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In Quest of Canonical Interpretation

by James I. Packer

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Having been asked for a personal statement on how I use the Bible in theologizing, I shall attempt one - though not without anxiety. Not that asking a theologian for such a statement strikes me as in any way improper. On the contrary, it is a supremely fitting thing to do, for one's answer to the request will at once show how seriously one takes one's trade, and that is something which the church needs, and has a right, to know. Furthermore, any theologizing that has integrity will reflect something of one's Christian identity, as that has been formed in experience, and making that identity explicit should therefore help others to understand and assess one's work. Paul's example in Acts 22, 24, and 26, Romans 7, Galatians 1-2, and Philippians 3 shows that it is no solecism for theologians to say where they come from experientially when that helps them to model or confirm what they want to get across. Professional theologians today hesitate to share their experience, fearing lest the pure objectivity and the transcendent reference point of their God thoughts be thereby obscured; but this is a great pity, for when they define their role merely in ecclesiastical or academic terms, thus in effect hiding behind their official identity, it renders their theology at best enigmatic and at worst downright boring. For my part (so far as I understand myself), the theology that I "do" in my churchly and academic roles is a conscious confessional expression of my personal identity and spirituality *coram Deo*, and to be asked to identify that identity, as it relates to my handling of Scripture, is no hardship at all. Nonetheless, I find myself feeling some prickles of anxiety as I turn to the task.

Why so? Because anyone who voices certainties as a Christian in directly personal terms runs the risk of being misheard, as if to be saying: "Believe this, or do that, because it is what I believe and do, and my own experience has proven that it is right;" in other words, "take it from *me*, as if I were your God and your authority." It was, I think, Kierkegaard who observed that the greatest misfortune for any person is to have disciples, and anyone who talks in a personal way about one's convictions maximizes the risk of disciple-making. I have

seen Christians in both academic and pastoral work attracting admirers who then progressively lose the power to distinguish between devotion to their human teacher and loyalty to their divine Lord, and I don't want anything of that kind to happen to me. That is why some folk who have asked to have me as their mentor and role model have received dusty answers. I am a pastoral theologian; my aim is to attach disciples to Jesus Christ my Lord, not to myself; and nobody is going to become a Packerite if I can help it. So I shrink somewhat from highlighting what I believe and do, as distinct from what God says ought to be believed and done.

Moreover, since God is infinitely good to all who truly seek him, I do not see how anyone's experience of grace or formation by grace can settle the truth of one confessional position as against another, and I do not want to look as if I think that the quality of my Christian experience or the strength of my Christian convictions should be decisive in persuading others to accept my views. The truth of theological assertions should be decided by asking whether they faithfully echo Scripture, not whether God has blessed folk who have held them. Certainly, one whose religious experience is lacking does well to inquire whether one knows enough as yet of God's truth about spiritual life, just as one who knows that truth sufficiently does well to take note of how God confirms it in experience. But it is Scripture as such, the written Word of God, that must finally identify God's truth for us - Scripture, and in the last analysis nothing else.

Hence, then, my anxiety. I fear lest by the very act of making a personal statement I risk both obscuring an emphasis which is basic both to my own Christian identity and to the message I seek to spread and sounding insufferably egocentric in the bargain. But that risk is unavoidable. All I can do about it is ask my readers in charity to believe that my goal is to celebrate God rather than to project Packer; and that I only talk about Packer because I was asked to; and that I would have felt freer and happier altogether if the title of this symposium could have been, "*How the Bible uses me* when I do theology." (That title would have meshed directly with my experience of the Bible during the forty years since my conversion. How often in modern contexts has my heart echoed the protest of John Rogers, the Reformation martyr, against the alleged inertness of the biblical text: "No, no, the Bible is alive!"). Enough, now, of preliminary remarks. I move into my assignment forthwith.

My Perception of the Bible

The first thing to say is that I perceive the sixty-six books of the Protestant canon to be the Word of God given in and through human words. Canonical Scripture is divine testimony and instruction in the form of human testimony and instruction. Let me explain.

By "God" I mean the pervasive personal presence, distinct from me and prior to me, who is the source and support of my existence; who through Scripture makes me realize that he has towards me the nature and name of love-holy, lordly, costly, fatherly, redeeming love; who addresses me, really though indirectly, in all that Scripture shows of

his relationship to human beings in history, and especially in the recorded utterances of his Son, Jesus Christ; and who is daily drawing me towards a face-to-face encounter and consummated communion with him beyond this life, by virtue of "the redemption which is in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:24). For academic purposes you may call this my model of God, to be set alongside other models, deistic, pantheistic, pantheistic, or whatever. But it is no mere notion; this is my non-negotiable awareness of the One whom I worship, an awareness that has been relatively clear and steady since I experienced a full-scale pietistic conversion from religious formalism to the living Christ at age eighteen.

By "Word of God" I mean God's own self-declaration and message about the way of godliness-worship, obedience, and fellowship in God's family-that Jesus Christ made known to the world. Some evangelicals use "Word of God" to mean the text of Scripture as such, known to be God's communication but viewed as still uninterpreted. I use the phrase as the Reformers did, to signify not just the text in its God-giveness but also the God-given message that it contains. This is in line with the way that in Scripture itself "Word of God" means God's message conveyed by God's messenger, whether orally or in writing. The narrower usage really involves a false abstraction, since no one ever has or is entitled to have a clear certainty that Scripture is from God when that person has no inkling of its message. I doubt whether any latter-day evangelicals ever deserved to be called bibliolaters, worshipers of the written Word of the Lord rather than the living Lord of the World. But if any did, it was this narrow usage that betrayed them by leading them to focus on the book itself as a sacred object, unrelated to the God of whom it speaks.

Many since Kant have doubted whether God, who gave us language, actually uses language to communicate with us whether, that is, God's "speaking" to people is a cognitive event for them as my speaking to you would be, or whether this "speaking" is a metaphor for some non-cognitive way in which we are made aware of his presence. Here, however, the incarnation is surely decisive. Rabbi Jesus used language (Aramaic, to be exact) in order to teach. But Rabbi Jesus was God come in the flesh. So the principle that God uses language to tell us things is at once established; and the claim that Scripture is a further case in point-a claim, be it said, that is irremovably embedded at foundation level in Jesus' teaching about his Messiahship and God's righteousness(1) -- presents no new conceptual problem.

By "canon" I mean the body of teaching that God gave to be a rule of faith and life for his church. God created the canon by inspiring the books that make it up and by causing the church to recognize their canonical character. The gaps and uncertainties that appear when we try to reconstruct this process need not detain us now. Suffice it to say that I read the historical evidence both as showing that this was how the early church understood the canon (Jesus' Bible) in Jesus' own day and as confirming rather than calling in question the authenticity of our entire New Testament. (Scholars will agree that this is a possible and even natural way of reading that evidence, even if it cannot be

established as the absolutely necessary way.) Then, theologically, I see the attestation of the Protestant canon by the Holy Spirit growing stronger year by year as more and more Bible readers have the sixty-six books authenticated to them in actual experience. (The problem of the eccentric Tridentine canon, which contains seventy-eight books, cannot be dealt with here.) We have to realize that only one theological question about the canon faces us, namely whether any evidence compels us to challenge its historic bounds. Once we grasp this, it becomes clear how we can accept with rational confidence the canon which the church hands down to us, even though many questions about the origin, circulation, and stages of acceptance of the various books remain unanswered.

Knowing how a belief began never, of course, proves it true, and not all convictions for which the Holy Spirit is invoked stand the test of examination; nonetheless, the following facts may be of interest. C. S. Lewis wrote of a motorcycle ride in 1931 to Whipsnade Zoo, a ride at the start of which he did not believe that Jesus Christ was the Son of God and at the end of which he found he did. Similarly, in 1944 I went to a Bible study at which a vision from the book of Revelation (I forget which one) was expounded, and whereas at the start I did not believe that all the Bible (which I had been assiduously reading since my conversion six weeks before) is God's trustworthy instruction, at the end, slightly to my surprise, I found myself unable to doubt that indeed it is. Nor have I ever been able to doubt this since, any more than I have been able to doubt the reality of the biblical Christ whom I honor as my Savior, Lord, and God. When, years later, I found Calvin declaring that every Christian experiences the inward witness of the Holy Spirit to the divine authority of Scripture,(2) I rejoiced to think that, without ever having heard a word on this subject, I had long known exactly what Calvin was talking about -- as by God's mercy I still do.

My Practice of Theology

The next thing to say is that, as the believer, theologian, and preacher that I am, I read Scripture in the way followed before me by Chrysostom (regularly), Augustine (fitfully), and all Western professional exegetes since Colet, Luther, and Calvin that is, I approach the books as human documents produced by people of like passions with myself. I read these books as units of responsive, didactic, celebratory, doxological witness to the living God. Those who wrote them, being believers, theologians, and preachers themselves, were seeking to make God and godliness known to their original envisaged audience, and the first question to be asked about each book has to do with what its writer saw it as saying and showing about God himself. But when I have seen this, my next task is to let the book's message universalize itself in my mind as God's own teaching or *doctrine* (to use the word that Calvin loved) now addressed to humankind in general and to me in particular within the frame of reality created by the death, resurrection, and present dominion of Jesus Christ.

That last phrase is important, for it determines my way of applying

Old Testament material. I see the Old Testament in its totality laying a permanent foundation for faith by its disclosure of God's moral character, sovereign rule, redemptive purpose, and covenant faithfulness and by its exhibiting of the positive dispositions of faith, praise, and obedience contrasted with the negative dispositions of mistrust and rebellion. But on this foundation it sets a temporary superstructure of cultic apparatus for mediating covenant communion with God; and this apparatus the New Testament replaces with the new and better covenant (that is, the better version of God's one gracious covenant) which is founded on better promises and maintained by the sacrifice and intercession of Jesus Christ, the better and greater high priest. This amounts to saying that I think the Old Testament should be read through the hermeneutical spectacles that Paul (Romans and Galatians), Luke (Gospel and Acts), Matthew, and the writer to the Hebrews provide. The typology of the New Testament teaches me to transpose everything in the Old Testament about typical provisions and promises (i.e., cultic prescriptions, expectations of this-worldly enrichment, and imperialist eschatological visions) into the new key, which we might call the key of fulfillment and which was established by the New Testament revelation of the corresponding antitypes -- spiritual redemption through Christ, the heavenly Jerusalem, and the world to come. Reading Old Testament books in the light of this principle, which was long ago expressed in the jingle "the New is in the Old concealed, the Old is in the New revealed," I find in their teaching about God and godliness a significance which a Jewish colleague would miss.

My way of reading Scripture involves five distinct convictions about theological method. That one's method must be a *posteriori* and biblically determined is for me a truth of first importance. These five convictions together fix the method to be followed when one faces problems of faith and practice and seeks to grow in the knowledge of God. This method, as will be seen, is kerygmatic in content, systematic in character, and normative in purpose. The analytical and descriptive techniques of historical, philosophical, phenomenological, political, and sociological theology have their interest and use as both sources and sieves of material for kerygmatic reflection, but only as one follows the kerygmatic method can one be said to be theologizing; any God-talk that falls short of this is no more than a contribution to the history of ideas. **it** is now the kerygmatic method that I describe as I detail my five convictions.

First conviction: by entering into the expressed mind of the inspired writers I do in fact apprehend God's own mind. What Scripture says, God says. In the writers' witness to God and communication about him God witnesses to himself and communicates personally with the hearer or reader. When they announce the mighty works of God in creation, providence, and grace, God is in effect setting before us fragments of his own autobiography. The identity of what the writers say about God with God's own message about himself is the truth that has historically been indicated and safeguarded by calling the biblical books *inspired*. Inspiration makes it possible to achieve a theology which, to use the old terms, is *archetypal* in relation to God's own thoughts as *archetypal*; a theology which, in other words, literally

thinks God's thoughts after him. Such a theology is my goal. But such theology is essentially biblical interpretation; and biblical interpretation must begin with correct exegesis, lest by misunderstanding biblical authors I misrepresent God; and correct exegesis is exegesis that is right *historically*. So I am grateful for the deepened insight in the West over the past two hundred years as to what historical understanding involves. I appreciate the critical awareness of differences between the present and the past, with techniques for determining those differences in particular cases, that the new historical sensibility has brought, and I welcome the refining of historical exegesis in Western churches that has resulted. For understanding of God can grow only as we better understand-understand, that is, with greater historical accuracy-what the biblical writers meant by what they said about him.

Second conviction: since all sixty-six books come ultimately from the mind of our self-revealing God, they should be read not just as separate items (though obviously one must start by doing that), but also as parts of a whole. They must be appreciated not only in their particular individuality of genre and style, but also as a coherent, internally connected organism of teaching. This, after all (and here I throw down the gauntlet to some of my academic peers), is what examination shows them to be. It is fashionable these days for Scripture scholars to look for substantive differences of conviction between biblical writers, but this is in my view an inquiry as shallow and stultifying as it is unfruitful. Much more significant is the truly amazing unity of viewpoint, doctrine, and vision that this heterogeneous library of occasional writings, put together by more than forty writers over more than a millennium, displays.⁽³⁾ The old way of stating the principle that the internal coherence of Scripture should be a heuristic maxim for interpreters was to require that *the analogy of Scripture* be observed.⁽⁴⁾ This is the requirement which the twentieth Anglican Article enforces when it says that the church may not "so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another." The modern way of expressing the point is to require that interpretation be *canonical*, each passage being interpreted kerygmatically and normatively as part of the whole body of God's revealed instruction. Accepting this requirement, I infer from it the way in which theology should seek to be *systematic*: not by trying to go behind or beyond what the texts affirm (the common caricature of systematic theology), but by making clear the links between items in the whole compendium of biblical thought.

Third conviction: biblical teaching, like the law of the land, must be applied to the living of our lives. So, as in legal interpretation, the interpreter has a twofold task. First, one must discern the universal truths and principles that particular texts exhibit in their particularized application to particular people in particular circumstances. Second, one must reapply those same truths and principles to us in our circumstances. Therefore one must look not only at but also *along* the Bible, just as one looks along a ray of light to see the things that it strikes and shows up. Biblical teaching, received as instruction from God, must be brought to bear on the world and life in general and on our own lives in particular. Interpreted Scripture must be allowed to

interpret its interpreters; those who in procedural terms stand over it to find out its meaning and bearing must recognize that in spiritual terms they stand under it to be judged, corrected, led, and fed by it. Interpretation has to be *imperative, self-involving*, and thus (to use an abused word) *existential* in style. The divinely authoritative claim on our compliance which biblical teaching makes, must not be muffled. My ears-and yours, too-must always be open to the Bible's summons (God's, really) to what Bultmannites call *decision*, what most Anglo-Saxons call *commitment*, and what the Bible itself calls *repentance, faith, worship, obedience, and endurance*.

Here the Holy Spirit's ministry is decisive. Commentaries will tell us what each writer's words *meant* as an utterance spoken into that immediate historical situation, but only the Spirit who gave them can show us, by using them to search us, what they *mean* as they bear on us today. Luther's famous observation that a theologian is made by prayer, meditation, and spiritual *conflict (oratio, meditatio, tentatio)* reflects his awareness of the way in which the Spirit does this.

Fourth conviction: The basic form of obedient theology is applicatory interpretation of Scripture in the manner described, reading the books as God's witness to his saving grace in Christ and God's call to sinners to believe and respond. Such theology is of necessity a form of preaching, just as true preaching is of necessity an exercise in the theological interpretation of Scripture. The technical disciplines taught in universities and seminaries-technical dogmatics, ethics, spirituality, apologetics, missiology, historical theology, and so forth-find their value as they lead to richer biblical interpretation. Dogmatics are for the sake of Scripture study, not vice versa, and so with all technical branches of theology. (By "technical" I mean using terms and forms of analysis that are developed within the discipline for its own furtherance.) Academically and professionally, my job description as a theologian may be to develop and teach one of these technical disciplines, but in terms of the theologians calling and churchly identity my main task is and always will be the interpreting of Scripture.

Fifth conviction: I must be ready to give account of my interpretative encounters with Scripture not just to my human and academic peers but to God himself, who will one day require this of every theologian and of me among them. This is to say that I must follow my method *responsibly* as one who must answer for what I do.

To sum up this section, I can schematize my use of the Bible in theologizing as follows. I make use of the Bible (1) in personal devotion, (2) in preaching and pastoral ministry, (3) in academic theological work. Use (3) underlies use (2) and is fed by use (1). I approach the Bible in all three connections as the communication of *doctrine* from God; as the instrument of Jesus Christ's personal authority over Christians (which is part of what I mean in calling it *canonical*); as the criterion of truth and error regarding God and godliness; as wisdom for the ordering of life and food for spiritual growth; and, thus, as the mystery-that is, the transcendent supernatural reality-whereby encounter and fellowship with the Father

and the Son become realities of experience. I attempt theological exegesis and exposition in the way and for the ends already described, depending on and expecting light and help from the Holy Spirit. I see ethics, spirituality, catechetics, preaching, and all pastoral counsel as needing to be informed and regulated by theological interpretation of Scripture, and I do not expect to see any good practical Christianity where this discipline is neglected. If you ask me for models of my kind of Bible-based theologizing, I would name John Calvin and the Puritan, John Owen.

The mention of Calvin, that most ecumenical of writers, prompts one last question: how, in seeking a canonical interpretation of Scripture, do I relate to church tradition? The answer is that, like Calvin, I theologize in constant dialogue with the whole Christian heritage of study, proclamation, and belief insofar as I can acquaint myself with it. Theology is a cooperative enterprise, and the fellowship of its practitioners has a historical as well as a contemporary dimension. In essence, tradition means neither *theologoumena* ecclesiastically imposed nor superstitions ecclesiastically sanctioned (the common Protestant stereotype), but the sum of attempts down through the ages to expound and apply biblical teaching on specific subjects. It should be appreciated as such and, finally, be evaluated by the Bible which it aims to echo and bring down to earth. (The old Roman Catholic idea, now generally abandoned, that tradition supplements Scripture can be safely dismissed as a freak.)

In tradition, enlightenment from God's Spirit and blindness due to sin coexist and coalesce, often strangely, so that treating tradition as infallibly right or as inevitably wrong is a mistake in either case. Dismissing tradition as representing only the worldliness of the church reflects unbelief in the Spirit's work since Pentecost as the church's teacher; embracing the dogma of faultless tradition reflects a lapse into ecclesiastical perfectionism. In seeking to profit from tradition I oppose the deifying of it no less than the devaluing of it. The worth of tradition as a help in our own interpreting of Scripture depends on its being constantly exposed to the judgment of Scripture. Its relation to us is ministerial, not magisterial, and we must keep it so.

My Method Applied: A Case Study

Nobody theologizes aimlessly; as in all one's mental life, one thinks for a purpose and to a point-though agendas are sometimes hidden! My agenda is no secret, however. My concerns, biblically directed I trust, are churchly. Like my convictions, they reflect Luther rather than Erasmus; I seek to advance learning not for its own sake but for the good of souls.(5) My goal is theology that will guide and sustain evangelism and nurture, pastoral care and spiritual renewal.(6) I draw heavily on Calvin and the English Puritans, for I find in them great theological and interpretative resources for the task. I contend for biblical authority-that is, the permanent binding force of all biblical teaching-because this much-challenged facet of Christ's Christianity is basic to the theology I build and to the Christian life to which that theology leads.(7) I contend for biblical inerrancy because

acknowledgment of Scripture as totally true and trustworthy is integral to biblical authority as I understand it.(8) On these various themes I have written a good deal. In the tangle of history and polemics that has marked my treatment of them it has doubtless been easy to miss what I was after, and any who have in fact failed to see it should not be blamed too harshly. They would in any case be to some extent victims of the habitual failure to probe motivation (what the Germans call one's theological intentions), which seems to me to be a chronic weakness of English-speaking scholarship. But if there is to be genuine understanding, the question of motivation (what's it all in aid of?) needs to be asked, and it seems to me that the motivation that has produced my published work has really been clear all along.

My goal is not adequately expressed by saying that I am to uphold an evangelical conservatism of generically Reformed or specifically Anglican or neo-Puritan or interdenominational pietist type, though I have been both applauded and booed on occasion for doing all these things, and I hope under God to continue to do them. But if I know myself I am first and foremost a theological exegete. My constant purpose was and is to adumbrate on every subject I handle a genuinely canonical interpretation of Scripture—a view that in its coherence embraces and expresses the thrust of all the biblical passages and units of thought that bear on my theme—a total, integrated view built out of biblical material in such a way that, if the writers of the various books knew what I had made of what they taught, they would nod their heads and say that I had got them right. I have been asked in the present essay to illustrate my use of the Bible, and that means showing how I work my way towards the canonical interpretations which are the goal of my theological endeavor. I shall now attempt to do this, taking as my paradigm case a theme that I have not mentioned so far, the much-debated question of what is currently called role relationships between the sexes.(9)

This is a many-sided question. It arises in connection with (1) church order (may women function as elders? sole pastors? bishops?); (2) family ethics (what kind and measure of subordination, if any, of wives to husbands is biblically required?); (3) socio-political ideals for the modern world (does Scripture imply that privileges, opportunities, rights, and rewards should everywhere be equal, irrespective of sex?); and (4) pastoral nurture of men and women to fulfill their God-given vocations in relation to each other. As secular society everywhere is split on these matters, so is the church generally and the evangelical sector of it specifically. For Christians the basic question is whether the undisputed spiritual equality of the sexes before God and in Christ sanctions equality of function, i.e., carries God's permission to share and exchange all non-biological roles in home, church, and community; or, whether God has ordained a hierarchical pattern whereby in some or all of these spheres men are to lead and certain roles are not for women. The main biblical evidence is (1) the stories of the creation (Gen.1:26-27 with 5:1-2; 2:18-25) and the fall (3:16-20); (2) Jesus' respect for women, whom he consistently treated as men's equals (Luke 8:1-3; 10:38-42; 11:28-29; 13:10-17; 21:1-4; Mark 5:22-42; John 4:7-38; 8:3-11; 12:1-8); (3) references to women ministering in the apostolic church by

prophesying, leading in prayer, teaching, practicing Samaritanship both informally and as widows and deacons, and laboring in the gospel with Apostles (Acts 2:17-21; 9:36-42; 18:24-26; 21:9 Rom. 16:1-15; I Cor. 11:2-16; Phil. 4:2-3; 1 Tim. 3:11; 5:1-i6; Titus 2:3); and (4) the seemingly mixed signals of Paul's assertion of equality in Christ (Gal. 3:28) alongside both his asymmetrical teaching on the duties of husbands and wives (Eph. 5:21-33; Col. 3:18-i9) and his real, if problematical, restrictions on what women may do in church as compared with men I Cor. 11:2-16; 14:34-36; I Tim. 2:11-15.)

This material raises many interpretative difficulties, which makes this an excellent case study of what seeking a canonical interpretation of biblical testimony on any subject involves. I offer now, not an attempted resolution of all the problems (!) but an applied statement of relevant hermeneutical principles, which will establish limits within which, here and in all cases, canonical interpretation lies. Evangelicals have not always noted the complexity of the hermeneutical task; indeed, sometimes they have let themselves speak as if everything immediately becomes plain and obvious for believers in biblical inerrancy, to such an extent that uncertainties about interpretation never arise for them. Granted, reverent Bible readers regularly see in texts practical lessons which are really there, and which doctrinaire students miss. Nonetheless, inerrancy is a concept that demands hermeneutical qualification, for what is true and trustworthy is precisely the text's meaning, and this only correct interpretative Procedures will yield. Moreover, while the central biblical message of new life through Christ is expressed so fully and dearly that one who runs may read and understand (which is what Reformation theology meant by the *clarity and perspicuity* of Scripture), there remain many secondary matters on which certainty of interpretation is hard if not impossible to come by. The present exercise will, I think, make that clear. Here, now, are the hermeneutical principles that I propose to illustrate from the role relationship debate.

(1) Biblical teaching is coherent and self-consistent: for, as I said above, with whatever variety of literary form and personal style from writer to writer and with whatever additions and amendments as redemptive history progressed, it all proceeds from one source; namely, the mind of God the Holy Spirit. Any adequate hermeneutical hypothesis on this or any topic, therefore, will have to show the internal harmony of all relevant biblical material. No hypothesis positing either the inconsistency of one biblical teacher with another or a biblical teacher's self contradiction (as when Paul Jewett diagnosed self-contradiction in what his apostolic namesake said about Christian women(10)) can be right.

(2) Biblical moral instruction corresponds to human nature: for it stands in a maker's-handbook relation to us, showing the natural, God-planned, and therefore fulfilling and satisfying way for us creatures to behave. Half-way houses, therefore, must be deemed faulty when they approve women ruling men in secular affairs (because Scripture nowhere forbids it and sometimes exemplifies it) but not in the church or home (because Scripture requires male

leadership in both), or when they approve women ruling in today's church (because Paul's restriction on this seems to be culturally determined) but not in the family (because biblical teaching on this seems to be transcultural and timeless). I say this not because of any particular failures or arbitrarinesses of argument, real though these may be, but because these views overlook the fact that in his enactments about role relationship, whatever they are, God is legislating for the fulfillment of human nature as it was created in its two forms, male-masculine and female-feminine. You can hold that a woman is so made that she enters into her sexual identity and so finds a particular fulfillment by giving cooperative support to a male leader, or that she is not; you can hold that a man is so made that he enters into his sexual identity and so finds a particular fulfillment by taking responsibility for a female helper, or that he is not; and you can argue across the board for whichever view of Bible teaching on role relationships fits in with your idea. But what you cannot do is argue that *both* views are true at the same time in different spheres. Human nature is either one thing or the other, and only across-the-board arguments are in place here.

(3) *Biblical narratives must be evaluated by biblical norms:* for it is not safe to infer that because God caused an event to be recorded in Scripture he approved it and means us to approve it too. As it does not follow that Paul approved of baptism for the dead because he mentions the Corinthians' practice of it (I Cor. 15:29), so it does not follow that every action of a believing woman that Scripture records is there as a model; we must evaluate those actions by normative teaching before we can be sure. Nor can it be argued (for instance) that God, when cursing Eve after the fall and describing to her how it was now going to be ("your husband . . . shall rule over you" [Gen. 3:16]), was thereby prescribing that thus it evermore ought to be, even in the realm of redemption. Normative teaching from elsewhere must settle whether that is so or not.

(4) *Biblical texts must be understood in their human context:* for otherwise we shall fail to read their real point out of them and instead read into them points they are not making at all. Only through contextual study can exegesis be achieved and eisegesis be eliminated. That Scripture interprets Scripture is a profound truth, but lifting biblical statements out of context to fit them into mosaics of texts culled from elsewhere is a corner-cutting operation (beloved, alas, of a certain type of "Bible teacher") which that profound truth cannot be invoked to justify. We must know the literary genre, historical and cultural background, immediate situation and occasion, and intended function of each passage before we can be confident that we have properly understood it. When, for instance, Paul tells Corinthian women to be silent in church (I Cor. 14:34) and then, maybe eight years later, tells Timothy that he requires women not to teach but to be quiet (I Tim. 2:11-12), is he making exactly the same point? Contextual study of each passage is needed to determine that.

But when we look we find that the context and intended function of Paul's restrictive statements about women is less clear. What abuses or questions prompted them? Had some particular women disgraced

themselves in a way that Paul was determined to clamp down on? Or did he bring in this teaching because it was part of a universal congregational order, modelled on the synagogue, which he believed that God intended for all churches at all times in the way that the unchanging gospel was intended for all churches at all times? In I Timothy 2:13-14 he justifies the silence rule as appropriate because of the order of creation and the sequence of events in the fall; but was he imposing this rule to be law forever, or simply as a rule of prudence which experience had shown to be expedient *pro tempore* in the churches for which he was caring? If we knew those things, we should at once know a great deal more. We should know, for instance, whether in these passages he is talking about all women or only wives (the Greek word which he uses, *gune*, regularly means both and is the only regular Greek word for both, so that linguistically this ambiguity is unresolvable). We should also know whether in I Timothy 2:12 he is forbidding women to teach men or to teach anybody in the public assembly (the Greek allows both renderings) and whether he would regard the completing of the canon and its availability in print to all Christians today (so that teachers need never say "take it from me," but always "take it from Scripture") as so changing the situation that his ban on women teaching no longer applies. We should know too whether the silence rule of I Corinthians 14:34 means that, after all, women must not lead in prayer nor prophesy publicly, as 11:4-10 seemed to allow them to do, or only that women must take no part in judging prophets, which is the theme of the immediate context, 14:29-33. But the pieces of information which alone could give us certainty on these points are lacking, and in their absence no guess as to what is probably meant can be thought of as anything like a certainty. This leads to the next point.

(5) *Certainties must be distinguished from possibilities*: for only certainties can command universal assent and obedience. In the present field of discussion the only points of certainty seem to be these: (a) both creation and redemption establish the equality of men and women before God, as both image bearers and children of God through Christ (Gen. 1:26-27; Gal. 3:26-29); (b) within this equality the man (or at least the husband) is irreversibly "the head" of the woman (or at least his wife), i.e., is of higher rank in some real sense (though the exact sense is disputed-causal priority only? or leadership claim too?-(I Cor. 11:3; Eph. 5:23); (c) Christian partners are to model in their marriage the redeeming love-responsive love relationship of Christ and the church (Eph. 5:21-33). Beyond this, everything --all that was mentioned in the last paragraph, and just how Paul would have expounded his key words about women's roles, "be subject," "respect" (Eph. 5:21-24, 33; Col. 3:18; cf. Peter's "obey," I Peter 3:5), and "submissiveness," "have authority over" (I Tim. 2:11-12) - is a matter of rival possibilities, on none of which may we forget the real uncertainty of our own opinion, whatever it is, or deny to others the right to hold a different view. It is the way of evangelicals to expect absolute certainty from Scripture on everything and to admire firm stances on secondary and disputed matters as signs of moral courage. But in some areas such expectations are not warranted by the evidence, and such stances reveal only a mind insufficiently trained to distinguish certainties from uncertain possibilities. Among those areas

this is one.

(6) *What is explicitly forbidden must be distinguished from what, though unfitting, is not forbidden:* for action that is undesirable, because unfitting, is not necessarily sin. That which is unfitting by reason of God's work should not be equated with that which is unlawful by reason of God's command: the two categories are distinct. Should it appear from Scripture that woman was not fitted by creation to fulfill leadership roles in relation to man, that would not *ipso facto* make it sin for a woman to be President or Prime Minister or general manager or chairman, or to have a male secretary, or even (if one does not judge Paul's silence rule to forbid this) to be a missionary church-planter or a sole pastor or a bishop. It could still be argued that these roles impose strain on womanly nature; that they are not what women are made for; that they show a certain lack of respect for God's work of creation; that in fulfilling them a woman is likely to treat men maternally, which will impose undue strain on masculine nature; and that the woman's womanly dignity and worth are to some extent at risk while she does these jobs; but it could not be maintained that she and those who gave her her role have sinned by disobeying God's command. The facts of creation in this as in other matters do not of themselves constitute a command, only an indication of what is fitting; and the various forms of ethical unwisdom and indignity which do not transgress explicit commands cannot be categorized as sin.

(7) *The horizons of text and student must mesh:* for only so can God's teaching in the text deliver us from the intellectual idolatry which absolutizes the axioms of contemporary culture. The meshing" or "fusing" of horizons is a picture, taken from H.-G. Gadamer, of how the inspired text, which we question in order to find its meaning and relevance, questions, criticizes, challenges and changes us in the process-" Some who today raise the proper question, whether there are not culturally relative elements in Paul's teaching about role relationships (an the material has to be thought through from this standpoint), seem to proceed improperly in doing so; for in effect they take current secular views about the sexes as fixed points, and work to bring Scripture into line with them-an agenda that at a stroke turns the study of sacred theology into a venture in secular ideology. We need grace both to believe, as our forebears did, that we really do not know our own nature, any more than we know God's nature, till taught by Scripture and to apply this truth to our own sexual nature in particular. The biblical word of God, which fives and abides forever, must be set free to relativize all the absolutes, avowed and presuppositional, of our post-Christian, neo-pagan culture and to lead us into truth about ourselves as our Maker has revealed it -- truth which, be it said, we only fully know and perceive as truth in the process of actually obeying it.

I take the discussion of role relationships no further. Suffice it to have illustrated from this one case some, at least, of the procedural principles which I try to observe when on any subject at all I seek a canonical interpretation of Scripture-the goal at which, in my view, all theologians ought centrally to aim and to which the study of

theological ideas should be viewed as a means. The greatest of the Church Fathers saw the matter so; Luther, Calvin, and Owen did the same; Karl Barth, in a slightly odd manner determined by his epistemological preoccupation and his eccentric sort of christocentricity, took essentially the same road; I follow in their train, as best I can.

There are, of course, many other principles of importance in the quest for canonical theological interpretation of Scripture -- for instance, the continuity of God's work in Old and New Testament times and the biblical typology that is based on it; the trinitarian identity of the God of the Old Testament; the theopomorphism of humanity which makes possible and meaningful the so-called anthropomorphism of biblical language about God; the nature of redemption as a restoring of fallen creation and so a fulfilling of God's original purpose for the world; the real overlap of the age to come (that world, heaven) with the present age (this world, earth) through the ministry of Christ prolonged by the Holy Spirit-but none of these can be discussed here. Other tasks, too, besides interpreting Scripture face theologians, tasks both intramural (dealing with the church) and extramural (dialoguing with the world)-tasks of phenomenological analysis of theologies past and present and of apologetics, philosophical, evangelistic, and defensive-but these cannot be spoken of here either. I end here by repeating my conviction that the canonical interpretation of Scripture is the theologians main job and by adding to it my further conviction that only those who give themselves to this task first and foremost will ever be fit to interpret anything else on God's behalf.

NOTES

1. Jesus' acceptance of the truth and authority of his Bible (our Old Testament) has often been demonstrated. See, for instance, John W. Wenham, *Christ and the Bible* (London: Tyndale Press, 1972), pp. II-37, and "Christ's View of Scripture," in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), pp. 3-37; J. I. Packer, *"Fundamentalism" and the Word of God* (London: IVF; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), pp. 54-62.
2. Calvin, *Institutes*, I.vii.5: "Enlightened by him (the Spirit), no longer do we believe that Scripture is from God on the basis of either our judgment or that of others; but, in a way that surpasses human judgment, we are made absolutely certain, just as if we beheld there the majesty (*numen*) of God himself, that it has come to us by the ministry of men from God's very mouth.... I speak of nothing but what every believer experiences personally (*apud se*), only my words fall far short of an adequate *Uustam*) account of the reality" (author's translation).
3. The Westminster Confession speaks of "the consent of all the parts" as one argument whereby the Bible "doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God." (I.v.) Demonstrations of the Bible's thematic coherence were made by various writers of the British

Biblical Theology school: e.g., A. M. Hunter, *The Message of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1944); A. G. Hebert, *The Bible from Within* (London: Oxford University Press, 1950); H. H. Rowley, *The Unity of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955).

4. The phrase "analogy of Scripture" or "of (the) faith" goes back to Calvin, who took Rom. 12:6 to mean that what is preached must accord with revealed truth, and spoke of "the analogy of faith, to which Paul requires all interpretation of Scripture to conform." (*Institutes*, IV xvii-32) The principle covered interpreting what is peripheral by what is central, what is obscure by what is clear, and what is ambiguous by what is orthodox in the sense of firmly established by thorough exegetical and theological testing.

5. See Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, tr. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (London: James Clarke; Old Tappan: Fleming H. Revell, 1957), *passim*.

6. Examples are *Knowing God* (London: Hodder and Stoughton; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973); *Knowing Man* (Westchester: Cornerstone, 1979); *God's Words* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981); *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (London: IVF; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1961); *Keep in Step with the Spirit* (Old Tappan: Fleming H. Revell, 1984); *I Want to Be a Christian* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1977), a contribution to catechetics: "Steps to the Renewal of the Christian People" and "An Agenda for Theology," in *Summons to Faith and Renewal*, ed. Peter S. Williamson and Kevin Perrotta (Ann Arbor: Servant, 1983) pp. 107-127, ISI-155.

7. Cf. *'Fundamentalism' and the Word of God; God Has Spoken*, 2nd ed. (London: Hodder and Stoughton; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979); *Freedom and Authority* (Oakland: International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, 1981); *Freedom, Authority and Scripture* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1982).

8. Cf. *Beyond the Battle for the Bible* (Westchester: Cornerstone, 1980), esp. chap. 2, "Inerrancy in Current Debate"; *God Has Spoken*, pp. 110-114, and pp. 138 - 153 (the Chicago Statement of Biblical Inerrancy); *Summit II, Hermeneutics; Explaining Hermeneutics: A Commentary* (Oakland: International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, 1983).

9. My own tentative thoughts on this subject are in "Thoughts on the Role and Function of Women in the Church," in *Evangelicals and the Ordination of Women*, ed. Colin Craston (Bramcote: Grove Books, 1973), pp. 22-26; and "Postscript: I Believe in Women's Ministry," in *Why Not?*, 2nd ed., ed. Michael Bruce and G. E. Duffield (Appliford: Marcham Manor Press, 1976), pp. 160-174. Among advocates of relational subordination of women, with more or less fixed roles, see esp. Stephen B. Clark, *Man and Woman in Christ* (Ann Arbor: Servant, 1980); James B. Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical*

Perspective (Leicester) InterVarsity Press; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981); George W Knight III, *The New Testament Teaching on the Role Relationship of Men and Women* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977); Fritz Zerbst, *The Office of Woman in the Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955); Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark), III 1, pp. 288-329, section 41 (1958); III 2, pp. 285-316, section 45 (1960); III 4, pp. 116-240, section 54 (1961). Among advocates of relational egalitarianism, free from role restriction upon women, see esp. Paul King Jewett, *Man as Male and Female and The Ordination of Women* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975, 1980); Don Williams, *The Apostle Paul and Women in the Church* (Van Nuys: BIM Publishing Co., 1977); Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty, *All We're Meant to Be: A Biblical Approach to Women's Liberation* (Waco: Word, 1977); Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *Women, Men and the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977). For analyses of the biblical interpretation on both sides, see Willard M. Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War, and Women: Case Issues in Biblical Interpretation* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1983), pp. 152-191; Robert K. Johnston, *Evangelicals at an Impasse: Biblical Authority in Practice* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979), pp. 48-76.

10. Jewett, *Man as Male and Female*, pp. 119, 134, 138.

11. I use this image as Anthony C. Thiselton does in "Understanding God's Word Today," in *Obeying Christ in a Changing World I*, ed. John R. W Stott (London: Collins, 1977), pp. 90-122, esp. pp. 101-105, and in his book, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), esp. pp. 15-17, 307-310. I do not suggest that Gadamer views Scripture as the Word of God in the way that I do.

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