

*The Danger of
Theological
Interpretation*

Questions:

1. What is Theological Interpretation?
2. What are Its Objections and Theological Concerns?
3. What are the Effects of Theological Interpretation?

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1. What is Theological Interpretation?
 - a. **Historical Theology**
 - b. Systematic Theology

Heiko Oberman's *Traditions*

Tradition 0—Bible is Only Authority, *nuda scriptura*, Scripture requires no interpretive tradition

Tradition 1—Bible in Context of Its Interpretive Tradition, Bible is *supreme authority*

Tradition 2—Bible & Magisterium

Tradition 3—Postmodern Communal Interpretation

John M. Frame

“[T]he attempt to maintain orthodoxy in the church by confessional subscription has not, historically, achieved its goal. Many denominations that require subscription, even strict subscription, have fallen away into liberalism and other heresies.

John M. Frame

“And my experience has been that in churches that use confessions as tests of orthodoxy, much time has been wasted trying to exegete the confession that could have been spent exegeting the Bible.”

The Doctrine of the Word of God (2010), 287.

John M. Frame

“In my judgment, strict subscription violates the sufficiency of Scripture. . . . But strict subscription guarantees that the confession will never be reformed according to the Word of God.”

The Doctrine of the Word of God (2010), 288.

Keith Mathison

“[T]he error of the heretics . . . is not in their appeal to Scripture but in their appeal to Scripture taken out of the context of the apostolic faith, that which Irenaeus referred to as the *regula fidei*. . . . According to Athanasius, Holy Scripture is the apostolic *paradosis* or ‘tradition.’”

The Shape of Sola Scriptura (2001), 30.

Keith Mathison

“It is important to realize that there were two very different versions of the *sola scriptura* principle which were advanced during the sixteenth-century Reformation. The first concept, advocated by magisterial Reformers such as Luther and Calvin, insisted that Scripture was the sole source of revelation, the sole infallible authority, but that it was to be interpreted in and by

Keith Mathison

“the communion of saints according to the *regula fidei*. Tradition in the sense of the traditional interpretation of Scripture was not discarded. This is the view for which we are using the term ‘Tradition I.’ The second concept, advocated by many of the radical Reformers, insisted that Scripture was the sole authority altogether.

Keith Mathison

“Not only were medieval ‘traditions’ disregarded, but tradition in the sense of the *regula fidei*, the testimony of the fathers, the traditional interpretation of Scripture, and the corporate judgment of the Church were discarded as well.”

The Shape of Sola Scriptura (2001), 128.

Keith Mathison

“Does any of the ‘God-breathed’ oral revelation communicated by the Apostles to the Church survive today outside Scripture? Those who advocate Tradition 0 say no, but this is difficult for them to conclusively prove using nothing more than the New Testament.

Keith Mathison

“Those who advocate Tradition I say ‘yes’ in the specific sense that the apostolic rule of faith remains the hermeneutical context of Scripture, but ‘no’ in the sense that this rule of faith is not a second source of revelation ‘outside’ or ‘apart from’ Scripture.”

The Shape of Sola Scriptura (2001), 166.

Keith Mathison

“Rather than placing the final authority in Scripture as it intends to do, this concept [that *sola scriptura* means that all doctrine is judged according to the only authority of Scripture] places the final authority in the reason and judgment of each individual believer.

Keith Mathison

“The result is the relativism, subjectivism, and theological chaos that we see in modern Evangelicalism today. . . . no one is infallible in his interpretation of Scripture.”

The Shape of Sola Scriptura (2001), 240.

Kevin Vanhoozer

“I began the book fairly convinced that the sufficiency of Scripture meant that the real issue in whether Christians are biblical or not concerns obedience: Will we obey what we hear? While I continue to think that one’s spirituality has a decisive bearing on one’s theology,

Kevin Vanhoozer

“I have come to rethink the matter of Scripture’s sufficiency. . . . This rethinking also led me to assign a more positive role to the notions of ‘tradition’ and ‘improvising’ than I had first anticipated.”

Drama of Doctrine (2005), xii–xiii.

Kevin Vanhoozer

“In part 2, I consider not only traditions but Tradition, together with the argument that the latter is as divinely superintended by the Spirit as the Bible itself.”

Drama of Doctrine (2005), 22 n70.

Kevin Vanhoozer

“equivalent plurality on the level of interpretative traditions.”

Drama of Doctrine (2005), 275-76.

Kevin Vanhoozer

“[N]o one version of Christianity—no one contextualization, that is—is equal to the original; rather, we come more fully to appreciate the meaning and significance of the original as we seek to translate it into the vernacular and contextualize it into the prose of everyday life.”

Drama of Doctrine (2005), 322.

Kevin Vanhoozer

“*Sola scriptura*: evangelicalism is ‘biblicist,’ but as we learned from the Reformers, this does not mean that the Bible is the sole source of theology; rather, the Bible is evangelicalism’s supreme authority.”

Biblical Authority After Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity (2016), 233.

1. What is Theological Interpretation?
 - a. **Historical Theology**
 - b. Systematic Theology

Martin Luther's *Assertio* (1520)

“First, I want them to know and witness how it absolutely does not please me at all to wish to be constrained by the authority of the Holy Father, except only so far as he has been proven by the verdict of divine Scripture. This I know they will only consider with exceeding reluctance.

Martin Luther's *Assertio* (1520)

“For they will suppose that this method itself merely begins with the Holy Scripture, only to be eroded by human authorities. And they will say this, that the common function of everyone’s mouth or pen is nevertheless understood by a few. On account of which, it is taught in pontifical canons,

Martin Luther's *Assertio* (1520)

“No Holy Scripture is from private interpretation.’ With such a proverb, they advance in the most perverse understanding, so that they do not interpret the Scriptures except from private interpretation itself contrary to Scripture’s own actual meaning. For this reason, having put aside the sacred

Martin Luther's *Assertio* (1520)

“writings, they are immersed in human commentaries alone, not searching what is from Scripture, but what they suppose to be in the Scriptures, as long as it is in one man, the Roman Pontiff (but only if surrounded by the most unlearned Sophists) in order that they alone may give the rule for interpreting the Holy Scripture.

Martin Luther's *Assertio* (1520)

“Yet regarding the one who presumes concerning the only power and height of majesty, on this side of all understanding and learning, they tell a fable that the Church (that is, the Pope) is not able to err in faith.”

Martin Luther's *Assertio* (1520)

“First, if no one is allowed to interpret the Holy Scriptures according to private interpretation, then why don't they recognize, that neither Augustine nor any other father was allowed either? Both he who understands the Holy Scriptures by following Augustine

Martin Luther's *Assertio* (1520)

“and he who does not better understand Augustine by following the Holy Scriptures, without a doubt he understands by following man and private interpretation. For if one is not permitted to understand Scripture privately, much less is Augustine permitted to understand privately: for who will make us certain, whether you understand Augustine correctly? . . .

Martin Luther's *Assertio* (1520)

“Therefore, what is so impious as our perversity, that we would not desire to learn the Holy Scriptures on their own terms and by their own Spirit, but by means of human meanings, with the example of opposition on all sides? And with these, should we boast in perversity as if it were a most religious piety?

Martin Luther's *Assertio* (1520)

“However, if we prefer this, we will concede that the Holy Scriptures are more obscure and unknowable than the patristic writings. But with this admission, we will further grant the sacred fathers in their own commentaries to have constructed nothing other than this—

Martin Luther's *Assertio* (1520)

“that until they prove their own writings by the Scriptures, they will have proved what is more known by what is less known. Thus, to such an extent in their own writings, they will have marvelously and utterly mocked us and they will have labored in vain.

Martin Luther's *Assertio* (1520)

“As a result, we must believe in interpretations more than in the utterances of Scripture. Who would be so insane?”

“*Assertio Omnium Articulorum*,” WA 7:96–100
(translation mine)

Martin Luther, *Defense* (1521)

“Holy Scripture must necessarily be clearer, simpler, and more reliable than any other writings. . . .

Martin Luther, *Defense* (1521)

“Scripture alone is the true lord and master of all writings and doctrine on earth. If that is not granted, what is Scripture good for? The more we reject it, the more we become satisfied with men’s books and human teachers.”

LW 32:11-12.

Martin Luther, *To Emser* (1521)

“So that such deceptive chatter may be recognized, I ask them again: *Who told them that the fathers are clearer than Scripture and not more obscure? How would it be if I were to say that they understand the fathers as little as I understand Scripture?*

Martin Luther, *To Emser* (1521)

“I could stuff my ears against the sayings of the fathers as well as they can against Scripture. But this is not how we shall reach the truth. If the Spirit spoke in the fathers, he spoke even more in his own Scripture.

Martin Luther, *To Emser* (1521)

“And whoever does not understand the Spirit in his own Scripture—who will believe that he understands him in the writings of someone else?

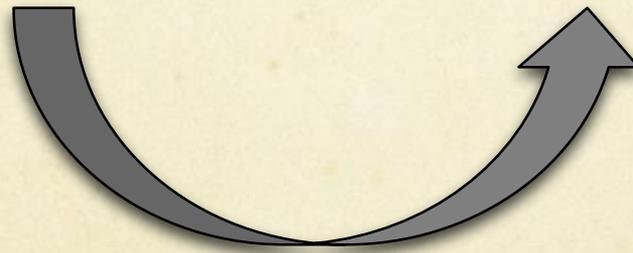
LW 39:164.

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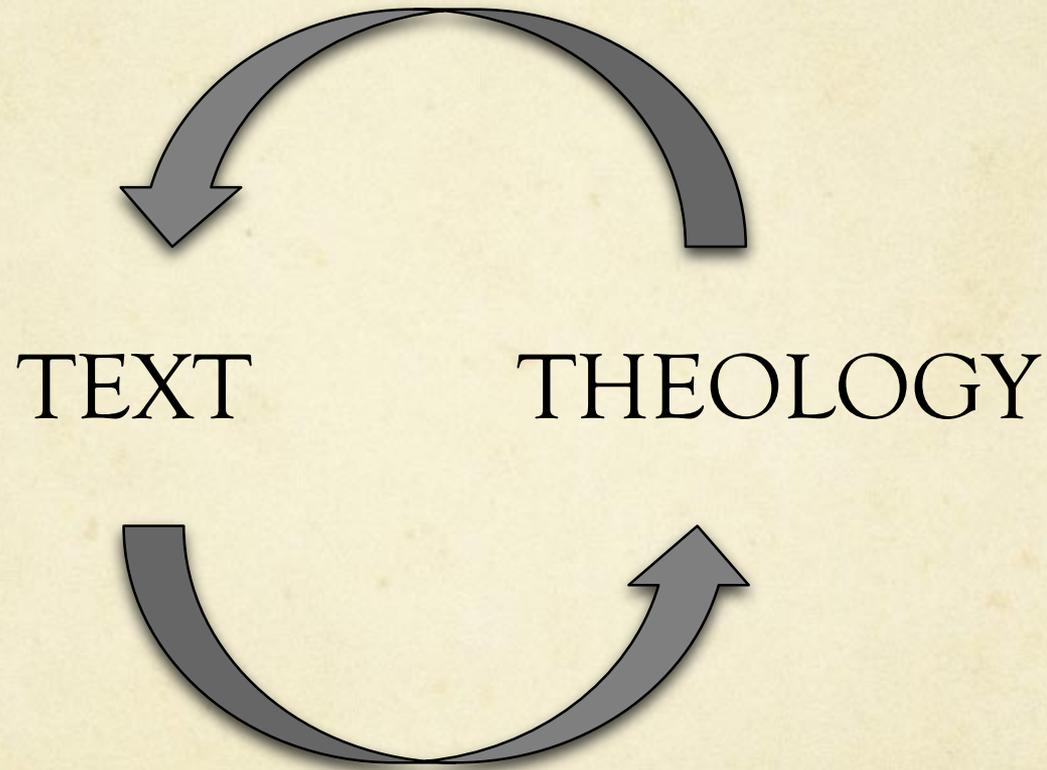
Grammatical-Historical Interpretation

TEXT

THEOLOGY



Theological Interpretation



Cornelius Van Til

“In the Westminster Confession of Faith the statement is made that that is true which by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture. *This statement should not be used as a justification for deductive exegesis.*”

Christian Theory of Knowledge, 38.

Cornelius Van Til

“Exegesis takes the Scriptures and analyzes each part of it in detail. Biblical theology takes the fruits of exegesis and organizes them into various units and traces the revelation of God in Scripture in its historical development. It brings out the theology of each part of God’s Word as it has been brought to us at different stages, by means of various authors.

Cornelius Van Til

“Systematic theology then uses the fruits of the labors of exegetical and biblical theology and brings them together into a concatenated system. Apologetics seeks to defend this system of biblical truth against false philosophy and false science.”

Introduction to Systematic Theology, 17.

Cornelius Van Til

“This distinction between the method of apologetics and the method of other disciplines we believe to be mistaken. *All the disciplines must presuppose God, but, at the same time, presupposition is the best proof.* Apologetics takes particular pains to show that such is the case. This is its chief task.

Cornelius Van Til

“But in so doing, it is no more neutral in its method than are the other disciplines. One of its main purposes is to show that neutrality is impossible and that no one, as a matter of fact, is neutral. We conclude then that apologetics stands at the outer edge of the circle of systematic truth given us by systematics in order to defend it.”

Ibid., 19.

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2. What are Its Objections, Theological Concerns?
 - a. Objection: G-H Hermeneutics Stands on the Enlightenment, not Scripture

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2. What are Its Objections, Theological Concerns?
 - a. Objection: G-H Hermeneutics Stands on the Enlightenment, not Scripture
 - b. Theological Concern #1: The Bible is a Divine Book

Dual Authorship of the Bible

Waymeyer, Matthew, “Words of God and Words of Man: Inerrancy and Dual Authorship.” In *The Inerrant Word: Biblical, Historical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspectives*, edited by John MacArthur. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016.

Blocher, Henri A. G. “God and the Scripture Writers: The Question of Double Authorship.” In *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, edited by D. A. Carson, 497–541. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016.

Sensus Plenior & Divine Meaning

1. Required by Grammatical-Historical
Hermeneutics

William Sanford LaSor

“There are guidelines to be observed in our quest for the *sensus plenior*. First of all, it must always begin with the literal meaning of the text. *Sensus plenior* is not a substitute for grammatico-historical exegesis, but a development from such exegesis.

William Sanford LaSor

“It is not a reading into the text of theological doctrines and dogmas; rather it is a reading out of the text the fullness of meaning required by God’s complete revelation.”

“Prophecy, Inspiration, and *Sensus Plenior*,” *Tyndale Bulletin*
29 (1978): 59.

Sensus Plenior & Divine Meaning

1. Required by Grammatical-Historical Hermeneutics
2. Distinct Intentions of the Human and Divine Author

Sensus Plenior & Divine Meaning

1. Required by Grammatical-Historical Hermeneutics
2. Distinct Intentions of the Human and Divine Author
3. Requires Two Hermeneutics:
 - i. GHH for Human Intention
 - ii. RHH for Divine Intention

Vern Poythress—*Sensus Plenior*

“The *sensus plenior* is that additional, deeper meaning, intended by God but not clearly intended by the human author, which is seen to exist in the words of a biblical text (or group of text, or even a whole book) when they are studied in the light of further revelation or development in the understanding of revelation.”

As cited in “Divine Meaning of Scripture,” 110.

Vern Poythress—Divine Meaning

- 1) the human meaning (grammatical-historical meaning) does not equal the divine meaning
- 2) human meaning intends the divine meaning
- 3) focus on the human meaning has tragic implications for interpretation
- 4) divine meaning is the *sensus plenior* of the human meaning and it is *distinct* from the human intention

Vern Poythress—Divine Meaning

“We have arrived, then, at a partial answer to Oliver Objectivist. Objectivist located meaning exclusively with the human author, and insisted on the precise stability of one meaning.”

Poythress, *God-Centered Biblical Interpretation* (1999), 133

Vern Poythress—Divine Meaning

“Scholarship tends to treat human meaning as if it were ‘there’ as a fixed, limited object. Scholars ignore the fact that the human author intends the fullness of divine meaning.”

“Dispensing with Merely Human Meaning” *JETS* (2014),
487.

Vern Poythress—Divine Meaning

“If the same words happen to be said by two authors, there are two separate interpretations. . . . Hence it would seem to be the case that we have two separate interpretations of any particular biblical text. The first interpretation sees the words entirely in the light of the human author, his characteristics, his knowledge, his social status.

Vern Poythress—Divine Meaning

“The second sees the same words entirely in the light of the divine author, his characteristics, his knowledge, his status. In general, the results of these two interpretations will differ.”

“Divine Meaning of Scripture,” in *Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts?* (1994), 93.

Vern Poythress—Divine Meaning

“My concluding advice with respect to the focus on an isolated human author is that we give it up. Period. There is no gain to it, and much loss. We who are scholars work on the intentions of human authors as if this focus will give us answers. But we are living an illusion. Instead, let us seek God.”

“Dispensing with Merely Human Meaning,” 499.

Questions:

2. What are Its Objections, Theological Concerns?
 - a. Objection: G-H Hermeneutics Stands on the Enlightenment, not Scripture
 - b. Theological Concern #1: The Bible is a Divine Book
 - c. Theological Concern #2: Christ is the Theme of Scripture

Graeme Goldsworthy

“Our concern is not how the Jewish contemporaries, the Pharisees and the Sadducees and others, regarded Jesus and his disciples, but how the Bible portrays both the continuity and the radical newness of the Christian hermeneutic.

Graeme Goldsworthy

“The Emmaus two are representative of a general inability to deal with the suffering Messiah as the bringer of the kingdom. Luke shows plainly that the encounter with the risen Christ makes the difference.”

Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture (2000),
54.

Dennis Johnson

“[T]he arrival and achievement of Christ have transformed the way in which the new covenant people of God understand and implement the message of the old covenant shadows and Scriptures.”

Him We Proclaim: Preaching Christ from All the Scriptures
(2007), 81.

Dennis Johnson

“What John needed to learn, as did Jesus’ disciples at a later point (Acts 1:6-8), was that God *reserves the right to fulfill his promises in his own way, even if his ways should contradict our natural, normal, ordinary, literal reading of those promises.*”

Ibid., 142, 143 (*italics mine*).

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 - i. The “Meaning” of Texts Collide with the Details of Texts

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 - ii. Fallible Theology (Historical or Systematic) Becomes an Interpretive Authority

Herman Bavinck

“Tradition became a force alongside of, and, not long afterwards, superior to, Holy Scripture. Finally, when tradition even received its own infallible organ in the person of the pope, it also, in fact, took the place of the Word of God, for ‘the *auctoritas interpretiva* is invariably the supreme and true authority.’”

Reformed Dogmatics, 1:233.

G. C. Berkouwer

“We could be lazy and fall back on tradition as though it had authority in itself. Had the Reformers done this, there would not have been a Reformation.”

“The Authority of Scripture (A Responsible Confession),” in *Jerusalem and Athens* (1980), 202.

Jeremiah 23:36

“For you will no longer remember the oracle of the LORD, because every man’s own word will become the oracle, and you have perverted the words of the living God, the LORD of hosts, our God.”

Questions:

3. What are the Effects of Theological Interpretation?
 - i. The “Meaning” of Texts Collide with Stubborn Exegetical Details
 - ii. Fallible Theology (Historical or Systematic) Becomes an Interpretive Authority
 - iii. Readers Develop Textual Illiteracy

Tim Keller

“But when we look at Psalm 40, *we see absolutely nothing to indicate that the speaker is Jesus or some messianic figure.* Why would the Hebrew author assume that Psalm 40 was about Jesus? He does so because he knows what Jesus told his disciples in Luke 24, that all the Scripture is really about him. The Bible is in the end a single, great story that comes to a climax in Jesus Christ.”

Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism (2015), 57-58

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 - i. The “Meaning” of Texts Collide with Stubborn Exegetical Details
 - ii. Fallible Theology (Historical or Systematic) Becomes an Interpretive Authority
 - iii. Readers Develop Textual Illiteracy
 - iv. Ears Become Sluggish

Heart Issues:

- Pride of Exclusivism—Experts Control Meaning
- Laziness—Exegesis is Work
- Arrogance—The Scripture Needs My Theological Balance