

# Scripture: A Very Theological Proposal

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## INTRODUCTION

*Scripture: A Very Theological Proposal* is a contribution to the burgeoning interest in theological (re)engagement with Scripture.<sup>1</sup> The very theological proposal developed in this book takes its rise from a series of convictions in relation to Scripture's status, location and life in the church. In summary form, these convictions can be set out thus. *To attest the texts of the Old and New Testaments as 'Scripture' is to make specific claims about this text: that it is drawn into the activity of the triune God of Israel, that its ultimate destination is the worshiping church and that it has a ministry in shaping Christian thinking and acting. Scripture is not first a source for historical inquiry, nor a text that delights our literary sensitivities; calling these collected texts 'Scripture' points to its commissioned role in the saving purposes of God.*

The particularity of these claims invites us to undertake the exhilarating task of showing how one theological 'claim illuminates another'.<sup>2</sup> An account of what Scripture 'is' is inseparable from the series of divine and human actions in which it is a participant. Scripture is not a text in pursuit of a location – it is *already* located within the reconciling action of God and the practices of the church. The determinedly local hermeneutical stance developed in this book therefore finds itself somewhat underferd by those modes of reading in which the conditions and anxieties of modernity are viewed as 'basic to a description of the context of scriptural interpretation'.<sup>3</sup> Attempts to displace attention to

1. The literature is extensive and much of it will be cited throughout this book. The recent launch of the *Journal of Theological Interpretation* as well as the Brazos/SCM Theological Commentary on the Bible series are just two pieces of evidence for the growing interest in engaging with Scripture theologically.

2. Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (London: SCM, 2nd edn, 2003), p. 62.

3. Donald Wood, *Barth's Theology of Interpretation* (Barth Series; Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p. 98. Two recent books identify some of the theological missteps that modernity made in reading Scripture. Matthew Levering's stimulating *Participatory Biblical Exegesis: A Theology of Biblical Interpretation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008) charts how when history came to be understood as metaphysically non-participatory then theological realities became extrinsic to a 'historical' reading of Scripture. Once this happened, several things happened: there was no obvious way to speak of the continuity between a Pauline community and the contemporary church, 'linear' understandings of history subsumed any talk of the participatory reality of God's

doctrine and the church in favour of a general hermeneutics have blurred theological focus on Scripture. Walter Moberly, a key contributor to the theological interpretation of Scripture, writes accurately that

[t]o be Christian means, at least in part, the acceptance and appropriation of certain theological doctrines and patterns of living. Yet the task of reading the Bible ‘critically’ has regularly been defined precisely in terms of the exclusion of these doctrines and patterns of living from the interpretative process.<sup>4</sup>

More urgent than the hermeneutical anxieties of modernity is that we make visible the implications of the church’s faith and so learn to *see* what Scripture is, and where it is most fittingly located. To presume that the Bible is intelligible ‘apart from specific theological convictions and practices’ is to fall prey to what Richard Topping aptly calls an ‘optical illusion’.<sup>5</sup> We do not by nature always see what Scripture is – which is why we first need to have our eyes prised open by the Holy Spirit and then have our sight corrected by the church. A proper emphasis on the office of the Spirit needs therefore to be placed alongside the awareness that ‘one cannot see just by looking. Transformation is required if one is to see realistically’.<sup>6</sup> If nothing else I hope to encourage you, the reader, to look again at Scripture, to read it with imaginative awareness of the regions in which it is most properly fixed and located.

Seeing Scripture is an exercise in seeing the actions in which it is a participant, and so we should properly speak of not just seeing Scripture but also of seeing *beyond* Scripture. Karl Barth’s category of Scripture as a ‘witness’ is helpful here in reinforcing the kind of vision required. To have one’s attention grabbed by a witness is to look away from her and towards that to which she witnesses. The aim of reading a text written by a biblical author like Paul is not to seek out the putative historical circumstances *behind* this or that

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history and ‘historical’ exegesis was seen as distinct from ‘mystical’ or ‘spiritual’ exegesis. When the understanding of history and time that comes through faith is ruled out of court, pre-packaged debates such as those framed around the ‘Jesus of history’ and ‘Christ of faith’ begin to become intelligible. Levering’s book could be helpfully read alongside Peter M. Candler, Jr, *Theology, Rhetoric, Manudiction or Reading Scripture Together on the Path to God* (Radical Traditions; London: SCM, 2006). Candler traces how, after the Reformation, Scripture became identifiable as a ‘thing’ detachable from its native habitat in the church’s communal practices of reading and liturgical worship. When people began to *see* Scripture as a ‘physical object . . . as opposed to an ongoing story continually performed and re-narrated in the liturgy’ (18) a host of hermeneutical problems, framed apart from attention to the church, emerged.

4. R. W. L. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith: A Study of Abraham and Jesus* (Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine, 5; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 5.

5. Richard R. Topping, *Revelation, Scripture and Church: Theological Hermeneutic Thought of James Barr, Paul Ricoeur and Hans Frei* (Ashgate New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology and Biblical Studies; Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p. 160.

6. Emmanuel Katangole, *Beyond Universal Reason: The Relation between Religion and Ethics in the Work of Stanley Hauerwas* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2000), p. 100.

pronouncement, but to look towards the reality which so radically reorientated Paul's life. Just as when we look out of a window at people staring upwards and yet cannot see the plane they are doubtless staring at, so too Paul 'sees and hears something which is above everything, which is absolutely beyond the range of my observation and the measure of my thought'.<sup>7</sup> Reading Paul as a *witness* upturned by grace, rather than prioritizing his status as author, is to follow the direction of his gaze, daring to see that which he points us towards. Good witnesses urge us to look not at them but at that which they indicate to us – a 'successful' witness is one who recedes as his object of attention begins to absorb our attention.<sup>8</sup> Scripture is then not the end point of our vision, but is rather an invitation to see in what kind of contexts it is intelligible as *Scripture*.

The plan of this book can now be set out.

Chapter 1 explores Scripture's location in the purposes of God and the life of the church with a determination not to see the two in competition with each other. If we think that we face a dilemma whether to speak of Scripture either out of attention to God or attention to the church, we have made a misstep.<sup>9</sup> We can only see Scripture from within a series of interlocked and overlapping claims and so by following the logic of the truism that '[e]very Christian doctrine seems to require every other for its clear presentation'.<sup>10</sup> Key aids to seeing Scripture in this chapter are P. T. Forsyth, John Webster and Stanley Hauerwas.

Chapter 2 turns to Scripture's role in Christian ethics. Echoing Stephen Fowl and L. Gregory Jones, I advance that Scripture is not a resource waiting to be 'used' in our ethical performance. We need rather to reason with Scripture, and in John Howard Yoder we find just such a scriptural reasoner who wills to participate in the reality Scripture makes known. Finally, we explore how the virtue of patience can help sustain the sheer difficulty of reading Scripture.

Chapter 3 invites us to consider how Scripture and doctrine relate to one another. Scripture and doctrine are not, of course, to be merged into one another, but neither should they be isolated from one another. After offering some criticisms of recent works in Christology, I turn to a reading of the witness that is John's Gospel, seeing what he sees with the help of a host of theological voices. As far as is possible, I seek to make a very theological proposal in relation to Scripture in which scriptural reading itself plays a part.

7. Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (trans. Douglas Horton; New York: Harper & Row, 1957), pp. 62–63.

8. For more on this theme of witness in Barth's thought, see Richard E. Burnett, *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis: The Hermeneutical Principles of the Römerbrief Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 221–30.

9. Cf. Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom*, p. 62.

10. James Wm. McClendon Jr, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (3 vols; Nashville: Abingdon, rev. edn, 1994), p. 123.

Chapter 4 seeks to embed Scripture *within* theological thinking by inquiring into the nature of preaching in company with John's Gospel. It is necessary to turn to preaching if, as I maintain throughout this book, Scripture as the church's book is unintelligible apart from its liturgical environment. How preaching 'works' is a question that we can answer by attending to the actions and lives of which it is part. Removed from these contexts we will lack a properly *theological* account of what preaching 'is'.

Chapter 5 asks a question that may have vexed readers who have been following the various claims of the book – can we read Scripture in the university? I begin by demonstrating how theology's 'travail' is only a replication of the travail or fragmentation of the wider university.<sup>11</sup> After critiquing Philip Davies' account of the Bible's role in the modern university, I seek to re-imagine the teaching of theology and re-conceive the university as a space in which participative reading of Scripture might prosper.

Throughout, this book supposes that the lenses needed to see Scripture will be found by keeping in close company with the church and with a host of eclectic theologians.<sup>12</sup> Keeping within this company draws us closer to the sheer strangeness of God's gospel, a gospel wed to Scripture. As such every invitation to *see* Scripture in terms of the actions and lives of which it is part, and in which it is intelligible, carries with it the warning of Gregory of Nazianzus: 'For one who is not pure to lay hold of pure things is dangerous, just as it is for weak eyes to look at the sun's brightness.'<sup>13</sup>

11. Nicholas Wolterstorff, 'The Travail of Theology in the Modern Academy' in Miroslav Volf, Carmen Krieg and Thomas Kucharz (eds), *The Future of Theology: Essays in Honour of Jürgen Moltmann* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 35–46.

12. I therefore concur with R. R. Reno, 'Theology and Biblical Interpretation' in Michael Root and James J. Buckley (eds), *Sharper Than a Two-Edged Sword: Preaching, Teaching and Living the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), pp. 1-21 (esp. 17–21), who argues that it is more important to recover the conversation between theology and Scripture, rather than Scripture and biblical studies.

13. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Theological Orations* 27.2. Cited and translated in John J. O'Keefe and R. R. Reno, *Sanctified Vision: An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible* (Baltimore/London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), p. 147.

## Chapter 1

### LOCATING SCRIPTURE

#### *Introduction: Questions and Proposals*

A very theological proposal in relation to Scripture is implicated in asking a series of interlocked and overlapping questions. What is Scripture? What is God doing with Scripture? How is Scripture best positioned alongside and within the church's doctrine, worship and practices? In what kind of time is Scripture a participant? Each of these questions fall within the task of offering an account of Scripture's *location*, whose own overarching question is the following: in the context of *what kinds of action* is Scripture intelligible? Such a question is a disabusing reminder that Scripture is not a text explicable wholly by reference to human agency, for example, in the investigations prioritized by historical critical scholars. The kinds of action in which Scripture is participant, actions which this book intends to trace, invite us to look beyond the explanations proffered by a historicism which confidently runs along the tracks of immanent causality. If Jesus is who the church has claimed him to be then the implications for the reading of Scripture, and the understanding of history, cannot be incidental but of enduring interpretative significance. What history 'is' is not a subject on which a theologian can afford to be neutral. These provocations indicate that a very theological proposal in relation to Scripture is resourced by chasing the implications of a set of dogmatic claims: Scripture is a text constituted by divine action; Scripture is a text through which is conveyed the gospel of reconciliation; worship and practice leavens this text through the people of God; and such a people are trained to see Scripture's location in time. To be sure, Scripture is not just 'again and again' taken up into God's eccentric action and expelled into the church but also 'more and more' taken into God's reconciling action.<sup>1</sup> If a theological account of Scripture

1. The phrase 'again and again' is borrowed from criticisms that George Hunsinger makes of Barth's overly punctiliar account of the Christian life. See George Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 274–75. The language of 'more and more' is a reminder of Calvin's account of the Christian as being engrafted into Christ so that we 'may grow more and more together with him'. See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV.xvii.33 (trans. F. L. Battles; Library of Christian Classics, XX; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), p. 1407. The Christian life and scriptural reading are mutually informing practices – as we shall see throughout this book, there can be no talk of 'using' Scripture because

represents a series of interwoven claims and practices – such as I have indicated – then to pick these apart will only cause church situated reading to wither.

Christian reading and the location of Scripture as this kind of unique text therefore requires the conformity of our minds to a specific object(s) of attention. Moreover, theological decisions as to the place and status of Scripture have a determinative role in shaping our use and understanding of those reading approaches that are *not* primarily shaped by theological convictions. Local hermeneutics precedes general hermeneutics. One cannot dogmatically locate Scripture *after* one has done the work of historical criticism, as if to imply that Scripture's status in the purposes of God is an optional extra for the work of theology.<sup>2</sup> If correctly locating Scripture in the purposes of God, the life of the people of God and theological work is 'everything', it will be by beginning from a determinedly local perspective that one can then broaden out to consider more general approaches to Scripture.<sup>3</sup> The problem with those approaches which bracket out divine agency – consideration of what God is doing with Scripture and the church – at the outset of their scriptural reading is that this begins by setting up the divide between the Bible and theological/ecclesial interpretation, a ditch over which it is assumed we then have to leap by means of our intellectual or hermeneutical agility. As suggested in the Introduction, when we find ourselves faced with the task – 'how do we relate Scripture to theology or the life of the church?' – this is usually a sign that where and how we have started out is at fault.<sup>4</sup> Another way of saying this is that a theological proposal in relation to Scripture is not content to commence with the assumption that Jesus' Lordship is dispensable or optional to understanding Scripture and so remains under-resourced by those reading perspectives that appear to operate as if 'Christ had never become incarnate, died, risen, ascended to heaven, and sent His Spirit'.<sup>5</sup> But if Christ *is* truly Lord, a theological location of Scripture is compelled to pursue the implications of this claim for our understanding of scriptural reading. In this setting, the doctrine of providence is as

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how the Christian lives cannot be so easily disentangled from their reading of Scripture. This is a way of saying that virtues sustained by what Christians do are essential to 'good' scriptural reading. For an integrated account of practices in the Christian life and theological education, see Craig R. Dykstra, 'Reconceiving Practice' in Barbara G. Wheeler and Edward Farley (eds), *Shifting Boundaries: Contextual Approaches to the Structure of Theological Education* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991), pp. 35–66.

2. Indeed, it is necessary to recognize that those interpretations that are centred purely on Scripture's human authorship '*already* have a theological dimension', albeit indirectly: Daniel J. Treier, *Virtue and the Voice of God: Toward Theology as Wisdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), p. 130 (emphasis added).

3. Stephen E. Fowl, 'The New Testament, Theology, and Ethics' in Joel B. Green (ed.), *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), pp. 394–410 (399).

4. Mark Alan Bowald, *Rendering the Word in Theological Hermeneutics* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p. 41.

5. John Howard Yoder, 'If Christ is Truly Lord' in *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Scottsdale: Herald, 2003), pp. 52–84 (77).



much a claim about the meaning, ordering and our reading of Scripture as it is about the form of God's revelation in Christ.<sup>6</sup> In abbreviated form therefore: if Christians claim Christ to be Lord, what are the implications of this Lordship for locating Scripture?

In a welcome move, a number of recent writers have encouraged us to afford divine agency a decisive role in our understanding both of what Scripture is and our role as readers of *this* text. "What Scripture says" or "how the community reads" is, then, awkward, and shorthand language for a constellation of theological assertions which orbit around divine agency', is how one recent writer begins his study of theological hermeneutics.<sup>7</sup> In this register, talk of God in relation to Scripture is not merely the *result* of exegesis. God's agency is rather accorded significance *throughout* ecclesial reading of Scripture. Doctrine, which we might be tempted to accord little role in our understanding of Scripture,<sup>8</sup> must be seen not just to arise from the toil of scriptural reading (the kind of reading I evince in Chapter 3) but also must be crucial for *how* we read Scripture itself. David Gibson argues in this vein that Barth's reading of Scripture was christologically 'intensive', the very nature of his reading of the scriptural teaching on election being decisively informed by the prior reality of Christ.<sup>9</sup> Looking to doctrine as that which is both rooted in Scripture (the organic metaphor not being incidental) *and* as that which switches back to make intelligible the very practice of scriptural reading itself is why there is little option other than beginning in the middle of the church's convictions and practices.<sup>10</sup>

Precisely because I am aware that I can only begin in the middle, this chapter is *also* deeply indebted to those who have sought to displace talk of (general) hermeneutics by emphasizing the priority of the church. Too often, I hold, an emphasis on God's action and attention to the church are seen as competitive, and in this chapter I resist separating the two: an emphasis on God's action implicates us in attending to the people of God. Attentive to Scripture's immersion

6. See Serene Jones, 'Graced Practices: Excellence and Freedom in the Christian Life' in Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (eds), *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 51–77 (75).

7. Bowald, *Rendering the Word*, p. 2. See also John Webster, 'Resurrection and Scripture' in Andrew T. Lincoln and Angus Paddison (eds), *Christology and Scripture: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (LNTS, 348; London: T&T Clark, 2007), pp. 138–55, and Wood, *Barth's Theology of Interpretation*.

8. A trait observed by John Webster in his 'Hermeneutics in Modern Theology: Some Doctrinal Reflections' in *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), pp. 47–86.

9. David Gibson, *Reading the Decree: Exegesis, Election and Christology in Calvin and Barth* (T&T Clark Studies in Systematic Theology; London: T&T Clark International, 2009).

10. See Nicholas Lash, *Believing Three Ways in One God: A Reading of the Apostle's Creed* (SCM Classics; London: SCM, 2002), p. 2: 'Theologians spend much time arguing where they should *begin*. This is a largely futile exercise because, if one thing is certain in this life, it is that none of us begins at the beginning.'

in both divine action and the church's practices, we can therefore say that the latter helps render visible the text's providential location in God's purposes, for the church is privileged to participate in God's actions. Talk of God's providence is made visible by a church that reads Scripture with an alertness to its figural thrust, with the virtue of patience and with lives that imitate Jesus' non-violence. Providence is not just something the church thinks, but it is (and must be seen to be) intertwined with the church's reading of Scripture, *how* it reads Scripture and the kinds of practices such reading generates. When one begins in the middle of the claim that

God's action is uniquely present in, with, and under this text in a way that it is not for any and all others,' it is easier to recognize that scriptural reading, as a church activity, is a *sui generis* activity.<sup>11</sup>

Having placed the reader quite deliberately in the middle of a series of claims, I can now set out how this chapter will plot the location of Scripture. How may we fittingly understand Scripture's place within the action of the triune God *and* the life of the church?

First, with the help of the Scottish Congregationalist theologian P. T. Forsyth, we shall locate Scripture within the wider field of God's redemptive action, God's irrepressible desire that his creatures might live in fellowship with him. Forsyth reminds us that Scripture is not a text that arises out of our best religious sentiments but is a text *constituted* by divine action. Scripture is first and foremost co-opted into a very specific *gospel* action.

Second, we shall see the fruits of locating Scripture in an account of time broadcast to the world and cultivated in members of the church by the liturgy and the church's practices. Here, at the instigation of Stanley Hauerwas, we turn decidedly to the church. We should not suppose, however, that locating Scripture in the action of God and the life of the church marks a two-stage attempt to place Scripture in a wholly divine region of activity (the gospel) and then a wholly human region of activity (the church). This chapter is not an attempt to offer a doctrine of Scripture 'from above' and then a doctrine 'from below'. Indeed, such a competitive account would only trade on asymmetrical impulses that I shall criticize. It is necessary to remember that the church, as a people brought into being by God, is a region of divine activity continuous with the eccentric action of the gospel.<sup>12</sup> When we move to the community of

11. Bowald, *Rendering the Word*, p. 23.

12. Have I not just 'collapsed' Scripture into the church and so stilled its slaying power? Since I know of no way in which we can understand Scripture theologically other than in company with the convictions and practices of the church (Robert W. Jenson, 'Hermeneutics and the Life of the Church' in Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (eds), *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), pp. 89–105 thus rightly says 'there can be no reading of the Bible that is not churchly' (98)), it is incumbent that the church's doctrines (Jesus' risen agency) and the church's practices (communal receptivity of the Spirit, confession of sins and accountability to one another) protect the church from itself. What matters is not imposing a model of Scripture's

the reconciled, we are paying no less attention to the reconciling divine action which generates Scripture. ‘Whether we are to say that God uses the gospel to gather the church for himself, or that God provides the church to carry the gospel to the world, depends entirely on the direction of thought’.<sup>13</sup> Appeal to the church is not then a general appeal to sociality or human togetherness but a reminder that *this people* is the particular form of salvation that the gospel takes, a gospel housed in *this* text: Scripture. God works the gospel through Scripture and then works Scripture through the church. The church *is* the embodiment of the good news which Scripture conveys – God’s determination to live in fellowship with those who were estranged from him (Eph. 2.14).<sup>14</sup> Attempts to locate Scripture theologically do not need therefore to balance out overused categories ‘from above’ and ‘from below’. Rather, locating Scripture theologically is a matter of seeing the interwoven aspects of Scripture’s vertical and horizontal locations. God works through Scripture so that we might be drawn to participate in the new life he makes possible through his Son.

*Scripture and the Gospel: Locating Scripture  
with the Help of P. T. Forsyth*

Piecing together the diffuse work of P. T. Forsyth (1848–1921),<sup>15</sup> helps us begin to answer the following question: in the context of *what kinds of action* is Scripture intelligible? Forsyth furnishes us with a doctrine of Scripture grounded in a determined attention to the lively and prevenient activity of the triune God.

Like Karl Barth (to whom he has often been compared), Scripture was central to Forsyth’s reorientation from the confines of liberal theology to the spaciousness of what he termed the ‘positive gospel’.<sup>16</sup> Forsyth’s redirection from being a ‘lover of love’ to an ‘object of grace’ sprang from his exposure to

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independence upon the church but for the church to work out practically, and so learn to see, how Scripture’s ministry is sustained by its practices and convictions. The church shares in the authority of Scripture and it is through processes of testing one another that the people of God protect themselves from a fissiparous individualism. See Gavin D’Costa, ‘Revelation, Scripture and Tradition: Some Comments on John Webster’s Conception of “Holy Scripture”’, *JIST* 6 (2004), pp. 337–50 (342).

13. Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1 (2 vols; New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 5.

14. See William T. Cavanaugh, ‘Pilgrim People’ in David Matzko McCarthy and M. Therese Lysaught (eds), *Gathered for the Journey: Moral Theology in Catholic Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), pp. 88–105, and Treier, *Virtue and the Voice of God*, p. 200 for more on the scriptural importance of the ‘people of God’.

15. Space precludes me from entering into a detailed biography of Forsyth, minister in a number of English pastorates for 25 years, and College Principal for 20 years. For more biographical details see William Lee Bradley, *P.T. Forsyth: The Man and His Work* (London: Independent Press, 1952).

16. Robert McAfee Brown, *P.T. Forsyth: Prophet for Today* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1952), pp. 20–21. Along with many other students of Forsyth, I think the language of ‘re-orientation’, in

the gospel for which he said Scripture was a 'shrine'.<sup>17</sup> The language of Forsyth consistently reinforces this commissioned role of Scripture in service of the gospel. The Bible is a 'humble vassal' bearing the gospel<sup>18</sup> or a 'field' into which the objective gospel has been ploughed.<sup>19</sup> The 'positive gospel', mediated by the New Testament in particular, is the apostolic insight into the significance of the Jesus-event; it is 'a certain interpretation of Christ which is given in the New Testament, a mystic interpretation of a historic fact. It is the loving, redeeming grace of a holy God in Christ'.<sup>20</sup> The gospel is therefore two-sided: it is both the outgoing of God's holy love *and* the apostolic interpretation of this divine action. The New Testament faith, which Forsyth consistently counsels the church to be resourced by, is that the actions of Jesus were the actions of God among us. Thus, in the hands of Paul the apostle the historical reality of Jesus' death on a Roman cross is seen for what in truth it *is*: the atoning death of God in Christ.

Forsyth's decisive positioning of Scripture in service to the apostolic gospel gave him notable freedom with regard to two prevailing sources of authority, which are just as present today as they were in Forsyth's time: biblical infallibility and biblical scholarship. Evangelical authority, Forsyth implores, is not secured by shielding the Bible from legitimate scrutiny but by turning with renewed concentration and vigour to that for which Scripture acts as conduit: the gospel. Christians who believe not in an infallible Bible, but in an impregnable gospel, need not be unsettled by the perceived critical plunders of scholarship. Authority in the church is a permanent correlate of the 'moral reality rising from the experience of forgiveness in the Gospel and from the certainty that Christ has there done on us a work that none but God could do'.<sup>21</sup>

Likewise, Forsyth encouraged the church to graduate from notions of the Bible's verbal inspiration, even if it was a distinctive tenet of Reformation thought. 'To the Bible as the Reformers read it we can never, indeed, return', Forsyth gravely intoned.<sup>22</sup> Notions of plenary inspiration relied upon theories that stultified the relationship between the Word and the Spirit.

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preference to 'conversion', better articulates Forsyth's gradual immersion within the positive gospel.

17. P. T. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind* (Biblical and Theological Classics Library; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), p. 177; P. T. Forsyth, *Faith, Freedom and the Future* (London: Independent Press, 1955), p. 171.

18. P. T. Forsyth, 'The Grace of The Gospel as the Moral Authority in The Church' in *The Church, The Gospel and Society* (London: Independent Press, 1962), pp. 65–127 (68).

19. P. T. Forsyth, 'The Place of Spiritual Experience in the Making of Theology' in *Revelation Old and New: Sermons and Addresses* (John Huxtable (ed.); London: Independent Press, 1962), pp. 68–80 (80).

20. P. T. Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ* (London: Independent Press, 1946), p. 3.

21. P. T. Forsyth, *The Justification of God: Lectures for War-Time on a Christian Theodicy of God* (London: Duckworth, 1916), p. 89.

22. Forsyth, *Faith, Freedom and the Future*, p. 132.

Verbal inspiration risks slighting the Spirit's present action upon Scripture, rendering Scripture merely a 'mechanical creation' running on fuel deposited there and then rather than having its location in a present reality continually at work through the Spirit.<sup>23</sup> 'The Gospel is always the Spirit in action, not from afar, not from an old inspired past which never loses its force but from the direct present using that timeless past.'<sup>24</sup> Conversion to the gospel is not the legacy of an inspired past but the operation of the Spirit in the present. The Spirit keeps us at once bound to the historic act of God in Jesus Christ while simultaneously operating as this singular event's 'continuity, amplification, and its individualisation'.<sup>25</sup> Danger lay in divorcing the Word and Spirit: not only would the Word become calcified, but the Spirit would have warrant to wander free of the Word and mutate into an adjunct of our evolutionary or subjective predilections. Wrenched apart from the Spirit, the Bible is de-historicized and, instead of being read in tune with the apostolic revelation, the text is 'brought to the bar of the inspiration it creates'.<sup>26</sup> This is to succumb to religious impressionism, namely enlisting the Bible to a spiritual experience created within us, rather than exposing ourselves to Scripture's regenerative gospel. The risen and present Christ, whose objective and completed work is the abundant energy acting on the Bible, works in us through the Spirit's stewardship. 'It is the living matter and content of the ageless Word that is brought livingly home to us by the personality of the Spirit.'<sup>27</sup>

Verbal inspiration was therefore replaced with talk of personal or apostolic inspiration: 'it is not, strictly speaking, the Bible that was inspired, but the souls of the men whose writings fill it'.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, Paul was 'inspired before his Epistles were' and he was 'more inspired than Romans'.<sup>29</sup> Forsyth therefore offers what might be called an ontology of the apostles, a theological account of who they are and how their writings are to be understood, both of these accounts firmly in relation to the saving action of God.<sup>30</sup> For Forsyth,

the Apostles were not panes of bad glass, but crystal cups the Master filled. They were not mere mediums even, but sacraments. They were not mere channels but agents, not

23. Forsyth, *Faith, Freedom and the Future*, p. 33.

24. Forsyth, *Faith, Freedom and the Future*, p. 30.

25. Forsyth, *Faith, Freedom and the Future*, p. 11.

26. Forsyth, *Faith, Freedom and the Future*, p. 130.

27. Forsyth, *Faith, Freedom and the Future*, p. 30.

28. P. T. Forsyth, *Christ on Parnassus: Lectures on Art, Ethic and Theology* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1911), p. 243. See also Forsyth, *Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, p. 139; P. T. Forsyth, *Theology in Church and State* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1915), p. 71.

29. Forsyth, *Theology in Church and State*, p. 37.

30. In this connection, see the helpful essay of C. Stephen Evans, 'Canonicity, Apostolicity, and Biblical Authority: Some Kierkegaardian Reflections' in Craig Bartholomew, Scott Hahn, Robin Parry, Christopher Seitz and Al Wolters (eds), *Canon and Biblical Interpretation* (Scripture and Hermeneutics Series, 7; Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006), pp. 146–66.

vehicles of Christ but members of Him. They did not merely take their departure from Jesus, they had their life, and function, and truth in Him always.<sup>31</sup>

The apostolic issue is the work of the Spirit as ‘the returning expositor and translator into history’ of Jesus’ work.<sup>32</sup> The uniqueness of the apostles is not their historical proximity to Jesus – plainly other people enjoyed historical encounters with Jesus – nor does their uniqueness lie in the quality of their faith, or their particular experience of redemption. The certainty which the New Testament conveys is not a matter of the religious experiences of the apostles. Rather, the apostles’ uniqueness was their instruction by the Spirit of the risen Christ whose office was ‘not enlarging the revelation in matter but . . . opening its interior’.<sup>33</sup> Their charism was Christ *himself* opening his final revelation out in them, and their writings are the textual extensions and expositions of his work, a work that could not remain dumb and inert.<sup>34</sup> Inspiration is therefore positioned by Forsyth at the frontier with revelation. Inspiration is a subjective state experienced by the biblical writers, ‘an exalted state of the spiritual and imaginative faculties’,<sup>35</sup> whilst revelation is the objective and saving action of Christ. Faithful reading is the careful sifting out of the decisive revelation from amidst the Bible’s fallible inspired writings:

The same molten state of inspiration holds suspended in it both gold and dross, both passing error and permanent eternal truth; and a great amount of inspiration will yield sometimes only a percentage of real and eternal revelation. To take the Bible as a whole, it is the record of a vast and voluminous inspiration, which fused up in its heat a whole mass of human interests, passions, beliefs, ambitions, and errors; but it is not impossible, as every Christian knows, to extract from the mass the pure gold of the historic, superhistoric, and eternal revelation of the holy love and free grace of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.<sup>36</sup>

31. P. T. Forsyth, *The Principle of Authority in Relation to Certainty, Sanctity and Society: An Essay in the Philosophy of Experimental Religion* (London: Independent Press, 1952), pp. 134–35.

32. Forsyth, *Principle of Authority*, p. 131.

33. Forsyth, *Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, p. 164.

34. See John H. Rodgers, *The Theology of P.T. Forsyth: The Cross of Christ and the Revelation of God* (London: Independent Press, 1965), p. 104: ‘The deed is only fully itself in that it communicates its significance to man.’

35. Forsyth, *Christ on Parnassus*, p. 243.

36. Forsyth, *Christ on Parnassus*, pp. 243–44. Thus, the authority of Scripture is not located in its inspiration, but rather in its commissioned role in conveying the gospel – the action which first pulverizes and then recreates our soul. This correct attitude to Scripture will mean that we strain the writings written by inspired authors for the revelation that lies within. It is this revelation which is the ‘creative interior’ of Paul’s writings, for in this vital centre we have ‘not an account of the Christian consciousness but of God’s revelation which creates that consciousness; a revelation which, indeed, emerges in man’s consciousness always, and in its terms, but is not identical with it, and does not arise from it’: Forsyth, *Theology in Church and State*, p. 9.

The New Testament therefore has a decisive location in the extension of the gospel. Indeed, Jesus' work is completed *only* with the interpretation of himself through the apostles, whose issue is 'part of the action . . . and not a searchlight thrown on it from without'.<sup>37</sup> Neither the record of Jesus' impressive personality nor an insight into the spiritual mores of the apostles, the New Testament is decisively fixed within the act of Jesus' self-revelation.<sup>38</sup> The apostolic records are indeed 'acts within his [Jesus'] integral and historic act of redemption' and so they are 'sacraments' more than they are 'sources' to be quarried by scholars.<sup>39</sup> The apostolic issue 'partakes of the authority of that revelation whom they interpreted'.<sup>40</sup> Whilst the synoptic Gospels alone could not found the church, this need not be a worry for the apostolic gospel can make sense of the synoptic witness.<sup>41</sup> The twofold witness within the New Testament, the synoptic and the apostolic, is not then to be sundered – or plundered – by the historical critics. Indeed, in his *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, Forsyth attempts to narrow the perceived gap between the synoptic and the Johannine witness to Jesus, staking much on the so-called 'Johannine thunderbolt': 'no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him' (Mt. 11.27).<sup>42</sup> In this declaration, Jesus reveals an awareness of his pre-existent Sonship, pointing to the congruity between Jesus' teaching and the apostolic gospel.<sup>43</sup> Just as in John, Jesus seems here to be preaching *himself* for *he* is the gospel: the eternal Son revealing the eternal Father. Little wonder that Forsyth says Mt. 11.27 'is the Fourth Gospel *in nuce*',<sup>44</sup> providing the 'centre of gravity' for the synoptic insight.<sup>45</sup> Forsyth consistently argues that there is no disjunction between the teaching of Jesus and the apostolic interpretation of Jesus. The Jesus who remains largely silent in the synoptic Gospels, as with all 'great doers', breaks his silence in Paul's epistles and 'becomes his own divine scholiast'.<sup>46</sup> Liberal proposals that the apostles were unfaithful to Jesus' teaching and imported a whole array of concepts foreign to Jesus himself betray

37. Forsyth, *Principle of Authority*, p. 131.

38. Forsyth, *Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, p. 151.

39. Forsyth, *Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, p. 172. See Forsyth, *Principle of Authority*, p. 141, for Forsyth's definition of a sacrament as that which comes 'to abolish time and space, and give us direct contact with Him in a mediate immediacy'.

40. Forsyth, *Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, p. 155.

41. Forsyth, *Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, pp. 142–43; P. T. Forsyth, *Rome, Reform and Reaction* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1899), pp. 76–77.

42. According to Robert Benedetto, *P.T. Forsyth Bibliography and Index* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1993), p. 76, Forsyth makes some 12 references to Mt. 11.27 in his books. Unless stated otherwise all translations are from the NRSV.

43. Forsyth, *Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, pp. 111–14.

44. Forsyth, *Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, p. 116.

45. Forsyth, *Theology in Church and State*, p. 28.

46. P. T. Forsyth, *The Cruciality of the Cross* (London: Independent Press, 1948), p. 16.

a lack of faith in the Spirit's work of binding together history and faithful expansion.<sup>47</sup>

The conviction that the apostles were powerfully co-opted into God's reconciling action also resourced Forsyth's attitude towards biblical scholarship. *How* we read the Bible is a correlate of the actions of which Scripture is a part. To confine the Bible to a rational veracity would install an intellectual hierarchy and misread the Bible as a historical source rather than a sacramental agent.<sup>48</sup> Forsyth consistently warned of the dangers of rationalism, an attitude which forgets that 'the judges of Christian truth are not, in the first place, reasonable men, but redeemed men'.<sup>49</sup> 'Grace', Forsyth reminds us, 'is not irrational in the sense of being foreign to reason, but it is not in the reason of it that its authority resides'.<sup>50</sup> The principal function of the Bible is not for it to be scrutinized, but for it to examine us. Thus the reality which the New Testament was created by is best 'expounded by a mind that has experienced its creative change'.<sup>51</sup> The reader who appreciated this would know that the gulf between the reader and the text is not one decisively traversed by intellectual apparatus but by the holy God who reaches out to sinful humanity. To adopt the words of John Webster in his discussion of the biblical hermeneutics of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth, the real difficulty in reading Scripture 'is spiritual and therefore moral; it is our refusal as sinners to be spoken to, our wicked repudiation of the divine address, our desire to speak the final word to ourselves'.<sup>52</sup> The rupture between the reader of Scripture and God is met by the gospel: the forgiving *action* of the holy Father in his Son, Jesus Christ. Readers of Scripture attuned to *this* reality find themselves in a place of remarkable freedom in relation to critical modes of reading Scripture. The Christian reads Scripture in a sphere of autonomous and regenerative grace, a topic about which A. M. Hunter wrote powerfully in his study of Forsyth:

The man who has never experienced this divine act [God's central act in Christ] in his own life has no rights to judge it by methods which, however valid in other fields, do not apply to the experienced fact of grace. In short, the Christian gospel cannot have anything else for its criterion. It is spiritually autonomous.<sup>53</sup>

47. Forsyth, *Cruciality of the Cross*, p. 49.

48. Forsyth, *Faith, Freedom and the Future*, p. 75; P. T. Forsyth, *The Church and the Sacraments* (London: Independent Press, 1947), p. 132.

49. P. T. Forsyth, 'Mystics and Saints', *The Expository Times* 5 (1894), pp. 401–04 (402).

50. P. T. Forsyth, 'Authority and Theology' in *The Gospel and Authority: A P.T. Forsyth Reader* (Marvin W. Anderson (ed.); Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1971), pp. 130–47 (140).

51. P. T. Forsyth, 'Regeneration, Creation, and Miracle', *The Methodist Review Quarterly* 63 (1914), pp. 627–43 (631).

52. Webster, *Word and Church*, p. 109.

53. A. M. Hunter, *P.T. Forsyth – Per Crucem ad Lucem* (London: SCM, 1974), p. 54.



Forsyth's conviction is that the gospel dislodges any human critical faculties in which we may seek to fix authority.<sup>54</sup> In every attempt to tame Scripture – through ecclesial institutionalism, creedalism or scholarship – the Bible reveals itself as a 'Trojan horse',<sup>55</sup> a text whose subversive principle *within* is always greater than any attempt to master it from without. Those concerned by the incursions of biblical criticism may, then, be of good cheer, for the Bible contains within it a gospel which the 'dissector's knife' cannot reach,<sup>56</sup> and scholars lack 'the power to reconstruct the Gospel in the Bible; and that Gospel has the power to reconstruct both Bible and Church'.<sup>57</sup> If the Bible is read for what it *is* – 'the exposition of a long action and a final act of grace' – criticism will not rock this truth.<sup>58</sup> Faith is therefore Scripture's 'native air, in which it expands, reveals and bestows its true soul'.<sup>59</sup> Biblical criticism has a restraining leash kept on it insofar as its findings are tested according to evangelical principles, their 'compatibility with the central life and experience of redemption which makes the Church'.<sup>60</sup> With the right perspective on biblical scholarship, biblical scholars can, of course, be enlisted in the theological endeavour as 'assessors and advisers'.<sup>61</sup> Biblical scholarship, after all, was a gift of the Holy Spirit.<sup>62</sup> The biblical reader, Forsyth warned, has nothing to gain by denying the validity of biblical criticism. Nevertheless, the reader of Scripture is best fixing their faith beyond the reach of biblical scholarship by returning 'to the Epistles for the key of the Gospels, for the evangelical secret, and the principle of the Highest Criticism of all'.<sup>63</sup>

With this attention to the action of the gospel, there is no sense of Forsyth being careless with regard to the historical reality of God's action. However, the crucial matter remains always how God in Jesus Christ's history is interpreted, and here Forsyth's reading companions to the Gospels are not surprisingly

54. Leslie McCurdy, *Attributes and Atonement: The Holy Love of God in the Theology of P.T. Forsyth* (Paternoster Biblical and Theological Monographs; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999), p. 78. For Forsyth's unwillingness to promote rationalism over revelation see P. T. Forsyth, 'Revelation and the Person of Christ' in *Faith and Criticism: Essays by Congregationalists* (no editor cited; London: Simpson Low Marston, 1893), pp. 95–144 (109).

55. Forsyth, *Rome, Reform and Reaction*, p. 108.

56. Forsyth, *Theology in Church and State*, p. 69.

57. Forsyth, *Rome, Reform and Reaction*, p. 225. See also Forsyth, *Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, p. 318: 'The judgement of the cross criticises all criticism, and the finality of its felt salvation is the rock impregnable.'

58. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, p. 170.

59. P. T. Forsyth, 'Treating the Bible Like Any Other Book', *The British Weekly* (15th August 1901), pp. 401–02 (401).

60. Forsyth, *Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, p. 49.

61. Forsyth, *Rome, Reform and Reaction*, p. 224.

62. Forsyth, *Church and the Sacraments*, p. 36; P. T. Forsyth, *The Work of Christ* (London: Independent Press, 1946), pp. 33–34.

63. Forsyth, *Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, p. 318.

the epistles with their kerygmatic interpretation of Jesus' significance. Scripture's decisive location is not the historical context from which the texts arose, but always the gospel.

Fact, history, is quite necessary, but it is the nature, the interpretation, the theology, of the historic fact, the nature of its purpose and action, that tells. It is the eloquence of the fact, or let me rather say its vitality, its conductivity, its conveying power. It is fact as sacramental.<sup>64</sup>

Historical study of Jesus risks confining our attention to Jesus within a limited time frame. The more urgent task is however to ground one's life and thought in what, through Jesus, is continually expansive.

Christ himself arose at a point within human history and stands at a particular moment of it. And the whole business of history is to give Christ His eternal place in the whole course of history . . . to let loose the eternity locked in those brief thirty years, and give it its ruling place in all the affairs of time.<sup>65</sup>

Forsyth is keen on giving the example of the cross on which Jesus died. That Jesus was crucified on a Roman cross is historic, but that this act is the decisive act of a holy God is super-historic. The gospel is based in history, but it is not confined to the investigations of historical scholars,

the Person of Christ which is to be the foundation of living faith must be something else than the residuary legacy of historical research . . . we must found anything so real as eternity on a historic fact; but one too creative of history to be given by history alone.<sup>66</sup>

As a consequence of these convictions, Forsyth directed that the Bible was neither a document of doctrinal orthodoxy nor a statute book of ethics. The one who speaks from within the biblical interior is fittingly resourced by the gospel 'upon which all [biblical] texts crystallize and fall into their graded place'.<sup>67</sup> Reading the Bible out from this centre gives readers the appropriate blend of finality and sequacity. The gospel 'is not something to stand on, but something to live from . . . [i]t is more than ground that will not give way; it is a source

64. P. T. Forsyth, 'Unity and Theology: A Liberal Evangelicalism the True Catholicism' in *Towards Reunion: Being Contributions to Mutual Understanding by Church of England and Free Church Writers* (no editor cited; London: Macmillan, 1919), pp. 51–81 (64).

65. P. T. Forsyth, 'The National Aspect of Missions' in *Missions in State and Church: Sermons and Addresses* (New York: A.C. Armstrong, 1908), pp. 167–93 (184–85).

66. P. T. Forsyth, 'The Inner Life of Christ', *The Constructive Quarterly* 7 (1919), pp. 149–62 (152–53).

67. P. T. Forsyth, 'The Need for a Positive Gospel', *London Quarterly Review* 102 (1904), pp. 64–99 (80).

that will not fail or dry'.<sup>68</sup> Forsyth's own reading of the Bible demonstrated this 'positive core' and 'flexible casing': He had little or nothing invested in the synoptic Gospels' presentation of the virgin birth, and he consistently argued that the finished work of the cross was the source of Christian ethics rather than the occasional precepts of the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>69</sup> Ethical action fuelled by Jesus' teaching would soon find itself running on empty; only the cross has resources enough to fund our moral behaviour. Again, Forsyth is as good as his own counsel; in *The Christian Ethic of War*,<sup>70</sup> written in the midst of the First World War, Forsyth excoriates those who justified pacifism on the basis of the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>71</sup>

How then was the Bible to be located within the church and the work of theology? The Bible is indispensable to theological thought because it is the source of the apostolic kerygma. Verses like 2 Cor. 5.19, Rom. 1.17 or Jn 3.16 were in service to what Forsyth understood as unshakeable 'dogma'. In such verses the church is confronted with a truth that is 'absolute, final and essential'.<sup>72</sup> The church speaks on the basis of these statements whose 'creative interior' is the action of God for humanity, whose guiding idea is not human thoughts about God but God's decisive dealing with humanity.<sup>73</sup> In Forsyth's understanding therefore, 'dogma' points not to the immovable creeds of the church. On the contrary, the apostolic kerygma evident in verses like 2 Cor. 5.19 serves dogma: 'God in his gracious turning to man in Jesus Christ'.<sup>74</sup> Doctrine, in this setting, is subordinate to dogma and marks the church's release of dogma's pressure; it is the space into which dogma expands. Doctrine is the energy of dogma expressed in the church's understanding, appropriate to the particular time and place it finds itself in, as in the historic creeds of the church.<sup>75</sup> The authority of a creed is therefore of a lower order from the authority of the dogma enclosed in the apostolic witness: doctrine is 'faith's

68. Forsyth, *Principle of Authority*, p. 36.

69. P. T. Forsyth, 'Orthodoxy, Heterodoxy, Heresy, and Freedom', *Hibbert Journal* 8 (1910), pp. 321–29 (322).

70. P. T. Forsyth, *The Christian Ethic of War* (London: Longmans, Green, 1916).

71. Forsyth's instincts are right here, but I believe his conclusion to be mistaken. Unless we are to subscribe to an unsustainable prescriptive reading of Scripture, the Sermon on the Mount alone cannot indeed warrant a pacifist perspective. Moreover, Forsyth is right to think that Christian ethical action is never fuelled by Scripture alone but is always nested in a wider region of divine-human action. Had, however, Forsyth attended to the overall narrative of Jesus' life, this would have encouraged him to see the peaceable nature of Jesus' life, explicated by his teaching. Attention to the length of Scripture is important here. Forsyth was notoriously inattentive to the shape and form of Jesus' life.

72. Forsyth, *Theology in Church and State*, p. 17.

73. Forsyth, *Theology in Church and State*, p. 9.

74. Rodgers, *Theology of P. T. Forsyth*, p. 85.

75. Forsyth, *Theology in Church and State*, pp. 46–50.

thermometer for guidance rather than its governor for obedience'.<sup>76</sup> Forsyth's location of Scripture in relation to doctrine will serve us well in Chapter 3.

As can be seen from our explorations thus far, Forsyth first and foremost locates Scripture in relation to *God's* activity, an action best regarded as 'not merely a gospel of definite truth but of decisive reality, not of clear belief but of crucial action'.<sup>77</sup> This plea that we attend to the lively activity of God – rather than a series of propositional truths *about* God – explains Forsyth's resistance to dry-freezing Scripture and regarding it as little more than 'an arsenal of Christian evidences'.<sup>78</sup> Scriptural reading is to resist having commerce with stupefied orthodoxies. Christian faith is not ultimately faith in doctrines but rather a faith in those realities and powers which Scripture and doctrine attempt to articulate.<sup>79</sup> The power of Jn 3.16 is not that it is a message about God's love for us; it points to God's love enacted for us. Finely-wrought doctrinal systems are prone to misunderstand faith as an intellectual assent to truths articulated, rather than the soul's 'direct contact with Christ crucified'.<sup>80</sup> Biblical readers who domesticate the Bible into systems of orthodoxy are liable to forget that it is the theologian's 'hard and high fate to cast himself into the flame he tends, and be drawn into its consuming fire'.<sup>81</sup> To be 'biblical' is therefore to apprehend that Scripture's core

is not a crystallization of man's divinest idea, it is not even a divine declaration of what God is in himself; it is his revelation of what he is *for us* in actual history, what he for us has done, and forever does.<sup>82</sup>

Being biblical is a matter of apprehending correctly God's redemptive activity *into which Scripture has been drawn and is now located.*

No belief is scriptural simply because it be met with in the Bible. We do not believe in the contents of the Bible, but in its content, in what put it there, and what it is there for. For it is a means, and not an end. We believe in the Gospel, the Gospel of God's Grace justifying the ungodly in Christ's Cross and creating the Bible for that use.<sup>83</sup>

Scripture is located by the gospel, before it is located by us.

76. Forsyth, *Theology in Church and State*, p. 57.

77. Forsyth, 'The Need for a Positive Gospel', pp. 70–71.

78. Forsyth, 'The Evangelical Churches and the Higher Criticism' in *Gospel and Authority*, pp. 15–53 (26).

79. Forsyth, *Theology in Church and State*, p. 99.

80. Forsyth, *Rome, Reform and Reaction*, p. 172.

81. Forsyth, *Cruciality of the Cross*, p. 169.

82. Forsyth, 'The Evangelical Churches and the Higher Criticism', p. 23.

83. Forsyth, *Theology in Church and State*, p. 81.

*Extending the Location of Scripture*

P. T. Forsyth reminds us that Scripture is fittingly located within the realm of God's gospel action. Located thus, the church recognizes that Scripture occupies a space like no other text. What Forsyth has to say about who the apostles were or the authority of historical criticism is ordered by this non-negotiable location of Scripture, elaborating some of the claims about the priority of local hermeneutics with which this chapter commenced. Moreover, Forsyth's assertions about Scripture's relation to divine action helpfully distinguishes between revelation and text, binding them to one another, although not confusing them with one another. We thus avoid the thickets of elevating Scripture to an inappropriate status or of foreclosing the freedom of God to act upon us anew. The priority must be *God's* use of the text. Equally, Forsyth reminds us, the reliability of Scripture is a question not of its verbal imperfections but a matter of Scripture's relationship to the triune God who elects it into his service. What T. F. Torrance calls the 'double place' of Scripture – its location both in the redeeming action of God and a world in need of redemption – is a way of recognizing the peculiar problem of Holy Scripture and its peculiar place. Holy Scripture is assumed by Christ to be his instrument in conveying revelation and reconciliation, and yet Holy Scripture belongs to the sphere where redemption is necessary. The Bible stands above the church, speaking to the church the very Word of God, but the Bible also belongs to history which comes under the judgement and the redemption of the cross.<sup>84</sup>

Scripture is thus located in God's movement outwards to embrace and call people into the gospel action. The reconciling action of the gospel is the sphere which initially and decisively renders Scripture intelligible: 'true hearing of the Word of God coming to us through the human words of the Bible which is faithful to those words can take place effectively only within the sphere of reconciliation to God'.<sup>85</sup> Scriptural reading is not an activity which can be allowed to wander far from our restored relationship with God made possible by the gospel.

Notwithstanding these notes of appreciation for Forsyth's location of Scripture, there are some problems in his account of Scripture. One disturbing lacuna at the heart of Forsyth's location of Scripture is his reticence on the Old Testament. Readers will have noticed that whilst Forsyth confidently locates the New Testament in relation to the gospel action, he says very little about the Old Testament. Such reticence threatens to relegate the Old Testament to a moment of salvation history now past and fails to see how Christ's resurrection

84. Thomas. F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (London: SCM, 1965), p. 138.

85. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, p. 142. See also T. F. Torrance, 'Introduction: Biblical Hermeneutics and General Hermeneutics' in *Divine Meaning: Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), pp. 5–13.

fills full the Old Testament as a *continuing* witness to Christ. As we shall see figural reading, a reading sustained by the liturgy and practices of the church, is a way of recognizing the Old Testament's location in the gospel action. A sustainable figural reading depends upon a clear idea of what time is in the purposes of God and an appreciation that, to borrow Forsyth's words, to understand history we must 'give Christ His eternal place in the whole course of history . . . let loose the eternity locked in those brief thirty years, and give it its ruling place in all the affairs of time'.<sup>86</sup> We shall emphasize the contribution of figural reading at various points within this book.

Forsyth's doctrine of Scripture as a commissioned text can be profitably placed alongside the work of a contemporary theologian, John Webster, and his robust location of Scripture within the action of God.<sup>87</sup> What might we learn about some of the shortcomings of a 'divine action' location of Scripture by drawing Webster alongside our reading of Forsyth? Both Forsyth and Webster certainly place a strong emphasis on the action of God, both steer well clear of making claims about the imperfections of the text and both prioritize God's deployment – 'annexation' in Webster's case – of the scriptural text in the communication of the reconciling gospel. But both accounts share a common problem: their accounts of Scripture's relationship to the church are frustratingly disembodied and set at a distance from the church's dense, timeful practices. Both Forsyth and Webster raise the spectre of *episodic* accounts of Scripture's action on and among us: such accounts are insufficiently wedded to the horizontal time which we inhabit and so make it hard for the church to see how Scripture and God's action *consistently* relate one to another through and in time. It is indicative, for example, that in one of his many accounts of God's action in relation to Scripture, John Webster narrates Scripture's interaction with Christians by recourse to such words as 'episode', 'event' and 'incident'.<sup>88</sup> Whilst such language is doubtless useful in prioritizing *God's* use of Scripture and securing the freedom and the transcendence of the Word, there is a risk of abstracting scriptural reading, and God's involvement in the transformation of such reading, from the 'limits and relativities' of the history we inhabit.<sup>89</sup> It is by locating Scripture in the church, and following through the implications of such a location that we will be helped to uproot our mundane expectations of time and invited to see that the world is figurally constituted. I suspect that Forsyth's near silence on the Old Testament has its origins somewhere near his reluctance to follow through his own insight that time is

86. Forsyth, 'The National Aspect of Missions', pp. 184–85.

87. See, for example, John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Current Issues in Theology; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

88. John Webster, 'Texts: Scripture, reading, and the rhetoric of theology', *Stimulus* 6 (1998), pp. 10–16 (11, 13, 14).

89. Nathan Kerr, *Christ, History and Apocalyptic: The Politics of Christian Mission* (Theopolitical Visions; Eugene: Cascade, 2009), p. 81.

constituted by the gospel. Equally, Webster's emphases upon the episodic nature of Scripture's action on readers, of a piece with his enthusiasm for the 'clarity' of Scripture,<sup>90</sup> are of little support to a figural reading of Scripture which prioritizes talk of participation.<sup>91</sup> To avoid this episodic language – correlative with a punctiliar account of God's action on Christians – Scripture's life needs to be located very firmly within the life of the people of God. If we do otherwise and locate Scripture's action on us in an isolated series of moments, we risk reducing Scripture's action and our reading of it 'to something that cannot essentially be *narrated*'.<sup>92</sup> In other words, in episodic accounts of God's relationship to Scripture, the text is not sufficiently set within our time. It is as if the church's reading with Scripture has 'no existence in real time'.<sup>93</sup> This is *not* a plea for the theological significance of historical criticism. Attending to Scripture's *participation* in the worship and liturgy of the church is more radically historical – more attentive to time – than the historical critics and can help counter that which John Webster rightly opposes, namely 'a competitive understanding of the transcendent and the historical'.<sup>94</sup> *Co-ordinating the life of Scripture with the life of the church invites us to locate Scripture in its proper liturgical setting, a setting which reworks what we imagine time to be.* Such a determination to locate Scripture in the church takes its rise from the wider aims of this book – to draw attention to the necessarily local aspects of scriptural reading.

All accounts of Scripture are inseparable from accounts of the church. As we apply this rule to Webster's account of Scripture, it is hard to shrug off the feeling that he ends up imposing a 'blueprint' of Scripture's authority upon the church in abstraction from how the Spirit helps the church work out, see and imagine both what Scripture is and the times of which it is part. The term 'blueprint' is one I borrow from Nicholas M. Healy who worries in a related manner about what he calls 'blueprint ecclesiologies'. Such models of the church imply 'that it is necessary to get our *thinking* about the church right first, after which we can go on to put our theory into practice'. The effect is, Healy avers, an entrenchment of the disjunction between 'theoretical and practical reasoning'.<sup>95</sup> Healy's point can be transferred to doctrines of Scripture abstracted from

90. Webster, *Holy Scripture*, pp. 91–101.

91. See Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis*.

92. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, p. 169.

93. Oliver O'Donovan, *Church in Crisis: The Gay Controversy and the Anglican Communion* (Eugene: Cascade, 2008), p. 13. O'Donovan makes this criticism of liberal theology's inability to interpret the situation in which we currently find ourselves.

94. Webster, *Holy Scripture*, p. 21. Similar concerns to mine are voiced by D'Costa, 'Revelation, Scripture and Tradition', p. 347.

95. Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine, 7; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 36. I suspect that Healy would charge John Webster's, 'On Evangelical Ecclesiology', *Ecclesiology* 1 (2004), pp. 9–35 with representing a 'blueprint ecclesiology'.

attention to the church as a region where, as in Scripture's original constitution, divine and human agency meet in a transforming encounter.

Scripture's authority in the church is indeed *given* (not generated), but the process of *receiving* Scripture and 'working it out' needs rather more attention than Webster is willing to give consideration. Unless attention is paid to the church's life as an aid to locating Scripture – as this study will endeavour to do throughout – we are at risk of simply not recognizing the text spoken of by Webster. Locating Scripture 'is not a doctrinal theory that can be worked out without close attention to the concrete life of the church'.<sup>96</sup> Although Webster rightly warns us away from competitive understandings of the text's relationship to God and location within history, it would seem that he is not immune to such temptations when he sketches Scripture's relationship to the church. Placing great emphasis on divine agency – especially the Holy Spirit – Webster advocates that talk of 'interpreting' Scripture should be replaced with the less hermeneutically anxious term 'reading'.<sup>97</sup> But surely this is to imply that interpretation cannot itself be sanctified by God, in the same manner that the human texts of the Bible are enlisted into the service of the gospel? One is left wondering precisely what is left for human agency aside from receptivity (which, I agree with Webster, is not passive).<sup>98</sup> By hindering his readers from exploring how we *learn* to read Scripture through the time God gives us, Webster ends up not sufficiently protecting himself from the risks of a one-sided account of interpretation. In other words, Webster falls into the same trap he had earlier warned against, of pitting human agency in competition with divine agency.

Avoiding an overly anxious 'division of labour' between what is deemed 'practical' and what is 'theological',<sup>99</sup> the next section of this chapter emphasizes that revelation has its necessary correlate in the interpretative practices of the church. The necessary emphasis on Scripture's location in God's action, emphasized by Forsyth and Webster, needs to be complemented by attention to the church but only because the church provides us with resources to understand God's action. Put simply, to understand the practices of the church – practices as mundane as reading – we need to see how 'God acts in our acts'.<sup>100</sup> By attending to the church, we can see the time in which Scripture is located and so re-imagine the shape of time. What we might call a 'concurvise imagination', aware that participation in the life of the church is an exercise in

96. Healy, *Church, World and Christian Life*, p. 50.

97. Webster, *Holy Scripture*, pp. 86–87.

98. Webster, *Holy Scripture*, pp. 68–106. I owe this point to a paper presented by Sean Winter at the 2008 British New Testament Conference entitled 'Interpretive Pluralism in Theological Perspective: The Contribution of Karl Barth' and the subsequent conversations afterwards.

99. Healy, *Church, World and Christian Life*, p. 66.

100. Craig Hovey, *To Share in the Body: A Theology of Martyrdom for Today's Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008), p. 30.



formation, sees Scripture as God would have us see it and need not be, as John Webster would charge, an exercise in self-assertion or creativity.<sup>101</sup>

### *Scripture, Time and the Church*

In the emphasis I now expand on – the location of Scripture in the time of the church – I am clearly motivated by what might inadequately be termed a ‘postliberal’ emphasis on Scripture’s ecclesial setting, with Stanley Hauerwas an especially important stimulus. Hauerwas exemplifies the importance of starting from within the church, and its practices and performances, in order to understand aright Scripture and its relationship to theology and ethics. Journeying with Hauerwas in this location of Scripture, I will follow ‘the direction in which he points’ by picking up what I can of the language he speaks and extending the implications of his writings.<sup>102</sup> To deploy an image which I alluded to in the Introduction to this book, and one that is important in Hauerwas’ first book, *Vision and Virtue*,<sup>103</sup> by pointing to the visibility of the church Hauerwas reminds us that the church can help us *see* the lives and actions of which Scripture is a part.

For Stanley Hauerwas, Gilbert T. Rowe Professor of Theological Ethics at Duke Divinity School, the community of the faithful is accorded prime significance in the reading of Scripture: ‘the Bible without the community, without expounders, and interpreters, and hearers is a dead book’.<sup>104</sup> So although he would rightly resist such restrictive labels, Hauerwas can nonetheless be positioned within that postliberal strain within theology which sees the church as an indispensable companion to understanding Scripture. Samuel Wells’ pronouncement that ‘Scripture . . . not only identifies God: it identifies God’s people’ is neatly representative of this desire to see church and Scripture as intertwined, implicated within one another and mutually informing.<sup>105</sup> Church-centred reading of Scripture, in Hauerwas’ hands, sits lightly in relation to presumptions that the meaning of a text is equivalent to establishing the (always putative) authorial intention. ‘Good’ reading of Scripture is faithful

101. Webster, *Holy Scripture*, p. 97–99.

102. Samuel Wells, *Transforming Fate into Destiny: The Theological Ethics of Stanley Hauerwas* (Eugene: Cascade, 2004), p. 2.

103. Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue: Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection* (Notre Dame: Fides Press, 1974).

104. Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom*, p. 98. See also Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), p. 55: ‘Without that community [the church], claims about the moral authority of Scripture – or rather, the very idea of Scripture itself – make no sense’.

105. Samuel Wells, *God’s Companions: Reimagining Christian Ethics* (Challenges in Contemporary Theology; Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), p. 17.

before anything else and builds up the church.<sup>106</sup> Worrying little about ‘meaning’, Hauerwas simply reads Scripture ‘as an aid for the church to “muddle though”’.<sup>107</sup>

Hauerwas can help us locate Scripture if we trace the implications of reading two very ‘Hauerwasian’ pronouncements alongside one another. First, Hauerwas opens his recent commentary on Matthew’s Gospel with the statement that ‘this commentary is guided by the presumption that the church is the politics that determines how Matthew is to be read’.<sup>108</sup> Second, towards the end of his Gifford lectures, Hauerwas (infamously) claims that ‘the truth of Christian convictions depend[s] on the faithfulness of the church’.<sup>109</sup> How would the church see Scripture if it followed the logic of these statements? Specifically, I wish to exploit these two statements by exploring how the *time* which the church inhabits and conveys can help us locate Scripture.

Scott Bader-Saye is right to say that, ‘the ways we experience, name, and interpret time contribute to the kinds of communities we imagine and inhabit’.<sup>110</sup> The school for Christian imagination is worship, for ‘the training we receive in worship . . . enable[s] us to rightly see the world and to perceive how we continue to be possessed by the world’.<sup>111</sup> The very act of ‘taking time’ to worship, a phrase redolent of our commodification of time and tendency to see time as ‘ours’,<sup>112</sup> is itself a political and countercultural act. Worship is a statement that we are not free to do as we wish with time, but we are to understand time as *gifted*. Christians view time not through the prism of scarcity but through the prism of providence, the assurance that God is an agent within time and that time is not devoid of his promise. Liturgical time – as time that is first received – is a corrective to the notion that we must master time or be mastered by it. Worship – in which scriptural reading is most fittingly enclosed – is therefore

106. Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew* (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible; Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), p. 145.

107. Stanley Hauerwas and James Fodor, ‘Remaining in Babylon: Oliver O’Donovan’s Defense of Christendom’, *SCE* 11 (1998), pp. 30–55 (42). For this kind of hermeneutical pragmatism see Jeffrey Stout, ‘What is the Meaning of a Text?’, *New Literary History* 14 (1982), pp. 1–12.

108. Hauerwas, *Matthew*, p. 30.

109. Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church’s Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001), p. 231. See the clarification of Stanley Hauerwas, ‘Hooks: Random Thoughts By Way of a Response to Griffiths and Ochs’, *Modern Theology* 19 (2003), pp. 89–101.

110. Scott Bader-Saye, ‘Figuring Time: Providence and Politics’ in Randi Rashkover and C. C. Pecknold (eds), *Liturgy, Time, and the Politics of Redemption* (Radical Traditions; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), pp. 91–111 (98).

111. Stanley Hauerwas, *In Good Company: The Church as Polis* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), p. 156.

112. Wells, *Transforming Fate into Destiny*, pp. 148–49.

an occasion for re-imagining our participation in time. Hauerwas and Willimon sum up these sentiments when they write:

Christian politics is constituted by the worship of the true God found in Jesus Christ. It is politics that assumes we have all the time in the world, eternity, in a world of deep injustice and pain, to take time to worship...Sunday worship is thus a radical protest from the world's time, a time when we literally take time to rejoice that in Jesus Christ God has made our time his own.<sup>113</sup>

Christian worship makes plain the difference of the Christian apprehension of time.<sup>114</sup> In being enfolded in a story not of our devising modernity's attempt to 'defeat time' is rudely confronted.<sup>115</sup> Time is not causal – 'just one damn thing after another' – but eschatologically directed; time and history are ruled now by the cross and empty tomb.<sup>116</sup> Time, 'what really *is*, is constituted by Jesus' history'.<sup>117</sup> Such time is apocalyptic time, and apocalyptic worshippers are confident that everything that needs to be done has been done for us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God's irrepressible presence in the world helps us exchange a view of history as 'a seamless web of causal relations' for a view of "how things are".<sup>118</sup> As we will see in the next chapter, such a distinctively Christian understanding of time is correlative with the patient virtues it nurtures in Christian lives. Patience is nothing less than the practical response to God's providential ordering of the world. Liturgy – a training ground for patience – is an invitation to participate in time as it truly is and to shape a counter-imagination to regnant models of time.<sup>119</sup>

We can point to three ways in which Scripture, church, liturgy and time co-inhere and mutually inform one another.

(1) Worshipful practices such as the reading and rereading of Scripture through lectionary cycles are themselves timeful, and so moral, exercises. As Rowan Williams points out the reading and hearing of a scriptural text, like a symphony, cannot be rushed, compressed or abridged without fundamentally

113. Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *The Truth about God: The Ten Commandments in Christian Life* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), p. 65.

114. Wells, *Transforming Fate into Destiny*, pp. 141–63.

115. Stanley Hauerwas, *The State of the University: Academic Knowledges and the Knowledge of God* (Illuminations: Theory and Religion; Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), p. 37.

116. Hauerwas, *State of the University*, p. 155.

117. John Webster, "'Assured and Patient and Cheerful Expectation": Barth on Christian Hope as the Church's Task', *Toronto Journal of Theology* 10 (1994), pp. 35–52 (40).

118. Stanley Hauerwas with Jeff Powell, 'Creation as Apocalyptic: A Tribute to William Stringfellow' in Stanley Hauerwas, *Dispatches from the Front: Theological Engagements with the Secular* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), pp. 107–15 (109).

119. Stanley Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence* (London: SPCK, 2004), p. 97–99.

altering its claims on us. If a reader at a Palm Sunday service boiled the Passion narratives down to a few 'key points' we would, rightly, feel somewhat short-changed.<sup>120</sup> Christians participate first in the narrative, not in the application of its 'lessons'. As Peter Candler has stated, in order to 'read well, then, one must take time, one must learn to remember, and one must make a certain progression through a text – a progress which is one of gaining knowledge, but also one of drawing nearer to wisdom'.<sup>121</sup> Properly then, the church does much more than 'take' time to read Scripture – receiving the time God gives us to read Scripture is the church's thankful giving of time back to God 'by the way we use it'.<sup>122</sup> Moreover, the church is not in the business of just reading Scripture, but *rereading* it, knowing that there is no point at which we could ever dispense with the text itself. The time the church sets aside to re-read Scripture is a reminder not just that the church can never finish reading Scripture, but also that its understanding is something acquired over time. The church's liturgical repetition of Scripture is not a returning again and again to the same 'meaning' but rather a deepening or a chastening encounter with the triune God who providentially orders the texts of Scripture. This re-reading of Scripture can be as much a rebuke as it can be a confirmation of what we think; reading Scripture under the pressure of eschatological time does not view growth in understanding as inevitable. Appropriate care must be taken here that we do not contradict the eschatological presence of Christ around which our reading constellates by lurching into the interpretative equivalent of an 'evolutionary eschatology' that presumes our advance or progress.<sup>123</sup>

(2) The time made known by liturgy and the practices of the church help re-imagine the time into which Scripture is drawn and of which it is part. 'Worship is the communal cultivation of an alternative construction of society *and of history*.'<sup>124</sup> Through worship we come to learn that there is more at play than

120. Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Challenges in Contemporary Theology; Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 51, and Rowan Williams, *Open to Judgement: Sermons and Addresses* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1994), pp. 247–50. Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith*, pp. 104–05, draws upon Williams to make this point about the timeful aspect of music. I am building upon them both to point to the role that scriptural reading plays in the liturgy's re-imagination of time.

121. Candler, *Theology, Rhetoric, Manudiction*, p. 9.

122. Ben Quash, 'The *Trisagion* and the Liturgical Untilling of Time' in Rashkover and Pecknold (eds), *Liturgy, Time, and the Politics of Redemption*, pp. 141–63 (159).

123. Karl Rahner, 'A Fragmentary Aspect of a Theological Evaluation of the Concept of the Future' in *Theological Investigations*, Vol. X (trans. David Bourke; 23 vols; London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1973), pp. 235–41 (236).

124. John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), p. 43 (emphasis added). Yoder's statement that worship offers an *alternative* construction of time and history is a helpful reminder of how moderns are shaped to see history as a more decisive category than providence. See Stanley Hauerwas, *Wilderness Wanderings: Probing Twentieth-Century Theology and Philosophy* (Radical Traditions; London: SCM, 2001), p. 46 n. 6. See also Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap

just the horizontal succession of events. When time, as it is in modernity, is understood without reference to God then it is easy for God to become extrinsic to time, and so somebody we subsequently labour to fit in to our stunted imagination of time. But time is *constituted* by the cross and resurrection and liturgy is the invitation to participate in the scripturally figured world.<sup>125</sup> It is the events of Jesus' life, death and resurrection that fill full Scripture with meaning: 'beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he [the risen Jesus] interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures' (Lk. 24.27). Correspondingly, liturgical imagination is a way of remembering that 'Israel and the church are not characters in a larger story called 'world,' but rather world is a character in God's story'.<sup>126</sup> If all time acquires its meaning in relation to God's activity in Israel and Jesus' cross and resurrection, then it is around these events that Scripture is to be read, rather than views of time and history framed apart from attention to the resurrected presence of Christ in the church. Hauerwas may be being deliberately provocative when he insists that '[w]ithout the church the world would have no history',<sup>127</sup> but his point is an important one. We do not naturally see time for what it is and only with the training of the church's worship can we hope to apprehend time as it truly is in the light of the resurrection. This alternative understanding of time is not of course created by worship: the rule here is that convictions about the nature of reality must always have their visible manifestation.

Worshipful practices such as figural reading and preaching are therefore faithful to the providential action in which Scripture is located. In this form of reading, one narrated event or person is read in the light of a perspective offered by a later narrated event or person. Scripture has a pattern and is not the narration of one random event after another. For example, placing the baptism of Jesus as a coordinating event of the triune God invites us to look back to the deliverance of Israel through the waters of the Red Sea (which in turn is an anticipation of Christ in the waters of the Jordan) and forward to our own

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Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 59: 'Our encasing in secular time is also something we have brought about in the way we live and order our lives . . . the disciplines of our modern civilized order have led us to measure and organize time as never before in human history. Time has become a precious resource, not to be "wasted" . . . We have constructed an environment in which we live a uniform, univocal secular time, which we try to measure and control in order to get things done.' If Taylor's account is so, it is incumbent upon Christians not to suppose that they can overcome the accounts of time germane to modernity, but to *see* how Christian convictions and practices embed Scripture within a rather different account of time.

125. See Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 310 n. 17.

126. Stanley Hauerwas, *Sanctify Them in the Truth: Holiness Exemplified* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), p. 192.

127. Stanley Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World, and Living in Between* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001), p. 61.

baptismal participation in the life of the church (Romans 6).<sup>128</sup> In this mode of reading events at different times are not carelessly collapsed into one another, but rather their participation in a common history is apprehended. It is in this way that figural interpretation is a hermeneutic of resistance against the idea that ‘each moment stands utterly unconnected from the moments around it – that every moment is self-enclosed’.<sup>129</sup> To read figurally is to apprehend that Scripture is a single text which has its point of unity in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

The people who help make this conviction visible are the church, those who lead lives that witness to the truthfulness of God’s providential figuring of the world. That we have lost grip of Scripture’s figural unity is surely correlative with an equal loss of a sense of how God’s providential activity stands ready to reorder our understanding of time and our lives. A practical appearance of the doctrine of providence would surely be the church’s willingness to embrace its status as people ‘not in charge’.<sup>130</sup> The church must be the people who make visible the claim that Scripture is a figural text, a claim clearly made in the wake of Hauerwas’ assertion that ‘the truth of Christian convictions depend[s] on the faithfulness of the church’.<sup>131</sup> If talk of history has been denuded of its providential categories, responsibilities for this forgetfulness must lie with a church that has not sufficiently heeded that ‘biblically the meaning of history is carried first of all, and on behalf of all others, by the believing community’.<sup>132</sup> It is worth noting well that none of this detracts in any way from what we learned in the opening part of this chapter. As people formed by the liturgy, the church comes to see that Scripture is a figurally charged text and so *is itself* a participant in the drama of salvation. Scripture is elected to participate in a quite specific field of divine activity to which human action must correspond. ‘You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf’ (Jn 5.39). When reading Scripture, the church is therefore ‘asked to engage a kind of map that traces the work of God in history . . . apprehension [of which] provides a living structure to the

128. A reading offered by Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* (trans. Adrian J. Walker; London: Bloomsbury, 2007), pp. 15–20. See Angus Paddison, ‘Following Jesus with Pope Benedict’ in Adrian Pabst and Angus Paddison (eds), *The Pope and Jesus of Nazareth* (Veritas; London: SCM, forthcoming) and the discussion of typological readings of baptism in the hands of Cyril of Jerusalem in O’Keefe and Reno, *Sanctified Vision*, pp. 78–82.

129. Ben Quash, ‘Making the Most of the Time: Liturgy, Ethics and Time’, *SCE* 15 (2002), pp. 97–114 (106). Earlier in this essay, Quash offers a helpful definition of liturgy as ‘the embodiment of worship in words, gestures, actions, habits and exchanges’ (97).

130. John Howard Yoder, ‘On Not Being in Charge’ in *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited* (Radical Traditions; Michael G. Cartwright and Peter Ochs (eds); London: SCM, 2003), pp. 168–79.

131. Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe*, p. 231.

132. John Howard Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiastical and Ecumenical* (Michael G. Cartwright (ed.); Scottdale: Herald, 1998), p. 118.

actual life of the world in which the [church] lives'.<sup>133</sup> If Scripture 'is part of the drama itself, moving along with it' then such a claim becomes intelligible through the lives of people who have become transparencies for their convictions.<sup>134</sup>

Two further things can be said here about the claim that the figural nature of Scripture is rendered visible by the lives of the people of God.<sup>135</sup> To say this is to be reminded that the main obstacle in understanding Scripture is not our lack of scholarly apparatus but our performance, our resistance to align ourselves with the deepest impulses of the text itself. One cannot divorce the shape of our lives from interpretation.<sup>136</sup> Second, there is the implication that Scripture's figural shape can *only* be discerned from within the church because the church provides the necessary backdrop of practices and lives which fill out this claim. The claim that outside of the church there is no interpretation and no understanding of Scripture is easily misunderstood as a statement of arrogant exclusivism, yet the claim is essentially that only in the church can the claims of and about Scripture *be seen* to make sense. It is a claim about the translatability of the doctrine of providence apart from the visibility of lives ordered to Scripture's providential location.

(3) As should be quite clear by now, liturgy's re-imagination of time holds in unity the church and Scripture. Reading Scripture in the church therefore allows us to be *more* historical than the historical-critics. Much historical criticism is motivated by the earnest assumption that the hard, scholarly work spent in recovering the form of the New Testament church stands a good chance of being automatically relevant for the church today.<sup>137</sup> Faithfulness to the scriptural narrative is not however a matter of nervously applying original features of the narrative to our context, but living out the story in our context.<sup>138</sup> This is carried out in the belief that the people and events of Scripture are in continuity, but are not *identical*, with the church today. Stanley Hauerwas writes of the

133. Ephraim Radner, *Leviticus* (SCM Theological Commentary on the Bible; London: SCM, 2008), p. 25. In the original quotation Radner referred just to 'the reader'.

134. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, Vol. II (trans. Graham Harrison; 5 vols; San Francisco: Ignatius, 1990), p. 112.

135. Note here the important work of Ephraim Radner who argues that the church's weak understanding of Scripture's providential depth is correlative to allowing the mutually informing relationship between Church and Scripture to be loosened. What we have lost sight of, Radner claims, is 'the conviction that the historical experience of the Christian community, because of its conformity to the scriptural narrative and claims, provided, the window of access to a clear knowledge of Jesus Christ': Ephraim Radner, *Hope Among the Fragments: The Broken Church and its Engagement of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2004), p. 170.

136. Stanley Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), p. 8.

137. For similar worries about the New Testament being read as a blueprint for contemporary ecclesiology, see Dale Martin, *Pedagogy of the Bible: An Analysis and Proposal* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), pp. 74–75.

138. Cf. Wells, *Transforming Fate into Destiny*, p. 153.

lofty ambitions sometimes harboured by historical critics who invest their historical work with theological significance:

The assumption that we should if we could get back to the “original language or meaning,” or discover “what the first hearers heard,” sometimes implies that at one time someone got it right. History done in the objectivist mode turns out to be the expression of mythological assumptions quite foreign to Christian practice.<sup>139</sup>

Attempts to recreate any supposedly ‘pure’ church of the New Testament neglect the much more important task of discerning what, as disciples, we must do now in extending the narrative. Being ‘a New Testament church’ is not a matter of doing what the Corinthian or Thessalonian Christians did, but doing what they did in a manner appropriate to our context. This is the skill of living in time faithfully. Therefore, attempts to recreate the Thessalonian church in our context signals a lack of belief that we are not already part of the same history. Such tactics ignore the necessarily Christian (and so local) claim that ‘the community from which Scripture comes and which is its immediate community of interpretation is simply the same community’.<sup>140</sup> The same, yes, but at different periods within history.<sup>141</sup>

The Christian journey is not a venture back to some ideal church but forward in the hope that God will sustain our efforts to be faithful. Assumptions that a New Testament church (or indeed any other time in the church’s history) got things just right signals an irresponsible evasion from time itself. To view ecclesial time as one of declension is just as unhelpful as viewing time as inevitably progressive. Being faithful readers of Scripture is less a matter of being faithful to putative origins and more a matter of participating and going on faithfully in the life which the Jesus of the Gospels makes possible. Here the benefits of starting in the middle become apparent: the movement of scriptural readers is from ‘the narratively rendered identity of God in Jesus Christ to the identity of the church as a character in that *ongoing story*’.<sup>142</sup> Truth, in this approach, is free to be eschatological rather than ‘archaeological’.<sup>143</sup>

139. Hauerwas, *In Good Company*, pp. 220–21.

140. Jenson, ‘Hermeneutics and the Life of the Church’, p. 104.

141. The loss of time as shot through with possibilities of figural participation in the scriptural world is wrapped up in the social imagination of the nation-state, as Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, rev. edn, 2006), pp. 22–24 argues (it is no coincidence that the cover of Hauerwas’ *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America* has a picture of the US flag keeping Scripture closed). As moderns, we balk now at medieval representations of the nativity replete with figures in dress contemporary to the time of production and the simultaneity thus being assumed.

142. Charles L. Campbell, *Preaching Jesus: New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei’s Post-liberal Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 230 (emphasis added). To be sure, the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ is the God of Abraham and Isaac, as all figural readers would appreciate.

143. John B. Thomson, *The Ecclesiology of Stanley Hauerwas: A Christian Theology of Liberation* (Ashgate New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology, and Biblical Studies; Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), p. 134.



That faithfulness to the story is often judged by our faithfulness to its origins, rather than its eschatological direction, is an indication that much scriptural reading in the church is still determined by something other than the continuity of the story which stretches from Israel to Jesus and the church. In historical criticism, a general hermeneutical approach that generations of preachers and clergy have been uncritically (!) taught, past and present *necessarily* remain divorced. Historical critical readings of Scripture, although they are immensely varied, have in common a ‘discernment that the real world in which we ineluctably exist is not the biblical stories’ world’.<sup>144</sup> Time sets us at a distance from the biblical world. Some historical critics even confuse their professional preoccupation – the maintenance of the distance between ‘their’ world and ‘our’ world – with the Word of God itself. To assume that we are set at a distance from Scripture is to neglect the vantage point offered by the church and the communion of the saints. It is to invest in a notion of time and history that we need not accept wholly. Readers of Scripture in the church have resources to resist the claim of historical critics that time alienates us from Scripture. Time, in an ecclesial setting, faithfully mediates and conveys the narrative of Scripture. Time, far from signalling an alienation from the scriptures, is the opportunity given by God that we might faithfully step into the narrative, participate in it and extend it.

### Conclusion

What then may we say about the location of Scripture? The company we have kept in this chapter reinforces the variety of actions and convictions in which Scripture is fittingly embedded. All the voices I have drawn from, in different ways, tell us that hermeneutics need not take the place of attention to doctrine and the church. Forsyth, for example, counsels us to attend to history as it is revealed by the gospel borne within Scripture, and to not allow immanent history to impose its principles on the gospel. Forsyth’s insight – Scripture’s location in the history and time of the gospel action – has been a particular preoccupation of this chapter, and one that I have sought to extend.

It needs to be recognized that recent advocates of the importance of divine agency to the theological depiction of Scripture – some of whom were cited at this chapter’s head – have voiced a fair degree of suspicion about the ecclesial emphases of Hauerwas and those associated with him. According to Donald Wood, for example, much postliberal, ecclesial interpretation borrows heavily from social science categories and imposes general reflections on reading communities upon the special circumstances of the church. The fear is twofold: first, that much theological weight is resting upon foundations based in little more than ethnography and, second, that doctrine is not allowed to describe

144. Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), p. 227.

in any substantive way the shape and manner of Christian interpretation.<sup>145</sup> Certainly, I think Hauerwas is vulnerable to the charge that he is insufficiently clear how what he proposes relates to doctrine. Hauerwas' pervasive suspicion that doctrine divorced from practical witness can be an ally of privatized forms of Christianity is the inspiration behind his insistence that 'theological claims are practical from beginning to end'.<sup>146</sup> But more work needs to be done in setting out the interdependence of *both* Christian convictions and practices. Hence, it has been a concern of this chapter to coordinate his proposals alongside a greater doctrinal clarity. Positioning Forsyth's robust theological location of Scripture is a reminder of a vital emphasis underplayed in some ecclesial locations of Scripture: God's revelation.

The criticisms of the risks inherent to Hauerwas' and Webster's respective locations of Scripture in this chapter are of a piece with my conviction that we still need to work at eliminating competitive understandings of divine and human agency in relation to Scripture. Likewise, we should be careful not to see doctrine and the church as competitors for our attention in the location of Scripture, but rather as implicated in one another. Forsyth's and Webster's divine-action models of understanding Scripture find their complement in a people whose life and worship is orientated to God's use of the text. 'Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But, while joined by many bonds, which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern'.<sup>147</sup> Rather than worrying about getting the order correct among Scripture, doctrine and the church, I propose that it is more helpful to see Scripture, doctrine and church as mutually informing realities. In such a vision, the movement between Scripture and the church will be more complex than a one-way relationship:

The Bible interprets the church, and the church interprets the Bible. Again, this must be a mutual relationship. We cannot seek refuge in an ecclesiastical positivism. Finally, the last word belongs to the church, but the church must give the last word to the Bible.<sup>148</sup>

145. Donald Wood, 'The Place of Theology in Theological Hermeneutics', *IJST* 4 (2002), pp. 156–71 (164–65).

146. Hauerwas, 'Hooks: Random Thoughts By Way of a Response to Griffiths and Ochs', p. 93.

147. Calvin, *Institutes*, I.i.1, p. 35.

148. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, 'Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: On the Question of the Foundations and Approaches of Exegesis Today' in Richard John Neuhaus (ed.), *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: The Ratzinger Conference on Bible and Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), pp. 1–23 (23). Cited in Gavin D'Costa, *Theology in the Public Square: Church, Academy and Nation* (Challenges in Contemporary Theology; Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 140–41. I confess that I cannot locate this citation in my copy of Ratzinger's essay.