

HERMENEUTICS AND THE MEDITATIVE USE OF SCRIPTURE: THE CASE FOR A BAPTIZED IMAGINATION¹

GLEN A. SCORGIE*

“That night my imagination was, in a certain sense, baptized” (C. S. Lewis)²

I. INTRODUCTION

Bible-centeredness is one of the defining and most celebrated features of the evangelical tradition.³ To a significant degree evangelical identity revolves around the central place we give to the Scriptures. Historically we have been very much a people of the Book. We confess that the Bible is unique among pieces of literature, for it is God-breathed—divinely-inspired, and therefore infallible (unable to fail), inerrant (without error), and supremely authoritative (possessing the right to compel assent). We acknowledge its power, and so we preach the Word (2 Tim 4:12), counting on its penetrating force as the sword of the Spirit (Heb 4:12).

But one quickly discovers that to hold the Bible in such a prominent place is no guarantee that the way we treat it and use it will always be appropriate. In fact, all too often just the opposite is the case. We are embarrassed at the prevalence of “magical” approaches to Scripture that bear more resemblance than we would like to the superstitious oracular and divining practices of the world’s primal religions. We have squirmed when fellow-evangelicals have treated the Bible as a volume of encoded secrets about the future that require esoteric and even mathematical deciphering.⁴

* Glen Scorgie is professor of Systematic Theology at Bethel Seminary San Diego, 6116 Arosa Street, San Diego, CA 92115-3902.

¹ Any attempt like this at interdisciplinary integration (in this case, between hermeneutics and spirituality) becomes quite intimidating, because the author is automatically reduced to an amateur commentator on most matters he presumes to address. An earlier version of this paper was presented to the students and faculty of the Biblical Seminary of the Philippines, an evangelical Chinese institution in Manila, in July of 1999.

² C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1955) 181.

³ David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989) 2–19, lists Bible-centeredness along with cross-centeredness, conversion-centeredness and evangelistic activism; compare Roger Olson, “The Future of Evangelical Theology,” *Christianity Today* 42/2 (February 9, 1998) 40.

⁴ A popular movie entitled *The Omega Code* (1999) recently exposed the American public to just such a numerological approach to the Biblical text. Produced by Good Times Entertainment, with Hal Lindsey serving as prophecy advisor to the director, this movie implies that properly-decoded prophecy contains the blueprint for the future. It is obviously a film adaptation of Michael Drosnin’s

It has given us headaches to attend home Bible studies at which every random and arbitrary interpretation of a passage put forward by participants is affirmed and validated as a stroke of genius.

And so saner heads among us have taken seriously the Scripture's own challenge to "rightly divide the Word of Truth" (2 Tim 2:15), as the older King James Version put it, or, as the New International Version now translates the phrase, to "correctly handle the Word of Truth." We evangelicals have worked hard to develop responsible ways of interpreting the Bible. We do not want to be victims of dangerous subjectivity and misleading judgments. For responsible evangelical scholars this has meant attempting as best we can to grasp the original authors' intended meanings, an effort that has in turn involved embracing historical-grammatical methods of exegesis and hermeneutics. And over the years we have taken ownership of a rather sophisticated apparatus of scholarly methods and lexical tools to help us with this. Through all of this the thing we have vilified most, and been most opposed to, has been *subjective interpretations* of Scripture.⁵

Subjectivism has challenged us in different forms, and we have done our best to remain resilient each time. Despite a considerable challenge in the twentieth century from the neo-orthodox approach to Scripture, evangelicals held to the conviction that, whatever God might say to a receptive reader of Scripture, it must be tethered to the propositional content of the Biblical text itself.⁶ More recently, evangelicals have responded to deconstructionism, the literary expression of postmodernism, according to which meaning resides only in the reader's creative construction of meaning rather than in the text itself.⁷ Generally, evangelicals have inclined in literary matters to submit to something like what renowned Christian apologist C. S. Lewis once vividly described as "the rough, male taste of reality, not made by us, or, indeed, for us, but hitting us in the face."⁸

quite incredible book *The Bible Code* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1997); for an evangelical analysis and critique see J. Paul Tanner, "Decoding the 'Bible Code,'" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 157 (2000) 141–59.

⁵ Works like Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (3d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970); J. Robertson McQuilkin, *Understanding and Applying the Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 1992); Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993); William W. Klein et al., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word, 1993); Robert H. Stein, *Playing By the Rules: A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994); and Walter Kaiser and Moisés Silva, *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) come to mind. This evangelical corpus reflects the strong influence of E. D. Hirsch, Jr. and his seminal work on hermeneutics, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967). A more synthetic approach is to be found in works like Anthony C. Thiselton, *Two Horizons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) and Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1991).

⁶ The neo-orthodox position is represented by Emil Brunner, *Truth as Encounter* (2d ed.; London: SCM, 1964), with a representative evangelical response from J. I. Packer, *God Has Spoken* (2d ed.; London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1979) 80–82.

⁷ For an evangelical response to the deconstructionist agenda, see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998).

⁸ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (London & Glasgow: Fontana, 1940) 13.

II. LIMITS OF THE HISTORICAL-GRAMMATICAL METHOD OF INTERPRETATION

Despite its laudable achievements this well-intentioned approach, which has generally been marketed as *the* approach to Scripture, has not served the church as well as one might hope. It is not failing because there is anything intrinsically wrong with either the methodological principles it advocates or the central importance it attaches to discerning the Biblical writers' original intentions. Rather, this prevailing evangelical approach to hermeneutics may be damaging the vitality of the church because of what it either completely ignores, deliberately underestimates, or cavalierly dismisses as of peripheral concern. I am thinking in particular of the deficiencies of evangelical hermeneutics in the three crucial areas of personal formation, practical application, and the facilitation of direct encounter with God. I must make clear that I am not suggesting that the historical-grammatical method be discarded or replaced; I am thinking more in terms of major supplementation and expansion. Its hegemonic status is the problematic issue in my mind, for the reasons just mentioned: namely, its formational, practical and religious deficiencies.

1. *Personal formation.* In the first place, and inasmuch as it is almost completely absorbed with the task of establishing intellectually valid inferences from the Biblical text, standard evangelical hermeneutics fails to provide any substantive resources for meeting the challenge of changing readers' lives. This is its *formational* deficiency.

2. *Practical application.* Secondly, evangelical hermeneutics can often bring the reader to the point of a decent grasp of what a particular text meant in its original historical and culturally-conditioned context. But it flounders seriously when it comes to the challenge of moving from what it *meant* to what it may *signify* now—in the present tense. Too often readers rest content with a feeling that they know what the text meant, and are not so concerned to move from this penultimate stage to consider what the text means for them. This space between the past and the present is a gaping chasm that simply cannot be bridged by direct, linear thought. This is the *practical* deficiency of the prevailing approach to hermeneutics.

3. *Encounter with God.* In addition to these deficiencies, there is also the fact that the reader's relationship to the text takes precedence over the reader's relationship to the living voice of God. The reader-scholar is the active miner whose vigorous efforts are the means by which the valuable ore is raised to the surface. It is the responsibility of the student of Scripture to locate and squeeze truth from the text. God is readily acknowledged as the original supervising author of the text, and his aid is now solicited to empower the exegetical miner to do his or her investigative job well. The need for guidance in making edifying connections between text and application is readily acknowledged as well. But for all of this God is essentially the

“behind the scenes” source of empowerment rather than a direct and personal dialogue partner with the reader. J. I. Packer made an important polemic point in his book *God Has Spoken*, but the use in the title of the past tense of the verb “to speak” highlights the sense of distance felt by many evangelical souls.⁹

Various historians have pointed out that the roots of this orientation to Scripture lie in an evangelical appropriation of certain Enlightenment assumptions about knowledge and induction, and the adaptation of this “scientific” methodology to the study of Scripture. We catch the flavor of this mindset in the words of nineteenth-century Princeton theological giant Charles Hodge:

The Bible is to the theologian what nature is to the man of science. It is his store-house of facts; and his method of ascertaining what the Bible teaches, is the same as that which the natural philosopher adopts to ascertain what nature teaches. . . . The duty of the Christian theologian is to ascertain, collect, and combine all the facts which God has revealed concerning himself and our relation to him. These facts are all in the Bible.¹⁰

Robert Stein probably speaks for many contemporary evangelical scholars, when he argues that Christians with the Spirit of God are unlikely to have any advantage of insight over non-Christians laboring without the Spirit of God when it comes to unpacking the meaning of a Biblical text. Hermeneutics is a scholarly challenge that may be met equally well without any special grace of illumination. God is not a central player in the game; at best he is a silent enabler of the serious pursuer of truth.¹¹ And so there is still a hunger for the God who speaks. This is the *religious* deficiency of our approach to Scripture.

III. CLASSIC EVANGELICAL PIETY

A crucially-important dimension of the evangelical heritage is at stake on this third point in particular. The evangelical tradition has always em-

⁹ Packer's book itself, however, concludes with a chapter entitled “God's Word Heard,” which urges the reader to “step into the Bible” with the aid of the Spirit (*God Has Spoken* [Downers Grove: IVP, 1979] 133).

¹⁰ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952; orig. 1872–1873) 1:10–11; quoted by Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 98. For a summary of Enlightenment influence on dispensational hermeneutics specifically, see George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980) 55–62.

¹¹ Stein, *Playing by the Rules* 69–71. Clark Pinnock makes a telling point when he observes that we have to go back almost three centuries to the Puritans to find a decent evangelical treatment of the doctrine of illumination. “Is it not naive,” he asks, “to think that one can master hermeneutics without paying attention to the Spirit and to the second horizon? It is apparent,” he concludes, “that evangelical scholars are more interested in inspiration than illumination and in the first than in the second horizon” (Pinnock, “The Role of the Holy Spirit in Interpretation,” *JETS* 36 [1993] 491–92). Perhaps there is evidence of Pinnock's thesis in a recent article written as a corrective to postmodern influences on evangelical methods of applying Biblical teaching to the contemporary context. The Spirit's role simply does not come up. See R. McQuilkin and B. Mullen, “The Impact of Postmodern Thinking on Evangelical Hermeneutics,” *JETS* 40 (1997) 76–82.

phasized and celebrated the privilege of a personal experience of the living God. Perhaps there is no more distinctively evangelical phrase than “a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.” As James Houston, the founding principal and long-time professor of spiritual theology at Regent College, has put the matter, the essence of our Christian experience is a “transforming friendship” with God through Jesus Christ.¹² Henry Blackaby, in his popular texts and workbooks, has described it even more simply as “experiencing God.”¹³

Useful and important for its many strengths as the prevailing evangelical understanding of hermeneutics is, it is clearly leaving the heart longing for something more. And rightly so. For surely the Scriptures are more than a quarry from which we dig propositional information. There must be more to how we handle the Bible than scooping up information from it with our heavy-duty exegetical equipment, and then dumping it into the rail-cars of term papers, sermons, and articles to be shipped off around the world. Those saints that have been endued with a spirit of holy dissatisfaction have always prayed instead: “Lord, speak to me, that I may speak, in living echoes of Thy tone. Make my reading of Scripture personal. Make it part of my transforming friendship with you.”

This is evidently what God wants to do, and certainly one of the purposes for which the Scriptures were designed. Evangelical Christians have always recognized that the inspired Scriptures are the chief “instrumental means” by which God communicates with us in a direct and intensely personal fashion. It is the main vehicle for the voice of God, as it penetrates from eternity like a shaft of laser light. As an eternal voice, it retains the quality of eternity itself. It is always living and in the present tense. This living, evangelical approach to Scripture has long been celebrated in our hymnody: “Beyond the sacred page, I see Thee, Lord; My spirit pants for Thee, O Living Word.”¹⁴ These lyrical phrases perfectly express the pattern of going to the Word, not as an end in itself, but so that through it we connect with God.

A. W. Tozer’s classic *The Pursuit of God* eloquently describes the evangelical soul’s desire to hear God speak in the present tense and personally.¹⁵ It is the nature of God to speak, suggests Tozer: “Self-expression is inherent in the God-head.” And it is this “present Voice which makes the written Word all-powerful. Otherwise it would lie locked in slumber within the covers of a book.” He continues: “That God is here and that He is speaking—these truths are back of all other Bible truths.” In this vein Tozer concludes with a prayer that includes the following: “Let me get used to the sound of

¹² For a profound exposition of this as the essence of Christian spirituality and prayer, see James M. Houston, *The Transforming Friendship* (Oxford: Lion, 1989). To appeal more to an American audience, the book was later retitled *The Transforming Power of Prayer* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1996).

¹³ Henry Blackaby, *Experiencing God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994).

¹⁴ M. Lathbury and A. Groves, “Break Thou the Bread of Life,” *Hymns of the Christian Life* (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1978) 411.

¹⁵ See especially “The Speaking Voice,” chap. 7 of *The Pursuit of God* (Harrisburg, PA: Christian Publications, 1948).

Thy Voice, that its tones may be familiar when the sounds of earth die away and the only sound will be the music of Thy speaking Voice.”¹⁶ In my opinion, Tozer’s vision embodies all that neo-orthodox theologian Karl Barth dreamed of, and more, and manages to do this while keeping the orthodox doctrine of Scripture intact.

IV. THE SPIRITUAL READING OF SCRIPTURE

The spiritual instincts of the people of God cannot be satisfied for long with a hermeneutical approach that minimizes personal formation, fades out when it comes to making practical applications, and fails to connect the reader directly to God in deeper and more meaningful ways. Consequently the evangelical community is being drawn increasingly to an alternative approach to Scripture, which is not really new but a resuscitation of a venerable tradition of encountering the Word. By this I mean the approach to Scripture advocated by such prominent contemporary writers on Christian spirituality as Richard Foster, Robert Mulholland, Dallas Willard, Simon Chan, and Marjorie Thompson.¹⁷

This approach goes by a number of names. Occasionally, it has been called a meditative approach to Scripture. Sometimes it is known as the spiritual reading of Scripture. Either designation is legitimate. But because the word “meditation” has connotations of Buddhist or Hindu notions of completely emptying one’s mind (which is actually the opposite of Biblical meditation as described in Psalm 1 and elsewhere), it may be best instead to refer to this approach as “the spiritual reading” of Scripture. By either designation this approach to Scripture, which historically took a fairly set form in the Benedictine tradition of *Lectio Divina* (lit. Spiritual Reading),¹⁸ is characterized by a slow and reflective treatment of the text.

Support for spiritual reading comes from numerous Roman Catholic writers. Less well-known perhaps is the endorsement it has received from great Protestant leaders like Martin Luther in the 1500s and the English Puritans of the 1600s. One such Puritan, Richard Greenham, wrote: “To read and not to meditate is unfruitful; to meditate and not to read [the Bible] is dangerous.”¹⁹ What is particularly important for our purposes here is that the meditative reading of Scripture addresses each of the deficiencies of the prevailing evangelical approach to hermeneutics.

The meditative approach to Scripture is rooted first of all in pastoral concern and the associated awareness that it is all too easy, as Calvin put

¹⁶ Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* 73–75, 83.

¹⁷ I refer briefly to these developments in “Yearning for God: The Potential and Poverty of the Catholic Spirituality of Francis de Sales,” *JETS* 41 (1998) 439–53. Compare M. Robert Mulholland, Jr., *Shaped by the Word: The Power of Scripture in Spiritual Formation* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room, 1985).

¹⁸ Traditional *Lectio Divina* involves four sequential steps: *Lectio* (reading), *Meditatio* (meditation), *Oratio* (verbalized response) and *Meditatio* (meditation); Marjorie Thompson, *Soulfeast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995) 22–25.

¹⁹ Quoted by Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1998) 158.

it, for truth to merely flit about in the brain and never take deep root in the heart.²⁰ Whenever this happens, it is not just unfortunate; it is potentially dangerous. For as Lutheran theologian and preacher Helmut Thielicke has pointed out, there is spiritual danger whenever head knowledge outdistances soul growth. Such distance is the fertile breeding ground for all sorts of inauthenticity and even hypocrisy.²¹ So the literature on spiritual reading is full of the imagery of slow rumination. The *Anglican Prayer Book* includes a prayer that we may “inwardly digest” God’s word. This is not always easy. As Macrina Wiederkehr has observed, “We do not always realize what a radical suggestion it is for us to read to be formed and transformed rather than to gather information. We are information seekers. We love to cover territory.”²²

Spiritual reading, by contrast, is designed to encourage longer and more accurate retention of truth.²³ And through it we enter into the text and the text then enters into us. It is an important key to the elusive *desideratum* of personal wholeness and integration. We may be very learned and still remain unchanged until the truth actually begins to alter the default settings of our mind and character. The first great value of meditation is that it is an aid to internalization of the truth. As Peter Toon describes its function, spiritual reading is “a particular way of receiving the revealed and dynamic Word of God into the heart from the mind so as to direct the will in the ways of God’s guidance.”²⁴ It is profoundly *formational*.

The spiritual or meditative reading of Scripture also addresses our other two concerns. First, it creates a context in which it is more possible to develop creative connections between the text and the reader’s own life and immediate context. This is actually consonant with more recent perception that meaning is not so much embedded in the text as it is discovered in the interplay between the text and the reader’s own reality—in other words, in the dynamic intersection of these two horizons. In the twentieth century it was the German martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer who, particularly in his book *Meditating on the Word*, so forcefully criticized the common way in which sermon-building preachers deflect away the message of the Bible from

²⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 3.2.36.

²¹ Helmut Thielicke, *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962) 10–12.

²² Quoted by Thompson, *Soulfeast* 18.

²³ In a sense this is an application to Scripture of an approach often advocated in relation to literature generally—as one that can be calculated to encourage longer and more accurate retention, deeper levels of internalization, and a more holistic appropriation of the particular truths being conveyed. See James Sire, *How to Read Slowly* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1978). It was his grasp of these dynamics that led Dawson Trotman to develop systematic memorization of and meditation on Scripture as a foundation for discipleship in the Navigators tradition. See *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, s. v. “Navigators, The.”

²⁴ Peter Toon, *From Mind to Heart: Christian Meditation Today* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987) 10. Walter Wink agrees: “The goal of the Bible study is not merely understanding or even new insights, but incarnating the Word, enfleshing it, getting it into the substance of our living” (*Transforming Bible Study* [2d ed.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1989] 12; compare Chan, *Spiritual Theology* 166–67).

themselves. "Do not ask how you should tell it to others," he urges, "but ask what it tells you."²⁵ It is therefore important that we keep from always reading for functional purposes. To do so is to indulge what Simon Chan calls our "pragmatic reflex,"²⁶ something that makes it almost impossible to listen to what God may be saying to us. The spiritual reading of Scripture addresses this issue.

Finally, through its posture of silent, attentive listening, the meditative approach opens the reader up to the quiet voice of God and impressions from on high. It sets a tone of humility and receptivity, rather than a tone of assertiveness and control. Admittedly it is a difficult, anxious, and risky business to wait for God to speak through the text to us. Yet we cannot demand that God speak to us. At best we can create the conditions in which God may choose to speak.²⁷

Again, Bonhoeffer was among those who commended the meditative use of Scripture. He identifies at least two reasons for such practice. The first is to enable us to achieve a degree of internalization of truth not otherwise possible. The goal here, he explains, is not to discover new thoughts, but to let familiar or neglected truths penetrate and dwell within us.²⁸ Bonhoeffer's second reason for endorsing the spiritual approach to Scripture is that it is a way to wait for the Word to address us personally. And in *Life Together*, his little classic on Christian community, he links a capacity for listening to God with our ability to "hear" our fellow human beings. "He who can no longer listen to his brother will soon be no longer listening to God either," Bonhoeffer says. "He will be doing nothing but prattle in the presence of God too."²⁹

A much more recent endorsement of this approach comes from a conservative evangelical with impeccable credentials and one not known for mushy-headedness. Walter Martin, author of *Kingdom of the Cults*, published an article in *Moody Monthly* entitled "Meditation as God Intended." In it Martin quotes the Joshua 1:8 exhortation to meditate on the Book of the Law day and night. He then observes that since the heart of our spirituality is relationship with God, two-way conversation and communication is of its essence. There is a logic to Christians turning their attention to where God has spoken and, we believe, God will continue to speak from his vantage point beyond time and tenses.³⁰

V. EVANGELICAL HESITANCY ABOUT SPIRITUAL READING OF SCRIPTURE

Here in a sense we have two competing approaches to Scripture, the historical-grammatical and the meditative, each of which can make a legitimate claim to representing a dimension of the evangelical ethos and

²⁵ Quoted by Chan, *Spiritual Theology* 170–71.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 162–63.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 162–63; Richard Foster, *Prayer* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1992) 150–52.

²⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1954) 83.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 83, 98.

³⁰ Walter Martin, "Meditation as God Intended," *Moody Monthly* (December 1986) 34–37.

tradition. My concern is that they not be left as polarized options for evangelicals, lest the evangelical community move into the postmodern era as a divided community. With reference to the Bible, this community must not become, to borrow a famous description of the English and French in Canada, “two nations warring in the bosom of a single state.”³¹ To achieve the desired *rapprochement* will require some movement on both sides.

A number of factors continue to incline contemporary evangelicals to shy away from the spiritual reading of Scripture, despite the potentially-correcting features it offers. To begin with, we should all be sensitive to the control issues in our own hearts. In the hands of carnal Christians, of course, the historical-grammatical method can be pursued in the spirit of a relentless scientific researcher who is out to grasp the truth rather than humbly depend upon God to reveal it.³²

But there is something else and something bigger that may account for our hesitancy to move beyond traditional hermeneutics to this “second stage” of personal formation, practical application, and direct encounter with the voice of God. It is our old, deep-seated fear that this is our old enemy of “subjectivity” returning to waylay us in another form. We continue to bear wounds from past experiences of biased and misleading interpretation. In particular, we feel ambivalent about the prominence of the exercise of imagination in spiritual reading.

This emphasis on imagination implies that what the Biblical text has to offer in itself is insufficient to complete the hermeneutical circle. It is another way of saying that there are additional factors or components that are necessary to make applications and to make connections with God. And the reader must reach up toward these things through the gift of imagination, which is the cognitive means by which that which is not yet or not known is first brought into being. Imagination is the human side; to identify its vision and message as God’s voice is faith’s interpretation of the apprehension of truth.

Indeed, imagination is critical to all three important functions of the meditative use of Scripture. The recommended methods for internalizing Biblical truth include, for example, creatively visualizing oneself in the midst of a Gospel narrative and imagining how the Sea of Galilee might smell in the early dawn. And while we are accustomed to this sort of thing in sermons, we are not altogether comfortable with it in our direct handling of the Scriptures.

Yet this point is in fact the least of our worries. Marjorie Thompson refers to the second function when she writes: “The mind work of meditation moves us to reflection on where we are in the text. Active imagination can sometimes help us find connections between our life stories and the

³¹ *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Durham Report.”

³² The subversive potential of the truly free imagination is described and celebrated in Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978): “Our culture is competent to implement almost anything and to imagine almost nothing. The same royal [establishment] consciousness that makes it possible to implement anything and everything is the one that shrinks imagination because imagination is a danger. Thus every totalitarian regime is frightened of the artist” (45).

great story of God's redemptive work."³³ Where we see the specter of subjectivism most clearly is in the use of imagination to make connections between the text and one's personal life, and in drawing conclusions about whether and what God may be speaking directly to one's soul. In the language of Shakespeare, "what dreams may come must give us pause." We fear the risk of false messages from our own souls, and even the possibility on occasion of deliberate and suggestive deceptions by evil powers.

And so evangelicals tend to be alarmed by the word imagination. It seems to connote the imaginary, the fanciful, the delusional, the false. We contrast imagination with reality. We recall the Bible's reference to "vain imaginations" (Rom 1:21, KJV; the NIV translates this as "vain thinking") and are inclined to assume that the adjective "vain" applies to *all* expressions of imagination.

But, in fact, imagination has good connotations. It was the eloquent preacher and churchman of the nineteenth-century Scottish Free Kirk Alexander Whyte who spoke of "the splendid resources of the Christian imagination."³⁴ Inventors are gifted with imagination. A successful engineer can use his imagination to come up with a creative solution to a previously unsolved problem. We describe an ineffective sports team's offense, or a boring musical performance, as unimaginative. In doing so, we are indicating that imagination is really the gift of making fresh and creative connections, of "seeing" certain things in our minds. Without imagination, we can never recognize possibilities. Without imagination, we are doomed to plodding along in the same old ruts.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann argues that we must learn to read the Bible from the "inside out"—to enter into the perspective of the community and writers who produced it. The information obtained through historical criticism is a foundation, but it is insufficient of itself. Historical imagination must be added. By this Brueggemann means the ability to *extrapolate* forward in a direction consistent with the past. He calls this "imagination shaped by history." History and imagination, though they move in opposite directions, are linked. Without the historical parameters we have in view here, imagination mutates into undisciplined fantasy. On the other hand, when the historical imagination is brought into play, stories like the exodus and the provision of manna come to serve as perennial prisms through which the people of God understand their unfolding life experience.³⁵

The spiritual reading of Scripture goes beyond what the text says to what the text means in our context and what specifically God may be saying

³³ Thompson, *Soulfeast* 23.

³⁴ Quoted by Foster, *Prayer* 154. John Goldingay concurs: "Modern study of Scripture has entrusted the task of interpretation to our reason. In its own nature Scripture is as concerned with the imagination and the will and it is people who bring their imaginations and wills to it who are most likely to indulge in productive dialogue with it" ("Postmodernizing Eve and Adam: Can't I Have My Apricot as Well as Eating It?," in *The World of Genesis: Persons, Places, Perspectives* [ed. Philip Davies and David Clines; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998] 58).

³⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *The Bible Makes Sense* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1977) 32–40. This line of thinking leads Brueggemann to suggest that the two special mandates of the church are fidelity and vitality (147).

to us through it. The scholarly approach to Scripture carries us as far as the first stage—to understanding what the text says. But scholarship cannot take us into the second and third stages all by itself. The linkage between what a text, composed perhaps two thousand or more years ago in the ancient Near East, meant at the time and what it signifies to a reader's personal situation at the dawn of the third millennium, is not according to some fixed, logical circuitry. It is not a matter of simply connecting the dots. Like it or not, making these linkages necessarily involves a subjective dimension. We require the Holy Spirit's guidance as we venture out beyond the text's historical context to its present-day application to us. This is uncharted territory, but it is a sure and necessary way to infuse our otherwise pedestrian approaches to the Biblical text with a spirit of awe and wonder.³⁶ Our main point, though, is that the process involves imagination.

VI. THE BAPTIZED IMAGINATION

When the Puritan Richard Greenham said, as quoted earlier, that "to meditate and not to read is dangerous," he highlighted the very legitimate concern that an undisciplined imagination could easily delude us and lead us astray as we meditate. Once detached from the bracing reality-check provided by the Biblical text—a healthy slap in the face when we wander off—there is no telling where we might end up, what wacky conclusions we might draw, or even how much the devil might manipulate our impressionable minds. These are legitimate concerns, and valid points of caution to raise. Our imaginations, cut adrift from Scriptural anchors, are unreliable and deceptive guides indeed. This leads us to the key. The gift of imagination that God uses is an imagination that has been shaped by the Biblical tradition of truth, and functions within the parameters of this body of revelation. As Peter Toon says: "Meditation, as it were, sits on the shoulders of faithful and reverent study."³⁷

In *Surprised by Joy*, the autobiography of his childhood and early years, C. S. Lewis describes the early development of his prodigious love of reading and creative writing. His cultivated imagination devoured literature, but for some time it was not stimulated or touched at all by Christian thought and the Christian vision of reality. It was through an encounter with the Scottish Christian novelist George MacDonald, and his book with the odd title of *Phantastes, a Faerie Romance*, that his own remarkably fertile imagination was, in Lewis's word, "baptized."³⁸ This rich image of baptism seems to signify that Lewis's mind was immersed in the Christian way of thinking, so

³⁶ See Glen Scorgie, "Wonder and the Revitalization of Evangelical Theology," *Crux* 26/4 (1990) 19–25.

³⁷ Peter Toon, *From Mind to Heart: Christian Meditation Today* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987) 15–16.

³⁸ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* 181. Compare Mineko Honda, *The Imaginative World of C. S. Lewis: A Way to Participate in Reality* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2000). In the same spirit Eugene Peterson describes his personal approach to the Book of Revelation in these terms: "I have submitted my pastoral imagination to St. John's theological poetry" (*Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988] xii).

that he began to see all of life through this profoundly re-orienting filter. Thereafter his imagination would be forever both *stimulated by* and *tethered to* the richness of Biblical narrative, doctrine, language, and symbol. Both functions were and remain crucial—the stimulation provided by the Christian way of seeing and the restraints necessarily implied by this particular lens on reality.

The baptized imagination may be thought of as a Biblically-informed predisposition. Lewis seems to mean that, by allowing his imagination to be baptized, he died to his right to autonomous thinking and moved his entire thought-life underneath the umbrella of a communal quest for truth and a Christian construct of conviction. This move was simultaneously both expanding and restricting. Powerful Christian themes, symbols, imagery, and narratives now fueled his thought-life with a new richness and connected him to a profound reality otherwise unknowable. At the same time, it placed restrictions on what he could seriously consider to be true, good, and beautiful. The truly baptized or converted imagination is not less creative than before. Just the opposite is true. But it is now a more useful and constructive imagination, because it is tethered to the truth.

VII. THE BAPTIZED IMAGINATION AS *GESTALT*

The typical evangelical practitioner of the standard historical-grammatical approach to Scripture seldom has any objection to the meditative use of Scripture, as long as this is strictly understood as a second step following after the first non-negotiable step of doing rigorous and responsible hermeneutical groundwork. No “pietistic” evasions of or shortcuts around this hermeneutical activity are to be allowed.

What I am about to suggest is the most tentative and perhaps the most questionable idea in this paper. I am saying that we should be slower to criticize those saints who utilize a meditative approach to Scripture and neglect in some cases to engage penultimately in rigorous hermeneutical analysis of the particular text in question. As we all know, a good portion of the Bible is quite perspicuous; that is to say, it may be readily apprehended without access to such special knowledge as may be controlled and dispensed by an intellectual elite. On this point there will be much agreement amongst us.

But what about those instances when the authorial intent of a passage is not so self-evident, and readers devoid of scholarly counsel may be particularly vulnerable to drawing invalid inferences from the text before them? The danger is real, of course, but there is a legitimate alternative or supplement to the inductive approach to a Biblical text, and I call it the *Gestalt* approach. The word “Gestalt” comes from the field of psychology and connotes a sense of the whole of a structure that is absent from any of the parts that constitute it.³⁹ In applying this term to an approach to Scripture, I mean to suggest an approach in which the words and phrases of the

³⁹ *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, s.v. “Gestalt Therapy.”

text trigger a wide variety of cognitive connections and ideas. They stimulate all sorts of neural networking and instinctive cross-referencing activities. The dynamics are in fact similar to those operating in the use of religious symbols, where encounters with the symbol can be highly evocative and multi-layered. According to this approach, Scripture evokes or triggers a consciousness of truth in a manner similar to that of religious symbols or icons.

Here readers do not so much discover the truth by inferring it from the text. Rather, the text triggers apprehensions of insight already latent in the readers' minds by reason of their previous encounters with truth. Obviously, one key to the validity of readers' conclusions will be the degree to which their imaginations have already been baptized, so that they instinctively entertain only those possibilities compatible with their prior and intuitive grasp of Christian truth as a whole. To borrow a concept popularized by scholars such as Thomas Kuhn and Peter Berger, the contours of the disciplined Christian mind serve as a kind of paradigm or plausibility structure that will determine which inferences the reader will feel comfortable drawing from a specific text.⁴⁰

In short, I am not trying to introduce a new approach to Scripture. I am simply describing an approach already pervasive in evangelical piety, and giving it more of an endorsement—within limits—than we are sometimes inclined to grant. The benefits of such careful validation are to protect us from setting up unfair scholarly barriers to meaningful lay access to Scripture, and to turn our attention back to the more urgent task of cultivating thoroughly baptized minds and imaginations. This is none other than the quest for an *overall* grasp of Biblical truth. The formation of the reader's over-arching Gestalt will always be at least as important as fine-tuning their exegetical approach to any given text.

VIII. CONCLUSION

As evangelicals, we have not always sufficiently acknowledged the vital role of imagination, which is none other than the contemplation of possibilities not already explicit.⁴¹ It is a capacity that is part of the image of God in us—a modest reflection in humanity of the Creator's own power to bring into being out of nothing that which is not yet. But for this to function reliably we face the continuing challenge of cultivating a *baptized* imagination. The task of the church is continually to enculturate believers into the culture of the Christian faith—an intentional "traditioning" of persons in the Christian ways of heart and mind. Walter Brueggemann calls for the

⁴⁰ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (3d ed.; Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Peter S. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969) and especially Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966).

⁴¹ There is no indication that the topic is going to fade either; see Garrett Green, *Theology, Interpretation and Imagination: The Crisis of Interpretation at the End of Modernity* (Cambridge, UK/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

deliberate construction, in these postmodern times, of a “counterworld of evangelical imagination.” Thus, he says, “the minister must think not of one Sunday or one text as an exercise in ‘totalism,’ but each text and each textual offer [as] a small piece of a larger possibility that will only slowly surface, in ways unhurried.”⁴²

Evangelical scholarship has generally been sensitive to an important matter of theological methodology, namely, how we should move from Biblical text to doctrinal conclusions.⁴³ And rightly so. But here in a sense we are concerned about the converse, about that which reverses the sequence of cause and effect. It is equally true that our imaginations, shaped by previous perceptions of truth, will influence our subsequent interpretations of Scripture. Text and baptized imagination spiral upwards in a symbiotic relationship. The term “science of hermeneutics” perhaps suggests an unrealistic degree of interpreter control and linear deduction, and therefore a truncated vision of the task of Biblical interpretation. Instead we need to validate both hermeneutics and spiritual reading, and widen our conception of the interpretive task to embrace both activities.

Finally, one of our goals in the evangelical church and its various institutions should be the fostering of an integration of academic study of Scripture with a vibrant spirituality. But we are coming to realize that it is much easier to set such a goal than to achieve it. There continues to be a perceived dissonance in approaches to Scripture between formal evangelical hermeneutics and the “active listening” encouraged by the meditative tradition. As long as these two remain in conflict, and are not brought together in a more healthy creative tension, the best that churches and seminaries can do is offer an equitable number of Biblical studies courses on the one side and spiritual formation courses on the other and hope for positive outcomes. Laypersons and students are still left to do the best they can to integrate these disconnected pieces of the puzzle. Often the result is an unfortunate kind of Christian schizophrenia. My argument has been that we can move toward a more satisfactory resolution of this problem through the affirmation and cultivation of a “baptized imagination.”

⁴² Walter Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 27.

⁴³ The significance of this issue is explored in Joel Green and Max Turner, eds., *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).