Biblical Theology and the Analogy of Faith

by Daniel Fuller

This material was first published in Unity and Diversity in N.T. Theology.
Essays in Honor of George E. Ladd, R. A. Guelich (ed.). Eerdmans, 1978.
Pp 195-213.

Every theology regarding itself as Christian, it seems, would want to affirm that it was in agreement with the Bible. There may be another authority alongside the Bible, as in Roman Catholicism, which regards church tradition as a separate source of authority. But since Roman Catholicism never regards these two sources as clashing with each other, it would always affirm heartily that its theology is biblical.

It is noteworthy, however, that the term "biblical theology" first appeared in the followers of the Reformation, among those who espoused the principle of *sola scriptura*. This principle affirmed that since the church was founded upon the teachings of the prophets and apostles, the authority for its teaching and practice must be derived only from the Bible. To support the legitimacy of a claim to know what the prophets and apostles taught, the reformers made several radical departures from the way theologians had been content to interpret the Bible in preceding centuries.

For one thing they rejected the medieval practice of finding in a biblical passage a fourfold sense: the literal, the allegorical, the moral, and the anagogical (or mystical, ultimate) sense. At the end of his life Luther summarized this hermeneutical principle in these words:

> [The Holy Spirit's] words cannot have more than one, and that the very simplest sense, which we call the literal, ordinary, natural sense. . . . We are not to say that the Scriptures or the Word of God have more than one meaning. . . We are not to introduce any . . . metaphorical, figurative sayings into any text of Scripture, unless the particulars of the words compel us to do so.. . . For if anyone at all were to have power to depart from the pure, simple words and to make inferences and figures of speech wherever he wished. . . [then] no one could reach any certain conclusions about . . . any article of faith. . .[1]

Studying the Bible in the original Greek and Hebrew was another way

the reformers earned the right to make claims about what the Bible taught. Both Luther and Calvin strove to master the language conventions of the biblical Hebrew and Greek so they could more readily grasp the meaning the biblical writers attached to their own terms, and be less apt to impute current meanings back onto those ancient words. But they also wanted their conclusions about the Bible's meanings to be made available to as many/196 as possible, and so they stressed the need for translating the Bible into contemporary language. The more people could read the Bible for themselves, the more the Bible itself (*sola scriptura*!) would directly teach individual Christians, and consequently there could be a priesthood of all believers.

The reformers also realized that theologians had kept the Bible from speaking for itself because they were so prone to construe its statements in terms of medieval scholasticism, which drew so heavily upon the philosophy of Aristotle. Luther said, "This defunct pagan [Aristotle] has attained supremacy [in the universities]; [he has] impeded, and almost suppressed, the Scripture of the living God. When I think of this lamentable state of affairs, I cannot avoid believing that the Evil One introduced the study of Aristotle."[2] And in arguing against the Roman Catholic view of transubstantiation, Calvin said, "The doctrine which we have put forward has been drawn from the pure Word of God, and rests upon its authority. . . . Not Aristotle, but the Holy Spirit teaches that the body of Christ from the time of his resurrection was finite, and is contained in heaven even to the Last Day."[3]

Seeking in these ways to let the Bible speak for itself, the reformers demonstrated how much of the principle of *sola scriptura* they had grasped. Ebeling has remarked, "Reformation theology is the first attempt in the entire history of theology to take seriously the demand for a theology based on scripture alone. Only among the followers of the Reformation could the concept 'biblical theology' have been coined at all."[4]

I

"THE ANALOGY OF FAITH" IN LUTHER AND CALVIN

But the reformers also emphasized a hermeneutical principle that is commonly called "the analogy of faith." This principle was used when the time came to combine what two or more biblical writers said about some article of faith like the law (Moses or Paul), or justification (Genesis, Paul, and James). In general, the analogy-of-faith principle of hermeneutics affirms that the norm for interpreting

other parts of the Bible is certain passages in the Pauline letters, which supposedly set forth biblical teachings with the greatest clarity and precision.

In stating this principle Luther said, "It is the attribute of Holy Scripture that it interprets itself by passages and places which belong together, and can only be understood by a rule of faith."[5] On the surface, the statement that "scripture interprets itself" seems to be another pillar upholding the principle of *sola scriptura.* But Luther's additional statement that passages… can only be understood by a rule of faith" raises the question of how anyone acquires the authority for knowing just what that rule is. As/197 we consider how Luther and Calvin elaborated on this principle of the analogy of faith, it becomes clear that, in the final analysis, the subjective preference of the theologian himself is the only basis upon which this all-important norm for interpreting the rest of scripture is established. Consequently, the analogy-of-faith principle does not undergird but undermines the *sola scriptura* principle.

The "analogy of faith" destroys *sola scriptura*!

In elaborating this principle in another place Luther said, "Every word [of scripture] should be allowed to stand in its natural meaning, and that should not be abandoned *unless faith forces us to it* [italics added]."[6] Luther's readiness to let faith force him to suppress the natural meaning of a text becomes evident from his famous statement made in his Disputation thesis, *De fide*, September 11, 1535. There he affirmed, "Scripture is to be understood not contrary to, but in accordance with Christ. Therefore Scripture is to be referred to him, or else we do not have what represents Scripture. If adversaries urge Scripture against Christ, we will urge Christ against Scripture." Likewise, "If it is to be a question of whether Christ or the Law is to be dismissed, we say, Law is to be dismissed, not Christ."[7]

Commenting on these statements of Luther, Ebeling says,

> Luther was no biblicist. . . . No biblicist speaks like that. . . . [Luther] had not thoroughly thought [the hermeneutical problem] through from the methodological point of view and therefore the methodology of theology in general remained obscure in decisive questions of fundamental importance. It was not made clear what the principle of *sola scriptura* means for the procedure of theology as a whole.[8]

For Luther there really were places where Christ should be urged

against scripture. In his thinking, the term "Christ" often represented the whole of his understanding of justification by faith. Luther was convinced that what James said about justification could not be reconciled with Paul's teaching on that subject. In the conclusion to an introduction to Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation, Luther said, "Many sweat hard at reconciling

James with Paul . . . but unsuccessfully. 'Faith justifies' [Paul] stands in flat contradiction to 'Faith does not justify' [James 2:24]. If anyone can harmonize these sayings, I'll put my doctor's cap on him and let him call me a fool."[9] Consequently Luther put James and these other books, each of which, in his view, had objectionable features, at the end of his New Testament of September, 1522. In his introduction to James itself, Luther said, "[This book] cannot be defended against [its] applying to works the sayings of Moses in Genesis 15, which speaks only of Abraham's faith, and not of his works, as St. Paul shows in Romans 4.... Therefore I cannot put him among the chief books. "[10]

In another place he singled out the books of the New Testament which did properly "urge Christ."[/198]

> To sum it all up . . . St. John's Gospel [not the synoptics!], and his first epistle, St. Paul's epistles, especially those to the Romans, to the Galatians, and to the Ephesians, and St. Peter's first epistle -- these are the books which show you Christ and teach everything which is needful and blessed for you to know even if you don't see or even hear any other book. . . . Wherefore St. James epistle is a true epistle of straw compared with them, for it contains nothing of an evangelical nature.[11]

The foregoing statements indicate what Luther meant by his assertion, "Scripture interprets itself by passages and places which belong together, and [scripture as a whole] can only be understood by a rule of faith."[12] They give concrete examples of how the analogy, or rule, of faith justified singling out certain parts of scripture as the norm by which other parts of the canon were to be judged. Surely Luther's submission to the Bible, implied in his rejection of the fourfold meaning, scholasticism, and church tradition, enabled him to learn and transmit many scriptural teachings that have greatly profited the church.

Luther's rule-of-faith hermeneutics took Matthew, Mark, Luke, Hebrews and James virtually out of the canon!

But when he set up his understanding of justification by faith as the basis for suppressing such books as the Synoptic Gospels, Hebrews, and James, he then made it impossible for these books to deepen or improve his understanding of this doctrine. He also made it harder for these books to inform him on other subjects which they taught. So his use of the analogy of faith undercut the *sola scriptura* principle not only for himself but for all those who have followed his hermeneutical lead ever since.

This conclusion is confirmed by what Matthaeus Flacius (a Lutheran) said about the analogy of faith in his Key to the Scriptures (1567), the first hermeneutics book to emerge from the Reformation. According to Flacius,

> Every understanding and exposition of Scripture is to be in agreement with the faith. Such [agreement] is, so to speak, the norm or limit of a sound faith, that we may not be thrust over the fence into the abyss by anything, either by a storm from without or by an attack from within (Rom. 12:6). For everything that is said concerning Scripture, or on the basis of Scripture, must be in agreement with all that the catechism declares or that is taught by the articles of faith.[13]

This statement of Flacius shows how Luther's use of the analogy-of-faith principle had made church tradition, fixed in creeds and catechisms, the key for the interpretation of scripture. Even though this tradition was now of a Protestant rather than of a Roman Catholic variety, yet the barrier which it erected against letting biblical exegesis improve or correct that tradition was exceedingly hard to surmount.

John Calvin followed the same hermeneutical procedure as Luther. In his "Prefatory Address to King Francis," designed to gain recommendation for his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin appealed to Romans 12:6 and its phrase according to the analogy of faith[14] as his best argument for why his teaching should be regarded as true. He said,[/199]

> When Paul wished all prophecy to he made to accord with the analogy of faith [Rom 12:6], he set forth a very clear rule to test all interpretation of Scripture. Now, if our interpretation he measured by this rule of faith, victory is in our hands. For what is more consonant with faith than to recognize that we are . . . weak, to be sustained by

[Christ]? To take away from us all occasion for glorying, that he alone may stand forth gloriously and we glory in him?[15]

There are, to be sure, many passages where scripture teaches that "no human being should boast in the presence of God," but "Let him who boasts, boast of the Lord" (1 Cor 1:29, 31). Those who are committed to *sola scriptura* want their understanding of such passages as well as those setting forth all other biblical teachings, to be deepened and corrected by a careful exegesis of all of them.

But *sola scriptura* was threatened when Calvin, like Luther, made the Gospel of John the "key" for understanding the Synoptic Gospels. Concerning the Gospel of John, Calvin said, "The doctrine which points out to us the power and fruit of Christ's coming appears far more clearly in [John] than in [Matthew, Mark, and Luke]. . . . For this reason I am accustomed to say that this Gospel is the key to open the door to the understanding of the others."[16] The problem, however, is that one who is convinced that John's teaching is the key for understanding the other Gospels will devote more energy to learning what John teaches than he will to learning what a Synoptic Gospel teaches. This in itself would be contrary to *sola scriptura*, which requires one to be equally docile to all of scripture.

Calvin jeopardized biblical authority by regarding the Gospel of John as the "key" for understanding the Gospel of Matthew.

Calvin also required Exodus through Deuteronomy to be understood in terms of Paul's view of the law. Indeed, Calvin concluded, just from the exegesis of the Pentateuch itself, that "the *same* [italics added] covenant, of which Abraham had been the minister and keeper, was repeated to his descendants by the instrumentality of Moses." But then when he considered what Paul said about the Mosaic law, he said, "Paul opposes [the Mosaic law] to the promise given to Abraham, because as [Paul] is treating of the peculiar office, power and end of the law, he separates it from the promises of grace [that are found in Abraham and Moses]. . . .[17]

Thus, according to Calvin, the message of Exodus through Deuteronomy could not be properly grasped simply by studying these books. One must first know about the antithesis Paul drew between Abraham, on the one hand, and parts of Moses, on the other, before his study of Exodus through Deuteronomy would produce accurate results. For Calvin, unless one knew that the promises in these books

constantly shift back and forth between conditional and unconditional ones[18], he would be led astray in his study of them. So Calvin concluded the introduction to his harmony of Exodus through Deuteronomy by saying, "I have thought it advisable to say this much by way of preface, for the purpose of directing my readers to the proper *object* [italics added] of the history. . . .[19/200]

But there are numerous passages in scripture where such blessings as eternal life, and inheriting the kingdom of God, are given because of the good works men have done. According to Matthew 25:34-36, 46, the blessed will inherit the kingdom of God and eternal life because they have done such things for "Jesus' brethren" as feeding them when they were hungry. Likewise, Paul commands, "Whatever your task, work heartily, as serving the Lord and not men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward . . ." (Col. 3:23-24). In his *Institutes,* Calvin interpreted these two passages by calling in statements from such remote contexts as Ephesians 1:5-6, 18 and Galatians 4:7. According to Calvin, these affirm that "the Kingdom of heaven is not servant's wages but son's inheritance, which only they who have been adopted as sons by the Lord shall enjoy, and that for no other reason than this adoption." So, "even in these very passages [Matt 25:34-46 and Col. 3:23-24] where the Holy Spirit promises everlasting glory as a reward for works, [yet] by expressly terming it an 'inheritance' he is showing that it comes to us from another source [than works]."[20]

Here is a concrete example of how analogy-of-faith hermeneutics worked in Calvin's thinking. He has to construe Matthew 25 and Colossians 3 in terms of other passages drawn from such distant contexts as Ephesians 1 and Galatians 4. These he selects because they accord well with his understanding of the analogy of faith, that only God, and not men, should be glorified.[21] Then he applies these remote-context passages to the ones in Matthew and Colossians, whose own terminology does not affirm so clearly that God alone is glorified in man's salvation. They even say, on Calvin's own admission, that "the Holy Spirit [!] promises everlasting glory as a reward for works. . . " But this statement of theirs must be suppressed and replaced by the passages from Ephesians and Galatians, so that the passages in Matthew 25 and Colossians 3 will make it clear that the inheritance spoken of there "comes to us from another source [than works]."[22]

Both Matthew 25:31ff and Colossians 3:23-24 teach that we are saved by doing the good works [of faith]!

So long as the exegesis of biblical passages is conducted by such analogy-of-faith hermeneutics, it would be difficult for systematic theology to be nourished and corrected by exegetical considerations from the biblical text. But this was the course which the reformers left for theology to steer. While the reformers themselves introduced into biblical exegesis many practices which greatly furthered the cause of *sola scriptura*, yet because they did not grasp how their analogy-of-faith principle clashed with *sola scriptura*, they gave a strong impetus for Reformation theology also to revert to a scholasticism not unlike the medieval sort against which they had rebelled. Thus Ebeling argues,

> This lack of clarity became apparent in the degree to which Reformation theology, like medieval scholasticism, also developed into a scholastic system. What was the relation of the systematic method here [in the post-Reformation]$^{/201}$ to the exegetical method? Ultimately it was the same as in medieval scholasticism. There, too, exegesis of holy scripture went on not only within systematic theology but also separately alongside of it, yet so that the possibility of a tension between exegesis and systematic theology was a priori excluded. Exegesis was enclosed within the frontiers fixed by systematic theology.[23]

There was one big difference, however. The post-Reformation era could not completely forget the several strong impulses which the reformers had given toward *sola scriptura*. So the more post-Reformation theology became scholastic, the more it clashed with these latent *sola scriptura* impulses. Consequently, it was inevitable that a methodology would arise which (whatever its name) would seek that full conformity with *sola scriptura* that systematic theology, with its analogy-of-faith principle, could not achieve.

II

THE RISE OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

A century after the Reformation the term "biblical theology" was first used. At the outset the term signified a corrective which certain precursors of Pietism felt Protestant Orthodoxy sorely needed. Philip Spener, one of the founders of Pietism, remarked in his *Pia Desideria* (1675) how two court chaplains in the parliament at Regensburg had complained some years earlier that "scholastic theology," expelled by Luther through the front door, had now come in at the back door to

suppress "biblical theology."[24] In his later writings Spener drew an antithesis between "biblical theology" and "scholastic theology." But in making this contrast Spener was not trying to discard systematics in favor of another theological method. He merely wanted to encourage theological students to spend less time mastering philosophical subtleties and more time learning the "simple" teachings of Christ and the apostles. As a result of Spener's plea there appeared a number of books which assembled proof-texts from all over the Bible to substantiate the affirmations of systematic theology. [25]

It was a century later that Johann Gabler used the term "biblical theology" to designate a method for ascertaining Christian teaching which should supersede systematic theology. In his inaugural address as a professor at Altdorf in 1787 he drew a sharp distinction between biblical and systematic theology. "Biblical theology," he said, "always remains the same since its arguments are historical."[26] What was "historical" had an unvarying quality about it, since "what the sacred writers thought about divine things" was something fixed in the past and represented to us today by an unchanging text of scripture. Dogmatic theology, on the other hand, "is subjected along with other human disciplines to manifold change." "It teaches what/202 every theologian through use of his reason philosophizes about divine things in accordance with his understanding, with the circumstances of the time, the age, the place, the school [to which he belongs]. . ." "Therefore," Gabler argued, "we are carefully to distinguish the divine from the human and to undertake a separation between biblical and dogmatic theology."

Thus biblical theology should be pursued in order to grasp exactly how each of the biblical writers thought. To do this, Gabler recommended that two steps be taken. First, every effort must be directed to "what each of [the biblical writers] thought concerning divine things... only from their writings.'' A vital requisite for this is to learn ''the time and place'' where any single literary unit was composed. Second,

> We must carefully assemble all ideas of the several writers and arrange them in their proper sequence: those of the patriarchs, those of Moses, David, and Solomon, those of the prophets-each of the prophets for that matter…. And as we proceed we are for many reasons not to despise the Apocrypha. In similar fashion, from the epochs of the new form of doctrine, [we must carefully assemble and arrange in proper sequence] the ideas of Paul, Peter, John and James.

After accomplishing these two steps, the interpreter's third step is

> . . . to investigate which ideas are of importance to the
> permanent form of Christian doctrine and consequently
> apply to us, and which were spoken only for the people of a
> given age or were intended for a given form of instruct. . .
> Who, I ask, would relate the Mosaic regulations, long since
> done away with by Christ, to our time, and who would insist
> on the validity for our time of Paul's exhortations that
> women should veil themselves in the sacred assembly? The
> ideas of the Mosaic form of instruction, which are confirmed
> neither by Jesus and his apostles nor *by reason itself*, can
> therefore be of no dogmatic value. We must zealously
> examine . . . what we must regard as belonging to the
> abiding doctrine of salvation; what in the words of the
> apostles is truly divine and what is fortuitous and purely
> human. . . . Then the consequence is in fact a "biblical
> theology." And when such solid foundations of"biblical
> theology." . . . have been laid after the manner we have
> described. . . we shall have no wish to follow uncertain
> ideas set forth by a dogmatic theology that is conditioned
> by our own times.[27]

. . . *sola scriptura* would be achieved only when the exegetical method left the interpreter with no alternative but to let the text speak for itself in its own terms.

In Gabler's first two steps there is the implication that each biblical
spokesman should be studied with equal diligence. But then came his
third step of drawing a distinction between "the permanent form of
Christian doctrine," and "ideas . . . for the people of a given age."
Later revelation (that of Jesus and his apostles) as well as "reason"
were the criteria for making this distinction. The problem with Gabler,
and with all biblical theology for the next century, was that the
criteria for carrying out the third step, and especially "reason," were
so amenable to the prevailing philosophy of a certain age that in the
teaching produced by biblical theology, the prophets, Christ, and the
apostles sound very similar to current modes of thinking.[/203]

An example of this is Bernhard Weiss's *Biblical Theology* (1868),
which argued that the kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus existed to
the degree that the disciples surrounding Jesus made progress in
living up to his ethical principles. Weiss said that "the dominion of
God begins to be fulfilled when a company of disciples gather around

Jesus, in whose midst is the kingdom of God."[28] Although Weiss conceded that 'Jesus nowhere directly designates the fellowship of his adherents as the kingdom of God," yet on the basis of verses like Matthew 21:31, "tax collectors and harlots precede you [Pharisees] into the kingdom of God," he confidently affirmed that "in [the disciples'] fellowship [the kingdom] begins to be realized. . . . [Its] success depends on the condition of men's hearts."[29] It was the kingdom of God understood in these terms which "must spread over the whole nation, like the mustard seed which grows from small beginnings to a disproportionate greatness."[30]

Such an understanding of the kingdom of God, however, was saying scarcely anything different from ethical idealism, the prevailing philosophy of that time. And this understanding was a virtual reduplication of the theology of Albrecht Ritschl, who stressed that the kingdom which Jesus founded was a community committed to the practice and furtherance of his ethical ideals.

We recall how Gabler had confidently predicted that as his three-step program for a biblical theology was carried out, the result would be ideas that belonged to the permanent form of Christian doctrine. These would replace the teachings of dogmatic theology, which have no permanence in that they are always conditioned by the thinking of their own times. But when a man as deeply committed to biblical authority as Bernhard Weiss practiced biblical theology and came up with an understanding of Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God that accorded so well with the prevailing philosophy and theology, it seemed that biblical theology was as vulnerable to the influence of current thinking as was dogmatic theology. The ideal of *sola scriptura* would be achieved only when the exegetical method left the interpreter with no alternative but to let the text speak for itself in its own terms.

III

THE IMPACT OF RELIGIONSGESCHICHTE

About the middle of the last century, certain biblical scholars became aware of many parallels between Jesus' language in the Gospels and the Jewish apocalyptic literature. The use of such writings as an aid for understanding what Jesus meant in his frequent references to "the kingdom of God" would be an example of one application of the exegetical procedure of *Religionsgeschichte,* or "the history-of-religions school."/204

In 1892 Johannes Weiss included this procedure in his exegetical

method in which, as he put it, "we attempt once more to identify the original historical meaning which Jesus connected with the words 'Kingdom of God,' and . . . we do it with special care lest we import modern, or at any rate alien, ideas into Jesus' thought-world."[31]

J. Weiss noted his father's concession that nowhere did Jesus equate the kingdom of God with his disciples.[32] Indeed, Jesus did say, in Matthew 12:25-28, that the kingdom had already come, but the meaning here is that the kingdom was present in that Jesus had power to cast out demons and to dismantle Satan's realm. So while Jesus was on earth, the kingdom of God was invisible and only indirectly evident through Jesus' miracle-working power. But according to Luke 17:20-24, what is now invisible will come, *in the future,* with the highest visibility when Jesus returns as the "Son of man" spoken of in Daniel 7 and in numerous places in the Jewish apocryphal book of Enoch.

On the basis of many other statements of Jesus about the futurity of the kingdom, and a rather constant allusion to similar thinking about the kingdom of God in Jewish apocalyptic literature -- The Assumption of Moses, The Testament of Daniel, Enoch, and 4 Ezra -- J. Weiss concluded,

> The kingdom of God as Jesus thought of it is a wholly supernatural entity that stands completely over against this world. It follows from this that in Jesus' thought there cannot have been any place for a development of the kingdom of God *within the framework of this world.* On the basis of this result it seems to be the case that the dogmatic religio-ethical use of this idea in recent theology, which has divested it completely of its originally eschatological-apocalyptic meaning, is unjustified.[33]

Weiss's conclusion regarding Jesus' understanding of the kingdom of God was much better established than his father's conclusion, because the son argued not only from a mass of evidence in the Synoptic Gospels, but also from evidence provided by *Religionsgeschichte*, that is, from similar ideas in Jewish apocalyptic literature, which were pertinent because they stemmed from the same general milieu in which Jesus lived. Faced with such double evidence, it became virtually impossible for a modern man to understand Jesus' statements about the kingdom of God in terms of cherished contemporary concepts.

This is why J. Weiss's *Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes* (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1892) represents a great

turning point in the history of biblical interpretation. It was this book and Wilhelm Wrede's *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien* (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1901) that provided Albert Schweitzer with the key for showing that nineteenth-century liberalism could no longer find support for its teachings from the Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels. As Krister Stendahl has said,[/205]

> The alleged biblical basis for what has been called "liberal theology" in the classical form . . . was not shattered by conservatives but by the extreme radicals of the *religionsgeschichtliche* Schule ("history-of-religions school"). [The exponents of this school] could show, on the basis of the comparative material, that such a picture of Jesus or of the OT prophets was totally impossible from the historical point of view and that it told more about the ideals of bourgeois Christianity in the late nineteenth century than about the carpenter from Nazareth or the little man from Tekoa.[34]

So the history-of-religions school presented biblical theology with an exegetical tool which made it virtually impossible for the Bible's message to be molded according to the current philosophy of a given culture. Now the Bible had to speak in terms of the meanings which the biblical writers had intended by the words they used. *sola scriptura* was now within the reach of all those who would work with the biblical text to grasp its intended meanings and who were not obligated to shape those meanings to conform to some analogy of faith.

But as *Religionsgeschichte* forced one back to the way the Bible thought in its own times and cultures, the relevance of the biblical message seemed, for many, to vanish. As Johannes Weiss expounded the Gospels' own view of the kingdom, he observed that "most people will neither be satisfied with this more negative description of the concept [of the kingdom of God as that which triumphs over Satan], nor want to understand it in this completely supernaturalistic way of looking at things, which is mythological from our standpoint."[35] And Stendahl observes that "the resistance to the *religionsgeschichdiche Schule* was openly or unconsciously against its disregard for [contemporary] theological meaning and relevance. "[36]

Indeed, *Religionsgeschichte* had made it possible for biblical theology to tell "what it meant," but there is little market for exegetical labors which merely describe, with an antiquarian interest, the thoughts of a by-gone age. There is, however, a very strong desire to know "what the Bible means,"[37] and this desire has sought fulfillment in two very

distinct theological procedures.

IV

TWO ALTERNATIVES

Karl Barth's procedure for affirming "what the Bible means" begins with the presupposition that though the biblical writers and the present-day interpreter are far removed from each other in terms of their culture, yet they have very much in common in that both have immediate access to the "subject matter" of the Bible. At the beginning of the *Church Dogmatics* Barth affirmed,/206

> Language about God has the proper content, when it conforms to the essence of the Church, i.e., to Jesus Christ. . . . "according to the analogy of faith" (Rom. 12:6). Dogmatics investigates Christian language by raising the question of this conformity. Thus it has not to discover the measure with which [dogmatics] measures, still less to invent [that measure]. With the Christian Church [dogmatics] regards and acknowledges [that measure] as given (given in its own thoroughly peculiar way, exactly as the man Jesus Christ is given us. . .) .[38]

Since Christ is given for us today, just as he was for the writers of the New Testament, it is understandable why Barth, at the very outset of his theological career, recommended an interpretational procedure which regarded all exegetical labors with a text's historical and philological data as mere "preliminary work," which was to be followed quickly by a "genuine understanding and interpretation," which means

> . . . that creative energy which Luther exercised with intuitive certainty in his exegesis; which underlies the systematic interpretation of Calvin . . . [who] having first established what stands in the text, sets himself to re-think the whole material and to wrestle with it, till the walls which separate the sixteenth century from the first become transparent! Paul speaks, and the man of the sixteenth century hears. The conversation between the original record and the reader moves around the *subject matter* [italics added], until a distinction between today and yesterday becomes impossible.[39]

The Holy Spirit, not the text, supposedly controls Barth's interpretation.

An example of how this all-important "subject matter" (which in another place in the Church Dogmatic is stated as "revelation remains identical with Jesus Christ"[40]) controlled Barth's interpretation of the text is his handling of passages like 1 Corinthians 15:51-54, which affirms that believers "shall all be changed, from mortality into immortality" (vv. 51, 52, 54).

But Barth said that in the Christian hope, "there is no question of a continuation into an indefinite future of a somewhat altered life . . . [but, rather] an 'eternalizing' of this ending life." His reasoning behind this surprising statement is, it seems, that if believers did actually undergo the inherent change of being resurrected, then something of what is revealed in Jesus Christ would be transposed from Christ over to created beings. But since Barth's "subject matter" bars revelation from extending itself beyond Jesus Christ, and since this *Sache* confronted both Barth and Paul, despite great cultural differences between them, therefore Barth regarded it as proper to restate 1 Corinthians 15:51-54 from his knowledge of it, even though his words communicated a different meaning from Paul's. As Stendahl puts it,

> Orthodoxy never had repristination as its program in the periods of its strength. The possibility of translation was given -- as it is for Barth -- in the reality of the *subject matter* [italics added], apart from the intellectual manifestations in the thought patterns of the original documents. God and Christ were not Semites in such a sense that the biblical pattern of thought was identified with the revelation itself.[41/207]

The problem with Barth's procedure is that even though Christ might be regarded as given to all believers in church proclamation, yet this Christ will be preached somewhat differently from church to church, and so each interpreter will read the text in a different light. Hence this procedure will produce as many interpretations of the text as there are interpreters, and not even as profound and wise a thinker as Barth has any basis for claiming that his interpretation of a biblical text should be taken seriously. Stendahl observes that

> Barth speaks as if it were a very simple thing to establish what Paul actually meant in his own terms. . . . [But] biblical theology along this line is admittedly incapable of enough patience and enthusiasm for keeping alive the tension between what the text meant and what it means. [In Barth] there is no criteria by which they can be kept apart; what is intended as a commentary turns out to be a

theological tractate, expanding in contemporary terms what Paul should have said about the subject matter as understood by the commentator.[42]

"Barth is wrong! Interpretation is based only on philological and historical considerations" -- Oscar Cullman, Barth's colleague at the Univ. of Basel.

In contrast, biblical theology, controlled only by philological and historical considerations, regards its first order of business that of construing an author's intended meaning in his own terms. Stendahl argues that biblical exegesis has reached a point where this is now possible for much of the biblical material:

> Once we confine ourselves to the task of descriptive biblical theology as a field in its own right, the material itself gives us the means to check whether our interpretation is correct or not. . . . From the point of view of method it is clear that our only concern is to find out what these words meant when uttered or written by the prophet, the priest, the evangelist, or the apostle-and regardless of their meaning in later stages of religious history, our own included.[43]

Stendahl regards Oscar Cullmann's procedure for establishing Christian teaching as representing the alternative to Barth's way. Cullmann is distressed with Barth for not subjecting his theological thinking to the meaning of the text as determined by philological and historical considerations. "Barth is particularly open to this danger, not only because of the richness of his thought, but because systematically he seems to treat philological and historical explanations as too exclusively *preliminary* in character.'"[44] Cullmann argues that the Holy Spirit who inspired the biblical writings

> . . . can only speak in human language, and that language must always bear the stamp of the period and of the individuality of the biblical writer. For this reason . . . [all philological and historical considerations] help to provide us with a "transparency through which, by an effort of theological concentration, we may see with the writer the truth which he saw and with him may attain to the revelation which came to him. We must thoroughly understand this historic "transparency"; our vision through it must be so clear that at any moment we may become the actual contemporaries of the writer.[45/208]

In contrast to Barth, Cullmann wants to find the subject matter of any literary unit in scripture simply by submitting himself to the pertinent historical and philological data, and by means of these alone to construe an author's intended meaning. Only as the interpreter is thinking along "with the writer [of the text]" will he have access to the author's subject matter. Cullmann rejects Barth's idea that the interpreter should have prior access to the subject matter through the church's proclamation of Christ. He says,

> When I approach the text as an exegete, I may not consider it to be certain that my Church's faith in Christ is in its essence really that of the writers of the New Testament. . . . In the same way, my personal self-understanding [*contra* Bultmann], and my personal experience of faith must not only be seen as exegetical aids, but also as possible sources of error.[46]

The sequence of redemptive history calls for a unity of the Bible -- Oscar Cullman

How then does Cullmann proceed where the Reformation foundered, namely, in the matter of avoiding subjectivity when the time comes to bring all the teachings of the Bible together? He answers that with the closing of the canon,[47]

> the thing that is new in this concluding new interpretation is the fact that not just individual excerpts of salvation history are presented, as was the case [prior to the composition of the last book in the canon], but that now, through he collection together of various books of the Bible, the whole history of salvation must be taken into account in understanding any one of the books of he Bible. When we wish to interpret some affirmation coming from early Christianity not merely as an isolated phenomenon, but as an actual biblical text, as a part belonging to a totality, we must call upon salvation history as a hermeneutical key, for it is the factor binding all the biblical text together.[48]

Thus Cullmann affirms that "a dogmatics or ethics of salvation history ought to be written some day."[49]

To the objection that making redemptive history the perspective for understanding any given passage of scripture is just as subjective as any of the other rules, or analogies, of faith, Cullmann answers that

salvation history is what called forth certain writings as canonical in the first place, and therefore only salvation history can provide the perspective from which they are to be interpreted. "I simply do not see any other biblical notion [besides salvation history] which makes a link between all the books of the Bible such as the fixing of the canon sought to express."[50] It should also be observed that, for Cullmann, salvation history never allows the thinking of one writer to be suppressed in favor of another (as the various analogies of faith do). He says,

> . . . [the scholar] must. . . resist the temptation to bring two texts into harmony when their affirmations do not agree, if he is convinced that such a synthesis is incompatible with the critical control exercised by philology and history; this he must do, however painful the biblical antinomy with regard to one point or another, once the synthesis has been rejected.[51/209]

Cullmann, however, does have statements where he speaks of later events in redemptive history as providing "reinterpretations" of earlier ones. For example, when the Old Testament kerygma passes on into the New Testament, he says, "This *kerygma* passes through new interpretations more radical than all those undertaken within the sphere of the Old Testament, because they are all subsequently oriented toward the Christ event. Furthermore, "The evangelists [Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John] still offer their reinterpretation of the form of a life of Jesus at a relatively late stage in the formation of the primitive Christian *kerygma*."[52]

But this "reinterpretation" does not mean that older interpretations of a redemptive event are discarded as no longer useful. The "correction" of the interpretation of a past saving event . . . never happens in such a way that an earlier account is disputed. Rather, aspects formerly unnoticed are by virtue of the new revelation now placed in the foreground, creating a correspondingly wider horizon."[53] Elsewhere he uses such words as "completed" and "refined"[54] to define what he means by "reinterpretation," and he also expressly criticizes Von Rad's understanding of later interpretations in redemptive history as invalidating earlier ones. [55] Therefore older interpretations of a redemptive event continue to make valid contributions to our understanding of that event, even though later revelation adds new information about it so that the perspective by which we view it shifts from that provided merely by the earlier interpretations.

On the basis of such an approach Cullmann argues that one hears

what the Bible itself is trying to say, and the very objectivity of this message, arising from the sequence and meaning of the Bible's redemptive events, constitutes the proper object to which faith responds. The very "otherness," or "strangeness," of the biblical message increases, rather than detracts from, the Bible's applicability to life. In that the biblical message is so out of step with human thinking in any age, it calls for a response from men that involves a complete break with the ways they are prone to view things. Cullmann affirms,

> The "application of the subject matter to myself" [paraphrasing the famous statement of Bengel given in the eighteenth century] presupposes that in complete subjection to the text (te totum applica ad textum [Bengel]), silencing my question, I struggle with the "res", the subject matter. But that means that I must be ready to heat something perhaps foreign to me. I must be prepared to hear a faith, an address, running completely contrary to the question I raise, and in which I do not at first feel myself addressed.[56]

At this point George Ladd criticizes Cullmann for not having taken the "second step in biblical theology-that of interpreting how the theology of salvation history can be acceptable today. . . . Biblical theology must be alert to this problem and expound reasons why the categories of biblical thought, admittedly not those of the modern world, have a claim upon our theological/210 thinking".[57] One reason Ladd gives for why men should welcome the claim made in the Bible's history of salvation is that because "Christ is now reigning as Lord and King," and will continue to reign until he has put all enemies under his feet (1 Cor 15:25), therefore "his reign must [eventually] become public in power and glory and his Lordship universally recognized (Phil. 2:10-1 1)."[58] A salvation history in which so many promises already have been fulfilled and which now promises that all the enemies that presently bring us such woe will someday be banished, inspires a confidence for the future which, it would seem, all men would most readily welcome.

 Send comments to dfuller@fuller.edu (Daniel Fuller)

Starting Points | **Biblical Expositions** | **Biblical Theology** | **Not Being a Loser**

Notes

[1] Quoted by W. G. Kummel, *The New Testament: The History of the*

Investigation of its Problems (Nashville/New York: Abingdon, 1972) 22-23.

[2] M. Luther, *An Appeal to the Ruling Class: Martin Luther; Selections from His Writings* (ed. J.Dillenberger; Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1961) 470-471.

[3] J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (LCC 20, 21, ed. J. McNeill; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 21, 1393 (IV, xvii, 26). All further references to the Institutes follow this edition.

[4] G. Ebeling, "The Meaning of 'Biblical Theology'," *Word and Faith* (London: SCM, 1963) 82.

[5] Quoted by C. Briggs, *Biblical Study* (New York: Scribner's, 1884) 332. A century later the Westminster Confession (I, ix) used similar language in enunciating this hermeneutical principle: "The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself, and therefore when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold but one), it must ["may" in the American editioni be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly."

[6] Briggs, *Biblical Study*, 332.

[7] Taken from the Latin given by Ebeling, "Meaning of Biblical Theology," 82.

[8] Ebeling, "Meaning of Biblical Theology," 82.

[9] Quoted by Kuemmel, *History of Investigation*, 26.

[10] Ibid., 24-25.

[11] Quoted by E. Reuss, *History of the Canon of the Holy Scriptures in the Christian Church* (Edinburgh: Hunter, 1891) 322, 329.

[12] *Supra*, n. 5.

[13] Quoted by Kemmel, *History of Investigation*, 30. We note Flacius' reference to Romans 12:6, where Paul exhorts his readers that if they have the gift of prophecy, they are to exercise this gift "according to the analogy of faith" (*kata ten analogian tes pisteos*). Paul's point is that each Christian should exercise his spiritual gift in accordance with the appropriate inner faith, or inclination, that he has by virtue

of that particular gift. So it is clear that "faith" in this passage does not represent the objective body of truth. But that is the sense in which this passage was taken by Flacius, and by Origen, who as nearly as I can determine was the nrst to use the words "according to the analogy of faith" to urge people to conform their language and thinking about a passage of scripture to an *a priori* understanding of what God's Word must be like (*De principiis* 4.26).

14 Cf. *supra*, n. 13.

15 Calvin, *Institutes*, 20, 12-13.

16 J. Calvin, *The Gospel according to John, 1-10* (edd. D. and T. Torrance; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959) 6.

17 J. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses* (4 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, repr. 1950)1, 314.

18 In my opinion, however, Calvin never demonstrated the existence of an unconditional promise in the Pentateuch, or anywhere in the Bible. A major emphasis of his system is that the gospel calling for faith comprises unconditional promises, whereas law appears in every conditional promise. See institutes, 20, 575 (III, ii, 29) where he makes a most basic statement regarding this distinction.

19 Calvin, *The Four Last Books of Moses*, I, 316.

20 Calvin, *Institutes*, 20, 822 (III, xviii, 2).

21 *Supra*, n. 15.

22 To the objection that we must remain with analogy-of-faith hermeneutics or else we will let passages like Matthew 25 and Colossians 3 lead us right back to Rome and salvation by works, my answer is twofold. First, we must determine, regardless of consequences, what the intended meaning of each of the biblical writers is. We must let each one speak for himself and avoid construing him by recourse to what another writer said. Otherwise there is no escape from subjectivism in biblical interpretation. Since the Bible itself does not point to certain parts as the norm to which other parts must conform, one would be free to set up any analogy of faith that he or she chooses so long as one can adduce a handful of verses, preferably from the New Testament, to support it.

23 Second, when we cannot quickly escape from passages running

counter to our theological presuppositions by an analogy-of-faith procedure, then we are driven to hear out a biblical writer with an intensity that is not otherwise possible. I am convinced that the whole problem of faith and works, which analogy-of-faith hermeneutics is most often called in to solve, evaporates as one probes more deeply into biblical theology. A good starting-point for solving this problem is an understanding of what Paul meant by a "work of faith" (1 Thess 1:3; 2 Thess 1:11). Works done from the motivation of faith preclude the possibility of any boasting and give all glory to God, yet these works are so vital to a saving faith that those lacking them are not saved. On this line of reasoning Colossians 3:23-24, Matthew 25, and many other passages could speak for themselves without having to be muzzled by the analogy of faith.

[24] Ebeling, "Meaning of Biblical Theology," 82-83.

[25] Ibid., 83-84.

[26] E. C. Baur, *Vorlesungen ueber neutestamentliche Theologie* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, repr. 1973) 3, provides a list of these books.

[27] This and subsequent quotes from Gabler are taken from Kuemmel, *History of Investigation*, 98-100.

[28] Ibid., 99-100.

[29] B. Weiss, *Biblical Theology of the Neu Testament* (2 vols., 3rd ed.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1882)1, 67.

[30] Ibid., 68.

[31] Ibid., 69.

[32] J. Weiss, *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God* (Lives of Jesus Series; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 60.

[33] Ibid., 68.

[34] Quoted by Kuemmel, *History of Investigation*, 228.

[35] K. Stendahl, "Contemporary Biblical Theology," *IDB* (4 vols.; Nashville/New York: Abingdon, 1962) 1,418.

[36] J. Weiss, *Jesus' Proclamation*, 81.

[37] Stendahl, "Biblical Theology," 419.

[38] I am indebted to Krister Stendahl, in his article on "Biblical Theology," cited above, for this apt way of stating the difference between the exposition of a text's meaning and its application for today.

[39] K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936)1/1, 11-12.

[40] K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (6th ed.; New York/Toronto: Oxford, 1933) 7. This is a statement Barth made in his foreword to the second edition of this book in 1921.

[41] K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956)1/2, 118.

[42] Stendahl, "Biblical Theology," 427.

[43] Ibid., 420.

[44] Ibid., 422. Barth opposes letting biblical theology have this sovereignty in determining Christian teachings. He regards it as having an equal share of the responsibility along with/212 dogmatic history, systematic theology, and practical theology. "Biblical and exegetical theology can become a field of wild chasing and charging when it bows to the idol of a supposedly normative historicism and when therefore, without regard to the positively significant yet also warning ecclesiastical and dogmatic history, or to its co-responsibility in the world of systematic theology (in which it may perhaps make a dilettante incursion), or to the fact that ultimately theology in the form of practical theology must aim to give meaningful directions to the ministry of the community in the world, it claims autonomy as a kind of Vatican within the whole" (Barth, *Church Dogmatics* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1962] IV/3, 881). But in reply we ask, How else can the principle of *sola scriptura* be realized unless we seek to remain silent and let each biblical writer speak for himself, in his own terms? In the earlier parts of this essay we have heard the warning, we believe, from what happened at the Reformation and afterwards when analogy-of-faith hermeneutics, such as Barth advocates, led theology down the road to scholasticism.

[45] 0. Cullmann, "The Necessity and Function of Higher Criticism," *The Early Church* (ed. J. Higgins; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956)16.

[46] Ibid., 13. Note Cullmann's use of Barth's key word, "transparency" (supra, n. 38).

[47] 0. Cullmann, *Salvation in History* (New York: Harper, 1967) 68-69. A Lutheran, Cullmann nevertheless believes Luther's rule of faith ("What urges Christ," *supra,* n. 7) needs to be modified to include the whole of redemptive history (*Salvation in History*, 297-98.

[48] For Cullmann's understanding that the canon imposed itself upon the church and was not established by some arbitrary bias in the early church, see *Salvation in History*, 293-304, and his essay, "The Tradition," *The Early Church*, 55-99.

[49] Cullmann, *Salvation in History*, 297.

[50] Ibid., 292. There is, I believe, a similarity between the sort of theological treatise which Cullmann envisions, and that which Jonathan Edwards hoped to live long enough to develop from his *History of the Work of Redemption*, which was a series of sermons he gave in 1739. His son re-edited this series after his father's death so they would read as a continuous treatise. It begins with God's creation of the world (and even his purpose in creating it) and inquires how each successive redemptive event, such as the call of Abraham, the Exodus, and so on, makes its distinctive contribution to the realization of God's one great purpose in history. At the beginning of this work Jonathan Edwards said, "In order to see how a design is carried on, we must first know what the design is. . . . Therefore that the great works and dispensations of God that belong to this great affair of redemption might not appear like confusion to you, I would set before you briefly the main things designed to be accomplished in this great work, to accomplish which God . . . will continue working to the end of the world, when the work will appear completely finished" (J. Edwards, *The Work of Redemption. The Works of President Edwards* [4 vols.; New York: Leavirt & Allen, 1858] I, 302). In the editorial introduction to this work, the son remarked that his father ". . . had planned a body of divinity, in a new method, and in the form of a history (Ibid., I, 296. Italics added).

[51] Cullmann, *Salvation in History*, 298.

[52] Cullmann, "The Necessity and Function of Higher Criticism," 15.

Cullmann believes that such antinomies exist in scripture because he says, "That there were distorting influences involved in the interpretation of the historical character and the kerygmatic meaning of the event should certainly not be disputed" (*Salvation in History*, 96). He thinks, however, that he can detect which interpretation is a distortion and can correct it by looking more closely at the event which it was trying to interpret. My problem with this is that redemptive events in scripture are always so inextricably bound up with interpretations that I despair of ever separating an event from the interpretation given it by the one reporting it. Furthermore, even if one could remove all interpretive features from a reported event, one could not then work back from this bare event to decide which interpretation was more valid. For example, knowing only that a man named Jesus rose from the dead carries with it no implication of its significance.

[53] Cullmann, *Salvation in History*, 113.

[54] Ibid., 88.

[55] Ibid., 112, 136.

[56] Ibid., 88.

[57] Ibid., 70.

[58] G. Ladd, "The Search for Perspective," Int 25 (1971) 48. Stendahl ("Biblical Theology,"421) voices the same criticism. It should be noted, however, that Cullmann deliberately avoids pointing to any psychological or existential need which the biblical message fulfills, because of the danger that such a need would become an "analogy of faith" by which every biblical line of thought would then be interpreted. This is what has happened in Bultmann's thinking, and Cullmann wants none of that.

[59] G. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 630.