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THE HOLY SPIRIT AND BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION:
ALEXANDER CAMPBELL AND CONTEMPORARY HERMENEUTICS

A Synopsis
Of a Guided Research Paper
Harding School of Theology
Memphis, Tennessee

For HST Colloquy

By
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Introduction

This paper is a synopsis of my Guided Research Paper.¹ The thesis of the larger project is that diversity in biblical interpretation is a good fruit of the indwelling Spirit of God, and that the scriptural narrative is designed to be translated and embodied into a multiplicity of contexts. Churches of Christ, however, have inherited two restrictions that hinder us from faithfully and creatively interpreting Scripture with the Holy Spirit: a rationalist hermeneutic and a weak pneumatology. The project investigates Alexander Campbell's approaches to the Holy Spirit and biblical interpretation that resulted in the inherited assumptions of uniformity around a singular interpretation. This historical diagnosis will be brought into dialogue with the current scholarship on the function of the Holy Spirit in the church's interpretation of Scripture before then proposing a practical path forward with a pneumatological hermeneutic for Churches of Christ.

Campbell's Biblicism in Context

Alexander Campbell's writing and ministry were shaped by his father Thomas Campbell, the Reformation, and Enlightenment philosophy. In Thomas's *Declaration and Address*, the assumption in his appeal to the divided congregations within the church catholic was that exclusive conformity to the NT pattern was imperative for unity.²

¹ Ladye Rachel Howell, "The Holy Spirit and Biblical Interpretation: Alexander Campbell and Contemporary Hermeneutics" (2020). *Dissertations and Theses. 14*. <https://scholarworks.harding.edu/hst-etd/14>. Referenced in this synopsis as Howell.

² Thomas Campbell, *Declaration and Address; with an Introduction by William Robinson* (Birmingham, U.K.: Berean Press, 1951). Originally written in 1809; widely considered to be the founding document of the Stone-Campbell Movement (SCM).

Alexander was heir to his father's rationalist biblicism that claimed to purely follow only what they found on the Bible's pages.

Further, Campbell viewed Martin Luther as a Moses figure who "restored the Bible to the world," but lamented that there was no Joshua to carry on that leadership of those "rallied under the banner of the Bible."³ He thought that the previous protestant goals of adhering to plain, basic scripture were being realized in his movement, and he saw himself and his followers as the true heirs of the Reformers.⁴ Additionally, Campbell pursued that fulfillment of Reformation objectives under the influence of his philosophical mentors:

We use the premises, and work by the rules, of all the mental philosophers of acknowledged orthodoxy in the science of mind and of language. The unbelieving Hume and the believing Locke, alike assent that all our simple and original ideas are derived from sensation and reflection; and that the imagination is absolutely dependent upon the discoveries of the five sense for all its inventions and creations. But the Apostle Paul sanctions these conclusions by affirming that it is 'by *faith* we understand that the universe was made by God' and that 'he that comes to God must *believe that he exists*' for the world by wisdom did not know God.⁵

From within that context, Alexander Campbell developed his rationalist biblicism, expressed in superlative and centered language of supremacy:

³ Alexander Campbell, *Christianity Restored: The Principal Extras of the Millennial Harbinger, Revised and Corrected* (Rosemead, California: Old Paths Book Club, 1959), 3-6. Hereafter cited as *Restored*; originally published by the author in 1835. Campbell saw his movement as a first *and* a final effort, explaining how "since that time, the first effort known to us to abandon the whole controversy about creeds and reformations, and to *restore* primitive Christianity, or to build alone upon the Apostles and Prophets, Jesus Christ himself the chief cornerstone, has been made."

⁴ *Ibid*, 8-9.

⁵ Alexander Campbell, "Evidences of the Gospel No. 1," *The Millennial Harbinger* 6, no. 5 (May 1835), 200.

The Bible is to the intellectual and moral world of man what the sun is to the planets in our system - the fountain and source of light and life, spiritual and eternal. There is not a spiritual idea in the whole human race that is not drawn from the Bible.

The Bible, or the Old and New Testaments, in Hebrew and Greek, contains a full and perfect revelation of God and his will, adapted to man as he now is.

The words of the Bible contain all the ideas in it. These words, then, rightly understood, and the ideas are clearly perceived.

The Bible is a book of facts, not of opinions, theories, abstract generalities, nor of verbal definitions. It is a book of awful facts, grand and sublime beyond description. These facts reveal God and man, and contain within them the reasons of all piety and righteousness, or what is commonly called religion and morality. The meaning of the Bible facts is the true biblical doctrine. History is, therefore, the plan pursued in both testaments; for testimony has primarily to do with faith, and reasoning with understanding. History has, we say, to do with facts—and religion springs from them.⁶

Campbell rejected denominational creeds as divisive, as well as unwritten “speculation and abstract notions” that misunderstood “the true nature of Revelation:”

[F]or it is founded wholly and entirely upon *facts*. There is not one abstract opinion, not one speculative view asserted or communicated in the Old Testament or New. Moses begins with asserting facts that had transpired in creation and providence; and John ends with asserting prophetic or prospective facts.... Facts, then, are the *alpha* and *omega* of both Jewish and Christian revelations.⁷

Further, Alexander Campbell assumed a model of inspiration in which the apostles were “under an infallible superintendence and inspiration in all their

⁶ Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System: In Reference to the Union of Christians, and a Restoration of Primitive Christianity, as Pleaded in the Current Reformation* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing, 1839), 2-6. Hereafter referred to as *System*. Please see Howell, 24-31, for an extensive survey of Campbell’s biblicism.

⁷ Campbell, *Restored*, 106-114. Therefore, through these firmly affixed lenses of empiricism and induction, Campbell’s understanding of the role of the Bible in the salvation of humans proceeded always in the same order: Fact, Testimony, Faith, Feeling. Facts must always come first.

communications to mankind.” This included the expectation that the text would be plain and obvious to any reader, logically resulting in uniformity of understanding:

We regard the apostles of Jesus Christ, as gifted with a full and perfect knowledge of the christian institution; which entitled them, without the possibility of error, to open to mankind the whole will of their master, whether in the form of doctrine, precept, promise, or threatening; and as furnished with such a knowledge of the signs of those ideas in human language, as to express this knowledge clearly, accurately, and infallibly, to mankind.”⁸

Campbell insisted that uniformity of language is essential for the realization of union. He critiqued theological and doctrinal terms from the “religious philosophers” of the denominations, and he argued for limitations on language. “Purity of speech” here is not a plea for reflective listening or clean communication, but an effort to control an exclusive vocabulary:

We choose to speak of Bible things by Bible words, because we are always suspicious that if the word is not in the Bible, the idea which it represents is not there.... There is nothing more essential to the union of the disciples of Christ than *purity* of speech. So long as the earth was of one speech, the human family was united. Had they been of a pure speech as well as of one speech, they would not have been separated. God, in his just indignation, dispersed them; and before he scattered them, *he divided their language*.... Purity of speech is here declared to be prerequisite to serving the Lord with one consent.⁹

Campbell assumed that certainty was desirable and would lead all Christians to a uniform interpretation. He does not consider the possibility that controlling language and practice would be a misuse of power and influence in which “purity of speech” becomes “my interpretation” to be enforced on the other.

⁸ Ibid, 18-20.

⁹ Ibid, 125.

Campbell on the Holy Spirit and Calvinist Conversion

Alexander Campbell's pneumatology was derivative of his biblicist rationalism, and the majority of his teachings on the Holy Spirit fall into two main categories: first, the inspiration and confirmation of the revelation within the Bible, and second, a rejection of the Calvinist pre-conversion experiences of that era. His rationalism prioritized exclusive dependence on dictation from the Spirit for the Apostles' *direct* teaching. Because of the growing number of churches, the Apostles could not be in every place to teach the ignorant, so the Holy Spirit was given to fill that gap:

Hence all these spiritual gifts were bestowed on the first converts for perfecting them. They could neither speak in the church, pray, nor sing, without supernatural aid. Writings of all sorts were scarce; and many had not the ability to read, had they had the writings of the Apostles all completed in their hands. In these congregations, then, every thing was done by the suggestion of the Holy Spirit... By the Spirit of God they spake, prophesied, sang, prayed, and exhorted.¹⁰

Alexander Campbell's descriptions of the Spirit's animation of the earliest churches suggest scripted puppetry, which was necessary in the vacuum of the superior written testimony, which had not yet arrived.

Campbell rejected the Holy Spirit's role in Calvinist conversion schemes as unscriptural, and the emotional expectations of regeneration practices offended his rationalist insistence that faith comes only from *hearing* the testimony. In *Christian Baptism*, he described the debate over the Holy Spirit's work for conversion, rejecting "word alone," "spirit alone," and a *pre-conversion* Spirit-Word hybrid before explaining

¹⁰ Ibid, 356-58.

his own position as Spirit-Within-the-Gospel-Arguments.¹¹ This was Campbell's primary lens of articulating the relationship between the Bible and the Holy Spirit, and he declined to discuss the agency of the Spirit much beyond the debate on the pre-conversion regeneration of sinners. His unwillingness to engage broader questions on the identity and activity of the Spirit meant that his teachings on the subject did not develop much farther than this declaration:

Until questioned, I shall strongly affirm it as a conclusion fairly drawn, that whatever effects or influences connected with conversion and sanctification are, in one portion of Scripture, assigned to the Word, are ascribed also to the Spirit; and so interchangeably throughout both Testaments. Whence we conclude that the Spirit and the Word of God are not separate and distinct kinds of power—the one superadded to the other—but both acting conjointly and simultaneously in the work of sanctification and salvation.¹²

This is a very tight association of Word and Spirit, and in the context of Campbell's extreme biblicism, the very real threat is that the Spirit would be collapsed into the Bible.

Deconstructing Contemporary Biblicism

The twin challenges of a rationalist hermeneutic and an underdeveloped pneumatology accentuate each other. Extreme biblicism within rationalism nearly makes the Holy Spirit functionally irrelevant, predisposing followers to overlook the diverse work of the Spirit in biblical interpretation. This avoidance of any appearance of mysticism or subjectivity may come from a need to have a respectable epistemology in anticipation of liberal critique. We must, however, identify and deconstruct the

¹¹ See Alexander Campbell, *Christian Baptism: With its Antecedents and Consequents* (Bethany, Virginia: 1852), 286-87. Much of this volume is a transcript of the Campbell-Rice Debate.

¹² *Ibid.*, 306-07. See Howell, 43-45, on the Richardson-Fanning affair.

presuppositions we have inherited from the reigning rational empiricism; this must be done to reclaim room for the Holy Spirit to lead us in biblical interpretation.¹³

The interpretive uniformity and certainty that biblicist Christians assume and crave does not exist; the reality instead is “pervasive interpretive pluralism.”¹⁴ Christian Smith explains that “whatever biblicist theories say *ought* to be true about the Bible, in their actual, extensive experience using the Bible in practice, Christians recurrently discover that the Bible consists of irreducibly multivocal, polysemic, and multivalent texts.”¹⁵ Diversity is the reality in biblical interpretation, and according to Smith, “to deny the multivocality of scripture is to live in a self-constructed world of unreality.”¹⁶ He examines Enlightenment influence on biblicist epistemology which “lacks the imagination and categories to understand the dynamic nature of the gospel and the church’s understanding of truth under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁷

However, the dismantling of biblicist expectations has earlier precedent in the inherent goodness of original creation, which includes the bounded nature of human beings. J. K. A. Smith describes how, since humans are finite, we do not have immediate access to the Other; therefore, all understanding must be mediated. This leads us to

¹³ See Howell, 47-49, for Clark Pinnock, “The Work of the Holy Spirit in Hermeneutics,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 1, no. 2 (April 1993), and Daniel Castelo, *Pneumatology: A Guide for the Perplexed*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015).

¹⁴ Christian Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011), 17.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 47.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 53-54.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 170.

“appreciate the plurality of interpretation as a creational good rather than a post-Babelian evil to be overcome. The result will be space and respect for difference.”¹⁸ Over time, then, we expect that finite humans interpreting together in community, with space for plurality, will naturally develop into diverse traditions.

Acknowledging that we are bounded by our histories as finite community members leads us to what Smith calls “undecidability.” Though this may be unfamiliar territory for biblicists, relinquishing certainty requires that we admit that “every interpretive judgment, then, should be accompanied by a corresponding hermeneutic humility or uncertainty.”¹⁹ Humility in the face of a plurality of interpretations, however, does not automatically result in an “anything-goes” anarchy, and Smith suggests six interpretive criteria, including, for Scripture, the Holy Spirit.²⁰ We are finite creatures connected by the inhabiting Spirit into one body:

only with respect to Scripture do we have a situation where the Author also indwells the reader—or better, the reading community—to illumine the text.... As the community of the faithful discerns the Author’s intention, they are indwelt and led by the Spirit of the Author.²¹

Christians catechized in biblicist objectivism who expect fixed certainty will need instead to develop an indwelled ecclesiology to relearn communal interpretation with the Spirit.

When we reject biblicism as an insufficient hermeneutic, we can re-locate the Bible as a derivative gift that comes from the primary gift of the Spirit. The same Holy

¹⁸ James K. A. Smith, *The Fall of Interpretation: Philosophical Foundations for a Creational Hermeneutic* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 156.

¹⁹ Ibid, 168-69.

²⁰ See Howell, 55-57.

²¹ Smith, *Fall*, 220-21.

Spirit has indwelt Christ's followers from Pentecost to today and is just as active in the appropriation of that testimony into various current contexts. Emphasizing that Scripture is *derivative-of* or *situated-within* the work of the Holy Spirit is an intentional effort to not inadvertently assume the Bible is the more primary phenomenon or revere the Bible over a member of the Trinity.

A Primary Pneumatology for Sacramental Illumination

If our interpretive history has included an over-exalted reverence for the Bible and a thin pneumatology, then our trinitarian realignment needs a thick primary pneumatology.²² Some theologians, in order to preserve the Bible's primacy as their standard, have privileged the written witness of the Spirit recorded in the Bible over the Spirit's work with Christians to interpret and apply Scripture, referring to the former as inspiration, and the latter as illumination. Clark Pinnock, however wants to categorize both as inspiration,

not just the original inspiration which produced the Bible but also the contemporary breathing of the Spirit in the hearts of readers.... God's breathing ought to be recognized both in the formation and in the appropriation of the text. The Bible should be viewed as part of a larger revelatory work of the Spirit who is always present in the community of faith helping people to interpret God's will

²² See Amos Yong, *Spirit-Word-Community: Theological Hermeneutics in Trinitarian Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002), 49-75. Yong explores the trinitarian metaphors of both Irenaeus' motif of Christ and the Spirit as the two hands of God (also called Word and Wisdom) and Augustine's motif of Lover, Beloved, and their mutual love to develop a "foundational pneumatology" and claims that in his presentation "there is no room for pneumatological subordination in Christian theology."

for their lives. The work of the Spirit giving wisdom and revelation has not ceased.²³

Many, however, were instead taught a fixed model of inspiration resulting from dictation to an inspired secretary, in which “inspiration is a property of the biblical text... registered at the time of the text’s composition;” the subsequent possibility, then, is that this “tethering leads to the domestication of the Spirit’s said role in both the Bible’s formulation and contemporary appropriation.”²⁴

An important step in unlearning this inherited static view requires investigating our use of the phrases “Word of God,” and “revelation” as referents for the Bible,²⁵ since our assumptions about what the Bible *essentially is* affect any discussion on the meaning of the *inspiration* of Scripture.²⁶ Christocentric reorientation of our vocabulary regarding Word of God and revelation, then, helps us readjust our assumptions in preparation for a more trinitarian or pneumatological understanding of inspiration.²⁷ It is Jesus whom the

²³ Pinnock, 3-5. For a fuller treatment on illumination, see John Webster, *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), chapter 3.

²⁴ Castelo, 89-90. He is concerned that seeing inspiration as a property of the text can feed into the approach that the “text’s revelatory and sacred effects are simply there to be mined by any reasonable and open observer.” He also describes that this “epistemological foundation of the cartesian variety, a move that is sometimes at play when people advocate the sola scriptura principle of scholastic Protestantism for the sake of grounding and specifying particular proposals in theological endeavoring. The assumed reliability of such a foundation is nothing short of a theological trump card par excellence.”

²⁵ See Howell, 63-67, for this discussion, referencing the Gospel of John, Irenaeus of Lyons, Karl Barth, Stanley Grenz, Merold Westphal, and William Abraham.

²⁶ For a fuller treatment on inspiration, see William Abraham, *The Divine Inspiration of Holy Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), including a summary of the recent history of the discussion on 1-13.

²⁷ In this view then, Paul’s insistence to Timothy that “all Scripture is God-breathed” (2 Timothy 3:16) is not to assert the authority of the Bible as a common anchor

Father reveals as the Word and whom we are continually re-locating at the center of our inherited doctrines of revelation and inspiration.

It is God incarnate in Jesus, explaining to his disciples how the anticipated Spirit residing inside believers would surpass Jesus' own presence and lead them into all truth, that should keep us from divinizing Scripture.²⁸ This reality of progressive presence means that God's Spirit in our predecessors who testified to God's revelation and work in their day is the same Spirit that indwells Christians today. There is continuity as the helper, whom Jesus promised to his disciples, is continually helping us into truth even now. God's Spirit inhabiting the original church is the same Spirit inhabiting the body of Christ today, and Scripture is derivative of that Spirit.

Yet we must still clarify to what end. God's Spirit does not give us Scripture for the consummation of empirical rationalism. Instead, the inspiration of Scripture is included within, and for, the inherent *telos* of the sanctification of believers. Scripture, then, is a means of grace that is "set apart" for the indwelling Spirit's dynamic work of

reference to enforce hermeneutical uniformity or identity. Instead, it is a weary apostle reminding his apprentice that the (OT) scriptures are a gift breathed from God that are useful in all his ministry tasks in his godless context. Additionally, N. T. Wright reminds us that "the risen Jesus, at the end of Matthew's gospel, does not say 'All authority in heaven and on earth is given to the books you are all going to write,' but 'All authority in heaven and on earth is given *to me*,'" commenting on the great commission from Matthew 28. N. T. Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God: How to Read the Bible Today* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), xi.

²⁸ See John 14:11-28 and 15:26-16:15. Webster cautions against "the use of the analogy of the hypostatic union to conceptualise the relation of the divine and human elements in Scripture." He warns that the "result can be Christologically disastrous" and "can scarcely avoid divinising the Bible... Over against this, it has to be asserted that no divine nature or properties are to be predicated of Scripture; its substance is that of a creaturely reality... and its relation to God is instrumental." John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 22-23.

New Creation, which is a much larger vision than merely individuals avoiding hell. The cosmic renewal of all things as the telos of this trajectory opens the possibility for understanding the work of the Holy Spirit in Scripture as sacramental illumination.

A sacramental illumination model of biblical interpretation is adaptable for translation into various communities “as a means of grace for the church’s healing,”²⁹ including those searching for healing from the twin challenges of a rationalist hermeneutic and a weak pneumatology. However, according to Castelo, for readers expecting a uniform, fixed interpretation, the contextualization could be disorienting:

With all this variability understood to be conceptually permissible in the construction of a pneumatology of scripture, one may wonder if scripture is an unsettled category, one that is too malleable or too conditioned by factors that could vary exceedingly depending on particular circumstances.... [Y]et not simply in spite of this diversity but through it, the Spirit employs this text to form and shape disciples of the risen one”³⁰

William Abraham’s metaphor for the adaptability of inspiration is a great teacher who, when explaining the content of instruction, motivates her students in such a way that they learn not only the information but then carry it forward to appropriate it for further fruitful research, even across disciplines into other fields of study. Instead of seeing inspiration as a fixed-long-ago property of the text, this paradigm for inspiration is “an example that will be illuminating rather than one that will be perfect in some absolute sense.”³¹

²⁹ Castelo, 92.

³⁰ Castelo, 92-93. Introducing a hermeneutics of openness will require exquisite pastoral sensitivity in any congregation or denomination that has rehearsed a fixed/finished biblicist hermeneutic for generations.

³¹ William Abraham, *Inspiration*, 62-72. The question is whether we expect “inspiration” to lead us to absolute answers or to contextualizable illumination. Pinnock, 19, says that “for the early Christians, loyalty to truth did not mean loyalty to traditional

Pinnock agrees, emphasizing the dynamic nature of the “openness” of Scripture that resembles “the Spirit unfolding a love relationship.”³² Inherent in this view is a posture of continual reflection *in preparation for* submission to future, fuller illumination, since our earlier understandings “stand beneath Scripture for its evaluation of them.”³³ Individual and corporate illumination, then, is perpetually unfinished as the Spirit steadily deepens our appropriation of Scripture. Pinnock describes how “as God’s word is pondered through the ages in countless settings, it is continually being related to a kaleidoscope of human needs and provides a living stream of transforming grace.”³⁴ Sacramental illumination therefore includes within it a prioritization of God over the Bible, as well as an ongoing robust expectation of the Spirit’s active, adaptable transforming work *through* Scripture.

Toward a Pneumatological Hermeneutic

The role of the Holy Spirit in biblical interpretation is sacramental, making gracious space for illuminated contextualization of Scripture by churches for their continuing transformation into the image of Christ in their neighborhoods. For any group expecting an exact blueprint in the Bible, though, the inherent variety in contextualization

formulas but loyalty that transforms and impacts on every new situation.” He then quotes Kraft, “the dynamic of Christianity is not the sacredness of cultural forms [but] the venturesomeness of participating with God in the transformation of contemporary cultural forms to serve more adequately as vehicles for God’s interaction with human beings,” C. H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 382.

³² Pinnock, 15-16.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

could be disorienting. Sacramental illumination is hopeful, however, as the indwelling Spirit partners with us in discerning the shape and limits of communal interpretation.

I suggest a three-fold scaffolding; the three arms of this interpretive trajectory are trinitarian narrative, embodiment, and ecclesiology, and any interpretations outside of this scaffolding are telling different stories rather than the Christian story.³⁵ Further, in our consideration of limits, our preparation is not for the rigid, exclusive posture of gatekeepers. Instead, with God's Spirit, we continually extend the invitation into the momentum of this trajectory.³⁶

Trinitarian Narrative. Interpreting the whole of Scripture as a grand cosmological narrative of God and God's work prevents us from collapsing the Bible into a pattern for propositional truths. We demonstrate the authority of the Scripture-story by recognizing where we are in this narrative and arranging our lives to faithfully flow *with* the triune God's work in this story. We are simultaneously reading *and* interpreting *and* participating personally in the story of the three-in-one God:

The triune God is the one who authors, initiates, empowers, and provides the "ends" for scriptural interpretation. Believers are active in the process of reading and performing Scripture, but only as ones who are gifted and indwelled by the Spirit, united to Christ as the climax of Scripture's drama of redemption, all in the

³⁵ Each arm of the trajectory could be understood as a corrective or healing of hermeneutics in Churches of Christ: Trinitarian narrative (instead of propositional patternism), Embodiment (instead of hypercognitive rationalism), Ecclesiology (instead of sectarianism).

³⁶ Crucial to my proposal is Centered-Set missiological paradigm that assumes the potential trajectory of each person moving towards Christ (as the center). This is over against a Bounded-Set paradigm where it is "us" on the inside with Christ and "them" on the outside (not yet having assented to insider conversion knowledge that leads inside the fixed boundary). See Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 41-53.

context of the loving initiative of the Father, who sends the Son and the Spirit on our behalf.³⁷

The acts of the triune God in Scripture then function as the lenses by which we interpret our own lives, for imitation, confrontation, or consolation. The individual stories and the larger narrative then layer over onto our lives to provide perspective and to exegete us.³⁸

Embodiment. Interpreting Scripture for sacramental illumination assumes participation of the whole person, and we reject modern forms of gnostic intellectualism that neglect physical and material creation. Instead, readers immerse themselves into the trinitarian narrative so the Holy Spirit can equip them for embodied practices and ethics, including physical suffering with Christ. Our anticipation of the *telos* of this trajectory includes embodied participation in the realization of the (inaugurated) final chapter of this narrative.³⁹

The analogy of music helps us understand that our enactment of the narratives from Scripture is real; our participatory identification is similar to a musician's distinctive

³⁷ J. Todd Billings, *The Word of God for the People of God: An Entryway into the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 200.

³⁸ Herzog says, "The living Word lures us into the world of the patriarchs and prophets or the times of the apostles and disciples not to leave us with their solutions but to model the perpetual task of the people of God who were called to interrogate their traditions and texts in the light of the living presence and activity of God so that we might catch a glimpse of how they entered faithfully into the creative work given to them. Seen in this light, Scripture reveals the task to which we are called, the fulfillment of which requires our creative participation." William R. Herzog II, "Interpretation as Discovery and Creation: Soteriological Dimensions of Biblical Hermeneutics," *American Baptist Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (June 1983), 116.

³⁹ See Romans 8.9-25 and 1 Corinthians 15.12-58. Wright describes how "the church is called to a mission of implementing Jesus' resurrection and thereby anticipating the final new creation. N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 208-212, 255-289.

performance of another composer's original score. The original score may be brilliant and beautiful on its own, but it is meant to be played, and it is designed to inspire and engage the creative flourishing of the performer.⁴⁰ Improvisational theater serves as a further analogy for our embodied participation:

When Improvisers are trained to work in theater, they are schooled in a tradition so thoroughly that they learn to act from habit in ways appropriate to the circumstance.... Improvisation is ecclesial... a form of hermeneutics. It is concerned with how a text and a tradition are realized by a community in new circumstances. It creates new examples, new aspects of the narrative in the course of its drama, and thus contributes to the hermeneutical spiral of action, reflection, and new encounter with text and tradition. Improvisation is concerned with discernment. It is about hearing God speak through renewed practice and attending to the Spirit through trained listening. It is corporate, since it is concerned with a group of people acting and reflecting like a theatrical company. It is concerned with engaging with the world.⁴¹

God's Spirit inhabiting each disciple continually trains us for the inspired improvisation of God's grand movement in the world and summons us back anytime we give our allegiance to other narratives. Actions of love by Spirit-indwelled performers are somehow continuous with the consummation of the telos of the story; this shapes our interpretation of Scripture in the present since we are enacting the future of this narrative.

Ecclesiology. Coming to Scripture as a means of gracious illumination is an activity that the body of Christ, inhabited by God's Spirit performs together. We are finite creatures who need communal vision to see clearly, and the Holy Spirit connects the many members and many denominations together into the One body. We are not

⁴⁰ Frances Young, *Virtuoso Theology: The Bible and Interpretation* (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 1990), 155.

⁴¹ Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 45-50.

maverick sectarian interpreters, but we are instead continually in conversation, receiving Scripture communally and remembering that other communities do also.

This extends our community as we check our reading with others. We should “expect that scriptural interpretation will always be marked by a level of debate, discussion, and argument,” understanding that the “controls” produced by community life together are:

communal judgments about whether such interpretations will issue forth in faithful life and worship that both retain Christians’ continuity with the faith and practice of previous generations and extend that faith into the very specific contexts in which contemporary Christians find themselves.⁴²

Additionally, Amos Yong insists that we push even farther:

Ecclesial praxis and ecclesial theology cannot avoid engaging the other publics within which the church is situated, and with whom the church engages.... Theological interpretation is, after all, not only by the church and for the church, but also in, to, and for the world.⁴³

Yong invites us to extend our theological interpretation beyond the confessional community of the universal church to missiological and eschatological frontiers.

Although this openness may prove too far a stretch for interpreters who expect certainty, acknowledging the possibility of faithful and creative interpretation in dialogue with *the*

⁴² Stephen E. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 204 Ibid, 26, 204. He emphasizes that he is specifically not advocating a singular model of ecclesial authority.

⁴³ Yong, 296-305, adds, “In the big picture, such truth will be fully known only eschatologically. In the meanwhile, however, truth prevails through the process of inquiry, and theological understanding is one contribution to or perspective among the community of inquirers, broadly conceived. It is essential, therefore, that the theological interpretation proceed via a pluralistic and dialogical hermeneutics that engages with any and all who are interested in the theological quest. Such an open-ended (i.e., eschatological) theological conversation that encounters others on their terms, their experiences, their traditions, their locations, and so on. It proceeds upon the conviction that all truth is God’s truth, wherever it is found.”

other that is yet unknown stimulates hermeneutical humility and prevents the arrogant assumption that the Holy Spirit is finished translating this story into human lives.

Conclusion

The discernment required for theological hermeneutics insists on honest investigation of our interpretive history. In 1853 Alexander Campbell described how:

The doctrine of the Bible, on any particular subject of inquiry, can be clearly and satisfactorily ascertained only by a full induction of all that is found in it upon that subject. When the induction is perfect and complete and fully comprehended on any one point, we can never have any more divine light upon that subject. This is our method of learning and of teaching what the Holy Spirit has taught on any given question.⁴⁴

This paper builds on the grateful acknowledgment that the “theological interpretation of scripture is, in many ways, simply the church’s attempt to read Scripture again after the hubris and polarities of the Enlightenment have begun to fade.”⁴⁵ Castelo describes a “Spirit-capacitation” that trains us for patient “attentiveness” that will then develop within us an “increased capacity to ‘live into the story’ of Christian identity in the midst of ever-pressing challenges and unexpected circumstances.” He adds,

A pneumatological account of discernment, however, has to take a specific shape, one that reckons with the ways the Spirit works in and through the creation. Subtlety, fragility, provisionality—these are some of the marks of such activity.”⁴⁶

With the three strong arms of Trinitarian narrative, embodiment, and ecclesiology, then, this trajectory has flexible momentum for appropriation into diverse

⁴⁴ Alexander Campbell, *Baptism*, 233.

⁴⁵ Billings, 224.

⁴⁶ Castelo, 133-34.

cultures today, as well as the Spirit's *future* translations of God's truth in Christ to be articulated in neighborhoods we cannot yet conceive. May we submit to the Spirit's gracious illumination of Scripture, and be trained in hospitable discernment with an apprenticed imagination.

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