us: a professor—thankfully Bunyan does not give his area of specialization!—in an iron cage, a man in despair who has missed the way; one who is lost in misinterpretation.

He saw a vision of the Last Judgment, where he discovers that the only wholly reliable reader of the text is the one who is its author. This picture extols the virtue of hermeneutical humility.⁶⁷

Finally, Christian saw the picture of a man with his eyes lifted up to heaven, the best of Books in his hand, the law of truth . . . written upon his lips. The Interpreter tells Christian that this is “the only man whom the Lord

⁶⁷ See David L. Jeffrey and Anthony C. Thiselton, “Hermeneutics,” in David Lyle Jeffrey, ed., *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) 347–49.

of the place wither thou art going hath authorized to be thy Guide." He sees Christ, the way, the life, the ultimate interpreter of truth.

2. *Walking the way of biblical truth: a new itinerary for inerrancy?* The Bible's authority covers more than the propositional content it conveys, important though that aspect is. Thanks to the diversity of its forms, the Bible trains us to see and taste the world in terms of the canonical imagination and to make judgments that correspond to already/not-yet nature of the theodrama. True doctrine corresponds to the theodrama and directs us to do the same. *We best put ourselves in the way of truth when we interpret the Scriptures in their canonical context with the aid of the catholic tradition.*

What is the moral of all this for inerrancy? I do not usually trade in etymologies, but I cannot help pointing out that "errancy"—as in "knight errant"—is related to the Latin *errare* ("to stray") which in turn is related to the term "itinerary." Inerrancy is first cousin to itinerary, and this reminds us that Scripture reliably maps the way of Jesus Christ, not as a theological Euclid—a book of abstract propositions—but as a book of theodramatic wisdom. The Bible is wholly trustworthy and true because its direction is wholly reliable.

Perhaps we need to rehabilitate the classic term "infallibility" to make sure that theological interpreters of Scripture do not become mere information processors. Inerrancy is most appropriate as a description of biblical assertions. Yet we need to recognize that everything God does with the propositional content of Scripture—warning, promising, commanding, and yes, asserting—is of theological significance. When properly interpreted, the Scriptures are utterly reliable because they are infallible—not liable to fail—no matter what God is doing in them. Recall the words of the prophet Isaiah in 55:11: "My word . . . shall not return to me empty, but shall accomplish the purpose for which it was sent." What is this purpose? The ultimate purpose of Scripture is to draw us into the drama of redemption, into the life and action of the triune God, so that we can be faithful yet creative actors who glorify God in all that we say and do. I trust that emergent and conservative evangelicals can agree on that!

Whatever term we employ to affirm the supreme authority of Scripture, we had better exercise caution before buying into philosophical theories that dilute the richness of its truth. Raschke exhorts us to "dehellenize" evangelical faith. To the extent that evangelical formulations of inerrancy have fallen prey to a modern philosophical captivity of the word, his warning is well-taken. On the other hand, there is nothing to be gained simply by exchanging masters! Evangelicals should no more emerge out of postmodernity than modernity. On the contrary, we should be prepared to diverge from modernity and postmodernity alike in order to preserve the integrity of our witness to the truth of the gospel, and if this means "de-continentalizing" the faith, then so be it.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ For a more considered response to postmodernity, see my "Pilgrim's digress: Christian thinking on and about the post/modern way," in Myron Penner, ed., *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005).

It is time to regroup; evangelicals should *diverge* from modernity and postmodernity alike when these do not serve the gospel and instead *converge* in the great Protestant tradition where Scripture is the supreme rule for life and thought. And not only the Protestant tradition. Thomas Aquinas was willing to correct the philosophy of his day to make it biblical, too. Moreover, he viewed faith as both propositional and personal: “faith is believing God himself since the truths of faith are revealed by God.”⁶⁹ Faith has a storable content, but the point of processing this information is to share in what God knows, to share in God’s life, and to participate in the evangelical action.

3. *Pilgrims’ practice: performing doctrinal truth truthfully.* The Christian pilgrim-interpreter is ultimately on a missionary journey. Just as Jesus’ mission was to be God’s truth claim to the world, so the mission of biblical interpreters is to bear witness to the truth of Jesus Christ in all that they say and do. The Christian truth claim is not a matter of the will to power but of the will to weakness, a matter of enduring all sorts of critical testing, epistemic and existential, just as Jesus endured the cross. Christian interpreters must speak the truth in love, do the truth in love, and suffer the truth in love.

I conclude my hermeneutic homily with a closing charge. *True interpretation of the word of truth is an act of understanding that must be proved and exhibited in practice.* It takes a company of pilgrims. Our life together in the church is our most eloquent commentary on the gospel and, as such, ought itself to be exhibit number one of Christian truth. At least, Paul thought so: “For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display” (1 Cor 4:9). As Christians and evangelicals, we are to be an exhibit—a spectacle [*theatron*] of truth to the watching world. May we all leave the House of the Interpreter refreshed, a great company of pilgrims, eager to take up our book and walk the way of truth and life.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992) 277.

⁷⁰ See Williams, “Scripture, Truth and our Postmodern Context,” 240–41 for the fittingness of the “walking the way” metaphor for Christian truth.