

## FAITHFULNESS: A PRESCRIPTION FOR THEOLOGY

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Before he ascended into heaven, the Lord Jesus commissioned his followers to make disciples of all nations (Matt 28:16–20). In doing this, the Gospel of Matthew tells us, they were to teach the nations to obey all that he had commanded them. The setting, the meeting at the mountain, the appearance of the Lord who has all authority in heaven and on earth, ordering obedience to all of his commandments, must have recalled to their minds the meeting of God with Israel at the mountain of Sinai where commandments were given that they be his holy people (Exodus 19–20). Perhaps they also recalled the promise in Isaiah that the nations would come to the mountain of the Lord and that they would be taught his ways, so that they might walk in his paths (Isa 2:2–4).

Luke likewise tells us that, before his ascension, Jesus explained to his disciples the things concerning him in all the Scriptures, the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms, that he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and that he sent them to proclaim from the Scriptures repentance and forgiveness of sins to all nations (Luke 24:27, 44–48).

John tells us about the sending of the disciples in the context of the upper room discourse and the high priestly prayer. Jesus prayed for the sanctification of those from the nations who would believe in him through the word of his apostles (John 17:17–21), the very same apostles whom he commanded to abide in and keep his word (John 15:7–11) and to whom he promised to send the Holy Spirit not only to bring to their remembrance the words he spoke to them but also to guide them into all the truth, fulfilling Christ's intent to say many other things as the Holy Spirit declared to the disciples all that belongs to Christ, which is also all that belongs to the Father (John 14:15–17, 25–26; 15:26–27; 16:12–15).

The obligation in the commission in the three Gospels is clear. The role of the disciples of Jesus in the work of discipling the nations is subordinate. The nations will come to know Jesus, not his disciples, as Lord. They will be disciplined in the words of the Lord, which include the words of his personal instruction, the words of the OT Scriptures, as he explained them, and the many other words that he would say by the sending of the Spirit of truth to

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his apostles. The words of his disciples serve in this task and are accountable to him in the accomplishment of it.

This is why Paul immediately stepped in, so to speak, into the situation at Corinth when he heard that the church was quarrelling about whom to follow (1 Cor 1:10–4:21). Paul reminded them that he had come to them as a servant of Christ (1 Cor 3:5–9; 4:1–4). Paul had proclaimed to them the cross of Christ, just as the Lord had commanded (1 Cor 1:17–2:5), and as an apostle of Jesus Christ, he proclaimed the wisdom of the mystery of Christ given through the Holy Spirit, “things God has revealed to us through the Spirit,” he said, for “we have not received the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit” (1 Cor 2:6–13).

Paul was a servant of Christ, a steward (*oikonomos*) of the mysteries of God, which did not belong to him, but were given to him, revealed by the Holy Spirit. And, he says, it is required (*zeteitai*), it is requested, or better, it is demanded, ordered, that stewards be found faithful (1 Cor 4:1–2). Ordered by whom? By Christ, the one of whom he is a servant. He, the Lord, demands, he orders faithfulness in the task of proclaiming, of teaching, of discipling the nations, in his words.

Brothers and sisters of the Evangelical Theological Society, our work as evangelical theologians and scholars of the Word finds its *raison d'être* in the Lord's commission to disciple the nations by proclaiming to them and teaching them his Word. We serve “Jesus Christ as Lord” in this task, “not ourselves” (to quote Paul again, 2 Cor 4:5). We teach students formally and informally. We write books and articles, commentaries and treatises, we review each others' works and the works of others not of our society, we speak publicly and privately, but we are under obligation in this work of words, and that obligation is to see that others are disciplined in his Words.

Not everyone, of course, sees the task of theology and biblical scholarship in the same way.

At this conference, we have been addressing the theme of Christianity in the Early Centuries, and this is so important because how we construe early Christianity is directly related to how we perceive who we are and understand the nature of our task. My purpose in this address is to take us back to the beginning of the Christian mission as set forth in the Scripture, to the Lord's commission to the disciples, and to the mission understanding of the apostles, to clarify our task within the history of this mission. Those who are most popular today in setting forth alternative views of early Christianity do not do so out of a mere antiquarian interest. They do so for the purpose of prescribing rules for theological discourse today.

Take Bart Ehrman as an example. Ehrman teaches at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and writes in the field of early Christian studies. An earlier title, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, is a good sign Ehrman is not an evangelical. In 2003, he published two volumes, *Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It into the New Testament* and *Lost Christianities:*

*the Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew*.<sup>1</sup> The first volume is self-explanatory; it is an anthology of non-canonical texts—apocryphal and agnostic. In the latter volume, Ehrman presents the reader with his own story of how Christian orthodoxy came into existence *vis-à-vis* the various religious views represented by the texts in the first volume.

His starting point is the various religious texts from the first to the third centuries that refer to Christ, the apostles, or Christian themes, texts that, he says, evidence an originally pluralistic and diverse Christianity or Christianities. These texts include not only the NT Scriptures, as I said, but the NT Apocrypha and especially several of the treatises which were found with the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library—Gnostic writings of various sorts. He also makes reference to writers in the great Church tradition, such as Irenaeus, Tertullian, and so on. Ehrman takes as a given fact a typical critical view of the compositional history of NT writings which assigns them to various communities and judges many to be pseudonymous and late. As a consequence, the person of Jesus Christ is relegated to obscurity in this construct; all that is known of him are differing portraits offered by the different communities. Reading the texts from a cultural-critical perspective with its interest in struggles for power, Ehrman then presents his story of how one group, which he calls the proto-orthodox, emerged victorious out of a power struggle with the others and succeeded in driving out these other forms of “Christianity” even to the point of rewriting the history of the conflict to make it look like it was the original Christianity and the others as only Johnny-come-latelies, departures from the original.

The reason, Ehrman says, why there ever came to be an orthodoxy that was *katholikos* can be traced to three things: exclusivism, intolerance, and clever strategy. The real problem, he says, was a spirit that all the groups shared, but of which the so-called proto-orthodox seemed to have a double portion, and that was the spirit of exclusivism and intolerance. Amazingly enough, these early Christianities seemed to think that being right was important, and since rightness implies wrongness, consequently they contended over the validity of each others’ views. But the proto-orthodox, much more than the others, were aggressively intolerant and worked to drive the others out of existence. Now it did help, Ehrman notes, that they were not as bizarre as some groups, and that they were better organized and had a missionary drive. However, Ehrman presents these proto-orthodox as especially vitriolic, slanderous, as fabricators of lies. All of the groups, he says, forged religious texts, but the proto-orthodox were especially clever at it. They also took over some earlier Christian writings and subtly inserted textual changes to make them appear to proscribe the views of their opponents. And

<sup>1</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); idem, *Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It into the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); idem, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

then, in the height of arrogance, they came up with the concept of canon, which no one had thought of before, and by declaring officially the list of acceptable books they banished into obscurity the rich textual diversity of those early years of Christian history. All that was necessary after that was to rewrite history in favor of the proto-orthodox party. But, says Ehrman, that is not quite the end of the story, because the exclusivism and intolerance of the proto-orthodox spirit finally turned against itself, disenfranchising many of its own party as proto-orthodoxy itself was eliminated to make way for—Christian orthodoxy.

Now, it should not come as any surprise that Ehrman's real interest in telling his story is to make a statement about religious and theological discourse today. The story of "internecine" conflict is meant to be taken as an object lesson today with regard to the dangers of exclusivism and intolerance.<sup>2</sup> He notes approvingly that today, many of the churches descended from the victorious party have accepted the fact of modern religious diversity. The intolerance exhibited by saying that another person will be damned in hell for not believing the gospel is just not acceptable in religious discourse today, and a person certainly should not take as a model the character of Jesus devised by the creators of the canonical Gospels or the real or forged apostles of other canonical writings. No, we do not need that any more, Ehrman says. It is much better now that the situation is more akin to the "famous tolerance" of Roman paganism. Of course, they were not tolerant of proto-orthodox Christians, killing many of them on various occasions. But it was their own fault, Ehrman says, for being intolerant!<sup>3</sup> And, our situation has improved even more now that the Nag Hammadi writings, those "precious" and "revered" alternative "Christian" writings once thought to be lost (due, we all remember to the intolerance of proto-orthodoxy) have been rediscovered and brought into today's pluralistic religious discourse for our promiscuous enjoyment.

Now, there are many things that could be said about Bart Ehrman's account of ancient "Christianities." The foundation for it all, of course, is a critical theory of NT compositional history which has been contested by evangelical biblical scholars. But you would not know that from Ehrman's book, which presents his critical views as simply the widely accepted results of biblical scholarship. Ehrman, it turns out, is not as interested in diversity as he pretends and has engaged in a little fabrication himself to cover it up.<sup>4</sup> Take away his NT critical views, and later Christian writings acquire a different look. If the NT writings were not forgeries, then the early Christian writers were not deceitful in their use of them. If the Gospels give a trustworthy account of Jesus and his teaching, then the early church cannot be faulted for appealing to them to adjudicate conflicting claims about what he

<sup>2</sup> Ehrman, *Lost Christianities* 7, 254–57.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* 255.

<sup>4</sup> Ehrman presents critical views as "so widely held as to be virtually common place" (*ibid.* 168), as views "generally held by scholars today" (*ibid.* 170), and similar statements (*ibid.* 172ff). No reference is made to evangelical scholarship.

said, especially if these claims are found in writings that *are* most likely forgeries. If, in fact, there are authoritative writings from the days of Jesus and his apostles, it is sound to consult them. It is not the case that all such writings are only projections of the diverse religious experiences of later communities. This is not to say that early Christian writers were without any fault in their discourse, in some of their characterizations or arguments. But, impugning their claim of faithfulness to Jesus Christ in accordance with his Word is unfair.

My interest, however, is in the implications of Ehrman's view of religious diversity for the task of theology. Ehrman does not draw these out, but I think we get a fairly good account from Kathryn Tanner in her book *Theories of Culture, a New Agenda for Theology*.<sup>5</sup> Tanner helps to illumine the postmodern "cultural turn" which has swept through the fields of history, literature, and the social sciences and has also impacted the relatively new field of Late Ancient Studies, as seen in a work like Ehrman's. In fact, it is primarily due to the impact of "culture studies" that Late Ancient Studies has come to exist as an academic field, over against the more traditional fields of patristics or NT studies.<sup>6</sup> After surveying ideas of culture, as used in anthropology, Tanner goes on to propose how theology might be done from the standpoint of a postmodern view of culture with its commitments to diversity, equality, tolerance, and freedom.

The postmodern view of culture goes beyond that adopted by postliberals such as George Lindbeck and Hans Frei.<sup>7</sup> Postliberalism, drawing upon the views of post-1920s anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz, emphasized the diversity of local cultures over against the idea of a universal culture applicable to all peoples in all places.<sup>8</sup> But those local cultures were seen as homogenous entities in themselves. This homogeneity was the basis for Lindbeck's proposal of a cultural-linguistic understanding of theology which has also been taken up by some evangelicals in their proposal of what they call "postconservatism." But postmodern anthropology with its interest in conflict sociologies and in poststructuralism's view of discourse as a field for the operation of power contests the homogeneity of postliberalism's local cultures. In the postmodern view of culture, diversity exists not just as multiple or plural local cultures. Diversity exists within local cultures. According to Tanner, to insist that theology is a matter of learning the linguistic rules of a local culture violates the diversity that is unavoidably inherent within that

<sup>5</sup> Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Guides to Theological Inquiry; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> A helpful overview of the development of the field of "Late Ancient Studies" is provided by Dale Martin in the introduction to the volume, *The Cultural Turn in Late Ancient Studies* (ed. Dale R. Martin and Patricia Cox Miller; Durham: Duke University Press, 2005) 1–21.

<sup>7</sup> The classic postliberal statement on theology and culture is George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984).

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); and idem, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

culture.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, it would be inconsiderate, intolerant, and exclusive, a violation of diversity, to prescribe or mandate a correct way of speaking or believing theologically even within a local culture, such as Christianity would be in this definition. It would seem, in such a situation, that there would be no theological norms at all. Like the Book of Judges, everyone would believe whatever was right in their own minds. It would be, as Tanner acknowledges, “an amorphous mush.”<sup>10</sup> But even a postmodern theology (a post-postliberal) senses that it is possible to go really, really wrong in belief and practice. I mean, someone might generate the idea that diversity is wrong! The problem, then, for Tanner, is how to do theology positively, how to come to convictions that are judged to be right, that are recommended to all, while respecting rather than suppressing diversity or eliminating it by division.

Tanner’s proposal is based on her understanding of the theological condition of “Christian” diversity. Coming out of the Yale school, Tanner maintains the notion going back to Barth of an absolutely free Word of God. The free Word can never be identified with human words or human practices which are at best time-bound and culture-bound testimonies to the Free, Unbounded, Unrestrained Word.<sup>11</sup> A given theology must be seen as human words or actions proposed or engaged in as a testimony to the Word. Such a theology is always a human construction contextualized in a specific time and place for a specific people. But the people, even though they may agree with it, may not have all understood it the same way when they did agree to it, not to mention those who harbored in their agreement reservations, or those who dissented. And this says nothing about how later generations will think about them. Furthermore, Tanner says, these *ad hoc* human productions (which include Scriptures, creeds, liturgies, discipleship practices), being occasional consensus productions of diverse people, are by nature inherently vague as well as time-bound and culture-specific.<sup>12</sup> So, they can never serve as that which all Christians must believe everywhere and always. But, besides all of this, the Word is so free, so unbounded, that one cannot automatically rule out non-Christian beliefs and practices as possible ways of faithfulness to the Word.<sup>13</sup> In a postmodern view of culture, cultural boundaries are permeable.<sup>14</sup> And this postmodern theology of culture sees the Free Word working across and through both inter-cultural and extra-cultural diversity. So, there may exist at any particular time a “common way of believing and thinking theologically,” but it is always contestable and may actually be or become oppressive to the “sincere” beliefs of any of the constituency as these

<sup>9</sup> This is Tanner’s primary criticism against postliberalism. Her work can be seen as a development of the methodological function of culture in theology, the central concern of the Yale school, by means of a postmodern understanding of culture. This is developed especially in part two of her work, Tanner, *Theories of Culture* 61–175; see especially 141, 157–59.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 174.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 155.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 154.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 117–19, 151.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 152.

beliefs come into existence and develop.<sup>15</sup> The postmodern theologian, then, needs to be sensitive to make sure all voices come into the work of theology all the time. Theology is the work of a “community of argument” guided by the Free Word, always asking the question of what it means to be Christian, and what Christians mean about God, Christ, salvation, and so on.<sup>16</sup> “Christian identity is found in looking for” an identity, not in one that is given or found, and theology consists in asking a set of questions, not in confessing a set of answers.<sup>17</sup> The theologian is an artist who is never finished—always working with traditional as well as new materials, constantly arranging and rearranging them in whatever configuration seems to satisfy the diversity into which the Free Word seems to lead.<sup>18</sup> There is nothing on the human level—no given words or practices—that guarantee faithfulness to the unbounded, unrestrained Free Word.<sup>19</sup>

Now, the problem with Tanner’s proposal is obvious—it is the same problem we find in Barth’s theology and the tradition that follows him, and that is this theological idea of the Free Word which entails the demotion of Scripture from the category of God’s Word. The communicative Word of God in Tanner’s theology has no human linguistic identity. Since even the most esteemed locus of human words about God is qualitatively different from God’s own communication, the best that is available in human speech is only vague, *ad hoc* testimonies. The meaning of grace is vague—a question to be asked, really, rather than a gift to be known and proclaimed with confidence. The gospel message of that grace can be no more than a vague, *ad hoc* testimony to an absolutely free word. And, the vagueness of the gospel would translate into a vague, at best, identity for the body of Christ, which makes the identity of the body in the culture difficult to distinguish, its boundaries being “porous” cultural lines and its substance culturally contestable.

The Free Word renders the human experience of God essentially ecstatic in the sense of not being capable of expressing any common faith. A common faith expression is always a secondary language expression, a human construction through reflection, striving even if only in a moment-by-moment way to testify to the one Free Word. But, some consensus, even if only momentary and changeable, is necessary precisely because of the unity of the Word that invokes it. Without the consensus, Tanner would have no claim to monotheism or even henotheism. The pluralistic voices would testify to an ultimate polytheism.

But now, let us turn our attention back to the work of theology we find ourselves engaged in here at the Evangelical Theological Society. Quite evidently, we differ with Tanner and, in fact, with all “modern” and “post-modern” theologies in their construal of the Word of God. There is no question that the Word of God is free, for he does all that he pleases (Ps 115:3). By

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 171.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 153–55, 173–75.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 155.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 166.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 151.

the Word of the Lord, all things were made (Ps 33:6). He works all things according to the counsel of his will (Eph 1:11). Who has known the mind of the Lord so as to be his Counselor (Rom 11:34)? But to argue on the basis of divine freedom that the Word of God cannot communicate in the form of human speech is a *non sequitur*. A divine Word of that sort is not free at all, but is limited in expression. One might as well deny that One who is very nature God could take the form of a servant, and be made in human likeness and be found in appearance as a man (Phil 2:6–7). We, on the other hand, affirm that the divine Word of God is not only capable of human expression but has communicated in words in accordance with his will to do so. We have the Word of God written; it is the Scripture. This divine communication in words informs our faith and directs our obedience as we submit to his Lordship.

However, even though we have the Bible as the Word of God written, it is quite evident that we also have theological differences among us. What do we make of that?

In some respects, we may look like Tanner's community of argument. A quick glance at our membership list quickly reveals that we are a "diverse" society. There are different ecclesiastical traditions represented here, and on top of that each of us, engaged in our various scholarly projects, bring a diversity of views and interpretations into the presentations, discussions, and debates that make up our annual meetings. And it is a legitimate question to ask whether our work amounts to something more than the constant re-arranging of theological material in response to a ceaseless flow of novel ideas and opinions. Well, I believe that it should, and that it could, if we understand the stewardship of our work and are faithful in the task.

The question to ask, it seems to me, is what is the epistemological and methodological significance of the revealed and written Word of God for the theological knowledge of the body of Christ?

I ask your indulgence for an unbelievably brief and admittedly simplistic sketch of the history of theology. God revealed through Jesus Christ the mystery of his will which was hidden for ages (Rom 16:25–27; 1 Cor 1:6–7; Eph 3:4–5). This has been proclaimed openly and is God's gift to us in Scripture. We are to understand these things by reading it (cf. Eph 3:4). We have been given the Holy Spirit so that we might be strengthened in the knowledge of these things as Christ is formed in us (Eph 3:16–19). Our situation is described in Ephesians 4—a body, growing into maturity, with the goal of unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God, not tossed and blown back and forth by every wind of doctrine and by the cunning and craftiness of deceivers. We are to speak the truth and grow up in all things into Christ, who is the head of the body. The problem of deceivers, false teachers and teachings, vain discussions, and divisions over worldly wisdom was a danger to the NT church and has continued to be a danger through the ages of the Church down to the present day. The apostolic admonition was to attend to the revelation that had been given and to be faithful stewards of it.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> This point, a concern in Rom 16:17–19, and in Paul's Corinthian correspondence, is a focused theme in the Pastoral Epistles, in 2 Peter, the Johannine Epistles, and Jude.

In the early centuries, pastors and teachers, confronting the pastoral problem of deception and false teaching that contested the meaning of the Scriptures, spoke of a “rule of faith,” a doctrinal summary that should guide the interpreter. But this was always a demonstrable summary through exposition offered plainly and openly with the expectation that the Church could see and recognize it in the Scriptures as they were expounded. By the fifth century, however, the authoritative focus had begun to shift away from the embeddedness of the rule in Scripture to the ordained authority of the Church to declare it so.<sup>21</sup>

The Reformation brought a renewed focus on the Scripture as the supreme authority for theology, and the Reformation traditions sought to rework the rule of faith by which the Church should read the Scripture as we seek to grow up into a mature knowledge of Christ, as Ephesians 4 tells us. The rule, or confession, of faith was again understood to be an exposition of Scripture, which is the real authority of its teaching.<sup>22</sup> However, it became apparent very quickly that the various summaries of the faith had differences that divided ecclesiastical communions, in spite of their affirmation of the supreme authority of the one written Word of God. How do we understand that? Is it the division of deception and false teaching? Or is it the immature understanding of the body of Christ? Either way, we all sense the obligation to work for the understanding of the knowledge of the revelation given in words that marks the maturity of the new creation in Christ. And through the various events of history from that time to ours in this incredibly brief and simplistic survey of history, we come to our situation in the Evangelical Theological Society.

Here we are, doing the work of theology, most if not all of us doing our work in accordance with one or another of the many evangelical confessions, affirmed institutionally or ecclesiastically. There is a lot of overlap. But we disagree on some confessional points, that is, on the question as to whether the Bible does teach things about which we differ such that they belong to the truth that marks the mature knowledge of the body of Christ. Here in this society, we work with a simple doctrinal basis concerning God and his Word. The various theological boundaries that divide evangelicals are not in that doctrinal basis. Rather, we have a common affirmation of the triune God and the authoritative, inerrant, written Word of God. Should we not see this as an opportunity to test and prove theological exposition for the benefit of the body of Christ?

Undoubtedly, I think many of us would say that. And yet, there are some who say that what the Evangelical Theological Society needs is a more expanded doctrinal statement, like many of the institutions and churches in

<sup>21</sup> The expositional nature of the rule of faith in the early church and the development of tradition as an authority in its own right is a central thesis in the work, *History of Theology*, vol. 1: *The Patristic Period* (ed. A. Di Berardino and Basil Studies; trans. Matthew J. O’Connell; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996).

<sup>22</sup> See, e.g., the introduction to the Formula of Concord: *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (ed. and trans. Theodore G. Tappert; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) 464–65, 501–4; see also John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.9.8.

which we work, that this would give more unity to our work and greater progress to our effort to fulfill the obligation of the body's growth into full knowledge. But I wonder if that is really so. Or would it be a loss—a loss of opportunity because of the loss of the necessity of demonstrable theological faithfulness? You see, what our situation actually calls for here, the mission impossible assignment, if we choose to accept it, is to go back to a common affirmation of the inerrant written Word of God alone and on that basis do what the earliest church and the Reformers set as their task, and that is speaking the truth in love, to strive for the unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God. We do not do that by abandoning the hard work and labor of biblical demonstration on confessional points that otherwise divide us or on those points we commonly confess, but by the diligent and difficult work of tracing in open view of the churches, and of the world, the faith and knowledge that God has given to us all in the publicly revealed Scripture.

Again in keeping with the theme of our conference, let me propose an example from the early Church.

Athanasius was bishop of Alexandria with jurisdiction over all of Egypt at the time that the Nag Hammadi writings were most likely being bound together in the form in which they were later buried.<sup>23</sup> The Arian controversy was in full swing then, and Athanasius had already written the first two *Orations against the Arians*, and possibly the *Third Oration* then as well. *The Defense of the Nicene Definition* may also have been written by that time along with a number of other works.<sup>24</sup> The Arian controversy was obviously a theological debate, but as such it was a debate over the interpretation of Scripture.<sup>25</sup> In fact, from the early correspondence about the controversy, it seems highly likely that its beginning was a public disagreement over the interpretation of Proverbs 8.<sup>26</sup> As it became clear that the issue concerned a deep disagreement about the nature of the Son of God, recourse was made by both sides to Scripture. The first two *Orations against the Arians* were written about 15 years after the Council of Nicea had anathematized the heresy. However, the Arian party had regrouped and had recovered enough political clout to send Athanasius into exile. They also published various pieces setting forth scriptural proofs for their view that the Son was a created being. The *Orations against the Arians* take these Scripture passages along with many others and argue at length for an orthodox understanding. What is interesting here is the patient and laborious process of expositing

<sup>23</sup> James M. Robinson, "Introduction," in *The Nag Hammadi Library* (ed. James M. Robinson; rev. ed.; New York: Harper & Row, 1988) 16–20.

<sup>24</sup> For a recent review of the dating of these Athanasian works, see James Ernest, *The Bible in Athanasius of Alexandria* (*The Bible in Ancient Christianity* 2; Boston: Brill, 2004) 108–11.

<sup>25</sup> Charles Kannengiesser, *Holy Scripture and Hellenistic Hermeneutics in Alexandrian Christianity: The Arian Crisis* (Berkeley, CA: Center for Hermeneutical Studies, 1982) 1.

<sup>26</sup> Allen L. Clayton, "The Orthodox Recovery of a Heretical Proof Text: Athanasius of Alexandria's Interpretation of Proverbs 8:22–30 in Conflict with the Arians" (Ph.D. diss., Southern Methodist University, 1988) 168–87.

theology from the text of Scripture.<sup>27</sup> Athanasius is a biblical rather than a philosophical theologian. Even apart from exegeting specific texts, his writing is richly filled with “biblical terms, phrases, illustrations, examples, and allusions.” It is evident that he has so memorized Scripture that it has come to saturate his own manner of discourse. Furthermore, in theological argumentation, Athanasius uses Scripture not just in its assertions, in a proof text manner, but it functions for him as “a semantical and conceptual matrix” for forming and testing theological proposals. The proposals are made, as much as possible, in the language of Scripture. Consideration is given to grammatical patterns—“the force and bearing of specific prepositions, adverbs, and adjectives in biblical usage” in order to determine the proper way to speak theologically.

I do not intend to suggest that Athanasius’s exegesis would in every case match that practiced today. Actually, as James Ernest has pointed out, if we think of exegesis in terms of a commentary genre, there is very little of that in Athanasius’s writings.<sup>28</sup> That is because we do not have any of his commentaries extant, with the possible exception of Psalms, and most do not consider it authentic. What we have is theology formulated within the linguistic structure of the Bible—with biblical vocabulary arranged in logical patterns that reflect the logic of biblical grammar. I find it remarkable that in this early, foundational theological controversy, we find such an intentional effort to be thoroughly biblical. I also find it remarkable that evangelical theology today rarely shares this degree of intense biblical thought and evangelical biblical scholarship rarely displays this concern for a common theology inhering the canon. But somehow, I think that the Lord must have had something like this in mind in his command to let his Word abide in us.

Of course, non-biblical terms and phrases were also used in theological discourse. *Homoousios* is perhaps the best-known example from this time. The orthodox use of this term has been the focus of many studies, generally under the theme of philosophical influences on early Christian thought. It is interesting, however, that *homoousios* really did not become a major focal issue until 25 years after the Council of Nicea. Athanasius’s treatise *On the Defense of the Nicene Council* was a response to the new attention that was being given to the term. The preference in formulating the creed, he says, was for biblical language. But, the Fathers were willing to use this term because they believed it summed up in one word the teachings of several passages on the Son’s relation to the Father and effectively answered the Arian heresy.<sup>29</sup> Many have focused on this “pragmatic” use of the term, downplaying the consideration given to its biblical suitability. But this leaves unanswered why the orthodox did not make greater use of it in the earlier years of the

<sup>27</sup> The observations on the Athanasian use of Scripture in the work of theology, including the phrases in quotations, come from the conclusions of my own study: Craig Alan Blaising, “Athanasius of Alexandria: Studies in the *Contra Arianos* With Special Reference to Method” (Ph.D. thesis, University of Aberdeen, 1988) 426–36.

<sup>28</sup> Ernest, *Bible in Athanasius* 6–7.

<sup>29</sup> Athanasius, *De decretis* 18–21 (NPNF, 2d series, 4.162–64).

controversy. And it also ignores the evidence of the Nicene Creed itself which is a careful composition of biblical language. In fact, something that is not often pointed out in the various studies of the creed is that its very structure, not to mention the majority of its vocabulary, is taken directly from 1 Cor 8:6: “For us there is [Nicea: I believe in] one God, the Father, from whom are all things (*heis theos ho patēr ex hou ta panta*).” That is the first head. And then comes the second head: “and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things (*heis kyrios Iēsous Christos di’ hou ta panta*).” The purpose was to be faithful to the words of Scripture.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, let me make reference to the famous Easter letter of AD 367. For a long time, the only portion of this letter that was known to Western scholars was the portion that listed books which Athanasius says are *kanōnizomena*. The letter has been treated as the first official declaration of a list of biblical books as canon. However, other fragments of the letter in Coptic were published in the late nineteenth century and have recently been translated into English by David Brakke in his work *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*.<sup>31</sup> With more of the letter available, we can see that the greater point that Athanasius is making is that Christ is the true teacher of the Church, and he teaches the Church through the Scriptures. In the process he lists the canonical books for the purpose of clarifying that certain books are not among those used in the churches (perhaps, some have speculated, books recently discussed in the Nag Hammadi writings), certain books apparently being read by some monks in monasteries in Upper Egypt. “Let the teacher [in the church],” Athanasius says, “teach from the words of Scripture,” and in time he will hear from the Lord, “Well done, good and faithful servant! Since you are trustworthy in small things, I will place you over great things.”<sup>32</sup>

Brothers and sisters in the Evangelical Theological Society, there are many works on theological method tracing the various elements that factor in the task. There are numerous proposals for tying theology to the shifting winds of cultural change, and there are many to lend the weight of scholarly theories and proposals for a vision of remolding the heart of the Church. But we are stewards of the Word of God written. Our call is ultimately, for all the work we do, a simple one. May we be faithful in the work of the Word that we and those we serve know him and that together we grow in knowledge of the truth as the truth is in Jesus, so that we, standing in a line of faithful servants, in the new creation will likewise hear the commendation: “Well done!”

<sup>30</sup> Contra Ehrman, who says, “The apostles, for example, did not teach the Nicene Creed or anything like it.” Ehrman, *Lost Christianities* 176.

<sup>31</sup> David Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (Oxford Early Christian Studies; Oxford: Clarendon, 1995) 326–32. This study was reissued in paperback under the title, *Athanasius and Asceticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 331–32.