Reading The Bible As The Word of God

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1. Words and the Word

Biblical Interpretation in Crisis

As is now widely acknowledged, the fault lines which run through the Christian Church on matters of theology and ethics, evangelism and apologetics, are manifestations of a tectonic shift in world-views in which 'hermeneutics' or Biblical interpretation plays a central rôle.[1] To paraphrase Lincoln's Second Inaugural, all interpret the same Bible, but the interpretation of all cannot be equally valid or the Bible ceases to have any coherent authority. While the study of hermeneutics since Schleiermacher has held out the dream of a path between ancient text and modern believer, it has produced instead a dense undergrowth of theories whose applicability to central Christian affirmations is confusing at best.

My goal in this paper is to argue that the classic way of reading Scripture is in terms of its *literal sense* and that this approach remains normative and credible for the Church today. I am aware of the danger involved in attempting to rehabilitate the word 'literal', as its meaning is frequently caricatured or trivialized. Since the advent of the scientific revolution, 'literal' has often been taken narrowly to mean 'factual' or 'empirically verifiable'.[2] Hence some fundamentalists have sought to 'prove' the literal character of Genesis 1 by means of 'creation sense'.[3] Some liberals, on the other hand, have attacked plain Biblical teaching as mindless 'literalism'.[4] Despite all this potential confusion of terminology, literal interpretation best describes what it means to read Scripture as the authoritative Word of God.

I begin with a meditation on the Johannine presentation of Word and Spirit as a window into the question of the Bible as the inspired Word of God. I shall then discuss the Church's tradition of literal interpretation as the appropriate response to its doctrine of verbal inspiration. Finally, I shall return to a restatement of the approach to the literal sense of the Bible which is faithful to the past yet aware of problematic issues in modern hermeneutics.

My hope and expectation is that readers will follow the argument to the end and apply to it the classic tests of truth: its conformity to Scripture and to the faith of the Church. I do not see this statement as a final word but rather as an invitation to a renewed discussion of the foundations of

Christian doctrine and identity.

The Word of God and the Literal Sense

The literal sense of Scripture can only be rightly understood as a *reflex* of the Word of God, that is to say, the appropriate medium of understanding verbal revelation. When after each reading in the liturgy we announce 'The Word of the Lord', we are attesting to the authoritative character of a particular text in all its specificity, even as we are also claiming that text as a part of the whole message of salvation proclaimed by the Church in word and sacrament.

The Prologue to John's Gospel sets *Logos* as the supreme category in the understanding of the revelatory activity of the Triune God in his ordering of creation, his prophetic message to Israel, his incarnate Person and work, and in the believing response of the community to his revealed glory.[5]

'In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.' The inner-Trinitarian love of the Father and the Son is bathed in the light of the divine speech, what Athanasius called God's 'intimate locution'. As Pannenberg says: 'The way in which Jesus speaks of the Father is the only access to knowledge of the Father, but also of the Son, for only through the Father is Jesus known as the Son (Matt. 11:27).[6]

'By Him all things were made . . .' God's Word upholds the cosmos in its orderliness, and humanity in God's image participates *mirabile dictu* in created rationality. The Word of God not only forms us after himself but makes room for our free response. Psalm 19 captures the manifold wisdom of God's Word: 'The heavens are telling the glory of God . . . the law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul . . . May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight'. God's word is embedded in the creation, revealed in his law, and returned to him in the praises of his saints.

'He came to his own, but his own received him not.' The Word of God entered into the space-time matrix of historic Israel, the bearer of the oracles of God. And although the Old Testament forms of the Word were shadows and types, in Israel too, 'the Word of God was mediated in such a way that a divinely prepared form of obedient response was included within it.'[7] Israel's response was above all embodied in the hymns and psalms of the Royal Servant who must suffer rejection by Israel, his most intimate enemy (Ps. 41:9; Isa. 53:3; Zech. 13:7).

'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth . . .' The Word of God, fragmented in creation and history, becomes united once for all in the God-Man, Jesus Christ. In him the Word not only takes on human garb but is crucified for our sake, and the Gospel becomes forever 'the word of the Cross', which is folly to worldly wisdom but grace and truth to those who believe. In his incarnate and risen glory he makes known ('exegetes') the hidden Father.

'. . . and we beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.' The incarnation of the Word is not left without witness. The apostolic 'we' is included in the revelation of his glory. In the incarnate I AM, being and knowing are united and offered as light and life to those who are born of his Spirit. And the proper mode of knowing the in-breaking truth of the Gospel is faith in the name of Jesus Christ the only-begotten Son (John 20:30f.; Acts 4:12).

In what way can we draw an analogy between the Incarnate Word and the written words of the Bible? In one sense Scripture is not identical with the divine Word or an object rivalling him in glory or calling for worship (Rev. 19:10f.). Jesus Christ is both the Form and Object of the Biblical witness; his royal image is the stamp impressed in the substance of Scripture. In this age the written words are the mirror in which we see him; when the perfect comes, we shall see him face to face (1 Cor. 13:12).[8] But there is no getting behind (or in front of) the verbal testimony of Scripture. The Divine Essence in its Personal relations is 'Logical', and his revelation comes in words and deeds interpreted by words (John 14:11). This revelation is received by his rational creatures, irrationally rejected, and finally enfleshed in the Person of the Son, whose grace calls forth a new people with ears to hear his Gospel.

As the literal sense of Scripture is the reflex of the saving Word entering our world, so also it is the *inspired letter* of God, the work of the Holy Spirit (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20f.). Thus the Catechism says that we call the Scriptures the Word of God 'because God inspired their human authors and still speaks to us through the Bible' (American Book of Common Prayer, p. 883). Once again, John emphasizes the Trinitarian context of the inspiration of Scripture.

'These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you (John 14:25f.).' The words of the incarnate Son, his commandments, are the substance of Scripture; it is the rôle of the Spirit to recall and exegete these words. The Spirit brings no new revelation but speaks through the apostolic word: 'He will bear witness to me, and you also are witnesses . . .' (John 15:26f.). At the crisis point of history, the Lord Jesus promises that the Spirit will come and reveal the truth of his words and work through the Gospel.

'When he comes, he will convict the world . . .' (John 16:8). The gap between appearance and reality—Koheleth's chase after wind, the flickering shadows of Socrates' cave—is closed by the Spirit of Truth, who no longer speaks in figures but transparently of the Father (John 16:12f., 25ff.). The Spirit, who is Author of the created forms of human speech, now opens these categories to the Incarnate Truth of God, evoking faith as the only way of knowing.

The epistemological rôle of the Spirit is crucial to understanding

Scripture as literal truth. Paul's rhetorical contrast of letter and spirit in 2 Corinthians 3–4 has often been misunderstood in this regard. In an elaborate *midrash* on Exodus 34, Paul identifies the 'letter' with the Mosaic *Torah*, which despite its divine origin, operates within the sign-world of human command (2 Cor. 3:7ff.). By contrast the apostolic 'statement of the truth' (4:2) breaks forth as new light from the Creator God, and this unveiled Gospel is received not by compulsion but in a receptive freedom which is itself a work of the Spirit (3:17f.). Paul's denigration of the letter is not about the mode of verbal revelation; on the contrary, he sees an enhanced rôle of the inspired word in converting hardened hearts. Thus the word of God can now be called the 'sword of the Spirit' (Eph. 6:17; Heb. 4:12).

The Literal Sense and the Tradition of Interpretation

In coming to his own, the Word of God emerges from, yet transcends, the tradition of Israel and the Church. The very idea of tradition itself presupposes a determinate sense of Scripture, since tradition by definition passes on something other than itself. Jewish interpreters, for all their exegetical virtuosity, regarded the letter of Scripture as normative for life in the covenant and in the age to come.[9] Early Christian apologetics toward Judaism assumed a common sky under which the truth of God could be disputed.

The great challenge faced by the apostles was to reconcile the interpretation of the Old Testament with the fulfilling revelatory event of Jesus Christ. In one of the earliest records of apostolic tradition, Paul states that Jesus' saving death and resurrection happened 'according to the Scriptures' (1 Cor. 15:1–11). Paul's tradition undoubtedly employed specific Old Testament *testimonia*, an exegetical method fully at home in the Jewish *milieu*.[10] At the same time, the Gospel was proclaimed as a new covenant of the Spirit that could not be simply poured out from the carnal wineskins of Jewish exegesis.

Gnosticism proved to be a snare to early Christians because it appeared to carry the common distinction between carnal and spiritual senses to its logical conclusion. However, the Gnostics radically reinterpreted the New Testament sense of flesh and spirit. Gnostics rewrote Scripture in such a way that its literal referents (God, creation and law) were seen to be essentially demonic.[11] As can be seen by contrast with Christian Gnostic texts, the apostolic development of historical allegory, or typology, was not a departure from literal interpretation but a reorientation of the *corpus* of Scripture from the perspective of the Gospel (1 Peter 1:10ff.), a move that would lead inevitably to the two-fold testament of the Christian Bible.

The Rule of Faith, that summary of doctrine which the Fathers used in their combat with heresy, presupposes a literal meaning of Scripture.[12] At the same time the Rule of Faith gave a 'theological' focus to Christian hermeneutics which could embrace such diverse exegetes as Origen and

Theodore of Mopsuestia.[13] The debate between the Schools of Alexandria and Antioch temporarily restricted the literal sense to the 'carnal' and 'narrative' dimension of Scripture.[14] Augustine, however, restored the normative balance of the letter as a key to the spiritual meaning of the text.[15] The Augustinian synthesis soon unravelled, however, into the mediaeval distinction of levels of meaning. Thus the literal sense once again was seen as being *transcended* in allegory or *supplemented* in the scholastic distinction of a 'double literal sense'.[16]

The outbreak of exegetical theology in the sixteenth century worked to restore the fullness of the literal sense of Scripture. The Reformers' use of typology or 'figural reading' was not a quaint remnant of mediaeval allegory but a vigorous reassertion of the unity of the testaments and of the narrative and doctrinal dimensions of Scripture. Although the Reformers were united in their basic approach, each emphasized particular elements of Scripture as the inspired Word. Luther saw the Gospel of Christ as the hermeneutical focus of both testaments, in its rôle as promise to be received by faith.[17] For Calvin the key to Scriptural interpretation was the activity of the Holy Spirit, who inspired the words and gave inner testimony to the believer.[18] Richard Hooker emphasized the rôle of 'right reason' in correlating the truths of nature and Biblical revelation with regard to the proper ends of each, the latter being eternal salvation in Christ.[19]

The modern grammatical-historical approach, or 'higher criticism', represents both continuity and crisis for the literal sense. The Reformers' attention to the grammar and logic of the text was developed through painstaking application of the developing disciplines of philology and the social sciences. At the same time exegesis of a text focused on the reconstructed intention of an original author whose life setting and aims were radically discontinuous with those of later redactors. The schism of canonical text and original author was a kind of Cartesian stake driven into the heart of the literal sense. While a boon to research in ancient Near Eastern and Graeco-Roman culture, the historical method presents immense difficulties for reading and preaching the Bible in the faith community.[20] It would be fair to say that all subsequent theories of interpretation have had to grapple with the loss of innocence in literal reading caused by higher criticism.

In reacting to historical criticism, with its distancing of author, text, and reader, 'romantic' hermeneutics has attempted to recover the power of the Biblical word by abandoning the notion of literal reference. The interpreter begins with the grammar of the text and then makes an intuitive leap into the consciousness of the author (Schleiermacher), or is called to authentic existence by the 'Word' (Bultmann), or identifies with a paradigmatic experience of oppression (liberation theology), or enters into the 'world of the text' (Ricoeur). Contemporary hermeneutics descending from Schleiermacher is founded on the dogma of historicism and its corollary

the 'hermeneutical circle', which teach that human consciousness cannot transcend its own time-bound *milieu*.[21] Hence *experience* replaces literal content as the *locus* of Biblical authority. Philosophically, this position has never been able to escape the charge of logical absurdity: 'Historicism thrives on the fact that it inconsistently exempts itself from its own verdict about all human thought.'[22] Historicists insist that their theory—and their's alone!—be taken literally and for all time. Historicism thus wrongly makes absolute the difficulty of human communication from person to person and age to age.[23]

Another attempt to re-establish the literal sense of the Bible without ignoring the work of higher criticism is the 'canonical approach' of Brevard Childs. Childs's project is a massive one: providing new forms of introduction, critical commentary, and integrative Biblical theology. What is sometimes overlooked is his call to recover a form of the literal sense of Scripture as a necessary aspect of the canon.[24] 'Canonical intentionality' is that cooperative inspiring work of the Holy Spirit and traditioning work of the community of faith which produces a final text of Scripture normative for all future generations of believers. The aim of literal interpretation in the post-critical age will be the same as that of previous generations but with a greater consciousness of the diachronic witness of the Biblical text. Childs's view shares some characteristics of conservative post-modern theology in seeking to re-establish the 'grammar' of the faith tradition of the Church.[25]

The reaction to the higher critical method among Evangelicals has been ongoing since the eighteenth century and has focused on defending the literal sense of the Bible in terms of verbal inerrancy. This defence is often philosophically rigorous and exegetically sensitive to the variety of genres found in Scripture.[26] While affirming the variety of Biblical forms and imagery, J.I. Packer nevertheless emphasizes that the Bible is 'a corpus of God-given instruction relating to Jesus Christ. . .'[27] For Packer, Scripture is accommodated divine speech:

> God has put His words into the mouths, and caused them to be written in the writings, of persons whose individuality, as people of their time, was in no way lessened by the fact of their being thus over-ruled . . .[28]

Other Evangelicals would question the paradigm of 'divine speaking' as the key to the literal sense. They would emphasize the freedom (under the overarching sovereignty of God) of the authors and editors to respond to God's revelatory deeds and oracles.[29] For them, inerrancy (if the term is retained) is not an architectonic principle of inspiration but 'simply means that the Bible can be trusted in what it teaches and affirms'.[30]

All exegetes and theologians have had the task of 'rightly dividing the word of truth,' of moving from the letter of the Biblical text to its sense or meaning. Thus interpretation is inevitably dialectical, involving text (words), reference (Word), and reader (significance). Dialectic, like a

dance, requires a lead partner. In classic hermeneutics, the literal sense leads the dance of interpretation; in modern (and Gnostic) views, the consciousness of the interpreter or interpreting community governs the final sense of Scripture.

A Preliminary Definition

The literal sense is that meaning appropriate to the nature of the Bible as the Word of God in the words of men. As the Word of God, Scripture is imprinted by the Gospel, that obedient movement of the divine Son Jesus Christ from the transcendent Father to his own sinful people and back to him to the praise of his glory (Phil. 2:1, 6–11).[31] As an inspired human word, it participates in natural forms of speech and the historical traditions of the communities of Israel and the Church, even as it summons people to faith and new life in Christ.

There are three implications which follow from this definition. The first is the referential quality of the text. Scripture 'means what it says', and the 'what' must refer to something else outside the text. Hence translation and exegesis necessarily accompany exposition and homiletics. Since the reference can be something visible or invisible, or both, the literal sense is the natural basis for figuration, allegory, and ambiguity.[32] It is a basic misunderstanding of the literal sense to miss the organic link between literal sign and the 'thing signified'. Ironically, when this unity is denied and language is seen to be essentially metaphorical, as it is in many contemporary theories, it can no longer mean anything in particular and becomes a kind of verbal black hole.[33]

The second implication of the literal sense is the existence of an authorial purpose. When I first wrote these words, I hoped to convey a particular meaning to the Episcopal House of Bishops. In this version I have rephrased my argument in order to respond to criticism and to address another audience.[34] I have chosen to speak of authorial purpose rather than 'intentionality' because intention is often confused with a state of mind, whereas the purpose looks to the end or design of a writing. Purpose also leaves open the possibility that an author's design could be further elaborated by others.

The divine inspiration of Scripture raises a special set of questions. Who is the true Author of a particular book of the Bible? Is it possible for the human author to mean one thing and God something totally different? While the idea of human and divine authors working at cross-purposes may be accepted as theoretically possible (Gen. 50:20), it goes against God's character as truthful (2 Tim. 2:13). Like iconographers, Biblical writers and editors experienced inspiration within a tradition. Prophets who claim to be direct recipients of revelation present their new word by a creative synthesis of tradition, and their disciples reorder their oracles into a shape consonant with the overall shape of the faith.[35] Jesus defined his mission by appropriating in unexpected ways the figures of the Suffering

Servant and the Son of Man (Mark 10:45). Thus the *sensus plenior* of Scripture is a function of God speaking 'at many times and in many ways' through the partial purposes of his agents and gathering them together into one great canonical Design. It is in this sense that one can speak of a 'canonical intentionality'.[36]

The final implication of the literal sense is the clarity of Scripture. Traditionally theologians have distinguished between the external and internal clarity of the Bible. While the Bible declares the mysteries of God, it does not do so esoterically. Meir Sternberg refers to the Bible's particular external clarity as that of 'foolproof composition':

> . . . Biblical narrative is virtually impossible to counterread. The essentials are made transparent to all comers: the story line,the world order, the value system. The old and new controversies among exegetes, spreading to every possible topic, must not blind us (as it usually does them) to the measure of agreement in this regard. The bedrock agreement is neither accidental nor self-evident. Not accidental, because it derives from the Bible's overarching principle of composition, its strategy of strategies, maneuvering between the truth and the whole truth; nor self-evident, because such a principle does not often govern literature operating at the Bible's level of sophistication and interpretive drama.[37]

The relevance of Biblical clarity is especially important given the global context of the Church's mission. The diversity of language, culture and education among those who hear the Gospel demands a plain sense of the Biblical offer of salvation. Western Anglicans, with their perception of the overwhelming difficulty of cross-cultural communication, can learn something from the 'naive' confidence of African, Hispanic, and Asian Anglican evangelists and catechists that the Word of God can go out to all the earth.

The Bible's external clarity does not mean that all who read will obey.[38] Internal clarity is the work of the Triune God, evoking faith in the heart: 'For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness", who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ' (2 Cor. 2:6). The focusing of the rays of God's word in the Gospel of Christ is a new creative act, 'what eye hath not seen nor ear heard', and this act marvellously includes those who are being saved and bestows on his saints 'hearing with faith' (1 Cor. 1:18; 2:9; Gal. 3:2). There is no ground for boasting about our knowledge of God's word because 'no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God' (1 Cor. 2:11).

2. The Fullness of Scripture as God's Word

Three Dimensions of Scripture

Contrary to the opinion that literalism involves a narrowing of Biblical meaning, a proper literal sense is rich and complex, reflecting the very

character of God, out of whose fullness we have received grace upon grace. A literal sense actually guarantees the *possibility* of multiple meanings (or 'allegories' in the broadest sense). One might draw a limited analogy to a dictionary entry, in which one word has a number of distinct, though overlapping senses. Meaning, of course, is not only lexical but syntactic, which further enriches the tapestry. Finally, Biblical language claims to be a vehicle of revelation, by which words can come to say something new in the service of the in-breaking Word of God.

The inspired letter of Scripture, far from being flat, is spacious, encompassing poetic, truth, and salvation-historical dimensions. Like the three-fold cord that is not easily broken (Eccles. 4:12), any Biblical text will reflect its own particular configuration of these dimensions.[39]

The poetic dimension of the Bible—I am using 'poetic' in the broadest sense of human artistry—is the self-effacing activity of the Word of God coming to us in fully human words. When God speaks, he lisps in human language forms, and the Spirit guides the Biblical writers in speaking of him (2 Peter 1:21).[40] Literal interpretation thus requires careful attention to the syntax of a Biblical passage: word usage, grammatical structure, literary devices, and genre. Since the Bible is ancient literature, it is important to employ historical tools of comparative linguistics and higher criticism along with literary analysis of the text itself.

Literal sense is 'genre-related'. We must constantly ask: what kind of writing is this? Form and genre criticism have heightened our awareness of the diversity of Biblical revelation as it comes to us through legend, novella, chronicle, testament, hymn and lament, admonition and proverb, dialogue and love song, judgment and salvation oracle, gospel, epistle and apocalypse. The distinctness of Biblical literary forms is a witness to God's involvement in the whole life of his people and also in the various affections of the human soul. The whole Bible is thus a resource book for the believer, 'a mass of strange delights', as the poet George Herbert described it, 'where we may wish and take'. Put another way, Scripture is like a musical score: only as the words and melody are performed do we hear the creation of the Author.[41]

The truth dimension of Scripture refers to its claim to participate in the speech of God. Truth, which derives from the universal trustworthiness of God, is the basis for the authority of the Biblical word which stands firm even if heaven and earth should pass away (Mark 13:31). At the same time, truth is apprehended not by mystical absorption into God but through the structure of reality, things visible and invisible, and through the analogical nature of language (Psalm 33:4–9).

Truth is attested to in both propositional and representational form. As propositions, the words of Scripture can also be called God's 'commandments' (Deut. 4:2–9; John 14:21–24). Like the two tables of the Law, these commandments include matters of belief about God and obedience to his moral will. The primacy of *Torah* ['teaching'] reminds us of explicit

doctrines and commands to be heeded. While the teaching of Jesus transforms the commandments of the Mosaic *Torah*, it retains their normative form: discipleship involves single-minded adherence to his words (Matt. 5:17–20; 7:24).

Representational truth, or *mimesis*, operates by verisimilitude, or truth-likeness.[42] *Mimesis* is not thereby artificial or purely formal: it is Lady Wisdom, the force of truth, of nature, drawing the soul to understanding.[43] Mimetic truth operates differently from propositional. It is grasped by the imagination, and it draws on common experience and creates new experience.[44] It is the fruit of a conversation in which no 'answer' is given but a relationship affirmed. When God proudly displays to Job his creature Leviathan, who is 'king over all the sons of pride' (Job 41:34), Job is satisfied, knowing himself, even in his quandary, to be judged and loved as a royal son.

It is a mistake to identify Biblical truth with either propositions or *mimesis* exclusively, as in the reduction of Scripture by fundamentalists to a set of lessons or by liberals to 'the play of metaphor'. A proposition such as 'the LORD reigns' can be represented narratively by means of the 'omniscient' viewpoint of the Biblical narrator and in the 'omnipotent' outworking of God's will, as when Hushai bests the counsel of Ahithophel (2 Sam. 17:14).[45] On the other hand, a well-chosen proof-text or allusion can summarize a wealth of Biblical experience and imagery, as in Peter's appeal:

> Come to him, to that living stone, rejected by men but in God's sight chosen and precious; and like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 2:4).

The interplay of propositional and mimetic truth accounts for the Bible's 'history-like' character, which has been at the centre of the knotty question: Is Biblical narrative history or fiction?[46] Propositional truth asserts the actuality of an event, *mimesis* only its plausibility. Several years ago, when I wrote a brief commentary on the Book of Esther, the editors wished me to assert the essential historicity of the events it describes, but I found it impossible to separate with any certainty the elements of history, liturgy, and fiction.[47] While our modern sensibility insists on deciding the issue, Biblical writers seemed confident that fact and fiction can be mixed and remain a witness to a transcendent order not of our own making.

In speaking of the third or salvation-historical dimension, I am using 'historical' in the theological sense of God's sovereign revelatory activity with its insistent eschatological thrust. A corollary to this historicality is the scandal of particularity: as Wesley says, ''Tis mystery all, the Immortal dies'. The saving activity of God is a mystery that cannot be deduced from the truth of God or the laws of history (Eph. 1:9f.). The lit-

eral word, historically considered, breaks in as the preaching of Christ and forms faith in the hearer (Rom. 10:17). Christology thus becomes the lens through which the special history of Israel and the Church is read.

What rôle then does historic Israel play in this scenario? Philosophical hermeneutics, from Origen to Bultmann, have foundered on the 'problem of Israel'. It was the genius of Luther to recover from Pauline theology a 'literal-prophetic' sense of God's promise which united the hopes of Israel with the faith of the Church.[48] Typology is the characteristic interpretative activity that honours the original situation of the oracles of God while pressing on to enunciate their fulfilment in Christ.

The 'historicity' or background of the Bible, both in matters of natural and human history, is the context, the home, into which the Word comes. Higher criticism has given a wealth of data to illuminate this history, though its direct relevance to the text of Scripture has at times been overstated.[49] Unfortunately sceptics and defenders of orthodoxy have chosen to skirmish in the historical underbrush. By asking a different set of questions of the Biblical data ('Did it really happen that way?'), they have obscured the more eschatological concern of Biblical narrators ('Where is it all headed?'—Luke 24:13–27). On the other hand, some post-modern literary critics, in recovering the literary unity of the Biblical text, have neglected the historical context which is an accidental property of God's revelatory activity.[50]

The salvation-historical dimension of Scripture works to unify not only events but genres, as can be seen in the grouping of Biblical books under the authorship of Moses, David, Solomon, or Paul, and beyond that in the equating of 'all Scripture' with prophecy (Luke 24:44). Implicitly, the Biblical authors assume the position of omniscient access to God's will and purposes in creation and history.[51] Whereas higher critics have excelled in dissecting the text into its formal units, pre-modern commentators, with their focus on its inspired unity, often saw it as of one genre: hence the different typographic conventions of the King James' and modern Versions. The mosaic unity, as Northrop Frye calls it, of the Bible, constitutes the 'world of the text' that recent critics have rediscovered.[52]

Likewise propositional and mimetic truth are ultimately reconciled by eschatological hope. In the same breath, the Psalmist proclaims that the Lord reigns and cries out, 'How long, O Lord?' Even after the deepest probing of the mysteries of life, the sages return to affirm God's ways (John 42:1–6; Eccles. 12:13).[53] To set our mind on things above and let the word of Christ dwell richly within us gives a perspective from which to enter into the problems and ambiguities of living in fallen structures of society (Col. 3–4). The world awaits the coming of the Lamb to reveal its purpose, and when he opens 'the scroll written within and without', its rationality is not destroyed but redeemed by a reordering of its priorities (Rev. 4–5).[54]

The unifying movement of salvation history is never simply complete.

As the short ending of Mark suggests, the essential work of the Son of God is done, but the story breaks off so that the reader may paint himself into the picture. It is in this sense that one can speak of Scripture as an 'open parable':[55] the Church down to the end of the age is called on to participate in the divine plan of salvation (Eph. 2:9f.).

An Example: The Parable of the Wicked Tenants (Mark 12:1–12)

In this section I hope to consider how a literal exegesis of a well-known parable of Jesus might be done. In no way can this be a comprehensive presentation. Neither do I claim special originality, since most competent Biblical criticism includes serious attention to the literal sense. In pursuing the three dimensions of meaning, however, my exegesis will take a different final shape from that found in many standard commentaries and studies.

The Poetic Dimension

Modern form criticism has discovered much about the distinctive nature of Jesus' parables.[56] Clearly they are patterned after the forms of wisdom similitude (*mashal*). What is not so commonly noticed is that the *mashal* is explicitly used by the Prophets to communicate the end-time mysteries of God's judgment and salvation (Num. 23:7 *passim*; Psalm 78:2; Ezek. 17:2; Hab. 2:6). The prophetic use of the parable fits both the setting of conflict with the Jewish leaders but also Jesus' use of a prophetic proof-text to clinch the argument (Mark 12:10f.; Ps. 118:22f.).

Since the writings of Jülicher, Dodd, and Jeremias, it has been commonly accepted that Jesus' parables are realistic stories that make one existential point and that any additional allegorical details are the work of Church redactors. To be sure, the parables in their original telling were intentionally opaque, crying out for interpretation (Mark 4:11f.). The parable works by tricking the hearers and confronting them with their stubbornness. In Mark 12, Jesus lures the chief priests and scribes, wealthy men all, into identifying with the landowner, who only later realize that *they* are the villains of the piece (*cf.* Matt. 21:45). Confronting sinners does not necessarily exhaust Jesus' purpose in telling parables, however. Craig Blomberg has argued that Jesus' parables are 'rhetorical allegories' in which several referents are possible.[57] As one might expect in a form borrowed from wisdom literature, the parable is a special teaching device adapted to the rôle of Jesus as eschatological mediator of the kingdom of God.

The Synoptic Gospels set this parable at the climax of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. Having foreseen his own betrayal and death at the hands of the chief priests and scribes (Mark 10:33), Jesus and the Jewish leaders proceed in the Passion narrative to act out the parable, much like Hamlet's play within a play. One wonders retrospectively whether the framing of Jesus' and John the Baptist's ministry and death, especially in Mark, does

not reflect the influence of this parable (*e.g.* 9:13).

Mark has placed the parable in a catena of conflicting *pericopae* following the Temple cleansing (A/11:27–33; B/12:1–12; C/12:13–17; B'/12:18–27; A'/12:28–45).[58] This series of confrontations begins with the question: 'By what authority are you doing these things?'; and it ends with Jesus' magisterial claim: 'You are not far from the kingdom of God'. The question about God and Caesar is the centrepiece of the series. When we connect the parable of the tenants to this *pericope*, we see that Jesus is interpreting Israel's history from the viewpoint of 'two kingdoms'. The tenants refuse to recognize the heavenly reign of God and his messiah and will try to kill him in order to grasp their earthly inheritance. Just as they cannot understand the resurrection life (12:27), so they are hardened in unbelief when the rejected stone becomes head of the corner (12:12).

The Truth Dimension

If we grant that the interpretation of allegories can yield determinate meanings, then what does this passage teach? First, in the landowner, we come to see God as a patient Lord over his people. Yet he also requires his just due, and his patience comes to an end in sudden and final judgment. Whether the absentee landowner's behaviour in sending his son is to be considered conventional by first century standards, he certainly miscalculates and endures the final humiliation of rejection by his own tenants. Thus the enigma of the merciful yet exacting landlord points to a resolution that goes beyond the boundaries of the story in the amazing event of resurrection when God makes the rejected stone head of the corner.

The citation of Isa. 5:1–7 connects the vineyard with Israel. The logic of the parable, however, discourages a direct identification of the vineyard with either the land or the people of Israel. Rather the vineyard is called an 'inheritance' by the tenants (12:7), and in Matthew, Jesus refers to it as the 'reign of God'. The vineyard thus represents the claim of God to rule over his people, a claim channelled through Israel but for the sake of all the nations. Thus the wicked tenants are the leaders of Israel, a type of those who had previously led Israel into sin and exile (*e.g.* Micah 3). The people themselves are the audience, called on to adjudicate the dispute between the owner's party and the tenants. Luke especially holds out hope for a faithful response to Jesus from the Jewish people. He places the parable in the setting of Jesus' teaching and evangelizing the people (20:1); and while the leaders harden their hearts, the people's 'God forbid!' suggests a shock reminiscent of the day of Pentecost (20:16; Acts 2:37).

The messengers in the parable refer to God's prophets sent repeatedly so that Israel would never lack the word of God, but also that Israel, except for a remnant who live by faith, would harden itself to that word. Matthew extends the allegory by speaking of two groups of prophets, probably the 'former' and 'latter' prophets of canonical Scripture. The prophets not only spoke the word but suffered for it, thus foreshadowing the ministry of

the Son. The accompanying psalm citation includes David in the goodly fellowship of prophets and may suggest David as a type of royal sufferer (Ps. 118:10–18; 132:1).

The son in the parable and the stone in the Psalm proof-text both refer to Jesus himself. Many commentators admit that Jesus identified himself in some way with the son and that this was a messianic claim (*cf.* Mark 12:35–37).[59] Though Jesus' or Mark's reasons for secrecy about his identity are debated, there is no doubt about Mark's final understanding of his identity: he is the Son of God (1:1; 15:39). Likewise he is the founder of a new community of disciples.

The Salvation-Historical Dimension

What is the significance of the introduction: 'And he began to speak to them in parables'? Read 'literalistically', the text transmits the *ipsissima verba Jesu*, the very words of Jesus. Yet comparison of the synoptic Gospels shows that, in all probability, Matthew and Luke did not hesitate to alter Mark (*e.g.*, Mark says that the tenants killed the son and cast him out of the vineyard, while Matthew and Luke apparently updated the parable in the light of the Crucifixion and have the son cast out first and then killed). By analogy, could Mark not have altered the actual Jesus tradition? We have already noted that 'historicality' does not demand exact 'historicity' to authenticate its claim to be a genuine witness to history. Even the minimal version of the parable in the *Gospel of Thomas* would preserve a common core of meaning.[60] Unfortunately the higher-critical concern for historical reconstruction has often obscured other legitimate historical features of the passage.

The voice of Jesus in this parable claims an imperial authority in interpreting the end of history. He recounts the entire history of Israel as the response to an offer of an inheritance (the vineyard). If the stone citation includes an allusion to Dan. 2:44; 7:27, the inheritance received by the son is a universal and eschatological kingdom. The dispute between the owner and the tenants runs parallel to Jesus' disputes with the chief priests and scribes. By absenting himself, the owner opened himself to ambiguous legal determinations as to right of possession. To enter into disputes about the Law, according to Jesus, was to misunderstand its purpose; but it was that very this-worldly claim to 'ownership of meaning' that blinded the tenants to the fact that the kingdom of God had drawn near (Mark 12:28–34).

The sending of the son to receive the inheritance is the climax of the parable. While not denying the veiled form of the parable, I would join those who see an astounding identification of the owner (God) with the son (Jesus). Whereas the messengers (the prophets) only remind Israel of the aim of its election, the son by his arrival claims to realize that aim. The tragic *denouement* is that in recognizing his claim, the tenants attempt to nullify it by killing him. Much like the Deuteronomic and Danielic histories, the parable thus ends on a note of judgment and exile. God's

determination to begin again with a new set of tenants would satisfy justice but not answer the question of 'Who is worthy?' to bring the cycles of sinful history to an end.

The citation of the 'stone' texts resolves the tension caused by the parable itself. Whether or not Jesus intended a word-play on son/stone (*ben/'eben*), the rejection of the stone is clearly meant to interpret the killing of the son in the parable. The stone texts go further than the parable by pointing to a miraculous act of God, breaking through the natural and historical cycles and leading to the exaltation of the rejected stone. The new people of God are not just another historical nation but those who confess about God's new act in Christ: 'it is marvellous in our eyes'. The true end of history then is the fulfilment of God's saving purposes in the apparently tragic death and the miraculous exaltation of Jesus the Son.

Historical criticism cannot prove or disprove how far the 'historical Jesus' understood the outworking of this parable. The precise arbitration of who said what between Jesus and the Church is not crucial to establish the historical dimension of the passage. Such a quest, while not illegitimate in itself, can distract us from the powerful crisis of response which the parable conveys. The Gospels not only report what Jesus said and did, but they confront us, like the original hearers, with the challenge: Who do *you* say that I am? Bultmann was absolutely right to sense this dimension of the Bible, but he was wrong in attempting to separate it from the truth dimension of the Scripture as the Word of God.

Let me add an unscholarly footnote to this study. As I pondered the letter of the text, I found myself drawn into the vortex of the parable: who is this owner and his son? and who is this Jesus who speaks the word with such authority? And from this centre, I could not help but want to preach the passage and relate it to our current hermeneutical impasse. Are we not in this churchly exercise disputing the ownership of meaning? Does not the parable itself call into question the exclusive right of the priestly and scholarly guild to interpret the meaning of Scripture? But then, is it really possible to avoid hermeneutical authoritarianism or pluralism? I take the parable to say: yes, there is a coherent message in Israel's history and Scripture, and yes, it is received by those who, under the spell of the Gospel, look again at the letter and say: 'It is marvellous in our eyes!'

3. Authority: Taking God at His Word

The Primacy of Scripture

Anglicanism has gladly joined with the Reformation in its affirmation of the Scripture principle—the primacy and sufficiency of the Bible—as its norm in matters of doctrine, discipline, and devotion.[61] This primacy is acknowledged explicitly in Anglican formularies, most pointedly in the Episcopal ordination oath that 'I do believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament to be the Word of God, and to contain all things necessary to salvation . . .'[62] It is also implicit in the assignment of Scripture

reading in every service of the Prayer Book.[63]

The classic stance of Anglicanism has not gone without question or qualification. Many Anglicans, fearing bibliolatry, see an absolute disjunction between Christ as the Word and Scripture as the witness to the Word.[64] Another current view sees Scripture as 'the repository of the Church's symbols of life and faith',[65] from which the Church draws new light in every age, a view which I would less politely call the 'grab bag' approach. Finally, among many Anglican writers the perspective of the Knower (reader) has come to take priority over the determinacy of the Known (literal text), so that the 'inerrant truth' of the Bible now becomes the 'experience' which we may share with religious people of all ages.[66]

I have argued that literal sense remains the most credible approach to interpreting the Bible. I likewise maintain that only in the light of its referential quality, purposiveness, and clarity can Scripture as 'God's Word written' (Article 20) function as prime authority in the Church. Approaches which treat Scripture as one authority among others inevitably end up granting autonomy to the individual conscience or the collective conscience of the Church.[67]

The appropriate response to Biblical primacy is hermeneutical submissiveness. The Church and the individual are to receive the Gospel in the spirit of the Blessed Virgin: 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word'. In the fascinating liberal-evangelical dialogue between David Edwards and John Stott, the extent of this submission to Scripture is the central issue.[68] Edwards argues that

> for all Christians the Bible, in some sense, is or becomes or conveys 'the word of God'. Its history is, in some sense, 'salvation history'. Its great images are signs pointing to our salvation, from the Garden of Eden to the final City of God. That seems—to understate its value for our salvation—sufficient. (pp. 43f.)

Edwards defines the term 'sufficient' to mean minimally necessary, thus creating a vast space in which his reason can pick and choose as to which Biblical teachings are authoritative. Stott's reply focuses on whether such minimalism is finally coherent:

> Sometimes you seem anxious to demonstrate that your position is more biblical than mine. I wonder why? I mean, if you could prove this to me, I would want to change my mind and position at once. But if I could show you that my position is more biblical than yours, would you be willing to change? . . . In later chapters you reject traditional Christian teaching about the atonement, miracles, homosexual partnerships, and the awful reality of hell, not only on the ground that you consider them unbiblical, but because on other grounds you find it unacceptable. Does this not mean that in the end you accord supremacy to your reason rather than to Scripture? (pp. 104f.)

'Searching the Scriptures' requires both access to the whole Bible and willingness to follow wherever it leads (Acts 17:11; John 5:39). In what I have called the 'grab bag' approach, Scripture is seen as a resource from which we choose the correct and omit the incorrect elements in preaching and theology. This view, mentioned above, is implicit in the 1979 American Prayer Book lectionary, and explicitly in any sample of episcopal preaching. When the grab bag method is used, the choice and use of the texts usually ends up conforming to the priorities of the late twentieth century enlightened consciousness. I do not deny that every interpreter brings a certain bias, or that there is a legitimate canonical focus on central texts, or that different kinds of Scripture function authoritatively in different ways.[69] Nevertheless, the Christian who reads the Bible literally must be very attentive to every text, comparing scripture with scripture as a check against one-sided reading.

Transformed by the Word

Let me begin with a meditation on the means of spiritual transformation inherent in a literal reading of the Bible. The meditation follows the lines of Cranmer's collect: 'Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning . . .'

'Grant us to hear and read them': The first aim for the Church's disciplines of preaching and teaching, worship and prayer, is a literate congregation of believers (Matt. 28:2; Acts 2:42). In the apostolic Church, this was done through public reading and preaching and memorization; since the print revolution, private Bible reading has become a major devotion for Christian disciples. The disappearance of reading in the twentieth century is not simply due to lack of time but reflects the hermeneutical crisis of Western thought.[70] Even if they have never heard of the deconstructionist theory that texts are self-immolating, people are daunted by the welter of experts advocating opposite opinions on every subject. With its classic approach to literal and plain sense, the Church has a compelling reason to promote literacy among its own and in the society at large.

'. . . mark and learn them': Reading must be accompanied by critical analysis and synthesis. It is characteristic of the Bible that it invites exegesis.[71] The advent of higher criticism has greatly increased our awareness of the genre differences and the diachronic character of the Biblical text. What has often been lost, on layperson and scholar alike, is the theological unity of Scripture, which is a key assumption of its authority (Ps. 119:160; Article 20). I would like to commend the lost art of proof-texting as a remedy to the fragmentation of the Biblical text.[72] Good proof-texting is a foundation not only for Biblical theology but for systematic theology and preaching as well, as it forces one to ponder the literal sense of a passage and its intertextual connexions with other passages. Just as one would wish to understand the thought of a politician, writer, or philosopher by apt

quotations from his works and accurate footnotes, so proof-texting seeks to justify generalizations and applications of the word of God by means of literary reference.

'. . . and inwardly digest them': A further step in this process is the drawing of analogies between the Biblical texts and our context. While there are appropriate rules for contextualization, the process of reading and marking the words of Scripture is an activity of the Spirit forming a Christian personality and world-view.[73] Classic African-American preaching,for instance, assumes the authority of the Bible as a whole but exhibits a freedom of movement from text to text with a creative retelling of the story, interpreting the experience of slavery and racism in a 'Bibleistic way'.[74] Truly digesting the word is difficult for modern readers because we have all imbibed the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' in regarding all argument as propaganda. We need to learn not only to approve those judgments of Scripture which confirm our views but to expect judgments which find us guilty and trust that in accepting those judgments we will find our true life (Mark 8:34–38; John 6:68).[75] It has never been easy to emulate the Prophet who ate the scroll of God's word and found it sweet to the tongue but bitter in the stomach (Ezek. 3:3; Rev. 10:10).

I now turn to several public ecclesiastical applications of Scripture literally interpreted 'Resurrection and Virgin Birth'. A mind formed by the literal sense of Scripture finds denial of Jesus' bodily resurrection and virgin birth unthinkable. Virtually all responsible Biblical exegetes would admit that as a whole and in its final form the New Testament proclaims that Jesus rose bodily from the dead and reigns eternally in heaven; that he is uniquely Son of man and Son of God; and that these things are in accordance with the prophetic sense of the Old Testament Scriptures. All those writings which purport to narrate Jesus' life refer to the empty tomb, and other texts (for example, Acts 2:23f., 31f.; 13:29f.; 1 Tim. 3:16; Heb. 12:2; 1 Peter 3:18f.) are more consistent with the empty tomb than with any other hypothesis. Likewise the two Gospels that relate Jesus' human origin say that he was born of a virgin, and no other New Testament Christological statement presumes some other form of birth. Working from the canon therefore, we can appreciate the 'cultural-linguistic' framework from which the credal affirmation of the virgin birth developed.

The perceived problem of the resurrection and virgin birth has to do not with whether the Bible attests to them but whether they are true, either as historical events or as necessary doctrines. At one level, this involves a philosophical debate about the possibility of miracles.[76] Even granting that miracles are possible, which is clearly the assumption underlying the literal sense of Scripture, higher criticism has attempted to unwind the three-fold cord by identifying earlier and later forms of tradition, different literary forms of the Gospel accounts, and the influence of the Church's faith in articulating the event. This exercise has made clear the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of simply harmonizing the various infancy and resur-

rection accounts and has sensitized us to the kerygmatic character of the Gospel narratives.[77] But it has also obscured the integrity of the Biblical witness to the truth of these mighty acts of God and the evangelical power and normative imprint of the text in shaping the believer and the Church.[78]

In reporting historical events, Biblical authors often assume that their words will be accepted as they intend them. Only occasionally do they state their canonical purpose explicitly, as when John writes: 'Now Jesus did many other signs which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ and believing you may have life in his name' (20:30f.). John is claiming contact with factual events that 'Jesus did', especially the resurrection. At the same time these events have revelatory power to bring people like Thomas to faith.

In doctrinal matters as well, the truth dimension of Scripture is usually tacit; but when challenged, Biblical writers do make clear normative claims. When Paul confronts those who said there was no resurrection of the dead in 1 Corinthians 15, he is uncompromising in his retort. He recites the apostolic tradition which he received as absolutely reliable (15:1–11). Then he argues that this tradition has two and only two logical outcomes: either its truth confirms the coming general resurrection of the dead, or its falsity means that the Gospel is blasphemy and Christians are fools and knaves (15:12–20).

With regard to the incarnation, John is equally uncompromising: 'every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God' (1 John 4:2f.). John is not simply asserting the existence of the historical Jesus, but the divine Sonship against those who are scandalized by the particularity of God in the flesh. In one sense the virgin birth is analogous to the empty tomb in the order of teaching, that is, it is not part of the earliest *kerygma* (Acts 10:38–41; Rom. 1:3). However, since the virgin birth is the perfect narrative complement to New Testament teaching on the nature of Christ,[79] and since no other explanations of Jesus' birth are seriously considered by New Testament authors,[80] the incorporation of the virgin birth as an item of credal orthodoxy appears a legitimate deduction from Scripture itself.[81]

Sexual Morality

I hardly need mention that sexual morality is the world-view battleground in late-twentieth century Western society, with issues like divorce, abortion, and homosexuality featured in the media and politics. This has led in the Church to a corresponding battle for the Bible, with some calling for an abandonment of Biblical teaching as oppressive and others for radical re-interpretation of traditional texts. In the latter category, I would include the influential book by William Countryman on sexual ethics.[82]

Countryman's avowed method is 'to read the texts as literally as possible' (p. 2), and he does indeed engage in exegesis of a wide range of

Biblical texts. Because the world-view of ancient texts is, for him, so obviously irretrievable, literal reading serves to 'relativize the present' and so open us to adapting our sexual ethics to new, evolving norms of modern individualism (pp. 237–40). Countryman goes to great lengths to show that none of the New Testament writers literally intended to proscribe physical fornication and homosexuality (p. 141), but given his approach, what difference would it make if they did? Using Jesus' declaring all foods clean (Mark 7:19) as an interpretative fulcrum, he allegorizes Jesus' specific condemnation of 'fornication, adultery, and licentiousness' in the verses immediately following (pp. 84–86). Countryman's attempt to drive a wedge between 'metaphorical purity' and specific moral behaviour is possible only because he overlooks the foundational rôle of the doctrine of creation.[83] This leads to an odd kind of spiritualizing of the literal sense in a gnostic direction.

By contrast, I would suggest Mark 10:2–9 as a more central text in gaining access to Jesus' understanding of sexual morality. The *pericope* is the first of a series of 'hard sayings' about discipleship in chapter 10. For the sake of the kingdom of God, the disciple will be utterly faithful in marriage; will manifest childlike openness to God's will; will be ready to sell all possessions; will abandon family status and property; will drink the cup of suffering and death; and will become servant of all. All of these sayings involve a reversal of worldly expectations, giving up the normal social honours. What then does the disciple give up in marriage? Jesus' answer seems to be, divorce!

Why should giving up divorce further the aims of the kingdom? Jesus does not say directly. His argument, however, is reminiscent of the Wicked Tenants' parable. Jesus places his teaching above that of Moses and claims to reveal a primal design of God from the beginning. This design involves a uniting of two in one flesh and a call for utter faithfulness between them. This faithfulness, he implies, is not possible by human will because of the hardness of the human heart; but 'with God all things are possible' (10:27). Grace reverses the Law and perfects nature in this parable of the New Covenant between God and his people. But grace comes at a price: sacrificing one's right to leave. Paul, who likewise speaks of marriage as a 'mystery', calls for mutual submission of husband and wife; and John in the wedding of Cana links the cup of joy with the cup of sorrow. Matthew adds another saying of the Lord to suggest that the celibate life is an equivalent dedication to the kingdom (19:11f.).

Jesus places on the legal ordinance of marriage the honour and weight of representing his new relationship as Bridegroom with his church. The specific outworkings of this new institution in the life of the Church have been somewhat variable.[84] In equating remarriage with adultery, it is not completely clear whether he intends to rule out every conceivable case or rather to challenge disciples dramatically to single-minded obedience. It is clear that he affirms the natural basis of marriage as good, but beyond that

identifies marriage (and celibacy) with his own work of atoning sacrifice. Jesus may have widened the menu of food choices, but his teaching on sexual relations is narrow. Thus people, then and now, have wondered: Who can stand it? (Matt. 19:10). The Church has no authority to reconfigure marriage but calls men and women to offer their fallen human sexuality within marriage and in 'single'-minded service of the Gospel.

To know Christ's word is not to do it, but it is the first step to grace and hope. Richard Hays, who has made an especially clear exposition of Paul's understanding of homosexuality in the Epistle to the Romans,[85] has written elsewhere a moving account of a man named Gary, who was wrestling with the word:[86]

> Gary came to New Haven in the summer of 1989 to say a proper farewell. My best friend from undergraduate years at Yale was dying of AIDS. . . . For more than 20 years Gary had grappled with his homosexuality, experiencing it as a compulsion and an affliction. Now, as he faced death, he wanted to talk it all through again from the beginning, because he knew my love for him and trusted me to speak without dissembling. For Gary, there was no time to dance around the hard questions. As Dylan had urged, 'Let us not talk falsely now; the hour is getting late'.
>
> In particular Gary wanted to discuss the biblical passages that deal with homosexual acts. Among Gary's many gifts was his skill as a reader of texts. . . . The more we talked the more we found our perspectives interlocking. Both of us had serious misgivings about the mounting pressure for the church to recognize homosexuality as a legitimate Christian lifestyle. As a New Testament scholar, I was concerned about certain questionable exegetical and theological strategies of the gay apologists. Gary, as a homosexual Christian, believed that their writings did justice neither to the biblical texts nor to the depressing reality of the gay subculture that he had moved in and out of for 20 years. . . .
>
> Gary wrote urgently of the imperatives of discipleship: 'Are homosexuals to be excluded from the community of faith? Certainly not. But anyone who joins such a community should know that it is a place of transformation, of discipline, of learning, and not merely a place to be comforted or indulged.' . . .
>
> In the midst of a culture that worships self-gratification, and a church that preaches a false Jesus who panders to our desires, those who seek the narrow way of obedience have a powerful word to speak. Just as Paul saw in pagan homosexuality a symbol of human fallenness, so I saw conversely in Gary, as I have seen in other homosexual friends and colleagues, a symbol of God's power made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9). . . .
>
> That seems to be the spiritual condition Gary reached near the end of his life. He wrote this in his last letter: 'Since All Saints Day I have felt myself being transformed. I no longer consider myself a homosexual. Many would say, big deal, you're 42 . . . and are dying of AIDS. Big sacrifice. No, I didn't do this of my will, of an effort to improve myself, to make myself acceptable to God. No, he did this for me. I feel a great weight has been lifted off me.'

Gary and his friend Richard, it seems to me, are examples of what it means to be servants of the Word. Gary was truthful about his own life experience but also stubbornly honest in acknowledging the possibility that Scripture might judge rather than endorse that experience. His friend acted as the good pastor-teacher in sympathetically listening to him and searching the Scriptures with him. The beginning of wisdom for Gary was a weighing of words which claim the authority of the Word; the end, however, was the work of the Spirit, applying the forgiveness of sins and new life in Christ from which nothing in heaven and earth can separate us.[87]

The Church's submission to the word of God in Scripture is nothing more than trusting in God's power and God's way of salvation on behalf of all the lost sheep of Christ's fold. When we let God be God and let God speak, then we will come to know that his word to us is not Yes and No, but finally and for ever Yes in the Son of God, Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 1:18f.).

> O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy: Be gracious to all who have gone astray from your ways, and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of your Word, Jesus Christ your Son; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

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NOTES

1 In his recent world-view analysis, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), p. 44f., James Davison Hunter distinguishes two main views of authority. 'Orthodoxy' involves the '*commitment on the part of adherents to an external, definable, and transcendent authority*'. 'Progressives', by contrast, share the '*tendency to resymbolize historic faiths according to the prevailing assumptions of contemporary life*'.

2 See the general cultural analysis of George Steiner, 'The Retreat from the Word', in *George Steiner: A Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 283–304.

3 For the background of fundamentalism in Baconian science, see George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism 1870–1925* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 55–62.

4 I have been sent numerous articles in American Episcopal publications attacking what John Shelby Spong refers to as 'the beast of literalism' in *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), p. 217. The tip-off to caricature is the

use of '-ism', which reminds one of the epigram that 'tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living'.

5 See the fine meditation on John 1:1–18 by T.F. Torrance, 'The Word of God and the Response of Man', in *God and Rationality* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 137–53.

6 W. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) Vol. 1, p. 308.

7 Torrance, *loc. cit.*, p. 149.

8 Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 1.39.43; Calvin, *Institutes* 1.6.1.

9 J.L. Kugel, 'Early Interpretation: The Common Background of Late Forms of Biblical Exegesis', in *Early Biblical Interpretation*, edd. J.L. Kugel and R.A. Greer (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), pp. 70–71.

10 Luke 24:44–49. *Cf.* C.H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures: The Sub-Structure of New Testament Theology* (London: Nisbet, 1952), pp. 28–60.

11 B.A. Pierson, 'Use, Authority and Exegesis of *Mikra* in Gnostic Literature', *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*, CRINT 2.1. (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1988), pp. 635–52.

12 R.P.C. Hanson, *Tradition in the Early Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), pp. 124–29.

13 R.A. Greer, 'The Christian Bible and Its Interpretation', in Kugel and Greer, *op. cit.*, pp. 184–85.

14 Maurice Wiles's comment on Origen is revealing: 'Despite the great range of his intellectual gifts, Origen was totally lacking in poetic sensitivity. The literal sense of scripture is for him the literally literal meaning of the words'. 'Origen as Biblical Scholar' in *The Cambridge History of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970) Vol. 1, p. 470. The Antiochenes in reacting against allegory likewise tended to restrict the meaning of Scripture to its 'narrative sense' (*historia*).

15 The starting point of Augustine's doctrine of Scripture is the clarity of the canonical text: 'Anyone who understands in the Scriptures something other than that intended by them is deceived, although they do not lie' (*On Christian Doctrine* 1.36.41). At times he can refer to this intentional reading as 'the literal sense'. He can also make a distinction between 'literal' and 'figurative' signs; the literal signs have a primary verbal referent ('ox' = the animal), while figures refer to something else, as in 1 Cor. 9:9 (*On Christian Doctrine* 2.10.15). In most cases figures turn out to be Old Testament types. He also recognizes the potential of words to generate ambiguity. He speaks of his interpretation as a 'nourishing kernel' even if its sense cannot be proved. If a legitimate scientific objection is raised, he will show how it is not contrary to the Scripture; if a heretical objection arises, he will refute it or not be swayed in faith (*The Literal Reading of Genesis* 1.21).

16 *Cf.* Raymond Brown's case for *sensus plenior* as a second meaning of the text in 'What the Biblical Word Meant and What It Means', *The Critical Meaning of the Bible* (New York: Paulist, 1981), pp. 23-44.

17 See J.A. Preus, *From Shadow to Promise: Old Testament Interpretation from Augustine to Young Luther* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), pp. 267–68.

18 'For as God alone is a fit witness of himself in his Word, so also the Word will not find acceptance in men's hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit', *Institutes* 1.7.4.

19 See esp. *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* 1.14, 2.8, 3.8 and 5.59.2; E. Grislis, 'The Hermeneutical Problem in Hooker', in *Studies in Richard Hooker* (Cleveland: Case Western, 1972), pp. 193–96.

20 See the survey and evaluation in B.S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), pp. 34–41.

21 'Historicist experience' is fundamentally opaque, whereas in classical thought common sense experience or opinion is the beginning of true insight (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.4). This is why 'experience' is such a loaded term in current discussions about authority.

22 Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1953), p. 25.

23 Note the wry comment of Oliver O'Donovan in *Resurrection and Moral Order* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), p. 161: 'Cultural foreignness, which we meet in our contemporaries daily, is not a final barrier to understanding, but a warning against shallow understandings.'
24 'The Sensus Literalis of Scripture: An Ancient and Modern Problem,', in H. Donner *et al.*, edd., *Beiträge zur Alttestamentlichen Theologie* (FS Zimmerli; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977), pp. 80–93.
25 Childs, 'The Canonical Approach and the "New Yale Theology"', in *The New Testament As Canon* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), pp. 541–46; E.V. McKnight, *Post-Modern Use of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988), pp. 74–79.
26 See, for example, the philosophical theology of Carl F.H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority* (Waco: Word, 1976); and the hermeneutical essays in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, edd. D.A. Carson and J.D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986).
27 'The Centrality of Hermeneutics Today', in D.A. Carson and J.D. Woodbridge, *Scripture and Truth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), p. 333.
28 *Ibid.*, pp. 349–50.
29 W.J. Abraham, *The Divine Inspiration of Holy Scripture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 67. This family debate demonstrates the ongoing vitality of the Calvinist-Arminian strands of classic Protestantism.
30 Clark H. Pinnock, *The Scripture Principle* (San Francisco: Harper, 1984), p. 78.
31 By way of analogy, Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, p. 313, sees the essential intra-trinitarian relations as the 'handing over' of lordship by the Father to the Son and the Son's 'handing back' of that lordship.
32 Older commentators observed a necessary link between the literal and figurative senses. So Patrick Fairbairn writes: 'All languages are more or less figurative; for the mind of man is essentially analogical . . . and in regard to things lying beyond the reach of sense or time, it is *obliged* to resort to figurative terms . . .' *Hermeneutical Manual: Introduction to the Exegetical Study* (Philadelphia: Smith, English, 1859), p. 158.
33 *Cf.* Northrop Frye in *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: HBJ, 1982) p. 61f.: 'The Bible means literally just what it says, but it can mean it only without primary reference to a correspondence of what it says to something outside what it says.'
34 E.D. Hirsch quips in *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 6: 'Whenever I am told by a Heideggerian that I have misunderstood Heidegger, my still unrebutted response is that I will readily (if uneasily) concede that point, since the concession in itself implies a more important point, namely that Heidegger's text *can* be interpreted correctly, and has been so by my accuser.'
35 Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (New York: Harper, 1965) Vol. 2, pp. 19–35; and Austin Farrer, *The Rebirth of Images: The Making of St. John's Apocalypse* (Westminster: Dacre, 1949), pp. 13–22.
36 Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, pp. 78–79; Douglas Moo, 'The Problem of Sensus Plenior', *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, pp. 204–209.
37 *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1985), pp. 50–51. [It is ironic that Sternberg cannot extend his insight to the rôle of the New Testament.]
38 K.J. Vanhoozer, 'The Semantics of Biblical Literature: Truth and the Scripture's Diverse Literary Forms', in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, p. 99f., points out that 'illocutionary speech' is effective 'simply in the hearer understanding the utterance of the speaker'. Sinful human beings, apart from God's grace, can reject a clear message of Scripture.
39 Both Origen and John Cassian supported the three-fold distinction among the senses of Scripture by references to Prov. 22:20 (LXX): 'Write these things triply in your heart . . .' Among modern commentators, Sternberg, *Poetics*, p. 41, makes a triple distinction between ideological, historiographic and aesthetic principles of Biblical narrative.

40 Abraham, *Divine Inspiration*, pp. 58–75, has made a solid case for including direct divine speaking within the larger category of human speech inspired by God.
41 *Cf.* Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Truth is Symphonic: Aspects of Christian Pluralism* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1987), pp. 7–9.
42 The classic description of mimesis in the Bible is that of Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1953). I am indebted to a development of Auerbach's case by A.D. Nuttall, *A New Mimesis: Shakespeare and the Nature of Reality* (London: Methuen, 1983).
43 Nuttall, *op. cit.*, pp. 181–93.
44 *Cf.* Stephen Prickett, *Words and the Word: Language, Poetics and Biblical Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 4–36.
45 On the use of literary omniscience and omnipotence, see Sternberg, *Poetics*, p. 100.
46 See David L. Bartlett, *The Shape of Biblical Authority* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), pp. 43–81.
47 *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible* ed. W.A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), pp. 326–28. *Cf.* C.S. Lewis's letter to E.J. Carnell (4/4/53): 'In what sense does the Bible "present" the Jonah story "as historical"? Of course, it doesn't say "This is fiction", but then neither does our Lord say that the Unjust Judge, Good Samaritan, or Prodigal Son are fiction. (I would put *Esther* in the same category as *Jonah* for the same reason.) How does a denial, a doubt of their historicity lead logically to a similar denial of New Testament miracles?'
48 See for instance his 1535 commentary on Galatians 3:2: '. . . all the patriarchs, prophets, and devout kinds of the Old Testament were righteous, having received the Holy Spirit secretly on account of their faith in the coming Christ.'
49 W.G. Dever, 'Archaeology', *IDBSup* (1976), p. 51.
50 See critiques by Sternberg, *Poetics*, pp. 2–35; and Baruch Halpern, *The First Historians: The Hebrew Bible and History* (San Francisco: Harper, 1988), pp. 3–32.
51 Sternberg, *Poetics*, p. 34: 'Omniscience in modern narrative attends and signals fictionality, while in the ancient tradition it not only accommodates but also guarantees authenticity.'
52 Frye, *op. cit.*, p. 206.
53 It may be objected that the conclusions of Job and Ecclesiastes are pious deflections of the sceptical questions within the books. Even if this were true, the canonical framing sets the books within the larger wisdom tradition, without denying their radical thrust. Similarly, Shakespeare can bring Fortinbras on stage to restore the kingdom of Denmark without undoing the radical disorder that Hamlet's questioning has caused.
54 O'Donovan, *op. cit.*, p. 25: 'Only God expresses love by conferring order upon the absolutely orderless, and he has contented himself with doing it but once.'
55 For the term, see F.H. Borsch, *Many Things in Parables: Extravagant Stories of New Community* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), pp. 12-13.
56 For an overview, see G.R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: I.V.P., 1991), pp. 235–51.
57 *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove: I.V.P., 1990), pp. 29–69.
58 I am indebted for this insight to my colleague Stephen M. Smith. See also J.D. Kingsbury, *Conflict in Mark: Jesus, Authorities, Disciples* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), pp. 65–88.
59 J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1963), p. 72f. For a survey of Christological options, see Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, pp. 313–23.
60 The case for *Gospel of Thomas* as secondary is stronger than the reverse; see K. Snodgrass, 'The Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen: Is the Gospel of Thomas Version the Original?' *NTS* 20 (1974), pp. 142–44.
61 See R.H. Fuller, 'Scripture', in *The Study of Anglicanism*, edd. S. Sykes and J.H. Booty (London: S.P.C.K., 1988), pp. 79–91.
62 J. Robert Wright, 'The "Official Position" of the Episcopal Church on the Authority of Scripture: Historical Development and Ecumenical Comparison' *ATR* 74 (1992) p. 350.

63 Oliver O'Donovan, *On the Thirty-Nine Articles: A Conversation with Tudor Christianity* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1986), p. 51, notes that *reading* of the Bible in the Tudor Church took logical priority over exposition because 'the way of knowing any given thing is dictated in large measure by *what the thing is*, and not only (or mainly) by the situation of the person who has come to know it.'

64 As Wright notes (*op. cit.*, p. 6), the 1983 statement of the Episcopal House of Bishops apparently intended[!] to espouse this view by omitting the familiar phrase 'to be the Word of God' in alluding to the Oath and by adding the statement that 'God's Word is a Person, not a book'. This view is apparently also behind the revising of the 1982 American Hymnal (see esp. the revisions to Hymn 632 and the new Hymns 629 and 630).

65 Anglican Church of Canada, *Book of Alternative Services*, p. 9. I find curious Robert Wright's comment (*op. cit.*, p. 2) that the ordination oath does not 'expressly deny the existence of some other Word or word(s) of God beyond or above the Sacred page.' If he means to extend this higher authority of other Word/words to matters of salvation, how can Scripture contain all things necessary to it?

66 The Episcopal Church's Teaching Series claims: 'What we mean by calling the Scriptures authoritative is simply that we know that the church has experienced the presence and power of God through the Bible . . .' R.A. Bennett and O.C. Edwards, *The Bible for Today's Church* (New York: Seabury, 1979), p. 72. For Philip Culbertson, 'Known, Knower, and Knowing: The Authority of Scripture in the Episcopal Church', *ATR* 74 (1992), p. 192, the common experience is 'the constancy of change'. For Bishop Spong, *Rescuing the Bible*, p. 243, it is the call 'to love, to live, and to be'.

67 Note how the orthodox intention of Charles Gore in the original *Lux Mundi* in asserting the inspiration of the Church alongside the inspiration of Scripture has become radicalized in the identification of the Holy Spirit and 'experience' in the centenary update of his position. D.N. Power, 'The Holy Spirit: Scripture, Tradition, and Interpretation', *Keeping the Faith: Essays to Mark the Centenary of* Lux Mundi (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), p. 153.

68 *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* (Downers Grove: I.V.P., 1988).

69 *Cf.* Bartlett, *Shape of Scriptural Authority*, pp. 131–54.

70 Robert Alert points out that not only have ordinary people given up reading, but students of literature have too. See *The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), p. 11.

71 St. Augustine (*Confessions* 3.5.9) describes Scripture as a 'text lowly to the beginner but, on further reading, of mountainous difficulty and enveloped in mysteries'. Sternberg's *Poetics* is a *tour de force* in demonstrating the 'key strategy' of Biblical discourse: 'the art of indirection or, from the interpreter's side, the drama of reading' (pp. 43–44).

72 Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 178–92, has shown how this method underlies Paul's reading of the Old Testament in the light of Christ. George Herbert enunciates the classic Reformation principle, based on 1 Cor. 2:13, in his second sonnet on 'The Holy Scriptures': 'This verse marks that, and both do make a motion Unto a third, that ten leaves off doth lie . . .'

73 Cranmer's sense of 'digesting' Scripture surely reflects the pre-critical assumption, as explained by Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), p. 4, that 'since the world truly rendered by combining biblical narratives into one was indeed the one and only real world, it must in principle embrace the experience of any present age and reader.' In like fashion, Herbert can go on to say in his Scripture sonnet: 'Such are thy secrets, which my life makes good, And comments on thee: for in ev'rything Thy words do find me out, and parallels bring . . .'

74 *Cf.* David T. Shannon, '"An Ante-Bellum Sermon": A Resource for an African American Hermeneutic', in *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical*

Interpretation ed. C.H. Felder (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), pp. 98–123.

75 I know of no more convincing demonstration of this truth than Chana Bloch's eloquent exposition of George Herbert's poetics in *Spelling the Word: George Herbert and the Bible* (Berkeley: University of California, 1984), pp. 30–31:

> Writing about Scripture, Herbert sets before us the mind and heart of the Christian who reads and interprets. Precisely where we might expect to find the self humbled and subordinated, we find it instead vigorously at work and conscious of its own motions in bringing the text to life. . . . The delighted play of the mind, so characteristic of *The Temple*, belies Stanley Fish's picture of Herbert, martyrlike, building his poetry into a pyre of self-immolation. In Herbert's poverty the self is not effaced by improved.

76 See Colin Brown, *Miracles and the Critical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984); and Gary Habermas and Anthony Flew, *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead? The Resurrection Debate* (San Francisco: Harper, 1987).

77 Raymond Brown's *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (New York: Paulist Press, 1973) sums up the evidence from historical criticism.

78 See Childs, *New Testament as Canon*, pp. 157–65.

79 Karl Barth, *CD* 2.1 p. 207; P.E. Hughes, *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), pp. 213–23.

80 The charge of illegitimacy was of course raised by Jesus' opponents (John 8:41). See the tendentious revival of this case argued by Jane Schaberg in *The Illegitimacy of Jesus: A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives* (San Francisco: Harper, 1987).

81 *Cf.* Bishop Spong, *Rescuing the Bible*, p. 217, for the *ex cathedra* pronouncement of the new orthodoxy: 'The virgin birth tradition of the New Testament is not literally true. It should not be literally believed.'

82 *Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988).

83 *Ibid.*, p. 265: 'The few pertinent verses in Genesis 1 and 2, for example, are brief and allusive in their language, which leaves them open to a variety of speculative interpretations.' By not beginning in the beginning, he fails to see the natural law logic behind the purity code and behind the Hebrew marriage and family law, a logic that Mary Douglas calls 'keeping distinct the categories *of creation*' [my italics]; *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966), p. 53.

84 *Cf.* H.W. House, ed., *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views* (Downers Grove, I.V.P., 1990).

85 'Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to John Boswell's Exegesis of Romans 1', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 14 (1986), pp. 184–215.

86 'Awaiting the Redemption of Our Bodies', *Sojourners* (July 1991), pp. 17–21.

87 *Cf. Issues in Human Sexuality: A Statement by the House of Bishops of the General Synod of the Church of England, December 1991* (Harrisburg: Morehouse, 1991). This report certainly takes the first step in identifying the 'ultimate biblical consensus' about monogamy and celibacy (p. 18), and it refuses to grant homosexual practice the status of a 'parallel or alternative form of human sexuality' (p. 40). Where the report falters (p. 41) is in granting an autonomy of individual conscience over the clear teaching of Scripture, thus selling short the transforming power of grace.