The Future of New Testament Theology, or, What Should Devout Modern Bible Scholarship Look Like?

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Abstract: Consideration of the nature of New Testament Theology (NTT) necessitates an account of theology or “God-talk”. Karl Barth grasped that all valid God-talk begins with God’s self-disclosure through Jesus and the Spirit, which people acknowledge and reflect on. Abandoning this starting point by way of “Foundationalism”—that is, resorting to any alternative basis for God-talk—leads to multiple destructive epistemological and cultural consequences. The self-disclosure of the triune God informs the use of the Bible by the church. The Bible then functions in terms of ethics and witness. It grounds the church’s ethical language game. Creative readings here are legitimate. The New Testament (NT) also mediates a witness to Jesus, which implies an historical dimension. However, it is legitimate to affirm that Jesus was resurrected (see 1 Cor 15:1–9), which liberates the devout modern Bible scholar in relation to history. The historical readings generated by such scholars have value because the self-disclosing God is deeply involved with particularity. These readings can be added to the archive of scriptural readings used by the church formationally. Ultimately, then, all reading of the NT is theological (or should be) and in multiple modes. NTT focuses our attention on the accuracy of the God-talk operative within any historical reconstruction, and on its possible subversion, which are critical matters.

Keywords: New Testament; theology; Barth; ethics; church; presuppositions; historical

1. Introduction

In this article, we are considering the curated volume of *Religions* “the future of New Testament Theology,” and its attempts to answer the question on what a New Testament Theology (NTT) should look like. This is a crucial question but also a complex and difficult matter. Immediately we can see the need to try to rigorously coordinate together three different sets of issues, taking into account their diverse constituencies and also locations. “Theology” is language that claims literally to speak accurately about God; hence, theologians sometimes refer to it usefully as “God-talk.” But when it is tied to the New Testament (NT), it really references the divinity identified by the church, which is composed in the main of Christians, who generally relate Jesus to a unified notion of God in some strong sense. “The New Testament” is the part of the church’s Scriptures added to the existing Jewish corpus by those who confess Jesus as God, although it only comprises twenty percent of the total and is a somewhat artificial demarcation. Indeed, the church has vigorously resisted attempts to sever the NT too strongly from its antecedent Jewish texts and so any consideration of theology in relation to the NT must keep the Bible as a whole in view. But the issues and constituencies in play are more complicated than even this coordination of God and Jesus, the church, and the Bible, might suggest. This analysis is appearing in an academic journal, and has been written by a professional NT scholar who works in a modern university, at which moment we see that this constituency and its rather different location, along with all its assumptions and practices, is in play as well. The modern university, it might be worth briefly recalling, is heavily involved with, and hence influenced by, the modern European nation-state (and is especially strongly influenced by German antecedents in the USA), and hence is a rather different entity from the universities.
that antedated this phenomenon—which were invented by the church—not to mention, from the church itself. Hence, we will need to finally endeavor to answer the question of what a New Testament Theology should look like for this person, in this location, namely, the modern scholar of the New Testament (In what sense can someone such as myself pursue New Testament Theology, and what should it look like as I do it?).

Answering this question satisfactorily requires undertaking a journey through these different loci and their constituencies. But it needs to be appreciated from the start that this journey will begin in a certain way—from a particular place that might strike some of my academic colleagues as unusual. I suggest, nevertheless, that this is the only way ultimately to answer our question appropriately, while any other point of departure will risk generating false, misleading, and incoherent conclusions. There is, it turns out, only one way to do New Testament Theology.

The initial prompt for this rather bold opening claim on my part derives from the fact that the question we are ultimately considering asks about theology. Although it explicitly asks for this notion to be explained in relation to the New Testament (although implicitly in relation to the Bible as a whole), it necessarily raises the broader question of theology per se, which is to say, of the verification of language that claims to speak accurately about God. And I would suggest here, at the very beginning of our journey, that if we want to talk at any point within it about God—that is, to engage in God-talk that is true, which grasps the nature of God accurately—we need to understand, tutored ultimately by Karl Barth, that there is only one way for us to do this. Moreover, we must appreciate, again with Barth, that this is a vitally important matter, and really is the matter. Nothing matters more than correct speech about God. That is why I myself read the Bible, having devoted my career to the interpretation of one of its key authors, Paul—because he talks so programmatically about God. But how do we proceed so that our interpretations mediate the Bible’s God-talk accurately?

Barth recognized with great clarity—and not a little courage—that we must begin with God-talk, so with theology, and, moreover, with God-talk undertaken in a certain way. In light of this initial data set (so to speak), from this place, we then derive an understanding of everything else we are trying to understand, the Bible and of how best to interpret it, whether ultimately the Old Testament or the New, and whether we are reading it in the church or in the academy, and in historical terms, theological terms, or guided by other hermeneutics altogether. If we begin anywhere else, we will get lost. Moreover, and even more importantly, we will not be talking about God. As Barth put it, we will simply be talking about ourselves in a loud voice.

However, I cannot offer any reasons for this point of departure at this moment, which is why I am simply asserting the point rather baldly at the outset of my analysis. We will shortly realize that God-talk cannot and must not have an epistemological preamble. However, reasons for this will emerge as we follow in Barth’s footsteps when it will become apparent, amongst other things, that this is the only way that reasons can emerge for this procedure—retrospectively. Indeed, some very powerful reasons for following this procedure and for starting from this place will become clear in due course.

In view of this, my analysis as a whole will begin positively if abruptly in Step I, with Barth’s understanding of proper God-talk, including there a brief sketch of some important immediate implications. This will be followed straightaway in Step II by a raft of negative considerations that corroborate this starting point—the promised reasons emerging here to retrospectively justify the opening claims of Step I (Barth was very clear-sighted about these grim concomitants as well). After this grounding in accurate, God-talk we will be in a position to think about some of the key truths thereby revealed to the community that God has summoned into being, that is, the church. And this is the right time to consider the nature and role of the Bible, which is this community’s Scripture. We will need to ask what the Bible is for within the church and how to read it there. After generating this set of insights in Step III, we will be in a position to shift the locus of the discussion to the university in Step IV, in our last analytic step. We will ask now what scholarly work is
appropriate for the modern Bible scholar in her particular institutional location with all its distinctive privileges and challenges, although assuming throughout that she remains “devout,” which is to say, grounded within the truths articulated by Steps I–III (If she does not stay grounded in Steps I through III then she will not be doing proper God-talk when she begins to interpret the NT in the university, and no answer to our initial question will now be possible). After this final specialized inquiry, our journey will be over and a cogent, if slightly surprising answer to our opening question will be apparent.

With this road map for the journey ahead in mind then, we can begin our quest where we must, with God-talk, learn rapidly as we begin, because God has already begun with us. And the person who has understood all this with the most clarity in the modern period is, I would suggest, Karl Barth.

2. Argument, in Four Steps (I–IV)

2.1. Step I: The Correct Starting Point and Basis for God-Talk

In the early 1930s, Barth’s understanding of the basis for God-talk underwent a paradigm shift that he then spent the rest of his life articulating, principally in his (Barth [1932–1955] 1956–1975), the 12 main volumes of which were published from 1932 to 1955. Barth’s pioneering insights, arguably mediated first by a deep engagement with Anselm’s Proslogion in 1931 (see Schwöbel 2000, pp. 28–30), were the twin realizations that, first, the truth about God derives from an act of self-disclosure to humanity by God, so it rests on a revelation, and, second, that this self-disclosure or revelation is definitively located in Jesus. God, in short, reveals the truth about God, and what God reveals is that the key insight into God is Jesus. The recognition of this situation—of this disclosure—is then the correct starting point for all God-talk, and all accurate God-talk reflects on this initial starting point, which is itself a given. Good theology is consequently always a Nach-denken. This sounds simple enough, but in fact, grasping this starting point clearly, developing it consistently, and maintaining it in the face of the swarm of challenges that immediately engages it, not the least from within the modern university, is anything but. A great deal is set in motion by these basal realizations to the point that Barth’s enormous 12-volume articulation remained overtly incomplete. Noted quickly here are seven important, immediate implications that will ground the analysis that follows:

Initial features. This disclosure is a gift to humanity by God, revealing that God is a fundamentally giving God; moreover, it is an unconditional gift. It proceeds from God and God’s own motives and concerns. It is also therefore, as such, an event, and necessarily an ongoing event. And it is now apparent that the information about God that God self-discloses is embedded within a relationship—within an ongoing, sustained event of divine self-disclosure to humanity by way of Jesus.

Pneumatology. Pressing further into this ongoing relationship that ceaselessly discloses who God is, we can detect a triune dynamic.

Barth was quick to note in his mature reflections that in order to be fully effective (which it is) this divine self-disclosure extends “all the way down,” into the very hearts and minds of its recipients (see Rom 8:27; 1 Cor 2:10–11). Hence the role of the divine Spirit—usually called the Holy Spirit by Paul—must be recognized alongside the definitive focal point of Jesus. The divine Spirit reaches into and discloses the nature of God as Jesus within the depths of her listeners, thereby creating (if necessary) the very perceptions and capabilities necessary for registering and acknowledging these truths, but also indirectly bearing witness to herself.

In short, those sensitive to the revelatory dynamics involved within this act of self-disclosure, as Barth was, can detect the activity of a triune God. A revealer definitively reveals in relation to Jesus but also in a way that encloses people within that revelation; hence, in more traditional parlance, the Father is revealed through the Son by the Spirit (using the language of “Father” and “Son” here advisedly). Barth thereby endorses the basic claims of Nicea, Constantinople and Chalcedon, and shows himself to be a
fundamentally orthodox thinker who is simply, in the modern period, taking the original ecumenical claims of the church rather more seriously than many of his contemporaries did.

It follows, further, that Barth is, strictly speaking, not discovering anything new about God. He is simply recovering the correct response to a divine self-disclosure that the ancient church was deeply familiar with—and indeed centered on—but that had been confused, overlaid, and even displaced by modern agendas. Having said this, Barth’s preferred textual mediation of these insights was not the Church Fathers or Mothers but the Bible. He constantly suggests, in an essentially historical interpretative mode, that the Bible attests repeatedly, in numerous ways, to this revelatory dynamic on God’s part.\(^8\)

Acknowledgement. It follows that the appropriate correlate to this complete and effective triune self-disclosure is a people who recognizes it—who receives it, affirms it as true, and goes on to confess it. At bottom, a people obeys this revelation, acknowledging that God is in it. And this people is also thereby invited to witness it to others when called on, and to maintain it, handing it on from generation to generation. An important set of dynamics is thereby set up in relation to witness and tradition that we will shortly need to explore more. For now, it merely needs to be noted that the correct location for accurate God-talk is in a particular communal location that gratefully acknowledges the self-disclosure of this truth, and that extends that gratitude and acknowledgement through space and time—and of course we tend to refer to this communal location as the church.\(^9\)

Facticity. It is worth appreciating at this moment that this revealed set of truths is a “fact,” which is to say, it is absolutely and utterly true.\(^10\) It is indeed the truth—the truth above all other truths. It is to be relied upon where all others fail, and to be acknowledged and maintained under any circumstances (Various apostles of modernity will challenge this claim, but I will suggest momentarily that clear-sighted witnesses to this truth will be able to detect critical moments of question-begging and contradiction within these challenges and so wisely reject them).

Sovereignty. In close relation to the foregoing, this truth is the truth by which all other truth-claims are now to be measured. The self-disclosure of God in Jesus through the Spirit is, as A. J. Torrance (1996, 2000, 2001, 2005, 2008) often says, of decisive epistemic significance, or, as Paul puts it, “every thought is [now] to be taken captive, in submission to the Messiah” (2 Cor 10:4–5).\(^11\) Hence, in the light of this definitive self-disclosure, even our previous understandings of the divine—of “God”—are now to be—if necessary—revised and given a more accurate form in terms of Jesus and the work of the Spirit. From this moment onward—and, we now see, only from this moment—we can speak with confidence about what God is really like.

And implicit in this simple ancillary recognition is, in fact, the bulk of the subsequent theological task, while its difficulty, at least at times, should not be underestimated. Those acknowledging the decisive epistemic significance of the God who has self-disclosed through Jesus, and hence those located within the church, are summoned to think through the implications of this self-disclosure for all other God-talk, and this will include both what we might denote as directly referential God-talk, where claims are being made about what the divine is like, and any indirectly referential God-talk, when the concerns and supposed engagements and instructions of the divine dimension so identified are being expressed (although we would expect these two dimensions within God-talk to be closely related). Hence, in biblical parlance, the triune God, focused on Jesus, will judge all other God-talk, along with any complementary activity dedicated or supposedly in obedience to this God.

It follows then that the self-disclosure of the triune God through Jesus demands the development of a particular mode of reasoning. Those who acknowledge this God are summoned to learn to think, and to think in a certain way (in terms of the Christological Nach-denken noted earlier). Moreover, this will undoubtedly involve the unlearning of a great deal that we probably hold dear, which is invariably a difficult, and even a painful process.\(^12\)
Reformulations. Some immediate examples of this potentially painful reformulation of our thinking are worth noting.

It is now apparent that the nature of God is dynamic or, as certain philosophers like to put it, actual (although the very definition of “actual” will need to be subject to the activity of the self-revealing God and not vice versa). What God is has been revealed through a set of events, irrupting into our location, and by God’s ongoing activity of dynamic relating. Hence God, who is fully disclosed here, must be what God does, which is to realize, as Eberhard Jüngel (1976) put it, that “God’s being is in [God’s] becoming.” This is often going to be a revolutionary set of insights into the fundamental nature of the divine reality and of reality in general. Thus, theological epistemology and ontology must be tightly intertwined, with a strong resulting emphasis on ontological actuality. We must now reject any strong being-act dichotomy, and certainly any account of the divine that deploys such distinctions too aggressively.

Closely related to this, we now realize that God is inextricably involved with that which is not God and so in a key sense is a fundamentally extrinsic being. God reaches outside of God, and this external actualization is a further key insight into the nature of God. God’s being is missional. Moreover, this insight parlays directly into the account of personhood that the self-disclosing God supplies.

The triune God is fundamentally and comprehensively interpersonal, comprising Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and so discloses a critical insight concerning what a person is. A person is revealed by the personal God to be, as we might have just begun to suspect, extrinsic and relational. As John Zizioulas (1995) puts this: “the hypostasis [or being] of the person consists of ekstasis [or “extrinsicity”].” Which is to say, people are inherently relational, and are constituted by their relationships with other people. They reach out from one another to others, existing qua people within interpersonal networks.13

Relationality and ethics. Unsurprisingly in view of what we have just learned, a profoundly personal and hence relational God has strong expectations in terms of the nature of those relationships, and we begin to grasp here the way that theology, ecclesiology and ethics are also inextricably intertwined. The relational God is inherently ethical, and summons those who acknowledge God to a certain sort of relationality—to a communion characterized, it turns out, by relational dynamics of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5:22–23). The self-identification of God reveals the true nature of humanity and the true orientation and calling of humanity in terms of the correct accounts of goodness and right behavior—in a word, “love”—which are important matters, to put it mildly.

We need now to pause for a moment from the positive task of clearly identifying the correct starting point for God-talk, acknowledged by the church, and from which all accurate God-talk proceeds, along with some of its immediate key implications, and to briefly articulate a complementary set of realizations that will encourage us to maintain this starting-point.

2.2. Step II: Foundationalism

Many good additional reasons are now—and I emphasize “now”—apparent for resisting any alternative basis for our God-talk. That is to say, in light of what we know, we can now view the consequences of straying from the path that has just been illuminated for us, and they are dire. Multiple considerations warn us not to accept any alternative epistemological starting point that would, in fact, then operate in a more fundamental way than the theological claims just noted in Step I above.

We will call all such alternative starting points (instances of) “foundationalism,” because they are attempts to construct an alternative foundation for God-talk from the basis supplied by God, a foundation that is then necessarily of our own making.14 We need to learn to recognize the operation of any foundationalism within the God-talk either of ourselves or others and to repudiate it because if we do not the ultimate results are serious. Barth traced the European church’s complicity in two horrific world wars ultimately, and
convincingly, to the failure to do just this. So, the stakes for maintaining the starting point for God-talk are very high. We will briefly note here nine problems that result from abandoning the self-disclosing God’s triune starting point in favor of one of our own constructions, and they ascend in severity:

*Collapse into the epistemological dilemma.* As Kevin Diller (2014) has recently pointed out with particular clarity, to abandon the self-disclosure of the triune God as *the* truth and to go on to attempt to justify or to measure this truth by some other truth criterion results in a treacherous outcome: our most basic rules for truth should never attempt to justify themselves, because if an attempt to do this is made, then they are necessarily displaced from a central or basic position in favor of the truth criterion just used to try to justify them. So, in traditional parlance, Jesus is Lord, and he is also the truth; he is, in fact, the Lord of the truth and in this he shows himself to be the Lord. Hence if we try to justify Jesus’s lordship by introducing some prior set of truth criteria by which to prove his ultimate claims, we necessarily strip his lordship of ultimate truth. He is now no longer the Lord of the truth, or *the* truth, and, as such, no longer really the Lord! This outcome should clearly be avoided, and can be if—and only if—the temptation to introduce a foundationalist justification for Jesus’s Lordship, including for his Lordship over the truth, is resisted. We should see this consequence playing out, like a chess gambit, and so refuse to accept its beguiling opening offer in the first place.

*Activation of an infinite regress.* In similar manner, to fail to resist the temptation to erect a prior, more fundamental set of truth claims by which (to attempt) to justify an initial set of truth claims, is to activate an infinite regress. If the claim that “Jesus is Lord” is truth claim A, but we—foolishly—accept the need for some prior, more basic authentication of this claim, then we must introduce another set of truth claims by which to justify set A, namely, set B. But we now do not know whether the truth claims in set B are true, because they are unjustified, so we must introduce set C by which to justify set B, and so on. This process can never end. Now this problem must be phrased precisely. Technically, the argument is Socratic. If someone charges us with holding unjustified truth claims at the base of our position—the criticism that they are claims that do not possess warrant in terms of some other prior, justified set of truth claims—then we reject this charge on the basis that our accusers cannot satisfy this criterion themselves. Insofar as they charge us, they condemn themselves, we might say (Rom 2:1–2), and so we are entitled to ignore their criticism—and we will save ourselves a great deal of unnecessary and futile effort by doing so.

*The adoption of an artificial starting point.* If we accept the invitation to step outside the circle of trinitarian revelation for the sake of argument—and in fact for whatever reason ultimately, whether in epistemological terms or not—we necessarily abandon the truth and engage in role-play that is not authentic, and it is difficult to see how this will benefit anyone (see Gal 2:11–14). Those who wish to engage with those located within the church will no longer be able to do so, because their representatives have stepped outside that space, while those representing the truths of the church will no longer be accurately expressing them. One would not expect a satisfying debate with a Marxist if she began the conversation by saying, “For the purposes of this engagement I am going to temporarily set to one side all the key Marxist truths and begin the discussion as if I had no Marxist loyalties or content whatsoever.” There is just no point having this conversation. Hence it is better for all concerned if those in the church know its epistemological basis and attest to its implications clearly (although, admittedly, its representatives do not always seem to appreciate the further implications that this entails a respectful and even a gentle advocacy; the means is the end (see Campbell 2020, pp. 193–94; 216; 516–18)).

*The adoption of a false starting point.* Building directly on the foregoing, we can now see that the adoption of an artificial, extra-ecclesial starting point from which basis to discuss the question whether or not Jesus is Lord would deny the fact that Jesus is Lord. It would deny that he is the truth, and hence that he is the Lord of the truth and that he is in fact Lord. Hence this starting point would be untrue, and the truth that Jesus is Lord would...
be subtly but directly undermined as we endorsed some other set of claims that is, in fact, false.  

Sheer disobedience. Moreover, we would not then be serving the triune starting point but undermining it. Indeed, we would be disobeying it. We would be rejecting the starting point that God has gifted us, and turning to our own resources—an activity the Bible generally calls either sin or stupidity (lit. “foolishness”). Since God has chosen to gift us with the truth about God in Jesus by way of the Spirit, we should simply accept this gift and not go in search of supplements or alternatives. This is the obedient and sensible, and not merely the appropriately grateful, course of action.

The presence of surprise. One of the results of being gripped by the triune self-disclosure acknowledged by the church is a sense of surprise. That God is revealed definitively as Jesus is crucified is almost certainly something of a shock (1 Cor 1:18–31), and this reveals in turn that our prior perceptual capacities were inadequate for the recognition of the divine. We did not see this was coming, and yet this point of degraded identification is where God is revealed at God’s deepest and most decisive level. It follows that our expectations were incorrect, and probably profoundly so. (Paul’s certainly were, see 1 Cor 15:9–10.) Hence, we learn here (amongst other things) that we simply cannot rely on our own intuitions about the nature of God independently of their correction by God’s self-disclosure. They have been shown to be, at least in certain respects, deeply unreliable, and so we should further repudiate any foundationalism which relies directly on those intuitions rather than on what God has shown us concretely to be the case.

The presence of sinful distortion and resistance. In continuity with the foregoing, our innate capacities to grasp God are shown by God’s own self-disclosure in a realization that may come as rather a jolt to be not merely inaccurate and misguided but directly resistant and hostile (Rom 8:5–7; Col 1:21; John 1:11; 3:19–20; 8:14–15, 43–44, 47; 9:39). Our minds are not merely inadequate but sinful; they oppose God, distorting what information we do have and actively subverting and resisting the promptings of the Spirit (Rom 5:10). It follows that our own intuitions, which lie at the basis of any foundationalist theological project, will be not merely unreliable; they will be sinister, actively twisting and subverting truthful God-talk—and three of these destructive consequences are worth identifying in more detail. I have dubbed these elsewhere “the horsemen of the foundationalist apocalypse,” meaning by this that whenever a foundationalist project is activated, they are set loose (Campbell 2020, pp. 40–47).

Horseman 1: atheism. The first “horseman” derives from the fact that alternative foundations as positive accounts of God invariably collapse. But the important point to grasp here is not the collapse of the church’s foundationalist truth claims as much as its cultural result, namely, atheism. As Michael Buckley (1987) has shown, a theological program that proudly advocates the self-evident nature of divine truth—in universally-demonstrable, propositional terms—creates a particular dynamic when it fails, as it invariably does. A culture that has been told that the truth about God can be proved, concludes, when it cannot, that God does not exist. And this judgment hardens into a general resistance even to the mode in which God does wish to be known—through the declaration of the cross. So here confidence in the foundationalist theological project only succeeds in generating its opposite: widespread cultural resistance to the existence of God, which is to say, atheism.

Horseman 2: deliberate obfuscation and obstruction. Those committed to a foundationalist theological project nevertheless tend to believe in it and to continue to advocate it—probably because its gatekeepers can generate a great deal of social capital by doing so. However, this tends to generate in turn—and deeply paradoxically—a resistance to God’s mode of divine self-disclosure. If the truth about God is supposed to rest on a particular foundationalist structure, its advocates will defend it tooth and nail, and, if necessary, against other suggestions about how to pursue God-talk including God’s own deepest act of self-definition and preferred mode of undertaking God-talk. It is truly astonishing to observe—one once knows to look for it—the constant resistance offered by many leaders in the church to the revelation of the divine nature disclosed through Jesus.
Perhaps in my modern context, in the South of the USA, the most common such resistance is by way of appeals to texts in the Bible. Even when a recommended construal cannot be ratified by Jesus biblical explications are nevertheless held to freight decisive insights into the divine nature that tend in practice to override the insights that come from Jesus himself. Of course, these insights derive from the viewpoint of the modern biblical interpreter, who has selected certain texts and read them in a certain way—often anachronistically—thereby supplying the key theological truth criteria here—a particularly subtle form of foundationalism. So, for example, Wayne Grudem (2010) argues that the Bible discloses clear information about political organization, but ends up endorsing in detail a system that is uncannily similar to the conservative political agenda within the modern U.S.A. The book’s cultural projections and anachronisms are especially apparent in chapters entitled “The Courts and the Question of Ultimate Power in a Nation” (which assumes the modern separation of powers that did not exist in biblical times but that is only possible in an industrial state and that is especially central to Jeffersonian democracy), and “Freedom of Speech,” and “Freedom of Religion” (which are again overtly modern Liberal political notions that would be entirely unfamiliar to the authors of the Bible). But as this confident “biblical” projection happens the operation of the second horseman is everywhere apparent, namely, the occlusion of God’s concerns as those are revealed by Jesus.

Horseman 3: cultural compromise, ultimately with evil. Foundationalist projects always involve cultural capture, followed by, most sinister of all, activity that is overtly oppressive and evil. As was most perceptively noted originally by Feuerbach ([1843] 1966), foundationalist projects in modernity literally project the idealized images of their founders into the heavens, constructing the definition of the divine in their own image. So self-ratification lies at the heart of such projects—something usually quite apparent in retrospect, although not so easy to detect at the time of their creation and endorsement. Two dangerous consequences follow from this (which Feuerbach’s sunny optimism was not so sensitive to).

Since this projection is held to precede and to ground the proclamation of the gospel it is removed from any triune control. Jesus is not Lord over these truth claims and necessarily so. Nevertheless, this projected self-image will enjoy divine ratification, and in certain respects, rather more than this. It is the basis for all further God-talk. So, it should not and cannot be criticized but must instead simply be defended. It follows from these corrupt theological dynamics that any flaws within the original projection—for example, any unwitting racial or gender marginalizations or special geographical claims—will enjoy divine ratification and immunity from any Christological correction. A more dangerous theological project is hard to conceive of.

Accordingly, for example, Dutch migrants originally settled in the south of Africa in the early 1800s believed that God had gifted them an exodus from the oppressive rule of the British empire there as they traveled away from British control in the Cape into uncolonized territory to the north and east. God then covenanted to be with them always, after he delivered the local, godless pagan nations into their hand for slaughter at the battle of Blood River on 16 December 1838, when 3,000 spear-carrying Zulu warriors resisting this incursion were massacred by the settlers’ musket fire (this day is still celebrated annually on site by the descendants of the settlers as a sacred covenant). It followed that, roughly 100 years later, God continued to endorse the cultural and racial distinctions created between peoples, and hence the creation of the Apartheid regime that recognized those distinctions, segregating people into black, white and intermediate categories. This arrangement also vested ongoing power and prosperity in the hands of the covenant people and in them alone, namely, the descendants of the original white settlers who had been overtly chosen and blessed. This notoriously oppressive arrangement could appeal to a frighteningly-high level of direct biblical and theological support since all of its key claims in terms of notions such as “creation mandates” were made foundationally, in advance of correction by the triune self-disclosure of God through the crucified Jesus.
I labor this point a little because of its importance. A road—twisting but nevertheless direct—runs from epistemology to politics. Thus, any human-centered foundationalism will eventually ask its advocates to pay a brutal cultural price. Moreover, the expression of this particular project within Pauline interpretation tends to take place in relation to Jews. A direct line can be traced from foundationalist God-talk in the church, mediated centrally by certain readings of Paul, to horrifically anti-Jewish, and ultimately anti-Semitic, activities. To repeat the key point here then: the stakes for resisting foundationalism are high. The cultural and political integrity of much that we do rests on acknowledging God’s self-disclosure through Jesus and then resisting the many siren calls to abandon that starting point for something that might seem in the first instance to be more learned, but that proves ultimately to be of our own making. That alternative will inevitably betray us even as it oppresses those who do not look like us.

These realizations bring us to the brink of an important subordinate question, namely, a consideration of the role of the Bible and the right way to read it. Needless to say, we will need to reflect on this locus in the light of the God-talk that was summarized in Step I and not the compromises of Step II.

2.3. Step III: The Bible as Scripture

What does the self-revealing God want us to do with the Bible? Quite a lot, as it turns out—so much so, that only a compressed summary can be provided here.

The Bible and ethics. Emerging from our brief consideration of the implications of the self-disclosing God is a sense of the arc of the cosmos. The triune God, almost incomprehensibly, desires a permanent gift of relationality with us. We have been created for eternal communion (Rom 8:29; Eph 1:3–14). However, that communion is a thoroughgoing interpersonal relationality and it follows that one of the principal influences on the church from the self-disclosing God will be a constant gentle pressure toward the appropriate modes of relating. We are both invited and summoned to a personhood that relates properly. We will set aside here for the moment the immediately apparent and deeply-awful truth that we are currently operating some distance from this good relating. The key point to grasp here is positive, namely, that the giving God is drawing humanity inexorably into a perfect communion, and it is here that the Bible will find its first important function.

Communion is relational, and our human relating, into which God self-discloses, is freighted almost entirely by language. In the light of this, we can see that the Scriptures anchor the language game of the community, to use Wittgenstein’s phrase for the moment. Nonetheless, that language game is also primarily an ethical language game. Hence, the Scriptures are not only the means by which we speak to one another; they are the medium through which we learn to speak rightly to one another. They are the written reservoir for the language of the community who acknowledges the self-disclosing God and journeys toward that God’s relational goodness. And straightaway it is possible to detect two important subordinate dimensions within the basic ethical function of the Scriptures.

First—and departing here a little from Barth on the advice of one his most insightful followers, Stanley Hauerwas (2001, pp. 141–204)—Scripture will function at the heart of the formational process that this community effects. Repeated use of the right language will play a critical part in the journey towards right relating, hence the enduring insight of ritual language or liturgy. It is clear then that community formation is not a rule-governed process; it is not analogous to a legal system. It works more like a close friendship or a good marriage. People talk through any issues that arise, with a language that is mutually intelligible because it is anchored in the same textual treasury.

Second—utilizing Barth’s insights here more directly—Scriptural language can convey divine commands that speak, in an unanticipated way, into the particular, unrepeatable circumstances of our personal journeys. God will tell members of the community what to do, and possibly quite frequently. “Go and proclaim my Son to the pagan nations” is an especially important example of such a command (although in fact Paul intertwined
this with further scripturally-mediated intelligibility; he “was set apart from his mother’s womb” for this task, echoing the call of Jeremiah to the nations; see Gal 1:15–16; Jer 1:5).

Those attuned to hermeneutical considerations will probably have detected by this point that the use of the necessarily delimited text by the community, which is to say, of the canon, can nevertheless be quite creative within the different, individuated lives of particular Jesus followers. Those taking up the scriptural text within the ethical journey toward goodness can generate meaning productively, not merely reproductively, in Gadamer’s (1989) terminology, utilizing whatever reading is helpful ethically, whether analogical, anagogical, typological, referential, or something else—although readings are not uncontrolled, because they are always subject to the theological judgment of the God who self-discloses through Jesus (see § 2.6 above, and more just below). And this observation leads us quickly to the next major dimension within the use of the Bible by the church alongside its ethical use.

The Bible and witness. We have noted repeatedly up to this point that God has self-disclosed focally in relation to Jesus. But the recognition of the divine Spirit’s involvement locates this self-disclosure within the present moment, where it needs to be, because this is where we live relationally. God’s self-disclosure to us takes place in relation to the living Jesus, which is to say, the ascended Jesus, who is “up there” as the old-fashioned language would have it, enthroned next to his Father as Messiah and Lord (we will leave the question concerning the coordinates of this location to one side for the moment). This is the Jesus who is disclosed by the Spirit, and who discloses his heavenly Father in turn, to whom we, “in him,” cry “Abba” (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6). Still, it will be best to envisage this disclosure—without claiming that this controls it—in terms of worship, although it will probably also be helpful to invest it with emphatic Pentecostal or charismatic dimensions, which are clearly presupposed by Paul.

As Paul notes in texts like 1 Cor 14—articulating a scenario much-repeated through church history—people may fall down or “quake” and “shake” in the divine presence mediated by the Holy Spirit; they may experience liberation from illness or some sort of evil influence; they may expostulate in what seems like an unintelligible language, or, alternatively, identify issues and situations in the lives of others that they have no way of knowing directly; and so on. Within all this drama—which is not supposed to descend into absolute mayhem—the worshipping community presently acknowledges and reveres—and thanks and praises and adores—a heavenly Father and Son by way of a palpably-present divine Spirit who has adopted them and destined them for eternal glory. This is what the gathering sings about and what its prayers presuppose. This God in their presence is alive and real, and this God accessed through the risen Jesus and his Spirit is alive, a God who reaches out to commune with them.

Notwithstanding, we come now to an important dimension within the situation. In this moment, the present, enthroned Jesus, who is being worshipped, is doubtless also being identified by a story that reaches back into the past and answers some important questions (and a broader story is immediately implied about the still more prior God of Israel). Here, it is clear that the Scriptures will again be critical.

The final part of the Scriptures that we usually refer to as the New Testament tell a story about a human being bearing the name Jesus of Nazareth who was executed shamefully on a Roman gibbet, buried, but then, in the Jewish terminology of the day, resurrected, appearing to many of his followers, before “ascending” to his current location where he is now being worshipped. We learn from this story, that is, about Jesus’s prior life, which, rather unusually, traversed through and beyond death and hence brought him to the place where is he now—“on high,” enthroned at the right hand of the Father. The critical importance of these prior events is even inserted into the community’s present worship by way of a ritual meal. The breaking of bread and drinking of wine together recall this antecedent narrative about Jesus’s endurance, crucifixion, burial, and resurrection (1 Cor 11:23–25). It also celebrates Jesus’s concrete connection with his community in the present, along with his anticipated return, so it speaks to all three temporal dimensions as we
experience them (so vv. 26–32; also 10:16–17), but one of these dimensions is past. Hence, implicit in this narrative is a tradition, which has been maintained by the community in the past, and thereby transmitted into the present, a transmission anchored by the New Testament. And the presence of this tradition now raises some interesting questions three of which need to be briefly but carefully explored:

What is it for? The story relates that the risen Jesus, who is currently being worshipped by way of the Spirit, was at one point a human being, just as we are. But as Paul tells it, and the ritual meal reminds us, the key events in this story focus on a sequence of days that the church now calls “Easter.” On a Thursday night Jesus anticipated his impending death, creating the ritual meal that would recall it; on Friday he obediently endured a shameful execution at the hands of the Romans; by Saturday he was buried; then on Sunday he began appearing to his followers, in some dramatic sense, alive; at a later point he ascended to “heaven,” where he has been enthroned as Messiah and is now also acclaimed with one of the divine names as “Lord.” It is there where he is now worshipped, although the complete story anticipates his return. And we need to ask now why the worshipping community tells this story, although the answer is possibly very simple.

The identity of the risen Lord is coterminous with the earthly Jesus; they are the same person, as the story states. Hence the story about the earthly Jesus, even just by way of its account of Easter, provides critical information about the character of the risen Lord, and so about the nature of the triune God as well (recalling both that to know a character necessitates telling a story; and to know one person within the one God is to know all three). And we certainly need to know just what sort of person the triune God is made up of; we need to know what relationality characterizes the divine characters, summoning us to conform to it. This is, after all, the arc of the cosmos. Hence, we receive critical answers from this story about Jesus’s earthly life and thereby about God and our current ethical situation. As Luther observed insightfully in 1518 CE, reproducing the insights of Paul written in 52 CE (1 Cor 1:17–2:16), the divine nature is definitively revealed by a theology of the cross. Unfortunately, the scope of the paper is too limited to develop this set of insights, but a great deal will flow from them. We must instead press on to our remaining interpretative questions in this direct relation.

What is the resulting epistemological structure of the situation? It is important to grasp now that even the telling of the story about the past, preserved in parts of Scripture, can be seen to preserve the basic epistemological pattern that we began with here (when, admittedly, read in a historical mode; see more on this momentarily). A self-defining, self-disclosing and hence self-revealing divinity, here in person of the risen Jesus, appears to a community summoning them to acknowledgement and obedience. Even the story that is told by the community then, received as a tradition, is couched in the form of revelation and corresponding witness. The story is of a group of witnesses recalling the story. And this invites the present community to join its witness to the witness that has preceded it, reproducing and affirming it. That is to say, the truth of that prior witness is not the basis for the present community’s posture as much as its confirmation. The present community is grounded in the present, and in the God disclosing in the present, but can thereby recognize a corresponding activity in the witnesses of the past, at which moment it is able both to affirm it and to join them.

It seems then that we are supposed to learn from this that the self-disclosing God clearly does not want its community “standing gazing up into heaven” (Acts 1:10) or back into the past; the crucial location is here and now. The present is primary and the past is secondary (2 Cor 5:16–17). The past serves the present; the present does not serve the past. And this has tended to mean, in turn, that the recall of the past has been shaped by the present location of those recalling it. That is, the past is recalled in such a way that the present purposes of the self-revealing God are also served (What would be the point of doing anything else?). This implicit arrangement and set of priorities is implicit in the very form of the texts that are transmitted, and so presumably we ought to take note of it.
We cannot get past the structure of “witness,” and we are not supposed to. This structure maintains the appropriate emphasis on present self-disclosure.

However, the recall of the past within this witness has to be, nevertheless, true, and this raises what we can call—very carefully at this moment—the “historical question.”

Is the historical dimension plausible? There can be no doubt that a divinity who has, at least in part, lived for a time as a human being among us, has been a part of the past and has thereby, at least in theory, left an imprint on the past. Jesus left footprints in the dust of the Galilean roads and hillside. He wore clothes, ate food, said words, and he interacted with others just as we do (or at least similarly to how we do). Hence, a modern person will usually ask at this moment if we can find evidence of this imprint and assess it—and this is fair, at least in basic terms. The story that the community tells about Jesus is committed to a historical dimension and to historical claims. It is not the most important question for the community—far from it. The community is located in the present, not the past, and looks toward the future. It is only certain modern academic specialists who tend to spend their time almost entirely focused on the past. But the reconstruction of the past is unavoidably involved as soon as any story about Jesus is told. So how should we assess the past, which is to say, the historical dimension, implicit within this story?

We need to assess it very carefully indeed because of the potential intrusion at this moment, subtle but deadly, of various foundationalist agendas. If we are to resist these subversions certain features of the situation need to be constantly born in mind.

First, and as we saw earlier, we need to recall that the self-defining God supplies important information in that self-disclosure about the nature of reality. This is one of the great benefits of being gifted with the truth. Other things tend to make sense in its light. And at the very heart of this truth is a God who is alive, and who resurrects from the dead. God is the God of life, which is to say, an entity who, very unlike us, can triumph over disorder, chaos, and death (Rom 4:17; see also Ezek 37:3–14). These truths are one of the main reasons why the community is so joyful, grateful, and excited, and the overt activity of the divine Spirit within the community makes particular sense at this moment.

Moreover, one of the things that has been exposed by the light is the darkness of many of our other ways of thinking. Our thinking is distorted, and often deeply so. It follows that when we turn to assess the past strictly in terms of what actually happened, we should do so in fear and trembling—or, at the least, well aware of our own limitations.

I emphasize these points here because we should detect at this moment, if we are honest with ourselves, just how much of our assessment of the past is generated by our own unreliable grip on the present. As the modern investigation of memory is beginning to discover in ever-greater detail, our own recollected past is in many respects the extrapolation of our present, with all its attendant blind spots. Meanwhile, the reconstruction of the distant past—of the lives of others—presupposes entire discourses of explanation that we must supply again from our present locations. Answering the question “what really happened?” is dictated by what we think could have happened, and that is shaped by our construction of our present location—by our judgments about what is or is not possible, and what is or is not likely here and now. It is also shaped by what we think will be useful for our present, which implies various judgments about what is presently expedient politically, culturally, and socially; the preservation of memories is a cultural process. And it follows that we make the past, to a significant degree, in our own image at which moment it is useful to recall that the self-disclosing God has revealed to us that our expectations about what can or cannot happen, and what is or is not good or right, are often well wide of the mark.

It follows from this that the assessment of the truth claims about the past implicit in the Jesus story that the church tells is a valid exercise, although secondary. But this assessment must proceed in terms of the account of reality—the metaphysics, so to speak—that the community stands within, complemented by an awareness of the limitations of our own powers of explanation. And once this location is grasped, and its metaphysics recognized,
I would suggest that the basic historical assessment can be completed both quickly and positively (strictly speaking, it has been completed).

Therefore, for example, in 52 CE, an early Jesus follower, who did not know him personally during his earthly lifetime but claimed on multiple occasions to have met him after his ascension, nevertheless recorded a comprehensive attestation by multiple figures to Jesus’s suffering, death, burial, resurrection and ascension (I am speaking about Paul’s words in 1 Cor 15:1–9). And there are simply no good reasons for doubting this. (There are a lot of bad reasons for doubting this, but these should be rejected, usually for presupposing an alternative, and ultimately dubious metaphysics. In short, when we turn to a historical assessment of the truth claims implicit in the Jesus story, bearing in mind just what an appropriate reconstruction of the past in historical terms might or might not involve, it is simply case closed—but it is worth noting immediately just how limited this essential historical assessment is.

We have made a quick inquiry into the truth of the Jesus story: Is the person we currently worship as alive and reigning “on high” in fact plausibly said to be the same person as the Jesus who ate on Thursday evening, was crucified on Friday, buried on Saturday, and then rose from the dead on Sunday in the early first century CE? Are the traces on the record that we might reasonably expect there? Since, given the appropriate account of reasonableness, the answer is “yes,” it follows that the identity of the Lord as the crucified Jesus remains true after its historical assessment, and if this remains true, then not much else will matter in terms of subsequent historical assessments, at least in terms of ultimate truth questions. Indeed, this realization—about the economy of the historical kernel that is implicit in the heart of the church’s witness—will shortly generate important, and ultimately deeply liberating implications for the Bible scholar who continues as a specialist to be interested in reconstructions of the past in relation to the Scriptures. However, we must now discuss some final implications within this particular line of reflection before turning to consider what biblical scholarship should look like.

Embodiment and particularity. The Jesus story, which identifies the self-disclosing God so significantly, contains not just the implication of traces on the past, and hence of a certain sort of historical inquiry, but also implicit commitments to the vital importance of embodiment and of particularity.

Embodiment denotes that Jesus was present as a person in a fully embodied form, and hence that the divine can be present in a fully embodied form, also thereby affirming a fundamental validity for embodiment. Paul’s account of the resurrected body also points toward a certain sort of (vital!) transcendence, but it too remains an embodied transcendence. Much more remains to be said, but this realization will suffice to place significant limits on future theological claims that denigrate or lack embodiment, that is, any type of what later became known as Gnosticism. God delights to be present with us, this story states, through bodies, and hence, in terms of our present, through our bodies. The centrality of the community or church is consequently once again affirmed.

Furthermore, the story about Jesus implies that the divine was present among us in the life of a certain, individuated and specific person—someone who lived, breathed, and walked in a certain way and a certain place. He was, like all of us, unrepeatable and unique. But the divine was necessarily present within every aspect of Jesus’s life, indwelling every detail, so to speak, which entails that the God self-disclosing through Jesus is deeply committed to particularity. God loves particularity and is in particularity, which is to say that God is present within the unique, and loves the unique. Moreover, this entails, to slip for a moment into Lucan idiom, that God is interested in every hair on our heads (12:7). Our locations are highly detailed and “granular,” and the God self-disclosing through Jesus affirms every facet, feature, and mark.

With these realizations in place, we are in a good position to reflect on the work of the Bible scholar in the context of the modern university.
2.4. Step IV: What Are (Devout) Modern Bible Scholars for?

We need now to generate an account of biblical scholarship in the specific context of the modern university. But I am going to presuppose in the following what we can call “devout” biblical scholars. Whatever else Jesus followers are called to do, it never overrides the importance of being Jesus followers; that remains primary. So, devout biblical scholars do not relinquish their primary ecclesial location when they travel into the far country that is the modern university, along with all its bewitching concomitants. And this preexisting loyalty must create a certain clear-sighted posture vis-à-vis various intellectual pressures.

As we just noted, devout biblical scholars—and I include myself among them—must clearly remain grounded in the ecclesial location of accurate God-talk. This is (obviously) non-negotiable. But in the context of the modern university maintaining this posture might require a higher degree of intellectual self-awareness than the average Jesus follower needs to muster. Perhaps ironically then it follows that the devout biblical scholar is, first of all, a good theologian, who is aware that her knowledge of God is a mere acknowledgement of the gracious self-disclosure of the triune God through Jesus and the Spirit, while part of this self-awareness is the realization that there is a gifted and undeserving dimension to this knowledge. It has not been gained, but simply received. We must eschew finding the bases of our learning for ourselves. I mention the importance of this self-awareness because it will probably be assaulted so quickly by various countervailing discourses that flow through the modern university.

Universities are factories for foundationalism. Consequently, corresponding to the self-awareness of the correct starting point for theological knowledge, the devout biblical scholar must maintain a crystal-clear awareness of the nature and ultimate destructiveness of foundationalism to her location and work. This methodological idolatry must be identified, in whatever guise in which it is travelling, and resisted—although, and again, rather ironically, the university will provide plenty of resources for this resistance.

Universities are highly contested spaces, and alongside the strong claims that some of their occupants claim to have discovered absolute truth within this or that project or agenda, are the representatives of countervailing discourses that unmask those claims as incomplete and occasionally pretentious (The term “post-modern” is misleading, but it does identify many of the most powerful discourses that engage in this subversion other than there is very little that is post-modern about them. Arguably, they are directly implicit within what we call “modernity.”45). If the devout biblical scholar is not a reasonably good theologian then, in both positive and negative terms, she may well get overwhelmed (although this is not a fate limited to muddled biblical scholars).

It is worth noting too that in order to survive, certain virtues might be needed in addition to theological clarity and Socratic dexterity. It might simply take courage to endure the speeches of Christianity’s cultured despisers, so many of whom can be found in the university, while the ongoing acknowledgement of the gifted nature of absolute truth may also have a dash of humility about it. Assuming that theologically-learned biblical scholars exist who do in fact possess both courage and humility, what should they actually do? What will their devout scholarship look like?

We return here to the question of history because most biblical scholars are trained to spend much of their time carefully reconstructing the past, retrieving the meanings that the biblical texts generated in those locations. But perhaps we need to pause to ask at this moment whether devout biblical scholars should engage in this practice? Let us bring this practice in submission to Christ. What is the point of it?

In fact, we have good reasons for doing this type of scholarship, although it will mean both more and less than it is often held to, and this might ultimately be a very good thing.46 We realized earlier on that God was present in the past, and, moreover, that this presence affirmed both embodiment and particularity, which is to say, God loves particularity and is present within it. Consequently, the investigation of past particularities has value, and could potentially be quite instructive. God was there, present within—although not to be identified with—every detail.47 It is important to recall that God is also here, and that
the self-disclosure taking place here both grounds and controls the reconstruction of God’s presence there. But under this impetus, and utilizing this control, the retrieval of the past may deeply enrich our language about God and our understanding of God. A word about this control is in order though.

The retrieval of the past is not under historical as much as it is under theological control. The definitive self-disclosure of God takes place through Jesus, and only through Jesus, as Chalcedon attempts to say; only there, in this person, is divinity fully present, although even there in a mediated form that is distinguishable from Jesus’s humanity although never separate from it.\footnote{It follows that the divine can be present elsewhere but never in such an immediate way. God’s involvement in the past will therefore be imperfect, and possibly in multiple respects. It must consequently be sifted, judged, and evaluated, in triune terms, if it is to prove useful to the community—and it will, as it has already on many occasions.} Moreover, partly because of the centrality of theological control, devout scholars are actually free to discover what really happened. They do not need to find anything, whether for or against God or for or against anything else in terms of what took place (insofar as we can reconstruct that). Recall that the key historical question has already been settled, and this liberates the rest of historical reconstruction from having to settle anything. There is nothing to fear from history, or to impose on it. Hence the devout scholar is free simply to explore the past and to tease out what really happened (guided here by a suitably open and nuanced account of what can happen). They might even be able simply to enjoy this process. Of all people, then, the devout biblical scholar can be the best—and perhaps also the happiest—historical scholar. But some useful virtues might be imparted by this careful historical attention as well.

Such reading trains its practitioners in deep attentiveness to particularity, which is a virtue in and of itself. In so doing it also teaches close attentiveness to the details of the text, which is the foundation of all good scriptural engagement. This type of reading is then simultaneously a training in the painstaking craft of listening to other voices—here in that most delicate of all positions, namely, silenced by death; historical reading is always cross-cultural reading—and here it cannot even be directly corrected. So, this education takes place in a delicate space. Nevertheless, it does afford the constant opportunity for interpreters to develop the complementary skills of listening deeply to one another, thereby recognizing their own presuppositional locations as well.\footnote{In close proximity to this developing attentiveness; however, we will also in all likelihood see a growing awareness of textual indeterminacy. Historical reading, done well, should be an education into the fragility of textual interpretation, and hence a further prompt in terms of humility. What the text “says” exactly is often very difficult to say, a phenomenon that the reconstruction of ancient semantic events can disclose quite clearly, while those who insist on making a text say something explicitly are often overstating the likelihood of their construction. It is a useful skill to be able to detect when this is happening. And this is an opposite moment to recognize some of the key limitations attending historical readings of Scripture.}

I have been articulating the positive contributions that can be made by devout biblical scholars reading the text in an historical mode. But while this modality can be useful, enjoyable, and even important, it is clearly by no means everything. No justification is apparent for imposing a historical monopoly on scriptural interpretation; and in fact, the reverse is closer to the case. Scriptural reading (as we have already seen) mainly takes place within the church in an ethical mode, to mediate the appropriate relationality, so its actual hermeneutical rules are undetermined and potentially highly creative. Readings are subject only to theological control. Moreover, from this moment forward we need to recognize that multiple scriptural readings undertaken in all these creative modes accumulate over time into an archive. This is the basic reality of scriptural reading that the church curates, and historical readings occupy a distinctive place within it.
Historical readings press rather distinctively into the fascinating but fragile meaning-events surrounding the origins of an interpretative archive, and this can be an especially rich semantic location to mine. This is when the archive of a particular text’s interpretation begins. Though interesting, such a reading remains no more—or less—important than subsequent readings. Reading arises upon reading, spiraling into diversifying and layered histories of interpretation. And these realizations open up some interesting further activities for the devout biblical scholar.

Such a scholar can now become a curator of the archive of scriptural interpretation. This is no small task, and not every devout biblical scholar will feel called to it, or called away from historical readings (although every scholar is called to some archiving). Nonetheless, it is important to recall at this moment that, as was the case for historical readings, every devout scholar is still called to evaluate theologically the archive that she is curating. Every reading is, needless to say, embedded in God-talk and its implications, and hence in ethics. And the devout biblical scholar is trained to detect when God-talk is correctly grounded and speaks accurately, and when it needs to be modified, corrected or even abandoned—something that can become evident as the communal impact of a reading is studied. Hence, the curating of the archive still involves the usual evaluative tasks and should thereby generate a clear-sighted ethics and politics of interpretation. And it is here that a useful conversation with historical readings might be resumed.

The archive contains quite an array of interpretative options, and it is the proverbial curate’s egg. Some readings have proved to be healthy and constructive, some are constructive in their own particularity but now not so useful, and some prove to be completely odious—read in certain ways functioning as “texts of terror” in Phyllis Trible’s (1984) famous phrase. The retrieval of historical readings can help to mitigate this last phenomenon (although they can also cause it). Such readings can introduce an alternative into the archive of existing readings that the church is using, which might displace the use of a reading that is destructive. The historical interpretation always has a right to be heard and might prove superior theologically and ethically to later options, though this might not always be the case.

In sum, to draw the strands of this last discussion together, we can perhaps see at this moment that the devout NT scholar, located the modern university, but theologically astute and alert enough to cope with that challenging context, is potentially called to a very happy life. She can generate historical readings by way of her scholarship that is historically astute and subtle and so often quite fascinating in its own particular terms, and yet that is profoundly aware in ethical respects, including in terms of self-awareness, and that might serve to displace and/or to correct unhelpful and even vicious readings generated by other readers. Having said this, if she is to maintain this scholarship, there will probably be times when she will need to call on the virtues of humility and courage in addition to her possession of a clear-sighted theological frame. Nonetheless, she is then grounded in the right location, and in the right God, to do so.

We can now return to consider our opening question.

3. Conclusions: What Is New Testament Theology?

It should be clear by now that everything depends on just how this question is posed specifically, and then answered. However, if we follow the progression I have recommended here, treading in the footsteps of Barth, theology is prior to the reading of the NT and then enfolds it and drives it. Only in this way will any NT analysis speak truly of God, and this is what ultimately matters. It follows from this that all reading of the NT that is undertaken in the right way is theological, and deeply so and in many respects. It is an articulation, in various different directions, of a theological location, and this includes historical readings, i.e., reconstructions of the text’s origins and original reception, for which biblical scholars located in the modern university are especially trained to undertake. These make sense theologically, as an exploration of particularity, which can be a very rich context to investigate; they are informed by an overarching metaphysics that
is ultimately grounded theologically; as with all readings, they are subject to theological and ethical judgment. This is not to suggest that they are not historical, however—far from it. Theologically-informed readings should be, of all readings, the most historical. The devout biblical scholar has the best grip on how history as an overarching category of reality operates, and is, moreover, free to find whatever details historical investigation might disclose.

In a sense then there is nothing but NT theology, when the devout Bible scholar reads the NT, even in historical mode (that is, assuming it is being done from the right place and in the right way). Given that all reading of the NT is theological then, we might ask if the question “What is New Testament Theology?” still has distinctive content or relevance. We now know how to do the important and relevant things that we should be doing (that is, as devout Bible scholars within the modern university).

Nevertheless, it seems to me, at the end, that this specific question can still direct our attention to the importance of God-talk within the readings we are generating. True God-talk as we well know by now is grounded in God’s self-disclosure, which is acknowledged in the present ecclesial moment, often in the context of worship, and it is, as we just noted, informing everything else we are doing. But insofar as we are modern Bible scholars generating historical readings, which is to say, approximations to what (in my case, for example) Paul’s texts were held to mean in their original settings, we can—and indeed must—subject those readings to theological evaluation; we must ask to what extent those readings mediate accurate God-talk, during which process we will almost inevitably run into closer and more distant articulations and hence be prompted to describe just where articulations have gone slightly—or significantly—astray. Moreover, such readings will go necessarily astray as they either begin foundationally, or allow the intrusion of foundationalism. It follows from this that if we perform our historical task accurately and faithfully, attentive to the precise God-talk in play, we will thereby constantly reiterate the interplay between Steps I and II that my analysis here has described; we will reinforce God-talk, insofar as it is found within our reconstructions to be accurate, and teach it, both in its own terms and when it is subverted. The question of New Testament Theology consequently focuses us on those aspects of our exegetical work that convey some of its most important contributions, and hence seems to be identifying an exegetical dimension well worth clearly defining and pursuing. It asks us to constantly evaluate the extent to which our reconstructions of ancient meaning-events are mediating statements about the living God that are actually true.

The journey to this point of clarity has not been easy. But we seem finally to have ended up in a constructive place—focused on accurate God-talk, and on a clear-sighted resistance to its subversion. There is very little, I would suggest, that is more important than this.

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Notes

1 This way of stating the situation deliberately leaves open a place within the church for Messianic Jews, whom I would not equate with “Christians.” “Christians,” as Acts 11:26 suggests, are converts to Jesus from paganism, or descended from the same. In Paul’s churches they are not summoned to full Torah-observance, although they are asked to be sensitive to Jewish practices in mixed settings. Messianic Jews are part of the Jewish people and can appropriately be fully Torah-observant.

2 To place the question as one of my key mentors, Stanley Hauerwas, would.

3 Alan J. Torrance explores this issue, in ultimate reliance on Barth, in his 2008 essay. Jenson is making similar observations in his 2008 essay. Andrew J. Torrance offers an insightful parallel discussion, assessing analytic theology vis-à-vis the philosophy of
Foundationalism necessarily involves prioritizing our own intuitions concerning the divine nature over what the divine has
disclosed. Kuhn ([1962] 1996) speaks to the way people think in terms of “paradigms,” and shift between them rarely and with great
difficulty. Kahneman (2011) outlines some of the reasons why the brain and its explanatory structures resist shifts in fundamental
explanatory categories. (His account of “fast” thinking is helpful here and in other respects; his account of “slow” thinking
should be ignored.)

The consequences of this insight are far-reaching, including, most probably, for many occupants of the modern Academy. The
massively-influential Cartesian view held by so many located there that the basic nature of the person is an individual, rational,
self-consciousness can now be seen to be deeply misguided, along with any epistemology, ethics, or politics advocated on
this basis. (This world-view and its debilitations are elucidated elegantly by Gunton [1985] 2006). It is not all bad news for
the modern university though; some views generated there are, conversely, rather vindicated, for example, the insights of
certain sociologists in terms of network theory, and the insights of philosophers of mind and neuroscientists into the relational
generation of the person as an infant offered by those developing the intellectual movement known as the Second Personal.
And so on. (My 2020 provides further details.) Having said this, it is important to remain aware, at the same moment, of the
individuated dimension within persons. A reaction against Cartesianism and similar accounts must not lead to an equally
unhelpful obliteration of the individuated, embodied, particularity of each person, within his or her relational matrices (Volf
provides an excellent account of this interplay in 1996.).

Paul is making a similar point in 1 Cor 3:9b–17.

The author of the Fourth Gospel is profoundly aware of this dynamic. Hence the prologue simply declares the presuppositions
that the rest of the Gospel rests on (1:1–18), and that the various characters in the subsequent narrative struggle to respond to
appropriately. So, for example, Nicodemus’s understanding is entirely dependent on the revelation of the Spirit, which is itself
at the behest of the Spirit, and not a result of his own status or learning (3:5–8, 11–13). Similarly, right understanding of the
Scriptures requires the revealed hermeneutical lens of Jesus, the person from heaven, and not vice versa (5:39–40; see also 2:22).
And so on.

This rejection of the challenge that we are too committed initially to our own location and its truth should be carefully
distinguished from the situation within which what we might call “an honest doubter” simply does not experience or sense
a divine revelation or presence and voices concerns accordingly. This posture of questioning necessitates a very different
response—inclusive, welcoming, and constructive. Kierkegaard is an excellent conversation partner in this relation. Briefer
responses to different kinds of doubt can be found in my 2020, pp. 464–67, 546, 723–24 (n. 5).

Clearly, a certain notion of faith is implicit here, and is very important. It is, as Paul well knows, a gift (see Rom 12:3, 6; Gal 5:22;
and perhaps also Eph 1:17–20; 2:8). For further discussion of the nature of faith necessary here—and especially its relation to the
presuppositional faith of Jesus—see my 2020, pp. 13–27, 62–65, 297–325.

Most of these claims are articulated in my 2020 (see esp. “Vigilance,” ch. 2, pp. 32–48); but this and the following consideration
are not deployed there in this relation.

Foundationalism necessarily involves prioritizing our own intuitions concerning the divine nature over what the divine has
self-disclosed.
So, in an especially clear example, Grudem (2016) (after some vacillation) supported Donald Trump’s candidacy for President in 2016 with a widely-read and -quoted justification. Its content is worth consulting purely as an example of how an extensive “biblical” case can be generated for an important question that nevertheless makes no appeal to the nature or character of Jesus. The closest Grudem’s argument comes to a comparison with Jesus or an evaluation of God’s purposes as revealed by the events of Easter is when the importance of character in a leader is marginalized, which functions as an act of Christological occlusion. See https://townhall.com/columnists/waynegrudem/2016/07/28/why-voting-for-donald-trump-is-a-morally-good-choice-n2199564 (accessed on 30 August 2021).

Wryly noted by Barth ([1947] 1959).

This particular instance is discussed in Campbell (2020, pp. 693–700). See also (De Gruchy 1979).

The outworking in relation to slavery is now—thankfully—uncommon; sadly, the outworking in relation to minorities in terms of gender construction is increasingly overt. A masterful analysis of many of the racialized othering dynamics at work here is (Jennings 2010).

I supply more details Campbell (2020, pp. 652–700).

Few appreciate this more than Stanley Hauerwas; see (Hauerwas 2011), esp. “Speaking Christian: A Commencement Address,” ch. 6 (pp. 84–93); and “Why ‘The Way Words Run’ Matters: Reflections on Becoming a ‘Major Biblical Scholar’,” ch. 7 (pp. 94–112); see also (Hauerwas 1993).

This is not to exclude rule-governed situations altogether, but they are secondary and, strictly speaking, denote an ethical failure (presupposing that a conditional, contractual regulation of human relationships is appropriate), hence if they become too prominent it is a very bad sign.

See Barth ([1957] 2009), esp. § 52, “Ethics as a Task of the Doctrine of Creation” (pp. 1–42).

It follows from these functions that the canon does not have to be exactly co-terminous across different traditions, although the various lists of texts assigned for repeated sacred use within those traditions do need to overlap significantly—and they do.

The scholar who has done the most to bring this hermeneutical cornucopia to the attention of the church is Henri De Lubac; see especially his groundbreaking study of Origen (De Lubac [1950] 2007).

And members of the community indwelling its scripturally-mediated language also need to know their lines! There is now a crisis of basic scriptural literacy. See (Campbell 2020, pp. 552–56).

T. F. Torrance is a good starting point for the consideration of this question; see esp. the analysis he offers of “space” and hence “place” in dialogue with Luther, Calvin, and modern physics, in (T. F. Torrance [1969] 2005).

This is an important corrective to Barth’s account offered by (A. J. Torrance [1996]), utilizing an insight derived originally from his father, (J. B. Torrance [1996]).

Here Fee’s (1994) magisterial should be consulted.

Insightful entry-points into the movements limited just to the modern USA are Wacker (2003) and Sánchez-Walsh (2018). (My thanks to Aaron Griffiths for assistance with these references.)

An insightful and deeply compelling account of these intimate, “present,” relational dynamics within Paul’s letters and his communities is Tilling (2015, pp. 75–187); he leans at times on an important earlier account by Fatehi (2000). An important modification of Barth’s program in this respect, orienting the location of self-disclosure towards the eschatologically-inflected message of the NT, is (Jenson 1997).

Jenson is especially attuned to these dynamics; see (Jenson 1997, 2008).

In The Heidelberg Disputation, esp. theses 20 and 21 (see Lull 2005, pp. 47–61).

My 2020 articulates things in a preliminary way in terms of love, gift, fidelity, peacemaking, enjoyment and celebration, contextualization, and vulnerability. See also esp. (Moltmann 1974).

Hauerwas makes some typically insightful observations about history and its relationship with the other key notions introduced here in his 2018 (leaning in turn here on Henri de Lubac and Rowan Williams).

Gilbert (2005) introduces this phenomenon accessibly.

So NT scholarship has relatively recently discovered the value of Jan Assmann’s (2011) work, who draws on the insights into the cultural production of “memory” originally developed (independently) by the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs and the art historian Aby Warburg.

Sam Adams (2015) provides an insightful account of the way historiography should be informed by theological considerations, and how to fail to provide this is simply to fall victim to an alternative, unwarranted metaphysics.

Rae is exceptionally insightful and lucid on the negative and positive dimensions of the “historical” assessment, not to mention, on the question of the definition of “history” itself (Rae 2005). The problems lurking within many claims to be undertaking objectively-true—but functionally reductionist—“history” are elucidated brilliantly by Gregory (2006, 2008). See also Hauerwas (2018).

A key theological emphasis in Barth that is articulated especially well by Gunton (1993).
MacIntyre’s justly famous Gifford lectures articulate this well (MacIntyre 1990). If Nietzsche, as he says, is the modern fountainhead of modernity’s own critics, other masters of suspicion will doubtless prove useful as well—Deleuze, Derrida, Foucault, and so on.

Green’s (2011) account of the type of historical criticism that can be practised in a way that both makes sense for devout scholars and constructively informs their contributions is both insightful and helpful. Except in the person of Jesus, when God was identified with every detail.

I would lean now especially on Beeley’s (2012) account of Chalcedon, and the neo-Orthodox network he identifies there. An interesting posture toward “history” is also detectable here. Devout biblical scholars already know that the reconstruction of the past presupposes a metaphysics, and they are in an excellent position to detect and to repudiate false conceptions. Hence devout scholars do not need to be reductionist. They celebrate particularity and complexity. History, like life, is inordinately complicated. (History is of course the retrieval of past life.) It can be explored but the devout scholar does not need to control it, and so is in a good position to detect when overarching conceptualities are doing too much work. Every reconstruction of the past presupposes an account of what reality is and so can be, and a foundationalist account is likely to be oversimplified.

There is insufficient space here to develop an account of the development of presuppositional self-awareness that is related to this point. This is an important question, but it raises so many further issues that another long analysis would be required. Suffice it say that a full-fledged presuppositional self-awareness is possible within this paradigm, and that this paradigm enhances that self-awareness—of presuppositions that are sound, grasping the object of their inquiry accurately, and of those that are unsound, distorting the object, which is probably here a reasoned historical reconstruction of a text’s original received meanings. A presuppositional architecture mapping the distorted reconstruction of Paul’s “justification” texts can be found in my “The Recognition of a Discourse”; ch. 7 in (Campbell 2009, pp. 221–46) (endnotes on pp. 989–96 n. 3 being esp. important). This map recognizes seven interpretative levels or dimensions, and five possible framing considerations (drawing in these on Derrida’s notion).

Historical readings can lend color, memorability, and impact to the exposition of the text, because they generally embed their interpretations in detailed reconstructions of the circumstances that surrounded its original production. A Pauline text was often originally deployed in a highly polemical context, before confused and even irritated congregants who were engaged by sophisticated rivals who can be dimly glimpsed just off stage, and all the while in the context of thriving Hellenistic cities under the aegis of the Roman empire. Friends, co-workers, apostles, and enemies, shuttle back and forth out of view. As these circumstances are reconstructed, historicizing interpretations can be highly memorable, even entertaining expositions!

We have arrived then in an interesting place. The devout biblical scholar treasures the scriptural text but does not worship it; but clearly it is not being despised or abandoned either. There is good historical work to do. Such readings are not everything but neither are they nothing. They are frequently fascinating and enriching, and sometimes even quite important. Meanwhile, there is a constant awareness of the text’s fallibility, and of the damage its interpretation can do. In all readings there is nevertheless important theoretical and ethical evaluation taking place. And I hope it is not too much to suggest that this is a supremely constructive place for devout biblical scholar to occupy—positioned between two deeply polarized, incoherent, and destructive poles, namely, between Fundamentalism and any wholesale rejection of the value of the Scriptures, which is usually associated with theological Liberalism, although that association is often imprecise.

If we do not follow the progression outlined here I suspect that we will be in the grip of a foundationalist agenda and that this will compromise everything else, including the accuracy of any God-talk. But this suspicion would need to be corroborated by a careful demonstration in relation to particular alternative proposals that this in fact the case and there is no space to do this here.

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