Overcoming Historicism's Dividing Wall of Hostility

BY DON COLLETT

In the wake of the breakdown of historical-critical modes of reading the Bible, a new movement—the theological interpretation of Scripture—seeks to heal the rift between biblical and theological studies, in both the academy and the Church. Four books reviewed here introduce major facets of the movement.

The second half of the twentieth century witnessed the beginnings of a rather tumultuous period of stocktaking and reevaluation in the field of biblical exegesis. In the wake of the breakdown of historical-critical modes of reading Scripture, a new movement arose that seeks to heal the rift between biblical and theological studies, in both the academy and the Church. Styling itself "the theological interpretation of Scripture," the movement has many facets and is arguably one of the more exciting and promising developments in the past two-hundred years of biblical exegesis. Of course, whether one judges the latter assertion to be true or false largely depends upon one's view of the nature and goals of biblical exegesis, as the following four books helpfully clarify in a number of different ways.

In *The Word of God for the People of God: An Entryway to the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2010, 235 pp., $18.00), J. Todd Billings offers an accessible introduction to a number of topics of special concern for those who are interested in the recovery of a robustly theological approach to the reading of Scripture. His discussion of the dynamic and functional character of the rule of faith is one of the more helpful introductory discussions of the topic available. Billings construes

the rule as a theological context that is authorized by Scripture (p. 22), and therefore may properly serve as a hermeneutical guideline for reading Scripture. While the rule's theological logic manifests itself in narrative, catechetical, and creedal forms, it is not to be identified with these forms, as though it were a fixed formula (p. 18, n. 14). Rather, the rule functions as a theological context delimiting the proper range of acceptable readings. While it may be stated in formal terms, the rule of faith is primarily functional rather than formal in character, owing to its dynamic and dialectical relation to the ongoing task of biblical exegesis.

Billings shares the concern of other writers canvassed in this review that revelation, inspiration, and canon have been dislocated from their Trinitarian context and given an independent integrity of their own in order to serve in the cause of foundationalist enterprises (i.e., projects that attempt to derive all beliefs from certain basic truths). Important also is his emphasis upon the Trinitarian and ontological framework authorized by the exegesis of Scripture and presupposed by the rule of faith (p. 74). By stressing the Trinitarian character of Scripture's frame of reference, Billings is able to avoid the sort of Christo-monism that ironically ignores the Trinitarian context that enables Christocentric accounts of Scripture to function in the first instance. In keeping with the stance of other books in this review (excepting Wright), he offers a largely positive analysis of the early and medieval church's use of allegory and the fourfold sense (e.g., the *Quadriga*), rightly recognizing that the Reformers did not depart from its inherent theological logic, but rather sought to reformulate it in a way that "retained the content of the medieval fourfold account. … In many ways, Calvin's approach is actually quite close to earlier authors" (p. 170; cf. pp. 178-179). Here Billings builds upon the insights of Richard Muller and other students of Calvin's exegesis.

Billings' last chapter offers sage advice on the spiritual and communal character of biblical interpretation. Especially helpful are his warnings about reducing theological interpretation to "method" (p. 195). While reading Scripture is a spiritual discipline that involves the use of what might be called scientific methods and tools (e.g., historical, lexical, and genre studies), it simply cannot be reduced to the use of such methods. The Spirit calls us as readers into deeper union with Christ through the biblical text, not by reducing that text to abstract information, as though honey is appreciated when we have understood the abstract dictionary definition of the word "honey," but by enabling us to taste its sweetness: "Reading Scripture," Billings argues, "is about discerning a mystery, the mystery of the triune God. It should not be reduced to conveying historical information from which we draw our own application" (pp. 212-213). Rather, it should always be borne in mind that Scripture is the instrument of the Triune God's communicative fellowship.

Turning now to Stephen E. Fowl's *Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009, 108 pp., $13.00), we find a continuation of a number of the essential themes and topics identified by Billings. This small primer, which is part of the Cascade Companions series, is intended to serve as an introductory guide and companion to the theological interpretation of Scripture. It is a model of lucidity and brevity. Experienced readers in the literature of "theological interpretation" will quickly realize, however, that Fowl's brevity is not to be confused with superficiality. Although brief, the book gives ample evidence of a deep familiarity and sophistication that can only come from years of navigating crucial topics of concern for theological interpretation. Given the confines of space, this review cannot hope to do justice to the many nuances at work in Fowl's book. Suffice it for present purposes to call attention to some of what I take to be the more interesting features of his study.

When it comes to navigating the nature and purpose of Scripture, theological interpreters often draw an analogy between the two natures of Christ and the character of Scripture as both a human and divine document. Invoking this Christological analogy is appropriate, Fowl argues, as long as it is not used to argue the necessity of a specific interpretive practice such as historical criticism (p. 3). The difficulty is that on the basis of this analogy, some have done just that. As a result, the Christological analogy between the two natures of Christ and Scripture's human and divine character has resulted in two claims: first, the *necessity* of using historical criticism to avoid Docetism (the belief that Christ's human form was merely an illusion), and second, the claim that Scripture should be interpreted "like any other book" (pp. 4-5). However, once the Bible is interpreted "like any other book," the problem becomes how to move from there to the claim that, in view of its divinely inspired character, the Bible is *not* just like any other book. The usual outcome of this procedure in the hands of historical critics was to situate the Bible in its ancient near Eastern world "without remainder."

The writers canvassed in this review share the concern that revelation, inspiration, and canon have been dislocated from their Trinitarian context and given an independent integrity of their own.

Like Billings, Fowl rejects the idea that Bible should be studied "like any other book," *if* by that one means that the Bible can be approached neutrally, apart from a theological and ontological frame of reference. Once one

accepts the mistaken notion that Scripture can be interpreted neutrally, apart from a particular view about God's nature, moving from the task of exegesis to theological and practical concerns become second order affairs at best, rather than realities that are implicit in the act of interpretation from the outset. Fowl also warns against detaching Scriptural revelation from its context within the triune life and saving economy of God, the effect of which is to undercut its primary function and purpose as a Spirit-inspired instrument for bringing us into communion with God. Following the lead of Aquinas, he argues that the inspiration of Scripture must be rooted in God's providential ordering of things, and not in inspired human authorial intent *per se*, which is but one component in the larger economy by which God inspired Scripture. It is not that the concern with authorial intent is unimportant, Fowl suggests, so much as it is *insufficient*. It is simply too narrow a basis to build a culture of Bible reading upon, because it fails to do justice to the richness of sense-making at work in God's providential ordering of things, the meaning of which is rendered by the Spirit speaking in Scripture.

Fowl prioritizes a theological and ecclesial approach to the task of biblical interpretation. Like Billings, he recognizes that certain practices and habits often have far more impact upon our ability to experience Scripture's transforming power than the use of a proper 'scientific method' for accessing Scripture's meaning. Thus he argues that it was not differing biblical interpretations *per se* that caused church division during the Reformation, since such differences have always been present from the earliest days in the Church. Rather it is the fact that these differences took place in an interpretive context that was separated from other Christian practices, for example, the practices of repentance and humility, which caused the division. These practices are crucial, because they help inform how Christians should relate to one another in the midst of interpretive differences. Fowl rightly notes: "In the absence of these practices, Christians cannot expect that any hermeneutical theory will keep their scriptural interpretation from leading them into various sinful practices" (p. 68).

Christian Smith's *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism Is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2012, 240 pp., $16.99) may be read as a sociological analysis of evangelical reading habits that also attempts to offer a constructive theological alternative to a set of problems raised for biblical interpretation in the modern era. Smith questions the fundamental assumptions undergirding evangelical versions of what he styles "biblicism," that is, a particular understanding of biblical authority rather than biblical authority *per se*. At the same time he calls for a more truly evangelical account of the Bible that will do a better job of honoring its authority.

He begins by marshaling empirical evidence to support his claim that in practice, multiple, diverse, and incompatible readings of Scripture are legion among evangelicals. For Smith, this "pervasive interpretive pluralism" (hereafter, PIP) is a problem for the particular view of biblical authority he calls "biblicism" because it renders a coherent account of biblical interpretation "impossible." Hence his title: *The Bible Made Impossible*. Smith recognizes that on strictly logical grounds, he cannot discredit biblicism's theory of biblical authority simply by pointing to empirical observations of its inconsistency in practice. For it could be, as Smith notes, "that biblicist theory is correct and that actual, empirical biblicist practices and experiences are often compromised. Life sometimes works this way" (p. 78). His argument seems to be that while one cannot make a logically compelling case against biblicism, there is simply too much inconsistency *in practice* for this qualification to save biblicism from being evacuated of any real content that goes beyond a purely theoretical, abstract, and therefore empty claim. Stated differently, biblicism is theoretically possible, but is it *really* possible? At the very least, Smith argues, the mountain of evidence sustaining the existence of PIP should cause biblicists to consider the possibility their theory is wrong. Yet they remain intransigent. Why is this?

Smith notes the influence of bad philosophies of language and science upon biblicists. On the one hand, paradigm-protecting approaches to organizing the diversity of Scripture generate canons within the canon. On the other, modernism's mathematical and scientific rationalism leads biblicists to effectively regard the Bible as a set of algebraic equations, thereby confusing mathematical and scientific ideas of precision with accuracy and truth. Sophisticated views of the philosophy of language and science are either unknown in popular forms of biblicism, or if known, exploited for purely negative and apologetic purposes, thereby precluding their constructive appropriation on any level.

The practices of repentance and humility are crucial as we interpret the Bible. Without them, Fowl notes, "Christians cannot expect that any hermeneutical theory will keep their scriptural interpretation from leading them into various sinful practices."

Among the more interesting answers that Smith gives to this question are found in his third chapter, which is largely rooted in sociological observations. As it turns out, biblicists do not get out much. They talk among themselves within socially and ecclesially constructed rooms of their own making, never bothering to open up windows to let in fresh air

from the outside. When one adds to this the sociological observation that the need to reinforce one's own identity is often tied to the need to differentiate oneself from others, this isolation is compounded even further (pp. 62-63). In short, because difference is essential to identity, biblicists may be subconsciously resisting "the idea of the biblical differences among them actually being settled" (p. 63). Smith's discussion of "homophily," which he defines as natural attraction to those who think in the same terms we do, also helps to explain, at least in part, why biblicism is so resistant to change. Evangelical biblicists regularly underestimate the influence of social networks and social location upon how people process Scripture (pp. 64-65; 195-196). Because of this, they fall into the trap of believing that if they can just get people all believing the right things, everything else would take care of itself. While one can go too far with this and foster a sort of social determinism that ignores the Bible's ability, through the Spirit, to overturn and counter the influence of what Smith (following Peter Berger) calls "plausibility structures," in my opinion Smith is right to point out that most biblicists regularly underestimate the impact their social context and location has upon how they hear Scripture. Many biblicists are Cartesians who view people as disembodied selves, or if you prefer, ideas with feet.

The second half of Smith's book offers a more Christocentric approach to understanding the nature and purpose of Scripture, an account that shares a number of features in common with the concerns of both Billings and Fowl. Here and there Smith's tone borders on stridency, especially in contexts where he is making rather totalizing claims about evangelicalism in general (pp. 37, 60). At times this makes it difficult to hear some of the more valid concerns of the book. In most cases, however, I found that reading the qualifications he makes in the book's endnotes were valuable for off-setting and clarifying possible misunderstandings arising from the tone of his prose.

In *Scripture and the Authority of God: How to Read the Bible Today* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011, 210 pp., $14.99), N. T. Wright seeks to develop an account of biblical authority that is not rooted in Scripture *per se*, but in the exercise of God's authority in and through Scripture. This bears a family resemblance to the concerns of Billings, Fowl, and Smith, to avoid an account of biblical authority that detaches it from its theological subject matter (though this point is rather theologically underdeveloped in Wright's book). The book is written at a very popular level and offers a history of biblical interpretation from the early church through the eras of the medieval and Reformation church, as well as the Enlightenment and the beginnings of modernity.

Wright has a heavy investment in the hermeneutical categories of story and narrative, which in contemporary evangelical hermeneutics now seem to have eclipsed earlier categories such as salvation history. Unlike the treatments of Billings and Fowl, and to some extent even Smith, Wright takes a rather dim view of the Church's use of allegory and the medieval fourfold sense, arguing that it was essentially means for getting around the "less savory" passages of the Old Testament. On the other hand, Wright does do an admirable job of distinguishing the view of Anglican divine Richard Hooker (ca. 1554-1600) on the importance of "reason" in relation to Scripture and tradition from modern rationalism's notion of the same (p. 80). Moreover, he does not make the Enlightenment the source of all evil and reduce it to a vast black hole in the history of God's providential dealings with the Church (p. 83). The most stimulating aspects of Wright's book are his theological and exegetical treatments of the issues of Sabbath and monogamy. These illustrations of his approach to Scripture are well executed and based upon penetrating insights into the theological nature of the two issues.

All four of the books reviewed here are readable introductions to the major facets of the theological interpretation of Scripture and the resulting revisions to modern ways of making sense of the Bible. My recommendation is to purchase and read them, but to read them constructively as well as critically in order to benefit from their teaching.

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