WHEN DOCTRINE DIVIDES

THE PEOPLE OF GOD

AN EVANGELICAL APPROACH TO THEOLOGICAL DIVERSITY

RHYNE R. PUTMAN

Foreword by David S. Dockery

"Many have wondered how Christians who read the same Bible can come to such different conclusions about what it means. Rhyne Putman not only provides a thorough answer to that question; he also helps us live more peaceably and fruitfully amidst our differences. This helpful book will encourage Christians to hold their convictions with greater irenicism, humility, awareness, and wisdom."

Gavin Ortlund, Senior Pastor, First Baptist Church of Ojai; author, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*

"With keen historical and philosophical insight, Rhyne Putman probes deeply the roots of Protestantism's disputatious and division-making nature. He asks the right questions and addresses the roots of the problems that have prevented even evangelical Christians with a high view of Scripture from uniting in common causes for the sake of the gospel. Without diminishing or downplaying our differences and their consequences, he calls us to once more heed the call of Wesley in his famous 'Catholic Spirit' letter and reach across the theological divides and say 'if your heart is as my heart, give me your hand' in things we can do together for the sake of Christ. Here is a practical study of how to disagree in love, without becoming disagreeable, much less foes. Highly recommended!"

Ben Witherington III, Jean R. Amos Professor of New Testament for Doctrinal Studies, Asbury Theological Seminary

"Rhyne Putman is one of the best Baptist theologians writing today, and he has given us a superb study on two themes central to Scripture: Christian unity and doctrinal diversity. Seldom have these topics been dealt with together in a more coherent way. This is an important book."

Timothy George, Research Professor, Beeson Divinity School, Samford University

"This book by Rhyne Putman is superbly done. I will be quick to commend it to others who want to understand how to navigate Christian differences with conviction and compassion, with both a love for truth and a heart of love. The chapter on Wesley and Whitefield and their complicated relationship alone makes the book worth the price! Buy it and be blessed."

Daniel L. Akin, President, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

"*When Doctrine Divides the People of God* is one of the most important books written since the turn of the twenty-first century. Biblically faithful, wise, and humane in his reflections, Putman addresses two of the most important questions of our time: First, how can faithful evangelical Christians come to such drastically different conclusions on matters of doctrine? Second, how should we handle those disagreements? Given that evangelical Christians will likely experience increased attacks from the antagonists of our secular age, we should take Putman's advice to heart, uniting whenever and however we can, to bear witness to the gospel once for all delivered to the saints. Recommended highly and without reservation."

Bruce Riley Ashford, Provost and Professor of Theology and Culture, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary; coauthor, *The Gospel of Our King*

"In this fascinating book, Rhyne Putman models not only erudition and breadth of study but also a necessary concern for the union of doctrine and practice. This work needs to be read by evangelicals and nonevangelicals alike. It teaches and models epistemic humility in the face of scriptural authority, thus showing how we can foster both confessional commitment and unity in the gospel across confessional lines."

Matthew Pinson, President and Professor of Theology, Welch College

"If evangelicals share a commitment to the gospel and a high view of Scripture, then why isn't there more agreement on theological matters? This is the thorny question that Rhyne Putman takes on and answers so ably in *When Doctrine Divides the People of God*. I wish I had read this book when I was a seminarian who thought he had all the answers! Like Putman, I long for a deeper sense of catholicity and a greater spirit of cooperation with fellow believers in other traditions. This book will help pastors, theologians, and other leaders work toward a greater embodiment of Jesus's high priestly prayer of John 17 with conviction and civility."

Nathan A. Finn, Provost and Dean of the University Faculty, North Greenville University

When Doctrine Divides
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An Evangelical Approach to Theological Diversity

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For my parents,
Glen and Diane Putman,
model peacemakers,
children of God (Matt. 5:9)

Contents

Foreword

Jesus prayed for unity for his followers in what many consider the greatest prayer recorded in Holy Scripture. In our Lord's own prayer, which he offered just before he was arrested, we see Jesus Christ pouring out his heart to the Father for his followers on the night before he died for us (John 17). This prayer was not only for the disciples and immediate followers of Christ, but for the church through the ages. Elsewhere, we are reminded that Jesus still prays for his own today from his exalted position at the right hand of God (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25). His prayers for believers today surely reflect the words of John 17, which is a prayer for unity and a prayer for truth, a prayer for a holy uniqueness and a unique holiness for his followers.

In verses 20–26 of John 17, we read that Jesus prayed for his followers to experience a spiritual unity that exemplifies the oneness of the Father and the Son. Yet, far too often the followers of Christ throughout the centuries have been characterized by controversy, infighting, disagreement, and disunity. It is to this tension that Rhyne Putman has applied his insightful theological skills, wrestling with the issues and questions associated with doctrinal divisions among the people of God. In this extraordinarily well-written and well-designed volume, Putman explores not only why we disagree about doctrinal matters but what we should do about these doctrinal disagreements.

If the church believes the Bible and if the words of John 17 are seriously taken to heart, then why do these doctrinal differences seem not only to continue, but to multiply and expand? Putman brilliantly examines perspectives on the nature of Scripture and the

hermeneutical questions involved in moving from Bible to theology. This careful treatment is followed by a thoughtful look at the role of reason, tradition, experience, and emotion in the formulation of Christian doctrine. Such a wide-ranging exploration will certainly prove to be helpful to readers.

The second half of the book encourages readers to move beyond explanation, taking steps toward application. Putman engages the thorny issues of when to change one's mind about previously held positions, and when and where to draw the lines regarding these doctrinal matters. The practical outworking of these challenging questions are given careful attention. *When Doctrine Divides the People of God* concludes on a hopeful note as Putman provides guidance on *how* we should disagree, offering a historically informed pathway regarding fellowship, shared service, cooperation, and collaboration.

The Nicene Creed, an important fourth-century confession, describes the church as one, holy, catholic or universal, and apostolic. Living out these creedal convictions and applying Putman's framework are much needed in our day. We should not, however, be naive to the difficulties involved especially when sorting out differences that arise over first-order theological issues, not to mention secondary and tertiary matters, requiring much prayer and wisdom.

Christ's followers are called to exemplify love and truth, oneness and holiness, catholicity and apostolicity. Certainly, we are to promote Christian unity at every opportunity. True believers belong to the same Father and are called to the same service. Believers trust the same Savior and have received the same gift of God's grace, thus sharing a common salvation. Ultimately, true unity must be built on true truth. Any other kind of unity is earthly, worldly, temporal, and thus falls short of the John 17 ideal.

Putman has offered beneficial guidance for his readers, doing so with exemplary exegetical skill, historically informed reasoning, and pastoral sensitivity. Taking seriously the reality of doctrinal differences that have developed over the years, he recognizes that a unity that exists without truth is mushy, misguided, and meaningless. The yearning for unity is real, as heard from those who ask, "Why can't we all just get along?" Putman, however, enables us to

see that those who promote a kind of unity not grounded in truth and those who champion truth without a concern for love and unity are hardly consistent with scriptural teaching or the aspirations of the Nicene Creed.

As we reflect on Jesus's prayer in John 17, we see that his desire is not only for spiritual unity but also for sanctified truth (John 17:17). So, as affirmed in the historical creed, the church is not only one and universal, but also holy and apostolic. True holiness is based on truth taught by the apostles and made known to us in Holy Scripture (John 14:6; 16:13; 17:17). Just as it saddens the Father and the Son and harms the witness of the church when we fail to love one another and demonstrate biblical unity, so, likewise, the witness of the church is harmed when we look to the world to be our guide rather than to the truthfulness of God's word and the best of the Christian tradition.

How then do we know when our calling to truth and holiness is a call to be different not only from the world but from other professing believers? Putman provides a wise resource for those struggling with this question. After all, the question is not new. As early as the time of Tertullian (155–220) and the Montanists in the late second century, and especially with the debate surrounding Augustine (354–430) and the Donatists two centuries later, these questions were raised and have continued to be raised through the years. In American Christianity, the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy in the early twentieth century brought about splits in major denominations, and parallel splits between conservatives and liberals took place in a number of churches in the United States and Canada. Putman's work is designed to strengthen theological convictions, foster Christian unity, and provide guidance for those who tend to divide or separate from others too quickly. Putman knows that such unnecessary fragmentation diminishes opportunities for genuine church reform and renewal.

Christians are thus called to live in tension emphasizing both truth and love, holiness and unity. It seems paramount in our polarized and fragmented world for followers of Christ to not only balance commitments to truth and love, but to pursue genuine Christian unity

informed by authentic doctrinal conviction. The apostle Paul exhorts us not to take a wait-and-see attitude, but to be eager to preserve the "unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3). God's Spirit energizes the church to exemplify unity to an observing world. When believers cultivate and practice the virtues described in Ephesians 4:1–6, they display and preserve the unity of the Spirit. Paul's admonition to unity also includes the basis for this unity.

Paul continues his appeal in verses 4 and 5 of Ephesians 4 by claiming that "one hope," "one faith," and "one baptism" exist because there is "one Lord." The "one hope" of our calling points to the confident expectation of Christ's coming glory. The "one faith" refers to the sum and substance of the church's belief. No long-term Christian unity will be possible unless believers share a common commitment to apostolic doctrine, the "faith that was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). This "one faith" reflects the common experience of faith in Christ and the same access to him shared by all believers. "One baptism" pictures the outward expression of faith in the "one Lord." The larger context of Ephesians 4 indicates that true Christian unity expresses itself through variety (Eph. 4:7–12), bringing about maturity (vv. 13–16) and purity (vv. 17–32) in the body of Christ.

Rhyne Putman is to be commended for offering this superb and substantive volume, which in many ways provides a thoughtful and engaging blueprint for living out the expectations of scriptural teaching found in John 17 and Ephesians 4, doing so with a thorough exploration of the challenges and issues associated with hermeneutics, reason, epistemology, experience, tradition, bias, boundary-making, all informed by his grasp of the history of Christian doctrine.

Putman's exercise in theological method is ever so much more than ivory tower discussion. Readers will be blessed by this work, enabling them to be the people of God before a watching world. We are reminded afresh that visible unity grounded in theological truth is God's expectation for Christ's followers. Let us pray and work for renewal and unity not only in our theological commitments but in our worship, in our fellowship, in our educational efforts, in our shared service and social engagement, and ultimately in our gospel proclamation. We trust that Putman's work will not only help us take steps toward theo-

logical understanding and maturity but will lead us toward renewal to hear afresh and live out the words of Jesus himself: "that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:21).

David S. Dockery
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Abbreviations

AT	Descartes, René. *Oeuvres de Descartes*. Vols. 1–12. Rev. ed. Edited by Charles Adam and Paul Tannery. Paris: J. Vrin/C.N.R.S., 1964–1976.
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
CP	Peirce, Charles S. *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. 8 vols. Edited by Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (vols. 1–6) and Arthur W. Burks (vols. 7–8). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931–1958.
ICC	International Critical Commentary
JETS	*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
JGRChJ	*Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism*
LW	Luther, Martin. *Luther's Works*. Edited by Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut T. Lehmann, and Christopher Boyd Brown. 75 vols. Philadelphia: Fortress; St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–.
NIDNTTE	Moisés Silva, ed. *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*. 2nd ed. 4 vols. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014.
NPNF[1]	*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 1. Edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, Philip Schaff, and Henry Wace. 14 vols. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994.
NPNF[2]	*Nicene- and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 2. Edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, Philip Schaff, and Henry Wace. 14 vols. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994.
S	Zwingli, Ulrich. *Huldreich Zwingli's Werke*. Edited by M. Schuler and J. Schulthess. 7 vols. Zurich, 1828–1842.

TDNT	Friedrich, Gerhard and Gerhard Kittel, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* [*Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*]. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965–1976.
WA	Luther, Martin. *D. Martin Luthers Werke*. Kritische Gesamtausgabe. 73 vols. Weimar: Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1883–2009.
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
Z	Zwingli, Ulrich. *Huldreich Zwinglis sämtliche Werke*. 10 vols. Berlin, Leipzig, Zurich: Heinsius, 1905–1991.

Introduction

When Doctrine Divides
the People of God

"Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!"
Psalm 133:1

"For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: . . . a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing."
Ecclesiastes 3:1, 5b

"Protestant Leader Refutes Other 'Protestant' Heretic over His Erroneous Doctrine of the Lord's Supper."

Had there been a thing called the internet five centuries ago when Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli had their famous feud over Christian Communion, the blogosphere might have lit up with clickbait headlines like this one. The armchair commentators of social media could have rushed to publish their underdeveloped musings on the whole affair, either by taking sides in the debate or by asserting their moral superiority over the whole debacle. Luther and Zwingli may have taken shots at each other in their respective podcasts, exchanged a series of combative tweets and blog posts, debated in a YouTube simulcast, and then followed the whole thing up with a conciliatory book tour.

But in the actual sixteenth century, less than a decade after the Reformation began, the German and Swiss pastor-theologians engaged each other in a series of tracts and written disputations made publicly available through the new mass media technology of the moveable type printing press.[1] They were eventually called to an intervention by Philip of Hesse—a young German prince convinced that a face-to-face meeting would help resolve their conflict. Though political motives drove his efforts at reconciliation, Philip may very well be considered the first Protestant *ecumenist*. He longed for the sparring Reformers to make nice so that Protestants across Europe could take a stand together against the bullying of the papacy and the Holy Roman Empire. Philip wanted to see a united Protestant movement that could rival Rome in its scope and power.

Team Luther and Team Zwingli met at Marburg Castle in the first three days of October 1529. This meeting of the minds, known by history as the Marburg Colloquy, was a defining moment in the early years of the Reformation, not because it was successful but because it was such a letdown. To Philip's chagrin, no political alliance of German and Swiss Protestants would emerge. But the greater tragedy may be the fracas that kept these giants from personal fellowship and cooperation in a time of ecclesial and social upheaval.[2]

So, what went wrong? Both of these pastors *practiced* the Supper in virtually the same way. Unlike many late medieval Catholics, both believed that the sacrament was for both laypersons and the priestly class. Yet they were poles apart in their understandings of the *meaning*

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1. Zwingli began the engagement with Luther with his *Amica exegesis, id est exposition eucharistiae negotii ad Martinum Lutherum* (1527; Z 5:562–758). Luther responded with *Daß diese Worte Christi: Das ist mein Leib, noch feststehen wider die Schwarmgeister* (1527; WA 23:64–283; *The Annotated Luther*, vol. 3: *Church and Sacraments*, ed. Paul W. Robinson [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016], 163–274). Zwingli responded to Luther with *Daß diese Worte: Das ist mein Leib usw. ewiglich den alten Sinn haben werden usw* (1527; S 2.2:16–93; Z 5:805–977). Luther's final written contribution to the debate was his book *Vom Abendmahl Christi, Bekenntnis* (1528; WA 26:241–509). Zwingli and Johannes Oecolampadius countered this tome with *Über D. Martin Luthers Buch, Bekenntnis genannt* (1528; Z 6.2:22–248).

2. The most comprehensive account of the controversy between Luther and Zwingli is in Walther Köhler, *Zwingli und Luther. Ihr Streit über das Abendmahl nach seinen politischen und religiösen Beziehungen*, vol. 1, *Die religiöse und politische Entwicklung bis zum Marburger Religionsgespräch 1529* (Leipzig, 1924); and vol. 2, *Vom Beginn der Marburger Verhandlungen 1529 bis zum Abschluss der Wittenberger Konkordie 1536* (Gütersloh, 1953). The most detailed treatment of the controversy available in English is Hermann Sasse, *This Is My Body: Luther's Contention for the Real Presence in the Sacrament of the Altar* (Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress, 1959). Whereas Köhler treats Zwingli more favorably, Sasse defends Luther's stance.

of the Supper. Luther rigorously argued that the risen, glorified body of Christ was present "in," "with," and "under" the bread and the wine of Communion.[3] Zwingli, on the other hand, insisted that the bread and the wine are merely symbolic representations of Christ's body and blood. For the Swiss Reformer, the Supper served as an important reminder of Christ's great sacrifice for our sin, but for the German, the Supper was an actual means by which God imparted grace into the lives of those who believe.

The kerfuffle between Luther and Zwingli began with different assumptions and starting points. First, they disagreed about the nature of the sacraments.[4] Second, they clashed over Christology, with each accusing the other of holding a heretical position on the union of Christ's human and divine natures.[5] Third, each took issue with the other's hermeneutics. They debated over what Jesus meant when he took the bread at the Last Supper and said, "This is my body, which is given for you" (Luke 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24; cf. Matt. 26:26; Mark 14:22). Luther took Jesus's words "This is my body" quite *literally*. Because he believed the human nature of Jesus is present everywhere, he contended Jesus is bodily present in the bread and wine of Communion. Zwingli, who contended Jesus was using figurative language here, thought Luther's interpretation had a whiff of the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation that both men claimed to reject.[6]

Aside from the colorful rhetorical jabs fired at each other, the colloquy was principally a debate about key biblical texts and the

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3. This language appears in the seminal Lutheran confessions. See The Augsburg Confession 10.1; The Small Catechism 6.2; The Large Catechism 5.8; The Apology of the Augsburg Confession 10.

4. Luther wanted to reform Catholic sacramentalism, and Zwingli wanted to abandon it. Zwingli believed the sacraments were mere signs of grace, not vessels of it. See Sasse, *This Is My Body*, 164–177; Sasse, "The Lutheran Understanding of the Consecration," in Hermann Sasse, *We Confess*, vol. 2, *The Sacraments*, trans. Norman Nagel (St. Louis: Concordia, 1985), 113–138; W. P. Stephens, *Zwingli: An Introduction to His Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 76–84.

5. On the communication of properties (*communicatio idiomatum*) between Christ's two natures, Luther contended that whatever one says of Christ's divine nature is also applicable to his human nature. Zwingli made a sharper distinction between the properties of the natures. Consequently, Luther accused Zwingli of Nestorianism and Zwingli accused Luther of Eutychianism. See Ryan Tafilowski, "Marburg Colloquy," in *Encyclopedia of Martin Luther and the Reformation*, vol. 2, ed. Mark A. Lamport (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 500; Z 5:930–932; S 2.2, 71; Sasse, *This Is My Body*, 121–122; Sasse, "The 1,500th Anniversary of Chalcedon," in Hermann Sasse, *We Confess*, vol. 1, *Jesus Christ*, trans. Norman Nagel (St. Louis: Concordia, 1984), 62–65; WA 26:332.

6. Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 531–534.

interpretive rules for distinguishing between metaphorical and literal descriptions. It was first and foremost a dispute between men who *read the same Bible differently*. They reasoned differently about the texts. They felt differently about their respective theological positions. They interacted differently with the tradition that had gone before them. Even though Luther and Zwingli were both staunch defenders of the clarity of Scripture, they disagreed adamantly about what the biblical text meant on this point.

At the end of the colloquy, the two Reformers and their associates acknowledged their agreement with one another on fourteen out of fifteen tenets of the faith in a document known as the Marburg Articles. It could have been the making of a beautiful friendship, but one article—the final article on the Lord's Supper—drove a permanent wedge between the two groups and even kept Luther from acknowledging Zwingli as his Christian brother at the time. A weeping Zwingli pleaded with Luther for his right hand in fellowship, which the German Reformer denied him. For many contemporary readers, the differences between these positions on the Lord's Supper may seem trivial, but in the minds of these sixteenth-century Reformers, the gospel itself was on the line.[7]

Though historians like to ruminate on what might have happened had the Marburg Colloquy gone another direction, only God knows what the Protestant world would look like if Luther and Zwingli had been able to work through this matter. Protestants, who share a core conviction that every individual should be able to read the Bible for himself or herself, more than likely would have found themselves in another equally divisive conflict a few months later.[8]

Why Can't We All Just Get Along?

Nearly five centuries later, the spirit of dissent that permeated the Marburg Colloquy still haunts Protestantism and evangelicalism. We

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7. For Luther, "This sacrament is the Gospel" (Sasse, *This Is My Body*, 405; cf. 281). Luther's emphasis on the sacramental nature of the Supper "led Zwingli to contrast two ways of salvation: the one by eating the flesh of Christ and the other by believing in him" (Stephens, *Zwingli*, 100). The former option was, for Zwingli, a return to papist religion that rendered the death of Christ unnecessary (Z 5:576, 659–661, 706–708).

8. Even if Luther and Zwingli had forged the union Philip wanted, these Magisterial Reformers still would have been at odds with the so-called "Radical Reformers" like the Anabaptists.

still quarrel over how best to understand the beginning of the Bible (Genesis 1–3), its ending (Revelation 19–22), and a good deal of what is in between.[9] We fight over which existing structure of church government most closely conforms to the biblical pattern (1 Tim. 3:1–13; Titus 1:5–9). We can be contentious over the proper candidates for baptism. We wag our tongues over speaking in tongues and the so-called miraculous spiritual gifts (Mark 16:17; Acts 2:1–13; 1 Corinthians 12–14; Heb. 2:3–4). We can have heated disagreements about predestination, election, and human freedom (Romans 8–9; Eph. 1:3–14). We have extended discussions about the extent of the atonement (Isa. 53:6; John 3:16; 10:15; Col. 1:20; 1 John 2:2). We even spar over what method of counseling or approach to apologetics is most faithful to Scripture. When we are not arguing about our theological traditions, we are caught up in more academic controversies like the recent scholarly debates over Paul's relationship to Judaism, the extent of God's foreknowledge, or the eternal relations within the Trinity.

Even as society becomes increasingly antagonistic toward traditional Christian beliefs and practices, many followers of Jesus remain gridlocked over the doctrinal matters that separate them. Though we live in what is becoming a post-Christian culture, some segments of the church have never been more theologically engaged—or divided. Never before in the history of the church have our theological disputes been so public, so accessible. The Reformation may have put the Bible in the hands of every individual, but the digital age has given everyone an open platform to discuss doctrine. Through the blessing (or the curse) of social media, everyone who has an opinion has an opportunity to air their viewpoints and project their disagreements to the world. Yet even with all of this ability to communicate, we still gravitate toward echo chambers that protect us from the risks of having open dialogue. We love protecting our tribes, our labels, and the self-assuring safety that comes in numbers. Though we should be modeling civility for our deeply divided political and cultural climate, we who are the people of God have done very little to set ourselves

9. Alister McGrath identifies at least nineteen Protestant approaches to Darwin's theory of evolution, all of which claim to be the correct interpretation of Scripture. See McGrath, *Christianity's Dangerous Idea* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 208–209, 372–386.

apart from the broader culture. Instead of embodying the gospel of grace, we have just been part of the problem.

It comes as no surprise that we are at odds with the unbelieving world—Jesus promised that would happen (Matt. 10:22, 34; John 15:18)—but why do we "devour one another" (Gal. 5:15) with our infighting over doctrine? Jesus told his disciples that they would prove themselves to be his followers by their love for one another (John 13:35). On the night of his betrayal, he asked the Father to give his followers perfect unity—that they would be "one" as the Father and the Son are one—so that "the world may know" he was indeed sent by God (John 17:23). In essence, Jesus wanted his people to reflect the perfect union of the Father and the Son in the immanent Trinity. Given this kind of mandate, why do Christ-followers seem to revel in the "narcissism of minor details"? Should we continue sparring in an increasingly anti-Christian context?

One answer to these questions comes from ecumenists who have dedicated themselves to the visible unity of all Christian traditions as an essential element of Christian witness. Ecumenists get their name from a Greek term meaning "the inhabited world" or "universal" (*oikoumenikos*)—the same term (*oikoumenē*) used to describe the ecumenical councils of the early church. Ecumenists seek to stage a "sneak preview" on earth of the future eschatological reconciliation of all followers of Christ throughout history. In their quest for visible (and sometimes institutional) unity, ecumenists are sometimes accused of making too little of the convictions that set these traditions apart. Though building bridges between various traditions and denominations can bear much fruit, the tendency of some ecumenists to overlook or ignore doctrine is deeply troubling.

Other evangelical scholars have written excellent works on the possibility and parameters of evangelical ecumenism, issues I do not plan to explore here in detail.[10] I am more interested in the theologi-

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10. See Michael Allen and Scott Swain, *Reformed Catholicity: The Promise of Retrieval for Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2015); Christopher W. Morgan, "Toward a Theology of the Unity of the Church," in *Why We Belong: Evangelical Unity and Denominational Diversity*, ed. Anthony L. Chute, Christopher W. Morgan, and Robert A. Peterson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 19–36; Curtis Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity: Theology for Other Baptists* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014); Steven R. Harmon, *Toward Baptist Catholicity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006); Harmon, *Ecumenism Means You, Too: Ordinary*

cal processes that led to these divergent traditions. However, I wish to preface this book on theological disagreement with a disclaimer about ecumenism. Many within my evangelical tradition cringe at the very mention of the term *ecumenical* because of the bad taste left in their mouth from twentieth-century ecumenical movements.[11] While some evangelicals suggest that we should recover the term *ecumenism* in a way that is consistent with our convictions about the gospel,[12] others maintain it is wiser to refrain from using it altogether because of its association with the ecumenical movements of the past.[13] Others prefer the related term *catholicity*, which doesn't come with all the sociopolitical baggage of *ecumenism*.[14]

I share many of the concerns my evangelical forebears had about ecumenical endeavors of the past. First, several (but not all) of the twentieth-century ecumenical efforts sought a tawdry peace through surrender and compromise. Evangelicals have felt that the social focus of many ecumenists undermined commitment to the gospel and personal evangelism. They were also uncomfortable with the easy peace made with some in these movements who denied essential tenets of the faith.[15] Of the eighteenth-century Latitudinarians, who shared with modern ecumenicists a penchant for theological accommodation, John Wesley wrote, "This unsettledness of thought, this being 'driven to and fro, and tossed about with every wind of doctrine,' is a great curse, not a blessing, an irreconcilable enemy, not

Christians and the Quest for Christian Unity (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010); Peter J. Leithart, *The End of Protestantism: Pursuing Unity in a Fragmented Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2016); and Luder G. Whitlock Jr., *Divided We Fall: Overcoming a History of Christian Disunity* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2017).

11. Kenneth Scott Latourette, "Ecumenical Bearings of the Missionary Movement and the International Missionary Council," in *A History of the Ecumenical Movement, 1517–1948*, 2nd ed., ed. Ruth Rouse and Stephen C. Neil (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), 353.

12. Timothy George, for example, contends for an "ecumenism of conviction, not an ecumenism of accommodation." See "Baptists and Ecumenism: An Interview with Timothy George," interview by Everett Berry and Winston Hottman, Center for Baptist Renewal, April 6, 2017, http://www.centerforbaptistrenewal.com/blog/2017/4/6/baptists-and-ecumenism-a-discussion -with-timothy-george.

13. The historical theologian Gregg Allison suggests that evangelicals use the term *gospel connectionalism* instead of *ecumenism* so that evangelicals who pursue unity can (1) avoid the negative connotations of the ecumenical movement and (2) make the gospel the central element of their agreement (Gregg Allison, interview by author, Louisville, KY, September 8, 2016).

14. The term *catholicity* shares a very similar etymology to *ecumenism* (*katholikē* and *oikoumenē* both speak to something universal).

15. This criticism appears in William R. Estep, *Baptists and Christian Unity* (Nashville: Broadman, 1966), 108–123.

a friend, to true catholicism."[16] Unity without truth is no actual unity at all because it is devoid of a common purpose. For this reason, Paul told first-century believers to be "of the same mind" (Phil. 2:2; cf. 1:27) and Peter told persecuted believers to "have unity of mind" (1 Pet. 3:8).

Second, many evangelicals are skeptical of post-Vatican II efforts to forge ecumenical dialogue with Roman Catholics, especially when something as central as the doctrine of justification by faith still divides them. As the controversy surrounding the 1994 statement *Evangelicals and Catholics Together* illustrated, evangelicals do not all agree with one another about how precisely they relate to Roman Catholicism.[17] On the other side of the aisle, Roman Catholics disagree with one another about whether the condemnations of the Protestant doctrine of justification made by the Council of Trent (1545–1563) still apply.[18]

Third, evangelicals rebuff the anti-realism of some ecumenical efforts. One of the most significant (and most controversial) works in contemporary theological method was George Lindbeck's 1984 book, *The Nature of Doctrine*. In it, the Lutheran ecumenist suggested one way of getting around our doctrinal disputes would be recognizing that doctrine is merely a culturally conditioned way of regulating our belief systems. Lindbeck denied that doctrine depicts reality. Instead, it is just a set of rules or grammar that shape the way we believe. By conceiving of doctrine in this way, he hoped to resolve conflicts between Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox Christians who present contrary doctrinal assertions.[19] However, evangelical theologians reacted strongly, asserting that such an anti-realist way of reading Christian doctrine undermined its ability to speak truthfully about God and his world.[20]

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16. John Wesley, "The Catholic Spirit," in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 14 vols. (London, 1872), 5:502.

17. See "Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium," *First Things* (May 1994); Timothy George and Thomas G. Guarino, eds., *Evangelicals and Catholics Together at Twenty: Vital Statements on Contested Topics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2014); R. C. Sproul, *Getting the Gospel Right: The Tie That Binds Evangelicals Together* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003).

18. See Karl Lehmann, Michael Root, and William G. Rusch, eds., *Justification by Faith: Do the Sixteenth-Century Condemnations Still Apply?* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997).

19. George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1984).

20. See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006); Alister E. McGrath, *A Passion for Truth: The Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 119–162.

Fourth, some evangelicals equate ecumenism with normative religious pluralism or compromising interreligious dialogue between Christian and non-Christian religions.[21] The term *ecumenical* typically signifies attempts at visible or organizational unity between self-described Christians, not agreement with other world religions. Though this pluralistic use of *ecumenical* is not the ordinary sense of the word, evangelicals are right to be concerned about any attempt to normalize religious pluralism. The centrality of Christ and exclusivity of the Christian gospel are central tenets of our worldview (John 14:6; Acts 4:12).

Finally, evangelicals in Free Church traditions like mine are particularly wary of any talk of institutional unions because of the often contrary ways Christians think about church government. The Baptists in my faith tradition emphasize the independence of local churches that enables them to make decisions for themselves under the authority of Scripture and the direction of the Holy Spirit without an outside governing body. This vision of church leadership is incompatible with top-down, hierarchical models of church government where local churches take marching orders from a central office.[22]

While I do have reservations about some ecumenical movements in recent history, I want to stress the great need for *catholicity* rooted in the biblical gospel. Catholicity is a celebration of the things that all gospel-loving Christians share in common. All who have been justified by Christ through faith believe the same gospel and belong to the same family. As Paul asserted, "There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:4–6). We may have our differences, but we must recognize that among followers of Jesus, there is only one body, one hope, and one calling. We share a common charge to go and make disciples of all nations, teaching them to obey all that our Lord commanded (Matt. 28:19–20).

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21. See John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 688. MacArthur describes ecumenism as a strategy from Satan where "all sincere religions involve valid expressions of worshiping the true God."

22. See Robert G. Torbet, *Ecumenism: The Free Church Dilemma* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1968).

Rivalry, discontent, and disagreement may be part of every natural family, but an adopted family rooted in divine forgiveness should extend that same forgiveness to one another, even if they cannot simply overlook all the things that set them apart. We should make every effort "to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3). We should strive toward "unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God" (v. 13). Though we recognize this as our ideal, we are on the lookout for "gospels" contrary to the gospel of Christ that cannot provide this true catholic unity (Gal. 1:8).

On occasion, Protestants and evangelicals must engage in *polemic theology*, an expression of Christian doctrine that explains and defends the distinctive beliefs of a particular theological tradition. Polemics serves an important and necessary function in maintaining and replicating belief. It stresses the importance of biblical truth and the need for coherence in a theological system. It eschews accommodation and can increase confidence in one's tradition.

The word *polemic* has its origins in a Greek word meaning "war" or "warlike" (*polemikos*). Sometimes such warring is necessary when opposing doctrines pose a danger to the faith and to the flock that God has entrusted the shepherds to protect (Acts 20:28; Titus 1:10–16). We must guard diligently those doctrines that we believe are *essential* to the Christian faith. But a polemic theology lacking wisdom or love can create more problems than it fixes. In the same way that a war can be justified with a just cause and righteous conduct, polemics can and should be carried out with Christian virtue and kindness. We must be willing to speak truth but always with love and with the building up of the body as our end (Eph. 4:15–16).

Other times, we must practice *irenic theology*. Irenicists, who draw their name from a Greek word meaning "peace" (*eirenikos*), seek peace with fellow believers from other traditions in their theological discourse. In so doing, they embody Jesus's blessing as the sons and daughters of God (Matt. 5:9). An irenic and graceful spirit should characterize our intramural disagreements. But just as polemic theology without love can be an abuse of polemics, irenic theology without a commitment to biblical truth can become imbalanced and distorted. The preacher of Ecclesiastes says that there is "a time for war, and a time for peace"

(Eccles. 3:8b). We might add that there is *a time for polemics* and a *time for irenics*. We can fight false teaching without being contentious, and we can be peacemakers without waving the white flag in the surrender of our biblical convictions. Christian unity is a good, valuable thing to pursue, but not at the expense of essential truth.

Unlike the spirit of theological minimalism that permeates so much of the ecumenical conversation, the discussion of doctrinal disagreement in this book celebrates both *doctrine* and *difference*. Protestants and evangelicals need teaching rooted in God's self-revelation. They need to be able to articulate the theological content of the Bible in a manner that is clear and concise and fitting for their context. They also need to be free to read the Bible for themselves without a church magisterium (or a popular blog) simply telling them what to believe.

As lovers of the truth, we should not reduce our doctrinal disagreements to much ado about nothing. Healthy disagreements are an important part of sanctification and growth in "grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:18). The doctrinal distinctives of our traditions and denominations are important, giving shape to who we are. To force conformity of thought or the capitulation of beliefs would work against the grain of what it means to be a Protestant. If I may misquote John Henry Newman, to be deep in uniformity of thought is to cease to be Protestant.[23]

The Plan of This Book

This book is a work in *theological method* that explores the nature of doctrinal diversity from a distinctly evangelical point of view. Theological method (sometimes called *theological prolegomena*) is an area of theology that addresses big-picture questions about the nature of doctrine, the sources of theology, and the processes by which we develop doctrine. It is a philosophy of theology. This book is meant to be an interdisciplinary exploration of doctrinal disagreement that borrows from the rich resources of hermeneutics, philosophy,

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23. See John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (London, 1893), 8. Accusing Protestants of being detached from history and tradition, the future Roman Catholic cardinal quipped, "To be deep in history is to cease to be a Protestant."

tradition, and other academic disciplines such as psychology and the social sciences.

Here, I will seek to answer two fundamental questions about theological diversity: First, how do Christ-followers with similar convictions about Scripture and the gospel come to such drastically different points of view in matters of faith and practice? Second, what should otherwise like-minded Christians do about the doctrines that divide them? This is not an exhaustive survey of every factor behind our theological diversity—I'm confident there are many important matters I don't address here—but a summary of the major factors I see at work in the divide among evangelical Christians.

The focus here is on theological diversity among Protestant evangelicals who affirm *sola Scriptura*—the Reformation doctrine that Scripture is the supreme source and only normative standard for Christian doctrine. Evangelicals confess Scripture as the only inspired, inerrant, and infallible revelation of God.[24] Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians give tradition a more prominent place of authority than their Protestant and evangelical counterparts do. For some in these traditions, ecclesial tradition is often placed alongside Scripture as an equal authority.[25] By contrast, *sola Scriptura* Protestants recognize tradition as a valuable resource for Christian theology but understand its authority to be derivative, not primary. In other words, tradition is not an independent, primary authority and is authoritative for the Christian only when it correctly conveys the message of Scripture.

Those in faith traditions that gauge religious beliefs by personal experiences (e.g., some in Pentecostal traditions or some liberal Protestants) are very likely to have differences of opinion because of the uniqueness of personal life experiences, and it should come as no surprise when such competing individual religious authorities yield

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24. My working definition of *evangelical* leans heavily on the "Bebbington Quadrilateral" found in David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 1989), 2–3. The four characteristics Bebbington identifies in all evangelicalism are: *conversionism*, the belief that lives can and should be changed through the gospel; *biblicism*, an unwavering commitment to the unique authority of Scripture; *activism*, the missionary and sociopolitical impetus of evangelical ministry; and *crucicentrism*, the emphasis on Jesus Christ's atoning work on the cross.

25. See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (New York: Doubleday, 2012), 31. "Sacred Tradition and sacred Scripture . . . flowing out of the same divine well-spring, come together in some fashion to form one thing and move towards the same goal. . . . Both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence."

diverse results. Some might assert the "Holy Spirit" is leading them to a new belief or practice contrary to Scripture, but the Holy Spirit cannot contradict what he inspired as inerrant truth. One may claim the experience of having been on a tour through heaven or of receiving a personal message from Jesus, but such claims are not provable by Scripture and therefore cannot be binding on all believers. They may be genuinely spiritual experiences without being from the Spirit of God (1 John 4:1–6). Again, *sola Scriptura* Protestants may recognize the value of experience in Christian theology without giving experience primacy in the formation of beliefs. Experience can confirm the truth of Scripture in the life of the believer, but experience does not dictate what Christians should believe about belief and practice.

I also will not address disagreements with other Protestant groups who downplay or outright dismiss the unique authority of Scripture in the formation of Christian doctrine or practice. Dissent with readers of Scripture who endorse its piecemeal application is inevitable for those who unequivocally invoke its authority on disputed matters. Those who deny the full truthfulness of the Bible usually claim conflicting opinions among biblical authors themselves. They will pit Jesus against Paul or Paul against "deutero-Paul" and take sides with one author or another on the issues most important to them. Though important conversations need to be had with those from these liberal and progressive traditions, those discussions are well beyond the scope of my project here.

I am more concerned with this question: how do evangelical Christians who claim the same final authority come to their opposing views, especially when they share common convictions about the sufficiency, clarity, and inerrancy of Scripture? Why do believers who agree that the whole Bible is true still disagree about the truth it teaches? In what way can we say Scripture is "clear" if what it says seems so foggy to us?

The first part of this book is an exploration of the question, "Why are the people of God divided over doctrine?" This section is primarily *descriptive*, meaning I am only describing what happens in theological disagreement, not necessarily what *should* happen. Just like the controversy between Luther and Zwingli, I submit that most

doctrinal disputes among Protestants and evangelicals today begin as disagreements over how best to understand the Bible, though other social, psychological, and rational factors are also key in understanding these feuds. I remain convinced that a better awareness of our own interpretive processes and the way we come to our theological beliefs can change the tenor of our debates.

I begin Part One with a description of the *interpretive limitations* of every Bible reader that builds on the insights of contemporary hermeneutical theory (chapter 1). This chapter is an exploration of the *general hermeneutics* of our interpretive differences, i.e., an exploration of how all human interpretation works. In Luther and Zwingli's day, the charge made by their Roman Catholic opponents was that Scripture was in need of a formal interpreter because ordinary people could not be entrusted with the responsibility of discovering its proper meaning. Today, the postmodern temptation is to blame this diversity of opinion on an unstable text without meaning, pronouncing authorial intent irrelevant and locating ultimate authority in the reader or the reading community. The realities of hermeneutical diversity—what Christian Smith has provocatively called "pervasive interpretive pluralism"[26]—pose a real challenge to the evangelical affirmation of the clarity of Scripture. Using the insights of evangelical hermeneutics scholars, I will suggest that traditional Protestant affirmations of the clarity of Scripture and the illuminating activity of the Holy Spirit in biblical interpretation can be maintained even in the face of pervasive hermeneutical diversity.

Chapter 2 is an introductory overview of the specific types of *exegetical difference* between Christians that can contribute to doctrinal disagreement. Whereas the focus of chapter 1 is general hermeneutics, the focus here is *special hermeneutics*, i.e., the specific ways readers approach biblical texts. Here I offer an introductory overview of specific ways in which differences at the level of biblical exegesis and historical interpretation can shape our various theological outcomes, something that gets surprisingly little treatment in many discussions of theological method. Much of what is covered here is material covered

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26. Christian Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism Is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2012).

in Biblical Hermeneutics 101: textual criticism, the role of semantics, syntax, and literary and historical criticism. I intend to show ways in which each step in the process of biblical interpretation can impact our understanding of biblical doctrines.

The more constructive arguments of the book begin with chapter 3, which addresses the role *reason* plays in our interpretive conflicts. Poor deductive and inductive reasoning may have some explanatory power with regards to our theological differences, but faults of the individual mind cannot account for all the differences. I will contend that abductive reasoning, a type of informal logic that depends on creative thinking, is the primary way we create and choose theological models for interpreting the thematic unity of Scripture. Differences are inevitable given the sizable role human creativity plays in interpreting Scripture and developing doctrine. Some of this discussion is unavoidably technical, but I have tried to address these issues in a way that will benefit nonspecialists who are patient enough to follow the argument through to its conclusion.

The role *human psychology* plays in our interpretive and theological disagreements is the subject of chapter 4. I interact extensively with the work of social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, who argues that people quarrel over ethics, politics, and religion because they begin with fundamentally different intuitions or feelings about morality. I critically employ Haidt's research to talk about the way in which *experience* and *personality* can shape our biblical interpretation and theological construction. I will suggest that emotion and intuition may have a powerful effect on the interpretive choices we make, even if we believe we are being completely rational in our reading of the Bible.

I conclude Part One with a discussion about the ways *bias* and *tradition* have tremendous sticking power in our theological formation and doctrinal disagreements (chapter 5). Tradition is an important formative tool in the life of any Christian, but uncritical engagement with tradition can foster unhelpful biases in theological formation. Using research from cognitive psychology, I address ways in which our reading of the Bible frequently tends to reinforce our previously held theological assumptions rather than producing faithful exegesis.

I conclude the chapter with suggestions drawn from the same research to minimize theological confirmation bias.

The second part of this book is more *prescriptive* than descriptive, and it addresses a more practical question: "What should the people of God do about doctrinal division?" In chapter 6, I engage with philosophers working in the area of "epistemology of disagreement" to help address the question "When should we change our minds about our theological disagreements and when should we agree to disagree?" As I hope to show, the practical advice offered by these philosophers can be useful for our in-house theological debates.

In chapter 7, I ask an ecclesiological question: When should doctrine divide the people of God and when should it unite them? When should we be joined together in cooperative fellowship and when should we go our separate ways? I explore the concept of doctrinal taxonomy, the way in which Christians tend to rank doctrines according to their importance. Here I explore the ecclesiological convictions which draw lines around our tribal fellowships and attempt to define the gospel in its simplest biblical expression. I offer three tests for determining where a particular tenet should fit in a doctrinal taxonomy.

The book concludes with a constructive Christian ethic of doctrinal disagreement informed by Scripture, church history, and pastoral theology. How should we act toward one another while we await the future eschatological event wherein God finally resolves all our differences of opinion? I appeal to the religious conflict and subsequent personal reconciliation of early evangelical leaders George Whitefield and John Wesley as models for a contemporary evangelical praxis for theological disagreement.

I pray this book helps some think more clearly about how we disagree about doctrine and how we respond to our parochial skirmishes. I contend that clarity in this matter requires a better understanding of how we move from the Bible to our theological systems of belief. I am convinced that appropriate respect for differing traditions and beliefs can honor the Lord Jesus and improve our gospel witness to the watching world. More than anything else, I want God's word, not a favorite theological tradition or denominational distinctive, to be the master of our thinking when we talk about doctrine.

PART ONE

WHY WE DISAGREE ABOUT DOCTRINE

1

We Read Imperfectly

General Hermeneutics and
the Clarity of Scripture

Protestants and evangelicals who quarrel over Christian doctrine and practice read the same Bible, the same sixty-six-book canon.[1] We may hail from divergent denominations or traditions, but we claim a common authority. We may have particular ways of doing church but all appeal to the same standard to defend our distinctive practices. We sometimes need to go our separate ways because we can't agree about the implications of the gospel, but all of us want to get the gospel right. We who affirm the Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura* agree, at least in principle, that Scripture is the supreme source and only guiding norm of Christian theology.

As evangelicals, we long to be "biblical" in what we teach and practice. We want our doctrine—our normative expression of Christian truth—to be rooted in the Bible. We all agree Scripture should have the final word in our disputes, but Scripture must be interpreted (Neh. 8:8; Acts 8:30). We want to be obedient to God's voice in the

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1. Roman Catholics acknowledge seventy-three books (including the Apocrypha). The Greek Orthodox canon contains seventy-nine. The canon of the Orthodox Tewahedo Church in Ethiopia has a whopping eighty-one-book canon! But while these canons contain apocryphal or deuterocanonical books, even these traditions give their additional books a lesser authority in the formation of doctrine.

text and sensitive to the Spirit's leading, but even those shared desires do not guarantee uniformity in our interpretations of Scripture. Something about our reading (or our nature) keeps us from coming into the Bible in the same way, from making the same judgments about the text. Though we eagerly await the future day in which all of our hindrances to knowing God fully are removed, now, in the interim period, we see the written word of God through a glass darkly (1 Cor. 13:12).[2]

Theologians have long recognized the role our interpretive differences play in doctrinal diversity. The fifth-century Gallic theologian Vincent of Lérins said, "All do not accept [Scripture] in one and the same sense. . . . One understands its words in one way, another in another; so that it seems to be capable of as many interpretations as there are interpreters."[3] Interpretive diversity—and the ever-present threat of heresy—led Vincent to believe "the rule for the right understanding of the prophets and apostles should be framed in accordance with the standard of Ecclesiastical and Catholic interpretation."[4] Though Vincent believed Scripture to be a sufficient source of divine revelation in need of no other additional content, he suggested interpreters read the Bible with church tradition so they wouldn't become heretics. Building on this germ of an idea, later medieval theologians insisted the church needed a formal teaching office to decipher the meaning of Scripture and the will of God for the people.[5]

The Reformers gave neither the church nor tradition such primacy in biblical interpretation. They conceded the potential for human error in individual interpreters, but they also realized the magisterium and church councils were also made up of people prone to the same kinds of mistakes.[6] Luther and the other Reformers maintained Scripture is

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2. See Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 1162n7. Paul does not mean that glorified believers will have omniscience or exhaustive knowledge of all things, only that our knowledge will be "without any error or misconceptions."
3. Vincent of Lérins, *Commonitory* 2.5; *NPNF*[2] 11:132.
4. Vincent of Lérins, *Commonitory* 2.5; *NPNF*[2] 11:132.
5. For a history of this development, see Heiko Oberman, *Forerunners of the Reformation: The Shape of Late Medieval Thought*, trans. Paul L. Nyhus (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1966).
6. Luther boldly charged the Fathers with the same potential for interpretive error: "Since the Fathers have often erred, as you yourself confess, who will make us certain as to where they have not erred, assuming their own reputation is sufficient and should not be weighed and judged ac-

clear enough for every Christian to interpret it without the need of a divinely instituted teaching office. Scripture has an intelligible meaning communicated by its human and divine authorship. The Reformers presumed that the Holy Spirit involves himself in the interpretation process, helping *illuminate* the meaning of Scripture for its readers.

Yet these affirmations pose an interesting problem: In what sense can we call the Bible clear if its meaning is so disputed? And why do believers reach conflicting conclusions if the same Holy Spirit is at work in each of their lives? This chapter breaks ground on the larger theme of this book: the relationship between our claims about Scripture as the definitive authority for the people of God and the reality of evangelical theological diversity.

In this chapter I lay out basic evangelical presumptions about the nature of biblical interpretation which will shape the discussion in the following chapters. Here I will borrow liberally from the work of more qualified hermeneutics scholars who defend the ability of authors to convey meaning and who acknowledge the fallibility of interpreters striving to make sense of authorial intentions. Theological diversity does not diminish or take away from the doctrines of the clarity of Scripture and the illumination of the Spirit when these claims are properly understood.

The Nature of Interpretation

How do we know what the Bible—or any text, for that matter—really means? Before tackling the big issues like ecclesiology, eschatology, or election, we must explore the more fundamental questions about interpretation. The term *hermeneutics* (from the Gk. *hermēneuō*, meaning "to interpret") has many uses. Most who hear the word associate it with the rules for interpreting biblical genres (what we also call *biblical hermeneutics* or *special hermeneutics*). The term can also refer to a branch of philosophy which examines how human beings make meaning and communicate through texts (*general hermeneutics* or *philosophical hermeneutics*).

cording to the divine Scriptures? They have (you say) also interpreted the Scriptures. What if they erred in their interpretation, as well as in their life and writings?" WA 8:484; translation appears in Mark D. Thompson, *A Sure Ground on Which to Stand: The Relation of Authority and Interpretive Method in Luther's Approach to Scripture* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 254–255.

General hermeneutics is a close cousin to other important areas in philosophy: the study of how we know what we know (*epistemology*), the search for what it means to be a human being (*anthropology*), and the field that examines how we use signs in human communication (*semiotics*). Here, I want to leverage the tools of general hermeneutics to defend the clarity of Scripture and a commonsense approach to biblical interpretation. Though some of the hermeneutical philosophers who shape my thinking here do not share my evangelical worldview, many of the assertions they make about texts and readers are consistent with what Scripture says about God's self-communication, about human nature, and about the world God has made.[7]

Theologians sometimes ignore the detours through philosophy so they can jump straight into the fray of exegetical debate, but questions related to general hermeneutics loom large over everything we do in interpreting the Bible and developing doctrine: *What are texts? What is the role of the reader in interpretation? Where does the meaning of a text come from—the author, the reader, or the text itself? What is the right way to read a text? The wrong way?* Answers to these questions usually fall into one of two categories: *author-oriented* or *reader-centered* hermeneutical approaches. Author-oriented approaches to interpretation seek to understand the meaning of a text created by the author. Reader-centered approaches put the onus of creating meaning on the individual reader or reading community. Clarity on these matters is crucial in a postmodern climate where exclusive truth claims are ignored or dismissed, sometimes even among self-described Christians.

Most Christian theologians throughout the history of interpretation have gravitated toward a commonsense hermeneutic that gives the authorship of biblical texts pride of place in interpretation. Before the dawn of modernity, readers usually took for granted the ability of authors to convey meaning through written texts. Even the medieval theologians who affirmed the "fourfold sense of Scripture" (i.e., its literal, typological, moral, and analogical senses) prioritized the "literal sense"

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7. Truth shared between believers and nonbelievers flows out of common grace. The inclusion of hermeneutical philosophy in a discussion on theological method does not make theology or the interpretation of Scripture subservient to such philosophical discussions. Instead, my aim is to appropriate the tools of "hermeneutical realism" as an ancillary complement to the truth of God's word. See Alister E. McGrath, *A Scientific Theology*, vol. 2, *Reality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 200–201.

of the authors in their interpretation of the Bible. As Thomas Aquinas explains, "The literal sense is indeed what the author intends."[8] Hugh of St. Victor encouraged readers of Scripture to give preference to the meaning "which appears certain to have been intended by the author."[9] Medieval interpreters may have believed the Bible can mean more than what its original human authors intended, but certainly not any less.

The Protestant Reformers downplayed the other three senses of interpretation but agreed with medieval theologians that interpreters should seek to understand Scripture's literal sense.[10] The Reformers' approach to biblical texts later came to be known as the *grammatical-historical method*. Contrary to what its name might imply, the grammatical-historical "method" is not so much a step-by-step methodology for biblical interpretation as it is a general orientation toward Scripture. Advocates of the grammatical-historical method see their primary task to be interpreting Scripture in its original linguistic and historical contexts without calling into question its claims. Interpreters in this vein presume the truthfulness of Scripture and receive the claims of biblical authorship in good faith.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, the practice of biblical interpretation began drifting away from the grammatical-historical emphasis on the discovery of authorial intent toward a *historical-critical method*. Modernists asserted that human beings were capable of mastery over their world, which entailed taking the Bible captive as an object of critical study. Instead of taking the intentions of biblical authors at their face value, these modernist interpreters sought to reconstruct the message of the Bible for Enlightenment-era humanity.[11]

The theologians and biblical scholars of modernity did not deny biblical texts the ability to convey authorial meaning, but they did deny these authors any authority over their lives. They rejected the

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8. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1.1.10; quoted in Thompson, *Sure Ground on Which to Stand*, 41–42.

9. Hugh of St. Victor, *De Scripturis et Scriptoribus Sacris* 6; quoted in Thompson, *Sure Ground on Which to Stand*, 41–42.

10. For a brief overview of this development in Protestant hermeneutics, see Anthony C. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 124–133.

11. For an excellent critical history of this period in hermeneutics and biblical scholarship, see Stephen Neil and N. T. Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament, 1861–1986*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

supernatural worldview of biblical authors as an artifact from the primitive past—something that needed to be "demythologized" rather than embraced.[12] They presumed they were in a place to understand biblical texts even better than the authors because they were in a better place to judge the authors' historical and cultural biases.[13] Many of these modernist figures embraced *positivism*, the belief in an individual's ability to have indisputable knowledge of the world around them. But they naively (and ironically) believed biblical writers were tainted by subjective, imperfect knowledge from an archaic worldview while maintaining that they themselves were being neutral, objective, and empirical in their own beliefs. Modernists asserted their ability to read Scripture without presuppositions while grumbling about the biased, "dogmatic" interpretations of orthodox Christians.[14]

On the other side of the hermeneutical spectrum lies a group of interpreters who stress subjectivity to the point that they deny the ability to know anything about what a text really means. Traditional notions about authorial intent came under scrutiny in twentieth-century literary criticism, in wave after wave of text-centered and reader-centered literary approaches such as the New Criticism, Deconstruction, Poststructuralism, and radical Reader-Response Criticism. Representatives of these schools believe readers or reading communities, not authors, ultimately determine the meaning of texts. They maintain that the structure of human language and the nature of interpretation prevents us from discovering the meanings of texts as intended by their authors.

Biblical scholars and theologians under the influence of these postmodern theories reject the notion that the Bible has a fixed meaning that its readers can discover.[15] In the words of the postmodern New Testament scholar Dale Martin,

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12. When I teach about demythologization in twentieth-century New Testament scholarship, I require my students to read Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1958). This book gives readers a clear introduction to the thought of one of the most influential voices of twentieth-century neo-liberal theology. As with many other liberal writers of his time, Bultmann believes himself to be doing Christianity a favor by providing an apologetic for the faith appealing to the scientific, modern mind.

13. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts*, ed. Heinz Kimmerle, trans. James Duke and Jack Forstman (Atlanta: Scholars, 1999), 113.

14. N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 32–34. Wright calls this modernist mind-set "naïve realism."

15. Dale B. Martin, *Biblical Truths: The Meaning of Scripture in the Twenty-First Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 96.

> Learning to interpret the Bible in seminary is pictured as learn-
> ing how to open the box, unpack and perhaps discard the rather
> useless packing materials, and pull the meaning out of the text.
> . . . The meaning . . . is objectively in there, simply hidden in the
> container of the text. . . . Texts are not just containers that hold
> meaning. The meaning of a text is a result of the interpretive
> process itself, which is not possible apart from the activities of
> human interpreters. . . . All readings of texts in fact are the mak-
> ing of meaning.[16]

Martin insists we can't get into the minds of authors, nor can we
capture their intentions. We come to texts with our own interpretive
frameworks and agendas. Interpreters do not "discover" meaning;
they *create* it every time they take up a book to read.[17]

By denying an author his or her place of determining the meaning
of a text, text-centered and reader-centered hermeneutics undermine
the prospect of recovering a "correct" reading of a text. Appeals to
the author or the text itself cannot resolve our feuds about the mean-
ing of the text because meaning is not in the text. For radical Reader-
Response interpreters, one reading of a text is just as valid as another.[18]
This means the Bible offers no "right" answers for our doctrinal dis-
putes. There is no "biblical position" on marriage or human sexual-
ity, or any other subject for that matter.[19] The atheist, the right-wing
Catholic, and the left-wing Protestant can all come to the same passage
and create drastically different meanings if neither the text nor the
author provides a means to adjudicate between the readings.

These postmodern biblical scholars claim our hermeneutical
and theological diversity as evidence for their belief that texts have
no meaning and no way of communicating authorial purpose. But

16. Dale B. Martin, *Pedagogy of the Bible: An Analysis and Proposal* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 30.

17. Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 4–7.

18. More moderate versions of Reader-Response Theory speak of ways in which authors in-tentionally invite readers in to actualize potential meanings latent in the texts. For an overview of the differences between radical and moderate forms of Reader-Response Theory, see Anthony C. Thiselton, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 25; Thiselton, *Hermeneu-tics*, 29–34, 306–325.

19. For a sampling of these postmodern readings on sexuality in the Bible, see Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*; Jennifer Knust, *Unprotected Texts: The Bible's Surprising Contradictions about Sex and Desire* (New York: HarperOne, 2011).

interpretive disputes need not lead to the drastic conclusion that texts have no meaning or that authors are incapable of expressing their desires. Far from it. The very fact that we have impassioned debates about the meanings of literary works shows that we intuitively presume them to bear meaning and purpose. We have dissenting opinions because we intuitively believe there is a right way and a wrong way to make sense of what we read.

Evangelicals reject both the modernist claim that we can lord it over the biblical text via the historical-critical method and the postmodernist assertion that biblical texts have no meanings apart from the meanings we give them. As John Webster and others have shown, the evangelical doctrine of Scripture flows out of the doctrine of God.[20] The triune God is a communicative agent who has willed to disclose himself to his creatures through the means of human language to bring about his desired ends.[21] In his sovereign providence, God inspired people with unique personalities in various historical settings to produce a clear message that is wholly his. Our affirmation of biblical authority is not the claim that an autonomous text has authority over our lives but an affirmation of God's authority expressed through human writers. The twin interpretive heresies of modernism and postmodernism which deny the divine authorship of Scripture are ultimately denials of the lordship of Christ.

Our interpretation of Scripture begins with two important hermeneutical assumptions that are true of every form of human communication. The first is *hermeneutical realism*. On this view, all texts have meanings "independent of the process of interpretation" because authors create those meanings.[22] The implication for biblical interpretation is clear: Belief in the inspiration and authority of Scripture would be futile if its divine authorship could not convey meaning through human language. If human language is incapable of communicating the intentions of authors, then God sent the prophets on a fool's errand when he commanded them to write down his word (1 Sam.

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20. John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
21. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 179–294.
22. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 48.

10:25; Isa. 30:8; Hag. 1:3). Worse yet, we are powerless to "hear the word of the LORD" (2 Kings 7:1; cf. Isa. 1:10; Jer. 10:1; Hos. 4:1). If authors cannot communicate meaning through texts, then reader or reading community would have the final say on matters of doctrine and practice, not the "men [who] spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet. 1:21).

Second, we must own our *limits and shortcomings* as interpreters of Scripture.[23] The second principle complements the first. As Richard Lints explains, "If truth can be known, then there must be some mechanism to explain why everyone does not agree with that truth."[24] This commonsense approach to interpretation is both an affirmation of *objective meaning* in texts and a recognition that understanding must come through *subjective interpretation*. The objective nature of texts means they can be read either correctly or incorrectly. The subjective nature of interpretation means that comprehension is fallible and open to revision or correction.[25]

"Let the Reader Understand"

Hermeneutical realism is in step with both premodern and modern intellectual traditions, which, despite their considerable differences, share affirmation of a real world outside of the mind of the observer. When applied to written texts and speech, hermeneutical realism entails the belief that authors and speakers are at least capable of communicating their meanings and intended purposes through writing and speech. Texts have meaning independent of their interpreters.

Biblical authors themselves testify to their ability to communicate their purposes through written texts. Commonplace writings and historical documents detailed in the Bible evidenced their belief in the ability of texts to convey the meaning of authors.[26] Elsewhere, God commanded Moses to write down clear words that would become the

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23. Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, 6 vols. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1999), 4:316.

24. Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 21.

25. Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 32–37; Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 300–302; 320–323.

26. See 1 Samuel 10:25; 2 Samuel 1:18; 11:14–15; 1 Kings 11:41; 14:19, 29; 16:14, 20; 2 Kings 1:18; 8:23; 1 Chronicles 28:19; 2 Chronicles 2:11; 35:4; Ezra 4:7; Esther 4:8; 8:8, 13; Ezekiel 13:9; Malachi 3:16.

basis of the covenant with Israel (Ex. 34:27). To his original audience in Corinth, Paul writes, "For *we do not write you anything other than what you can read and also understand*. But I hope that you will understand completely" (2 Cor. 1:13 NET; cf. 1 Cor. 4:14). The gospel of John has a clear statement of purpose: "These [things] are written *so that you may believe* that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, *and that by believing you may have life* in his name" (John 20:31). Luke unambiguously states his intention to write clear and orderly accounts of the life of Jesus and his earliest followers (Luke 1:1–4; Acts 1:1). Consequently, the postmodern rejection of authorial intention is contrary to the explicit statements of biblical authors.

Premodern and modern thinkers also believed that the world was inherently rational, meaning it was capable of being perceived by the mind. Because hermeneutical realists presume that all written texts are the products of their authors, laden with the intentions of authors to do something with their words, they likewise assert that normally functioning human minds are at least capable of retrieving or reconstructing meaning in a way that is faithful to an author's design for a text. This assertion does not mean that readers climb deep into the psyche of authors or that they necessarily understand their unstated motivations for writing. Rather, it means that interpreters are capable of receiving the communication writers and speakers intend to express.

Using the resources of philosophy and literary criticism, evangelical biblical scholars and theologians have mounted numerous lines of defense against the postmodern critics of hermeneutical realism.[27] Many have built upon the work of American literary critic E. D. Hirsch Jr., whose 1967 publication *Validity in Interpretation* served as an apologetic for the intent of the author and the determinate meaning of texts. There, Hirsch advocated a strict distinction between the *meaning* of a text and its *significance*. For the early Hirsch, the *meaning* of a text was something fixed by the author by his or her particular use of language. *Significance*, by contrast, is the unique way a reader approaches the fixed meaning of a text, how she applies it to her life situation. The

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27. The most comprehensive defense of hermeneutical realism to date is Vanhoozer's *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, in which Vanhoozer systematically responds to the reader-centered approaches of New Criticism, Deconstruction, and Reader-Response Theory.

author-intended meaning of a text does not change, but a text can be applied in numerous ways in new contexts.[28]

Though appreciative of Hirsch's work as a whole, Christian hermeneutics scholar Anthony Thiselton calls Hirsch's dichotomy between meaning and significance "grossly over-simple, over-general" and incapable of serving as "a panacea for all hermeneutical headaches."[29] Thiselton understands faithful interpretation of Scripture to be more than the mere rediscovery of a past authorial intent, because the "past" could easily be defined as closed off to the present.[30] Interpreters of the Bible engage with the divine-human authorship of the text and obey it. Though the books of the Bible were written by human authors in historical settings far removed from our own, the divine author of the Bible still speaks directly to us through Scripture. The reader is in a covenantal relationship with the divine author of Scripture, not with an objectified statement about the text's meaning.

To understand the Bible in the way its authorship intends us to, we must seek to *apply* it, not just grasp its cognitive content. Biblical authors commanded this: "Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves" (James 1:22; cf. Josh. 1:7–8; 2 Kings 17:37; John 13:17; Rom. 2:13). The reader of the Bible who puts himself under its authority seeks to experience its transforming power. He wants to see the world in the same way the divinely inspired authors of the text see it, not simply recreate its significance for himself in the present.

One helpful amendment to Hirsch's work has been built on the insights of speech-act theory. Developed by philosophers of language, speech-act theory was initially meant to describe the way language works, not to prescribe a model for interpretation, but hermeneutics scholars have called upon its resources to help defend authorial intent. According to speech-act theory, every time a person speaks, writes, or

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28. E. D. Hirsch Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967), 8. Hirsch moved away from this clear-cut distinction between *meaning* and *significance* in his later writings, though his modified position still gave authorial intent priority in interpretation. See E. D. Hirsch Jr., "Meaning and Significance Reinterpreted," *Critical Inquiry* 11 (1984): 202–225.

29. Anthony C. Thiselton, "'Behind' and 'in Front of' the Text: Language, Reference, and Indeterminacy," in *After Pentecost: Language and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Craig Bartholomew, Colin Greene, and Karl Möller (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 103. See also Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 259–265.

30. Thiselton, "'Behind' and 'in Front of' the Text," 332–333.

uses nonverbal communicative signs, he or she intends *to do something with those words or signs*.[31] Every speech-act, whether written or spoken, has at least three components:

- the words said or written (the *locution* or *locutionary act*),
- the intent or purpose of writing (the *illocution* or *illocutionary act*),
- the intended effect of the words on the hearer or reader (the *perlocution* or *perlocutionary act*).[32]

The sentence you are presently reading is a speech-act intended by this author to illustrate the way speech-acts work. If it succeeds, then the words written on my laptop (the locutionary act) will accomplish my communicative purpose (illocutionary act) and the reader will have a better grasp on the subject (perlocutionary act). Not every speech act is an effort to inform or explain. With words, speakers/authors can also attempt to persuade, question, challenge, taunt, threaten, mislead, deceive, insult, promise, bless, or curse.[33] Some speech-acts can even *create new worlds* or *new states of affairs*, such as God speaking creation into being with the phrase "Let there be" (Gen. 1:3, 6, 14), a judge delivering a guilty verdict, or a minister pronouncing a couple "husband and wife."

When the purpose of the writer and the effect on the reader align, what J. L. Austin calls a "happy" speech-act occurs.[34] A happy speech-act does not mean that the reader/hearer always agrees with the author/speaker, but it does mean that the reader/listener has successfully understood the author's/speaker's intent or purpose. On other occasions, the intended effect and the actual effect did not align, resulting in miscommunication. Even when miscommunication occurs, it does not mean that author/speakers are incapable of communicating their meanings.

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31. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962); John Searle, *Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

32. A fourth component I could list is the *propositional act*, a development made by Searle that describes the extra-linguistic reference of a speech-act. See Searle, *Speech Acts*, 24–25. This element simply means that every speech-act has reference to some state of affairs, real or imaginary. The imperative statement "Sit in the chair" makes sense only if the speaker believes the proposition, "Chairs exist."

33. Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 299.

34. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 14ff.

Biblical scholars and theologians have made use of speech-act theory to describe the nature of texts, the nature of interpretation, and the theological task in new ways.[35] One of the key figures in this trend, Kevin Vanhoozer, defines a text as a "communicative action fixed by writing."[36] In general hermeneutics, every reader is responsible for working to understand what the author is trying to do with his or her text. In special or biblical hermeneutics, the interpreter is trying to make sense of Scripture's "human-divine communicative actions that do many different things."[37] The Bible presents us with many different genres, and the divine-human authorship of Scripture seeks various responses from its readership, depending on the genre and the text. The reader under biblical authority desires to understand the illocutions (communicative purposes) of Scripture and to act or react in ways consistent with the perlocutionary acts that the authors desire.

Though speech-act theory has its limitations and is not in and of itself a be-all, end-all method of biblical interpretation, it can be a helpful supplement to traditional author-oriented hermeneutics. It does not account for whether authors/speakers are telling the truth, nor does it prescribe a step-by-step method of interpretation. Speech-act theory modestly offers a commonsense description of the way writers use words to convey meaning or produce results. It not only describes the place of the author/speaker but accounts for how misinterpretation can take place.[38] Both are important for the present discussion.

"Lean Not unto Thine Own Understanding"

Though human beings are capable of communication through words and sentences, not every attempt at such communication succeeds. Writers sometimes fail to communicate their intentions. (I have seen

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35. See Richard S. Briggs, *Words in Action: Speech Act Theory and Biblical Interpretation, Toward a Hermeneutic of Self-Involvement* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001); Dietmar Neufeld, *Reconceiving Texts as Speech Acts: An Analysis of John* (Leiden: Brill, 1994); Daniel J. Treier, *Virtue and the Voice of God: Toward Theology as Wisdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006); James Wm. McClendon Jr. and James M. Smith, *Convictions: Defusing Religious Relativism* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity, 2002), 47–79.

36. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 229.

37. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture, and Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 151.

38. Speech-act theory is not without its evangelical critics. See Gregory Alan Thornbury, *Recovering Classical Evangelicalism: Applying the Wisdom and Vision of Carl F. H. Henry* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 112–114. I respond to some of these criticisms in my book, *In Defense of Doctrine: Evangelicalism, Theology, and Scripture* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 276–279.

my own unintended mistakes in print!) Diplomacy fails because of linguistic and cultural misunderstanding. Lovers can spat when they don't successfully communicate their intentions and feelings. (Sometimes, in a disagreement, I tell my wife that her perlocutionary act isn't matching up with my illocutionary act. That always goes over very well!) Bottom line: both human speakers and human hearers are capable of error and misunderstanding. The purpose of words spoken or written can be lost in the shuffle, because of either the incompetence of the speaker/writer or the misunderstanding of the hearer/reader.

Human interpreters are creatures gifted with rationality, intelligence, creativity, self-awareness, and adaptability, but they also have limitations and impediments to their understandings of written and spoken texts. This is true in every instance of human communication, including our attempts to make sense of Scripture. Though Christians make unique claims about Scripture's full truthfulness and infallibility, this affirmation does not guarantee infallible and inerrant interpretations on our part. We assert the inerrancy of Scripture, but we cannot make the same claims about its readership. Readers are prone to error and are limited in their capacity for understanding.[39]

Our interpretation is fallible for several reasons. *First, human reason is limited.* We are flawed, fragile creatures in the presence of an almighty God who is unfathomable through ordinary means. Scripture talks plainly about the inability of human beings to have complete understanding of the world or of God's works:

> When I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how neither day nor night do one's eyes see sleep, then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out. Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out. (Eccles. 8:16–17)

No matter how much we may toil in seeking the knowledge of God in this world, there are things we cannot know or understand (Job 11:7;

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39. In the words of John Locke, "Though every thing said in the [Old and New Testament] Text be infallibly true, yet the Reader may be, nay cannot chuse but be, very fallible in the understanding of it" (Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch [New York: Oxford University Press, 1975], 3.10.23 [489–490]).

Isa. 55:8–9; Rom. 11:33–34). Our knowledge of God is already limited to what he reveals, but on top of that, we are capable of altogether misconstruing his revelation!

Hermeneutical philosophers label this creaturely limitation the *finitude* of the interpreter. The interpreter is finite in intellect, limited to his time and place, and did not choose the culture that shaped his thinking.[40] We interpret Scripture with our fallible reasoning processes, and we can misinterpret Scripture even when we have the best of intentions. Some Christian theologians blame these interpretive limitations on the brokenness of the world following the fall of humanity, while others suggest that this interpretive finitude reflects our essential creatureliness. Some theologians submit that God can help us overcome our limitations as interpreters by the work of his Spirit, while others propose that God purposely made us with innate epistemic limitations to remind us of our status as creatures.[41]

The mind is *selective* in its attentions and limited in its *capacity* to retain information.[42] This pervasive inability to recollect details casts a shadow over interpretation. The brain, like a computer with low RAM, also has difficulty *processing too many details at once*, which means we cannot always consider every significant factor in interpretation at the same time. A lack of *topical knowledge* can hinder our ability to reason through the meaning of a biblical text.[43] Some interpreters have more *procedural knowledge* than others.[44] (I know many Hebrew and Greek scholars far more adept than I am at translation and syntax! I also know several analytic theologians whose brains seem to work much, much faster than mine.) Education can help overcome some of these limits of intelligence, but these handicaps still affect our ability to grasp some texts.

Second, we interpret texts with our own ingrained cultural and personal perspectives that color our readings. Every reader must acknowledge his or her own subjectivity, even when trying to make

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40. See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962); Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2004).

41. For an evaluation of these competing perspectives, see James K. A. Smith, *The Fall of Interpretation: Philosophical Foundations for a Creational Hermeneutic*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012).

42. See Stephen K. Reed, *Cognition*, 4th ed. (Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1996), 50–78.

43. Raymond S. Nickerson, *Reflections on Reasoning* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1986), 15.

44. Nickerson, *Reflections on Reasoning*, 16.

sense of biblical or doctrinal statements that are objectively true. We do not read books, watch television, or look at art as blank slates, nor do we come to the biblical text as neutral observers who passively receive what it offers us. Instead, we are active readers who come to texts with our own unique questions, experiences, and presuppositions. Years of enculturation, family background, language training, and personality development coalesce to create our subjective *horizon* or frame of reference.

In its most literal sense, the word *horizon* refers to the line in a field of vision where earth and sky seem to touch. Metaphorically, horizon describes an individual's perception of the world.[45] When someone tells us that we need to "broaden" our horizons, we typically take this to mean that we need to try a new experience, like a new food or a new hobby, or that we need to try looking at things from another point of view. In the same way that a visual horizon is limited by a person's field of vision, her perspective of reality is constrained by her geography, her culture, and her milieu. God makes the sovereign choice of when and where in history and culture his creatures will live and develop intellectually (Acts 17:26). We cannot see future events, and we can only make sense of the past through the point of view of our present horizon.

Our experiences, our families, our education, and our cultures can have a cumulative effect in shaping not only our points of view on particular issues but also our entire worldview. In the same way that the literal horizon can change with the earth's rotation beneath our feet, the passing of time can change our metaphorical horizons. A change in our cultural location can change the vantage point of our beliefs.[46] The evangelical missiologist Lesslie Newbigin recognized the challenges that our cultural limitations impose on our reading of Scripture:

> We read the Bible in our own language and it is full of resonances which arise from past cultural experience. Where do I find the stance from which I can look at myself from the point of view of

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45. Since the nineteenth century, philosophers have used the metaphor of *horizon* to portray the limitations of our perspectives and the way our perspectives change. According to Gadamer, Friedrich Nietzsche, Wilhelm Dilthey, and Edmund Husserl all use *Horizont* to "characterize the way in which thought is tied to its finite determinacy, and the way one's range of vision is gradually expanded" (Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 301).

46. Ben F. Meyer, *Reality and Illusion in New Testament Scholarship: A Primer in Critical Realist Hermeneutics* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994), 50.

the Bible when my reading of the Bible is itself so much shaped by the person that I am, formed by my culture? . . . All our reading of the Bible and all our Christian discipleship are necessarily shaped by the cultures which have formed us.[47]

Though our cultural backgrounds and settings shape who we are as readers, they are not deterministic rulers over our interpretation of the Bible. As we grow in our knowledge, our frame of reference and cultural presuppositions can change as well.[48]

Everyone reads the Bible through a kind of *narrative framework*, or story. Scour through Amazon reviews of any best-selling Christian book on traditional marriage and you will find a litany of complaints for any author who takes seriously Paul's command for wives to submit to their own husbands (Eph. 5:22). These readers find traditional views of sex and marriage oppressive and outmoded ways of thinking. They reject Paul's instruction here, believing it to be "patriarchal," "fundamentalist," or "misogynistic." Believing marriage to be primarily about personal fulfillment, they might also wince at the suggestion that husbands should love their wives self-sacrificially like Jesus loves the church (v. 25). As evangelical Christians, we also recognize that we read the Bible within a narrative framework. But we have consciously chosen the narrative we believe the Bible to be spelling out for us: creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. We take these commands seriously because we buy into the narrative Paul is laying out for us.

The people of God want Scripture, not culture or tradition, to have the final say over the content of doctrine, but the natural limitations posed by our horizons mean that theology is an exercise always shaped by time, place, and culture. Our readings of Scripture are always laden with presuppositions.[49] We never think or write about God in a vacuum or from some remote, detached location. Many of the questions we seek to answer in theology are shaped by our cultural settings.

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47. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 196.

48. William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 239–241.

49. Evangelicals consciously embrace presuppositions like the authority of Scripture, inerrancy, etc., when reading the Bible. Rather than presupposing the possibility of error, we presume that any tensions or apparent contradictions can be resolved when the text is interpreted properly.

The way in which we proclaim the unchanging gospel message is always contingent on our setting and audience. We have good precedent for this type of contextual presentation. Biblical authors, too, wrote in human languages and from specific cultural settings to address real-world problems. Yes, these authors spoke for God, and yes, the truthfulness of what they wrote extends far beyond their original time, intended audiences, and cultural settings, but they also model for us ways of making God's word speak in fresh and relevant ways to our own ministry contexts.

Third, the historical, cultural, geographical, and linguistic distance between biblical authors and their contemporary readers can make grasping the meaning of biblical texts difficult.[50] Years ago I had a student from Taiwan who told me that he took it upon himself to learn the rules of American football so that he could understand the sermon illustrations at the church he attended during seminary. Not only was this student having to listen to sermons in a second language, but he also had to learn the rules of the sport to decipher the pastor's sermon! (Gridiron football is, after all, an important staple here in the southern United States.) The distance between the Taiwanese seminary student and the pastor from the southern United States was more than geographical; it was cultural. If this interpretive difficulty is true of people who live in the same time and place, it is even more complicated for readers of the Bible who are trying to understand two- and three-millennia-old books!

Interpretation happens where our horizons meet the horizons of the text. Contemporary Westerners do not view the world in the same ways ancient Near Eastern and first-century Christians did. In order to come into the Bible in the right way, we have to understand the ways in which its setting and its cultures are unlike our own.[51] The historical distance between the reader and the Bible means that the interpreter should spend considerable time developing the skills and ascertaining the background knowledge needed to make sense of the text.[52] Biblical

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50. See Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 53–59.

51. For a helpful overview of particular ways in which Western culture distorts biblical interpretation, see E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012).

52. Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 25.

interpreters can always benefit from a better grasp of ancient agrarian cultures, honor and shame dynamics, economies in the biblical world, purity practices, and a host of other issues phone-addicted twenty-first-century Christians normally have difficulty fathoming.[53]

Fourth, we have our own unique preunderstandings of texts that we bring to them. That is to say, we begin with assumptions about a text before we start to read or interpret it. We don't usually start a book or a movie or a biblical passage without some sort of "big-picture" concept of what it is about, even if that preunderstanding is completely incorrect. We have an initial preunderstanding of a text as a whole that we bring to its particular parts. When we interpret the parts, it reshapes the way we understand the whole. This is what is sometimes called the "hermeneutical circle" or "hermeneutical spiral."

Oftentimes postmodern scholars suspect these preunderstandings have a determining influence that keeps us from ever getting at the authorial meaning of a text. As noted above, I do not believe that to be the case. However, we must work to be keenly aware of our assumptions, whether they are shaped by a culture or a theological tradition, and we must be willing and ready to make sense of the text on its own terms. When we read those with whom we disagree, we should practice charitable reading that seeks to understand the author in the fairest light. When we read Scripture, we must be willing to lay aside our presumptions and let the text correct our misunderstandings.

Finally, we can also admit that sin can affect our interpretation of Scripture by distorting its meaning with our selfish desires and prejudices. The Bible repeatedly stresses the negative effects of the fall on human thinking, what theologians call the "noetic effects of sin." Those who live according to their sinful desires have minds set on those desires, and their minds are hostile to God (Rom. 8:5–7). Unbelievers are incapable of "seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ" because the god of this age has blinded their minds (2 Cor. 4:4). As a result of their sin, they regard the word of God a

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53. For introductory surveys of these topics, see David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship, and Purity: Unlocking the New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000); Richard L. Rohrbaugh, ed., *The Social Sciences and New Testament Interpretation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996).

"strange thing" (Hos. 8:11–12). Believers also endure the effects of sin on the mind, and their minds are in need of renewal (Rom. 12:1–2; Eph. 4:20–24). But as Stephen Moroney remarks, the Bible does not explicitly say how human thinking is corrupted by sin and what the renewal of the mind does to alleviate these effects.[54]

The human heart is prone to self-deception (Jer. 17:9; cf. Prov. 14:12; 28:26). Interpreters can likewise be guilty of reading texts in self-serving ways. For this reason, biblical interpreters need to practice something akin to what Paul Ricoeur called a *hermeneutic of suspicion*. By a "hermeneutic of suspicion," I do not mean readers should mistrust Scripture itself or that they should call into question its truthfulness (i.e., the kind of suspicion modeled by Nietzsche).[55] Rather, Bible readers should be aware of the ways in which their own motives and prejudices can keep them from a correct understanding of the Bible. Every follower of Jesus should practice a *hermeneutic of submission* that minimizes the role of self in interpretation and submits to the divine authority behind the text. In this way, we truly practice the authority of Scripture, by prayerfully acknowledging our weakness and asking God to correct our faulty or sinful assumptions about the content of Scripture.

Our doctrinal disputes are indicative of the fact that readers can be wrong about their respective interpretations of the Bible, but followers of Christ are not without hope. Not only do we receive God's grace in interpretation—grace that enables us to know God despite our frailties and weaknesses as interpreters—we also have the promise of a day when we will understand more completely. Paul depicts our present knowledge of God as a pale reflection our future, more complete knowledge of God. One day, instead of looking into the mirror, we shall see God face to face, and our knowledge of God will be without dispute among one another. "Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known" (1 Cor. 13:12b).

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54. Stephen K. Moroney, *The Noetic Effects of Sin: A Historical and Contemporary Exploration of How Sin Affects Our Thinking* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2000), 90.

55. Alan Jacobs contrasts this unhealthy hermeneutic of suspicion with healthy discernment in *A Theology of Reading: The Hermeneutic of Love* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2001), 88–89. Jacobs notes that in a Christian worldview, everyone is a "neighbor" but not every neighbor is a good neighbor, nor should every neighbor be trusted as a friend. Discernment, not a hermeneutic of suspicion, helps us make that distinction.

The Clear Meaning of Scripture and Interpretive Disagreement

The contemporary affirmation of hermeneutical realism is consistent with a doctrine held dearly by Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, and most within the Protestant tradition: the *clarity* (or *perspicuity*) *of Scripture*.[56] The doctrine of the clarity of Scripture is a statement about Scripture's sufficiency as a source of divine truth. It developed as a response to the late medieval Roman Catholic Church's claim that the Bible is in need of authoritative ecclesial interpretation because it is too obscure and too complicated for untrained laypersons to interpret for themselves.[57] To the contrary, Zwingli declares, "God's Word can be understood by a man without any human direction."[58] For Luther, this doctrine was "the very first principle . . . by which everything else has to be proved."[59] But if Scripture is so clear, then why do Christians so often disagree about how best to interpret it?

Somewhat ironically, the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture can be easily misunderstood. An oversimplified version of the doctrine parallels simplistic and unhelpful versions of the doctrines of inspiration. In the same way in which the inspiration of Scripture is not mere dictation, the clarity of Scripture is not a promise of perfect comprehension apart from the hard and fallible work of hermeneutics. Furthermore, anyone who would suggest that all of Scripture is plain to anyone who reads it fails to appreciate the humanity of the Bible or its complexity.[60] Even the classical Protestant formulation plainly states that the Scriptures are "not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all."[61]

Consider the following definitions of scriptural clarity from contemporary evangelical theologians. For Wayne Grudem, the doctrine

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56. Luther lays out his doctrine of the clarity or perspicuity of Scripture in his *Bondage of the Will*. Zwingli articulates his doctrine in his 1522 sermon, "On the Clarity and Certainty of the Word of God."

57. For a masterful exposition of the development of this doctrine and a robust contemporary defense of it, see Gregg R. Allison, "The Protestant Doctrine of the Perspicuity of Scripture: A Reformulation on the Basis of Biblical Teaching," PhD diss. (Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1995); cf. Allison, *Historical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 120–141.

58. Ulrich Zwingli, "Of the Clarity and the Certainty of the Word of God," in *Zwingli and Bullinger*, ed. G. W. Bromiley (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953), 78.

59. Luther, *On the Bondage of the Will* [*De Servo Arbitrio*], in *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, ed. E. Gordon Rupp and Philip S. Watson (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 159; WA 18:653.

60. Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 196–197.

61. The Westminster Confession of Faith 1.7; see Horton, *Christian Faith*, 197.

of the clarity of Scripture means that "*the Bible is written in such a way that its teachings are able to be understood by all who will read it seeking God's help and being willing to follow it.*"[62] Gregg Allison defines the clarity of Scripture as "a property of Scripture as a whole and of each portion of Scripture whereby it is comprehensible to all believers who possess the normal acquired ability to understand oral communication and/or written discourse, regardless of their gender, age, education, language, or cultural background." Allison also adds that Scripture's clarity "requires a dependence on the Holy Spirit for Scripture to be grasped and calls for a responsive obedience to what is understood."[63] Mark Thompson summarizes the doctrine in this way: "*The clarity of Scripture is that quality of the biblical text that, as God's communicative act, ensures its meaning is accessible to all who come to it in faith*."[64] What all three of these contemporary definitions have in common are affirmations (1) that clarity is a quality or property of Scripture itself, (2) that believers can ascertain its basic meaning, and (3) that dependence on God is necessary for its understanding and application.

Yet dissenting opinions in theology and biblical interpretation have always posed a challenge to the concept of biblical clarity. In his debate with Luther over free will, Desiderius Erasmus argued that their differences stemmed from God's choice to leave some ideas in Scripture vague:

> There are some things which God has willed that we should contemplate, as we venerate himself, in mystic silence; and moreover, there are many passages in the sacred volumes about which many commentators have made guesses, but no one has finally cleared up their obscurity: as the distinction between the divine persons, the conjunction of the divine and human nature in Christ, the unforgivable sin; yet there are other things which God has willed to be most plainly evident, and such are the precepts for the good life. . . . These truths must be learned by all, but the rest are more properly committed to God, and it is

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62. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 108, italics original.
63. Allison, "Protestant Doctrine of the Perspicuity of Scripture," 516.
64. Mark D. Thompson, *A Clear and Present Word: The Clarity of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 169–170, italics original.

more religious to worship them, being unknown, than to discuss them, being insoluble.[65]

Disputed theological issues such as the doctrine of the Trinity, the unity of Christ's natures in one person, the unpardonable sin, and free will are, according to Erasmus, unsettled because Scripture is less than clear on these matters.[66] Rather than highlighting defects in human understanding, Erasmus minimized God's role as a communicative agent.

Luther does not contest Erasmus's claim that much about God remains a mystery to his creatures, but he wholeheartedly rejects Erasmus's claim that Scripture is obscure by divine design. The main subject matter of Scripture is so clear and so accessible that any interpreter who brings due diligence to the duty of interpreting the text can make sense of its meaning. Luther labels this quality of the text the *external clarity of Scripture*. Doctrines like those mentioned by Erasmus have mysterious qualities, yes, but Scripture is not obscure in what it "simply confesses" about them. True, Scripture leaves some mystery to the inner workings of the Godhead. However, the divinely inspired authors do lay out a clear means by which interpreters can affirm the tenets that there is one God and that God is three persons.[67]

Luther's observation here parallels a distinction long held by philosophers and theologians between the *apprehension* and *comprehension* of a subject matter. To *apprehend*, which literally means, "to lay hold upon" or "seize," is the simple recognition of a mental object as truthful or factual. *Apprehension* is the most basic level of understanding. To *comprehend*, by contrast, is to "take it all in," to have exhaustive knowledge or understanding of an object.[68] Luther's distinction between the belief of what Scripture confesses about God

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65. Desiderius Erasmus, *On the Freedom of the Will* [*De Libero Arbitrio*], in *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, ed. E. Gordon Rupp and Philip S. Watson (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 39–40.

66. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 181.

67. Luther, *On the Bondage of the Will*, 112; WA 18:551–787.

68. See Richard Chenevix Trench, *On the Study of Words* (New York, 1856), 185. As Trench (1807–1886) distinguishes these categories, "We 'apprehend' many truths which we do not 'comprehend.' The great mysteries of our faith, the doctrine, for instance, of the Holy Trinity—we lay hold upon it (*ad prehendo*), we hang upon it, our souls live by it; but we do not take it all in, we do not 'comprehend' it; for it is a necessary attribute of God that He is incomprehensible; if He were not so He would not be God, or the being that comprehended him would be God also. But it also belongs to the idea of God that He may be 'apprehended,' though not 'comprehended' by His reasonable creatures; He has made them to know Him, though not to know Him all, to 'apprehend' though not to 'comprehend' Him."

and a full understanding of it reflects Augustine's important maxim about theological knowledge: "We are speaking of God; what marvel, if thou do not comprehend? For if thou comprehend, He is not God. Be there a pious confession of ignorance, rather than a rash profession of knowledge. To reach to God in any measure by the mind, is a great blessedness; but to comprehend Him, is altogether impossible."[69] We may be able to apprehend divine truth, but we cannot comprehend God. God cannot be mastered by our finite minds.

Another objection to Scripture's clarity comes from the number of difficult texts in the Bible and the recognition of the need for interpretation in the Bible (Acts 8:30–31; cf. Isa. 53:7–8). How do we harmonize biblical clarity with Peter's observation that the letters of Paul contain "some things in them that are hard to understand" (2 Pet. 3:16)? Luther grants that there are difficult passages in Scripture but maintains that they are difficult to understand because of our own frailties and limitations as interpreters, not because God has in any way failed to communicate clearly.[70] As Allison makes note, the clarity of Scripture does not mean that "all of Scripture and each part of Scripture is easily understandable, only that it is intelligible." Certain portions of Scripture that pose interpretive difficulties to readers are "'hard to understand,' not impossible."[71]

Biblical authors do not explicitly teach a doctrine of the clarity of Scripture, but it is an implication of what they say about inspiration: "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16–17). The Scriptures provide everything needed "to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15). The divine inspiration of Scripture ensures its profitableness and sufficiency for doctrine, correction, and obedience. Since "God is not a God of confusion but of peace" (1 Cor. 14:33), his written revelation—intended to equip us for every good work—was inspired with the purpose of expressing everything we need to know in order to be obedient followers of Jesus.[72]

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69. Augustine, *Sermons* 67.5 [117.3.5]; *NPNF*[1] 6:459.
70. Luther, *On the Bondage of the Will*, 110; WA 18:606.
71. Allison, "Protestant Doctrine of the Perspicuity of Scripture," 519.
72. Thompson, *Sure Ground on Which to Stand*, 274.

The general clarity of the subject matter of Scripture does not guarantee a perfect, automatic understanding of every difficulty in the biblical text. Vanhoozer observes that "Scripture's clarity does not mean that reading works *ex opere operato* ['from the work worked'], as if simply pronouncing the words magically yields understanding."[73] Kevin DeYoung states, "The doctrine of the clarity of Scripture is not a wild assertion that the meaning of every verse in the Bible will be patently obvious to everyone."[74] Mark Thompson adds, "God does not ensure that understanding is uniformly automatic or intuitive, nor has any serious affirmation of Scripture's clarity ever denied the continuing reality of difficulty at points."[75]

Every dedicated and hardworking teacher has had that student who does not pay attention in class, read his assigned books, or do his homework. The teacher cannot be blamed for that student's failure or incompetence. In the same way, our refusal or inability to listen to God does not reflect back on his ability to speak clearly to us. Biblical interpretation may be hard, messy work, and some of us struggle with it more than others, but that does not entail that God has not spoken in such a way that he can be understood by those who are willing to listen carefully.

The Illumination of the Spirit and Human Fallibility

So, how does the recognition of human fallibility square with Jesus's promises that the Holy Spirit whom he sent will "teach . . . all things" (John 14:26) and "guide . . . into all the truth" (John 16:13)? Theologians sometimes call this work of the Spirit *illumination*, the activity of the Spirit by which "believers are aided in their understanding of particular passages of Scripture."[76] Though Jesus does not speak directly about the illumination of Scripture by the Holy Spirit, the notion of scriptural illumination seems to be a proper inference from the biblical claims that Scripture preserves God's teaching (2 Tim. 3:16–17) and that the Spirit helps us understand divine truth (1 Cor. 2:10; cf. Prov. 2:3–6).

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73. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel: Retrieving the* Solas *in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2016), 113.
74. Kevin DeYoung, *Taking God at His Word* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 59.
75. Thompson, *Clear and Present Word*, 167.
76. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, 6:266.

For Luther, the affirmation of the Spirit's illumination goes hand in hand with Scripture's clarity: "For the Spirit is required for the understanding of Scripture, both as a whole and in any part of it." The Spirit's work provides for Luther what he dubs the *internal clarity* of Scripture.[77] Were it not for the external clarity of Scripture, Luther argued, there would be a need for the church to tell untrained Christians what the Bible says and what they should believe. Without the internal clarity of Scripture brought about by the work of the Spirit, men could not understand what the Bible says about their own spiritual conditions.[78]

According to Calvin, the Spirit's primary role in illumination is the confirmation of the word of God in the heart of the believer. In other words, the Spirit testifies to the truthfulness of Scripture and the interpreter's need for that truth.[79] This definition is consistent with Paul's description of divine wisdom, which contrasts the mind of the natural person who "does not accept the things of the Spirit of God" with the "spiritual person" who possesses "the mind of Christ" and the ability to discern the things of God (1 Cor. 2:14–16). The illumination of the Holy Spirit is what separates the reading of the uneducated believer who is convinced of her sin and her need for Jesus from the reading of the skeptical scholar who understands the language, composition, and historical background of the text but does not see how the text or its message fits into his own life.

Some evangelical interpreters have suggested that the illuminating work of the Spirit eliminates subjectivity and supernaturally corrects misunderstandings about the text.[80] However, as Thiselton observes, "The Holy Spirit may be said to work *through* human understanding, and not usually, if ever, through processes which bypass the considerations discussed under the heading of hermeneutics."[81] Illumination is not normally an automatic impartation of knowledge (though it is certainly within God's power to produce such knowledge). Rightly

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77. Luther, *On the Bondage of the Will*, 112; WA 18:609.
78. Thompson, *Clear and Present Word*, 228–235.
79. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.9.3.
80. Robert L. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2002), 52–53.
81. Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1980), 92.

handling the word of truth is hard work which requires diligence and endurance (2 Tim. 2:15).

Moreover, illumination does not guarantee uniformity of belief, nor does it mean that interpreters are beyond critique or revision. Grant Osborne observes how doctrinal and interpretive dissent makes this reality apparent: "By the very fact that scholars differ so greatly when interpreting the same passage, we know that God does not miraculously reveal the meaning of passages whenever they are read."[82] The desire for an interpreter to experience the illumination of the Spirit does not mean that the interpreter's work is beyond criticism, as Carl Trueman warns: "Too much emphasis on illumination as providing the content of Christian belief can render biblical interpretation an essentially gnostic activity, which places the views of those who have been 'illuminated' beyond the criticism of those who have not."[83]

The Spirit does a work in the life of the believer that enables him to receive God's message with gladness (1 Cor. 2:12–13; cf. Eph. 3:16–19), but this work does not necessarily ensure a perfect understanding of every Scripture in much the same way that the Spirit's ongoing work of sanctification does not result in instantaneous perfection in the life of the Christian. We grow in gradual holiness and in ever-deepening understanding of God's word. In *The City of God*, Augustine details four basic states human beings experience in relationship to sin and salvation, all of which have potential application to our hermeneutical shortcomings:

1. Before the fall, innocent human beings had the ability to sin or not to sin (*posse peccare, posse non peccare*).
2. After the fall and before redemption, man had the ability to sin and was unable not to sin (*non posse non peccare*).
3. After receiving the new birth but before glorification, humans were able to sin or not to sin (*posse non peccare*).
4. After glorification, the redeemed man is finally unable to sin (*non posse peccare*).[84]

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82. Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 24.
83. Carl R. Trueman, "Illumination," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Craig G. Bartholomew, Daniel J. Treier, and N. T. Wright (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005), 318.
84. Augustine, *City of God* 22.30; *NPNF*[1] 2:510.

In comparing the various ways humans experience "free will," Augustine implicitly compares the activity of the Spirit in regeneration/sanctification and in glorification. The believer before glorification has a God-given ability to act in obedience but is also capable of sin as someone who still wrestles with his depravity. The Spirit completes his work in glorification, in which a person always freely choses obedience.

It is possible to posit a similar picture of human thinking and interpretation before and after the fall that takes into account creation, grace, redemption, and eschatology. Like any work of God, there is an already/not yet tension between the present age and the age to come (Luke 17:20–21; 20:34–36).[85] The Spirit's illumination in the present age makes it possible for believers to receive the word of God as a word of truth, but this supernatural work does not ensure perfect comprehension or absorption of that word:

1. Before the fall, finite human beings had *the ability to understand and obey God's commands* or *understand and disobey God's commands* (Gen. 2:15–17; 3:1–7).[86]
2. After the fall and before the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit, the natural person was *incapable of understanding the things of God* (Job 17:4; Ps. 14:2; Isa. 6:9; Mic. 4:12; Eph. 4:18; 1 Tim. 6:4; Jude 10).
3. After the illuminating work of the Spirit but before glorification, the interpreter is able either to *grasp the meaning of revelation in Scripture* or to *misinterpret the meaning of revelation in Scripture* (Joel 2:28; Matt. 15:16; 16:11; Mark 9:32; Luke 24:25; John 20:9; 2 Cor. 1:14; 10:11; Gal. 1:4; Eph. 5:17; 2 Pet. 3:16; 1 John 5:20). The interpreter's knowledge is in an eschatological tension, *already* in possession of an imperfect knowledge of God in Christ but *not yet* having the fuller knowledge of God promised in 1 Corinthians 13:12.
4. The glorified saint, who will be able to know fully as he is fully known, is finally *unable to misinterpret God's revelation* (1 Cor. 13:12; 2 Cor. 4:18; Rev. 22:4).

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85. See George Eldon Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959), 24–51.

86. I do not mean to suggest Adam and Eve had a comprehensive understanding of the consequences of their actions—they did not yet know good or evil—but they clearly apprehended God's primary speech act ("You shall not eat"; Gen. 3:3). God's command was intelligible to them, but they chose to believe the serpent before God.

Even with the illuminating activity of the Spirit and a clearly revealed word, biblical interpreters are imperfect readers prone to error and disagreement, and they will remain so until God completes the good work he began in them on the day of Jesus Christ (Phil. 1:6).

The consummation of the kingdom of God in the eschaton will bring a more complete understanding of God to believers and unbelievers alike (Zech. 12:10; 2 Cor. 4:3–4; Phil. 2:9–10). This final removal of hindrances to knowledge will not likely give us godlike omniscience, but we will be free from sinful distortions and creaturely imperfections.[87] In the interim, we can pray for Spirit-led understanding which reflects our future, fuller knowledge in the same way that we pray for the Kingdom to come in the present age as we await its future consummation (Matt. 6:10; Luke 11:10).[88]

Conclusion

In contrast to postmodern thinkers who cast doubt on the ability of authors to communicate meaning, hermeneutical realists affirm that such communication is possible. On the other hand, naive interpreters who dogmatically confuse their understanding of the biblical texts with the texts themselves will often have difficulty coming to terms with those who challenge their opinions. Interpretive diversity abounds because human beings are frail creatures beset by natural limitations and impediments, as well as those imperfections caused by the brokenness of the present age.

True recognition of the authority of Scripture requires *openness* to ways in which it may challenge one's worldview and preconceived notions.[89] Openness to Scripture means readers must put their own interpretive interests and theological agendas under the microscope. Interpretation can be hard work, because of our limitations as readers and the distance between our present world and the world of the Bible. The challenges of interpretation do not prevent the Presbyterian teenager, the Methodist soccer mom, or the uneducated Baptist layman from ascertaining the larger narrative of Scripture summed up

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87. For thoughtful speculation about the possibilities of learning in heaven, see Randy Alcorn, *Heaven* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2004), 317–327.
88. Thiselton, *Systematic Theology*, 5–6.
89. Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 97.

in the good news of Jesus. The Spirit often provides these interpreters with a fuller understanding of Scripture than even the most erudite of professional theologians and biblical scholars, those who may be able to grapple with the historical complexities of the Bible but fail to see how its message applies to their own lives. Notwithstanding these challenges, the Bible is clear enough to bring any individual who reads it with an openness to the activity of the Spirit into an understanding sufficient unto obedience and service to God.

"Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one."

JOHN 17:11

As evangelicals, we desire to be biblical—we want our doctrine to be rooted in the Bible, our lives to be guided by the Bible, and our disagreements to be resolved by the Bible. And yet, conflicts within our church communities continue to appear and seemingly multiply with time. Interpretations of the Bible and deeply held convictions often put Christians at odds. Encouraging us toward grace in disagreement and firmness in truth, Rhyne Putman reflects on how Christians can maintain the biblical call for unity despite having genuine disagreements.

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