

WORD MADE FLESH, FLESH MADE WORD:
BEYOND THE PROTESTANT INTERPRETATION PROBLEM

By

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Chapter I

Identifying the “Protestant Interpretation Problem”: *Sola Scriptura* Hermeneutics from Luther to Barth

This project is concerned with a distinct set of hermeneutical quandaries faced by many Scripture-revering Christians, and which uniquely trouble those among them who identify as Protestant. Given that the term “Protestant” potentially blankets countless differences amongst denominational orientations, it is apposite that I specify my intended use of the term in the context of this dissertation: I employ it heuristically, and as an invitation to ongoing analysis, to refer to those Christians who would self-identify as aligning with the original Reformers’ rejection of ecclesial hierarchal sacerdotalism. I am particularly interested in the members of this group who generally align with the basic tenets of the Reformers’ *sola Scriptura* teaching, identifying the Bible as supremely authoritative as a source of divine self-disclosure and attributing to it the capacity to communicate the gospel message to every reader with equal clarity.¹ The hermeneutic difficulty facing this broad-ranging conglomerate of Protestants—whom one might identify as holding “low church/high Scripture” commitments—has been its practitioners’ historical inability, when conflicting interpretations arise, to identify together *which* interpretation is authoritative and why. Rather than moving toward consensus, Protestant fellowships have tended to splinter along lines of disagreement. Though there appear to be distinctive theological gifts that stem from Protestant willingness to part company over theological convictions,² residual dissatisfaction with such fracturing amongst Protestant practitioners attests to the persistent need for careful theological

¹ I specify this group as a Protestant subset and note their “general” alignment with *sola Scriptura* with a nod to historian C. Scott Dixon’s reminder that “theological principles such as [*sola Scriptura*] readily apply to the bulk of the mainstream tradition, but not all of the so-called radical groups accepted these principles on the terms understood by reformers such as Luther and Calvin, and indeed some rejected them altogether” in *Protestants: A History Wittenberg to Pennsylvania 1517-1740* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 6.

² Even the famously ardent Roman Catholic Hans Urs von Balthasar lauded Protestant breaking-away for its capacity to attest to revelation’s truths in a manner that *could* show Roman Catholics overlooked aspects of the faith. (I will examine Balthasar’s claim on this account in this dissertation’s fourth chapter.)

reflection upon and constructive response to current practices of biblical interpretation in these circles.

The practical question that haunts “low church/high Scripture” interpretive history appears to be this: In a Bible-centered community that has rejected the direction of a divinely guided Magisterium, can interpretive conflicts be resolved without either decentralizing Scripture or abandoning the conviction that the Bible may be read with equal clarity by every person? I identify this uncertainty as the “Protestant interpretation problem” (PIP), which both emerges from and signals a complex confluence of theological commitments and practices. This dissertation is an invitation for the reader to join in my exploration of the materialization and evolution of the PIP, as well as to join in my reflective engagement with possibilities for moving beyond it. That invitation begins in this first chapter’s outlining the historical shape of the PIP, which I present as originating in Martin Luther’s seminal “*sola*” approach to Scripture and culminating with Karl Barth’s pivotal reappropriation of the Word of God theology.³ In chapter two, I examine two influential responses to Barth’s hermeneutics that have been offered by prominent Protestant theologians, considering what is both promising and lacking in their proposals as options for moving beyond the PIP. I turn in chapters three and four to “high(er)⁴ church/high Scripture” approaches to the hermeneutic quandaries delineated in chapters one and two, identifying the resources and hazards that potentially reside within these modern applications of ancient spiritual approaches to revelatory knowledge. Finally, in chapter five, I attempt a constructive synthesis of the insights acquired by way of this dissertation’s survey with those of certain sacramental theologies. Such a constructive

³ I take Barth as the “culminating” Protestant theologian for this issue in contemporary times because, as Sarah Coakley pithily notes, Barth’s work, “with its resounding ‘*Nein!*’ uttered against secular power politics and against any attempts to moor theology in an analysis of the human, is probably still the dominating influence in new, contemporary attempts at systematic theology.” See Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay ‘On the Trinity’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 41.

⁴ By “high(er) church” I mean to signal that the thinkers upon whose work I draw express more positive views of the revelatory value of the ecclesial body than do the Reformed and Lutheran theologians, and yet they themselves have varying commitments regarding the reliability of the magisterial figures’ dictates—namely, as my analysis will hold to light, Hans Urs von Balthasar has a decidedly “higher” view of the church in this regard than does Sarah Coakley.

synthesis, I propose, holds community-building promise for Christian hermeneuts of all stripes—not least those who hope to move beyond the “Protestant interpretation problem” in faithfulness to God’s Word incarnate and encountered via Holy Scripture.

In this chapter’s material to follow, I work to supply a diachronic account of the “Word alone” hermeneutic sensibility “handed down in the living experience of Protestantism from Luther to Barth,” to borrow Louis Bouyer’s phrasing.⁵ I do so in the mode of critical-yet-appreciative inquiry—a mode that I intend to characterize my overall strategy in this project, with the particular goal in this chapter being to highlight the distinctive drawbacks *and* merits intertwined with the history of “low church/high Scripture” Protestant reading practices. I overview three critical moves in the unfolding history of Protestant hermeneutics toward that end. The first episode is the foundational emergence of the early Reformers’ *sola Scriptura* position, particularly as expounded in and connected with Martin Luther’s theology. The second move may be labelled “modern challenges to Luther’s approach.” In examining this broadest swath of history I assess how the Reformers’ approach to scriptural revelation was contested and Protestant interpretation strategies impacted by the rise of scientific rationalism and philosophical hermeneutics in the seventeenth through twentieth centuries. Finally, in this chapter’s third move, I focus upon Karl Barth’s doctrine of scriptural revelation as a post-Enlightenment reprisal of the *sola Scriptura* approach to biblical revelation.⁶ I propose that, as a point of teaching in itself, Barth’s hermeneutic framework is better suited than Luther’s for accounting for interpretive discrepancies; and yet it

⁵ Louis Bouyer, *The Spirit and Forms of Protestantism*. trans. A. V. Littledale (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1957), 128. Bouyer, formerly a Lutheran minister, was received into the Catholic Church in 1939 and became an influential figure in the Catholic biblical and liturgical movements of the twentieth century. In *The Spirit and Forms of Protestantism*, Bouyer endeavors to evaluate the essential elements of both Protestant and Catholic communions.

⁶ In the interest of manageability, I do not here endeavor to survey the “public” texture of these three movements, i.e., the socio-political, economic, and cultural conditions that propelled them forward. This necessary omission is regrettable, given the import of such considerations for informed theological analysis and construction. As it stands, I ask my reader to join me in attending to the *sola Scriptura* dogma’s practical trappings, considering how they function as theological concerns in their own right.

does not finally succeed at helping the church evade the vulnerabilities of Luther's attempt at distributing Scripture's meaning equally amongst all believers. Those vulnerabilities speak to the nature of the contemporary PIP and its accompanying challenges for practitioners.

The Original Context for and Tenets of *Sola Scriptura*

In 1523, Nuremberg *Meistersinger* poet Hans Sachs penned the following lines expressing that the papacy had deluded believers through traditional practices amounting to "vain fantasy and human trickery":

with letters of indulgence, church attendance,
with kisses of peace, sacred spectacle
with endowing masses and building churches,
with alter decorations of great splendor,
...
All of this the pope calls service to God,
and says people merit heaven through these things
and are released from their sins.
This is totally without foundation in Scripture,
vain fantasy and human trickery
which God takes no pleasure in.⁷

The reader may note that, according to Sachs, the Pope's fundamental crime lies in the fact that these ostensibly meritorious traditional practices are "totally without foundation in Scripture." Sachs's bold claims speak to the sea change gathering reformers together at the advent of the Protestant Reformation, which involved a momentous shift in hermeneutic sensibility: the perceived site of doctrinal authority in relation to biblical Scripture had transferred from the church hierarchy to the common person.⁸

⁷ Hans Sachs, "Ist doch als in der schryfft ungrünt" in *Die Witenbergische Nachtigall* (Bamberg: Georg Erlinger, 1523) in *Flugschriften*, ed. Laube, 1:595. Quoted in Carol Piper Heming, *Protestants and the Cult of the Saints in German-Speaking Europe, 1517-1531* (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2003), 25.

⁸ Cf. Werner G. Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1991), 31. Jeanrond explains the grand hermeneutic shift as follows: "For the Reformers the exclusive criterion for adequate theological understanding of Christian doctrine and existence became now the Word of God as perceived through their renewed reading of the Scriptures. They no longer sought the additional authentication of their biblical understanding by an ecclesiastical institution, such as

Bouyer notes that Protestantism's raising up the Bible above every other authority originated as an intended rebuke of "those who declined to accept any authority other than themselves."⁹ Luther articulates such an admonition in his *Treatise on Civil Authority*, declaring: "No one ought to, or can, lay down laws for the soul, if he does not know how to point out the way to heaven. No man is capable of so doing; God alone can. Therefore, in all that concerns the salvation of the soul, nothing must be taught and heard but the Word of God."¹⁰ On such grounds, Reformers punctuated the transcendence of the Bible foremostly because of its authorship by God. It is worth noting, however, that hardly any Christian theologians in this period of the movement's history would expressly place any human authority on or above the level of Scripture's authority. In this sense, the majority of Catholics and Protestants alike have held to a kind of *sola Scriptura* position, taking the Bible to be uniquely inspired and therefore uniquely authoritative.¹¹ Nevertheless, there was a key distinction between the emerging humanist interpretation theory that funded the Reformers' position and the traditional hermeneutic framework of the Church Fathers—especially Augustine's, which held sway in Church teaching in the early 1500s. That distinction consisted in the fact that Augustinians understood biblical interpretation as fundamentally tied to the Church's corporate understanding, whereas for Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and other Reformers, *individual* biblical interpretation increasingly became the critical mode of assessing which aspects of doctrine and practice corresponded to authentic Christian faith.¹² Hence, the rejection of the necessity of a

the Roman authorities." This firm belief is why Protestants were among the first to embrace the translation of Scripture into the vernacular.

⁹ Bouyer, 117.

¹⁰ Luther's *Treatise on Civil Authority* quoted in Bouyer, 120.

¹¹ See Bouyer, 129. He says that the "unanimous verdict of Judaism on the Old Testament, once constituted, and of the Fathers and theologians on the Bible as a whole" was that the Bible alone is the "'Word of God' more directly and fully than any of its other expressions, since it alone is so inspired by God as to have him for its author."

¹² The Christian humanist movement had gained widespread momentum in Europe in the 1400s. Historians David A. Rausch and Carl Hermann Voss explain that the center of the humanist movement was the

teaching office for the layperson's reception of God's Word disclosed in Scripture defined the Reformers' unique *sola Scriptura* approach.

In championing every believer's equal access to revelation, the Reformers also set aside the established hierarchical ecclesiological paradigm of the day, which was founded in the Dionysian metaphysical framework.¹³ That paradigm asserts that the created order reflects God, its source of existence, in varying degrees of perfection. Generally speaking, this hierarchical structure was taken to be the shape of the cosmos *and* of the church's proper mode of union with the divine. That union was thought to be properly maintained through connection with Christ, the head of the mystical body (both cosmic and ecclesial). That union with Christ, attained hierarchically, entailed that the laity belonged to a lower order than the clergyman, with the latter mediating the presence of Christ to the ecclesial body by administering the sacraments. Nicholas Cusanus articulates this standard concept in *De concordantia catholica* (1434), with the triadic ecclesiastical hierarchy mapping onto the celestial one with relevance to ecclesiastical polity. That hierarchy, in descending order, is the sacraments, the priesthood, and the faithful. "The sacraments enlighten and purify (*illuminantiae et purgantia*)," Cusanus explains, while "the pastoral priesthood purifies and is purified (*purgatum et purgans*), and the faithful are purified and do not purify (*purgatur et non purgat*)."¹⁴

individual's worth. "Although it differed from place to place," they explain, "Christian humanism applied the Renaissance concepts of classical studies, individualism, excellence, vitality, and versatility to a pious life devoted to God. Because man was created in the image of God, the Christian humanists asserted that man possessed dignity even in his fallen state." *Protestantism—Its Modern Meaning* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 18.

¹³ Hank Voss notes that this understanding of the church, including its division of Christians into classes of spiritual and secular as well as clergy and laity, had "steadily been growing since Dionysian's hierarchical view of the cosmos received papal endorsement by Gregory the Great (ca. 600)." *The Priesthood of All Believers and the Missio Dei: A Canonical, Catholic, and Contextual Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016), 131.

¹⁴ Cusanus, *De concordantia catholica* I.6, 32, quoted in Richard J. Serina, *Nicholas of Cusa's Brixen Sermons and Late Medieval Church Reform* (Boston: Brill, 2016), 57. According to the hierarchical view Cusanus articulates, bearing in mind that the goal of this ordering is union with Christ, Serina explains that

For pre-Reformation Christians in the Middle Ages, the meaning of Scripture was also distributed along these hierarchical lines, a belief which indicates their conceiving of Scripture as possessing a sacramental character, mirroring the Christological two-natures. Lutheran theologian (and devoted advocate of hermeneutic theology) Gerhard Ebeling expounds upon that common belief, explaining that believers in the medieval church grappled with revelation's historical character by "applying at one and the same time both physical and metaphysical, historical and metahistorical categories to the event of revelation."¹⁵ They considered revelation-history to be a *sui generis* event, a *historia sacra* existing in conjunction with secular history.¹⁶ Those thinkers further maintained that this sacred history must be discerned by standards of assessment befitting its *sui generis* character, and they believed that the Bible provided just such a mode of assessment. They accordingly ascribed to Scripture a Christological character in keeping with the sacraments, maintaining that Scripture, like Christ, is "of human and divine nature at the same time," Ebeling explains: "It, too, stands in spite of its human nature so to speak outside the context of original sin."¹⁷ Because they understood Scripture as possessing this sacramental character—and because they believed that, in the natural gradation of the church, Christ mediates himself through the sacraments to the priests, who in turn represent Christ to the laity by administering the sacraments to them—it is little wonder that pre-Reformation Christians assumed that the enlightening significance of Scripture was available to believers in varying degrees, in keeping with the sacred hierarchy of the church.

Christ "mediates himself symbolically to the church through the sacraments, thereby enlightening and purifying ... the priests, who in turn enlighten and purify the faithful" (57).

¹⁵ Gerhard Ebeling, *Word and Faith*, trans. James W. Leitch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 30.

¹⁶ See Ebeling, 30-31.

¹⁷ Ebeling, 31.

The Reformers moved to abandon the sacerdotal understanding of the clergy under the bold leadership of Martin Luther. During his transformational “tower experience,” Luther believed he had discovered that God speaks in the Gospel message to each individual more clearly than through any human teacher. He consequently deemed illuminating commentary on Scripture handed down by the teaching office unnecessary; in 1519 he publicly articulated this conviction by declaring that “a layman who has Scripture is more than Pope or council without it.”¹⁸ Luther anchored this assertion to the New Testament theme of the priesthood of all Christian believers. He argued that, according to Scripture, Christ acts “alone as mediator, atoning sacrifice, high priest and intercessor,”¹⁹ and so the only true priesthood is Christ’s, in which all believers participate equally through their baptism. Hence, the principal functions of Christ’s priesthood—including teaching, praying, and offering spiritual sacrifices²⁰—are equally accessible to all believers as spiritual priests.²¹ Thus, though there remains a difference of *office* among Christian believers for the sake of church order, there is no difference in spiritual rights or the spiritual import of one’s earthly vocation, which depend upon baptism rather than ordination.

One such right, Luther maintained, is the knowledge of Christ that is given to each believer by the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit who guided the penning of the Scriptures; thus, each Christian

¹⁸ Quoted in F.W. Farrar, *History of Interpretation: Eight Lectures Preached Before the University of Oxford in the Year 1885* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1886), 326.

¹⁹ Martin Luther, *Augsburg Confession*, Art. XXI. trans. Kolb, R., Wengert, T., and Arand, C. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000).

²⁰ According to Hank Voss, Luther also frequently mentioned four more functions of priesthood: bearing the keys (i.e., offering forgiveness to the penitent sinner on behalf of Christ), judging doctrine, baptizing, and celebrating communion. Only once does Luther list all seven priestly functions together (in *Concerning the Ministry*, 1523) although he regularly treats one of the seven independently. See Voss, *The Priesthood of All Believers and the Missio Dei* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016), 141.

²¹ In reference to Luther’s *Lectures on Hebrews* from 1517-18 Voss clarifies that, for Luther, believers share in the priestly function of sacrifice in a different way than Christ does: Christ’s once-for-all sacrifice was atoning, while believers’ spiritual sacrifices are always those of thanksgiving. See Voss, 141.

has a right and duty to exercise spiritual judgment of doctrine.²² Because for Luther the believer needs no mediator apart from Christ in accessing God, the “priestly privilege of prayer meant that a believer could be taught directly by God . . . through the Word,” explains historical theologian Hank Voss. Hence, “Luther’s commitment to Bible translation in vernacular language flows logically from his understanding of the priesthood of all believers.”²³ Aligning with Voss’s observation on this point, I would add that Luther’s priesthood of all believers teaching, along with its associated notion of direct access to God through the Word, also flow logically to and from his eschewal of the Dionysian metaphysical picture of reality in favor of operative grace. In his 1535 lecture on Genesis, Luther explained that the traditional metaphysical thinking faltered by presuming that one must transcend the material to contemplate the divine presence when, in reality, created things function as God’s self-giving “masks.”²⁴ This correlates with Luther’s use of the notion of *verbum reale*, asserting that “when Scripture says that God speaks, it understands a word related to a real thing or action . . . When the sun rises, when the sun sets, God speaks. When the fruits grow in size, when human beings are born, God speaks.”²⁵ For Luther, we come no closer to godliness by tracking some metaphysical distance between what exists and God, because what God wills, or says, *is* what exists—including God’s special words given to His people and expressed in the Eucharist and

²² Farrar specifies that Luther felt that it would, in fact, be cowardly for the Christian “to resign into the hands of any one the exercise of that spiritual faculty—the gift which comes from the unction of the Holy One—which is promised to all Christian men alike” (Farrar, 329-30). Interestingly, Voss notes that although Luther initially stressed the function of judging doctrine as all believers’ responsibility, after the ensuing conflicts of his day (such as the Peasants’ War) that were in part funded by this revolutionary teaching, “Luther tended to only emphasize the exercise of this function by the magistrates” (Voss, 143-44). It thus appears that Luther himself recognized the volatility of this teaching though he did not account for it systematically.

²³ Voss, 143.

²⁴ *Luther’s Works: American Edition*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehman, 55 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958-1986) (subsequently cited as *LW*).

²⁵ Luther, “Psalm 2,” translated by L.W. Spitz, Jr., in *LW*, vol. 12 (1955), 33.

Scripture. These particular expressions are simultaneously God's masks and God's means for making sinners righteous.

From Luther's perspective, then, grace is none other than the presence of God. In concurrence with their theological shift away from the long-standing metaphysical hierarchies of the scholastic system, the Reformers adopted a "personalistic" construal of revelation-history, centered on the individual's direct *sola fide* access to God via the Word proclaimed.²⁶ Luther solidified that move as he came to affirm not only that we are saved by faith alone but also that, in salvation's process, God acts in love and forgiveness on the human's behalf. Hence, divine grace justifies us only operatively and extrinsically, rather than also cooperatively (i.e., in conjunction with the human will toward good works) and/or substantively (i.e., as a power God infuses in humans).²⁷ Accordingly, Scripture possesses *claritas* and *sui ipsius interpretres* (it interprets itself)—its audience need only listen with a heart open to the Spirit's transforming proclamation issued through the gospel message: "If a touch of Christ healed," Luther said, "how much more will this most tender spiritual touch, this absorbing of the Word, communicate to the soul all things that belong to the Word."²⁸

There was a conflicted character to the Protestant shift from metaphysical to personalistic categories in their approach to salvation history. For the Reformers, the church's history, teachings, formative practices, sacraments, and holy text all were no longer physical sites mediating the metaphysical presence of Christ. They were redefined as means of the personalistic faith-encounter. Hence, allegiance to them no longer warranted the maneuverings of analogical negation, virtue

²⁶ See Ebeling, 30. The Reformers believed that actualization of revelation takes place via "genuinely historic, personal encounter" (Ebeling, 56), which necessitates hearing the Word by way of Scripture and its elucidation in the sermon.

²⁷ That is, as Bouyer explains it, Luther asserted that "once faith is present, there is salvation, but there is nothing in the sphere of salvation existing apart from faith itself, and faith in its turn has no transcendental object, no content outside itself" (140).

²⁸ "The Freedom of a Christian, 1520," *LW* vol. 31 (1957), 349.

formation, hierarchical submission, or any other trappings of the Dionysian metaphysical paradigm. Nevertheless, the Reformers wanted to maintain the validity of the biblical picture of the world and of history without taking up the metaphysical paradigm. They did so in agreement with Luther's *verbum reale* framing of God's presence in creation and the gospel proclamation, maintaining that Scripture possessed self-interpreting *claritas*. In keeping with these claims (i.e., the divine inspiration of Scripture and the spiritual gift of knowledge imparted to every believer), Luther's resonating hermeneutic principle was that that Scripture's meaning is not opaque, requiring theological tradition in order to understand it. Rather, Luther and the Reformers maintained that Scripture possesses *claritas*—that is, that it has the illuminating power to clarify all things, including the church's theological tradition.²⁹ That *claritas* is afforded by the Holy Spirit who inspired the composition of the Bible so as to open the heart of the believer to the Gospel. The Spirit must therefore be, Luther maintained, "the all-simplest writer that is in heaven or earth; . . . his words can have no more than one simplest sense, which we call the scriptural or literal meaning."³⁰

Notably, Luther's stance on Scripture's Spirit-afforded *claritas* warranted a distinction between its ostensibly lucid *res* (subject matter) and its partially unclear *verba* (manner of presenting that subject matter).³¹ Luther and his followers dealt with that distinction by agreeing that the Bible's self-interpreting norm or "spiritual sense" was its *sola fide* concentration. This consensus—secured by the appeal to the Holy Spirit's presence to every believer—temporarily evaded the problem that the personalistic paradigm faces in its lack of reckoning with the distance between the Word of God and the "simple" human words of Scripture.³² As for the diversity of

²⁹ For an example in Luther's writings, see "The Bondage of the Will" in *LW* 33 (1972), 24-28.

³⁰ From one of Luther's 1521 pamphlets against Emser, who had claimed that it would be better to read Virgil than to read the Bible literally. Quoted in Farrar, 329.

³¹ See Ebeling, 307.

³² Cf. Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), 35-36. Jeanrond identifies the prominent theologians who developed this teaching as Matthias Flacius Illyricus, Johannes Andreas Quenstedt, and Abraham Calov(ius).

interpretation of nearly every verse in the Bible, Luther attributes it to the depravity of the interpreters rather than the ambiguity of the textual medium, arguing that “all heresies and errors have originated, not from the simple words of Scripture, as is so universally asserted, but from neglecting the simple words of Scripture, and from the affectation of purely subjective (*ex proprio cerebro*) tropes and inferences.”³³ We can, nevertheless, find Luther grappling with the partial obscurity of Scripture’s *verba* in his 1528 preface to Isaiah, where he lists foundational rules for each person accessing the text’s clear content. Among these Luther includes the *analogia fidei*, or “proportion of faith,” the hermeneutic principle maintaining that the passages of Scripture which set forth Gospel teaching with greatest clarity should be used to interpret the passages that may be less clear. As Luther explained it, “It is the attribute of Holy Scripture that it interprets itself by passages and places which belong together, and can only be understood by a rule of faith.”³⁴

What, according to Luther, is this “rule of faith” according to which we find the scriptural passages of greatest clarity? In keeping with his famous “tower experience” realizations, Luther maintained that, in encountering the proclaimed Gospel message, one fundamentally finds that “God has sent us his only-begotten Son that we may believe in him and that whoever trusts in him shall be free from sin and a child of God.”³⁵ He rooted that message above all in Christ’s cross, wherein he maintained that one hears God saying that “we are children of wrath, and all our works, intentions, and thoughts are nothing at all.”³⁶ In short, for Luther, at the heart of the gospel the believer finds the meaning of existence disclosed as an infinite mystery, the sinner’s salvation a gift of utterly free and sovereign grace—hence the Reformer’s use of the Latin phrase “*sola gratia*.”

³³ Quoted in Farrar, 327.

³⁴ Quoted in Charles A. Briggs, *The Bible, The Church, and the Reason: The Three Great Fountains of Divine Authority*. 2nd ed. (New York: Scribners, 1893), 9.

³⁵ “The First Sermon, March 9, 1522, Invocavit Sunday” in *LW* 51 (1959), 7-75. Here at 71. Revision of translation by A. Steimle.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 70.

Accessing that salvation cannot be obtained through righteous works mandated by an ecclesiastical leadership, nor through righteousness as a sort of healing substance infused by grace; it may only be received via the gift of faith, given to us by God through Christ crucified (hence the use of the Latin phrase *“sola fide”*). Luther accordingly set the “salvation by faith” Pauline texts over the “salvation by works” texts, such as the books of Hebrews and James, in terms of their primacy for interpreting other parts of scriptural canon.

Luther and his supporters thus took the Christological principle of *sola fide*, grounded in *sola gratia*, to be both the mode for understanding the biblical text properly *and* the self-interpreting norm of the Bible’s coherent content. They maintained that the “spirit” or “spiritual sense” of the Bible coheres with this *sola fide* concentration. On this point we find that the terms “letter” and “spirit” did not continue to mean for Luther and his followers what they had traditionally meant in the fourfold sense.³⁷ Essentially, Luther saw the “letter” and “spirit” as two layers of the literal sense: “the ordinary ‘literal sense’ and the ‘prophetic literal sense’.”³⁸ He accordingly pronounced that each believer should strive to arrive at this clear twofold understanding that each passage of Scripture contains, rather than its allegorical, moral, and anagogic senses as well, for “it is the historical sense alone which supplies the true and sound doctrine,” while the added senses (the allegories being the worst offenders) tend to be little but “empty speculations”³⁹ handed down by church teachers. “With all due respect to the Fathers,” he

³⁷ This is the hermeneutic tradition of the early church that takes each scriptural passage to have four “senses” or meanings: the literal (what the text says, grammatically, about past events), the allegorical (what it reveals, typologically, about Christ), the moral (what it teaches about right living, tropologically), and the anagogical (what it indicates about the future directed by God). As Augustine articulates it, “in all sacred books, we should consider eternal truths that are taught, the facts that are narrated, the future events that are predicated, and the precepts of counsels that are given” (*The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, trans. John Hammond Taylor (New York: Newman Press, 1982), 19.

³⁸ Jeanrond, 34. For Luther, Jeanrond explains, the “spiritual sense becomes a reality only in so far as it is evoked by the literal/historical sense of the biblical texts during the acts of reading or preaching.” (33)

³⁹ “Commentary on Genesis, 1535-46” in *LW* 1:233.

said, “I prefer the authority of Scripture.”⁴⁰ This is the point Luther worked to drive home: that the Scriptures are in themselves sufficient for instructing the believer, *without* the eloquent commentary of theologians.

It is somewhat puzzling, given his critique of the “uncertain opinions” of church teachers, that Luther never worked out with methodological diligence the procedural norms of applying the “rule of faith.”⁴¹ This may be due to the fact that, as Bouyer suggests, “it was a living intuition of salvation that crystallised his view of the Bible” rather than vice versa.⁴² What is of further interest is the fact that, apparently, the widespread acceptance of Luther’s *sola Scriptura* rules amongst Reformers was fueled by a shared set of intuitive convictions, including: that there is no real belief where it is not grounded in active, personal faith; that God intends for that faith to be based on the divine Word—living and supreme in Christ—above all human authorities; and that the individual’s apprehension of the divine Word in Scripture comes by way of interior experience of the Holy Spirit’s witness to faith, which is an unmerited gift of grace. Examining this configuration of intuitive convictions undergirding the Reformation’s *sola* principles, Bouyer proposes that they emanate from a core sensibility that has consistently informed the Protestant movement over time. Characterizing Protestantism as a “religion of . . . the God who speaks, who utters the Word of life,” Bouyer muses:

The importance it [Protestantism] gives to the Bible, however great, proceeds entirely from this, and from the fact that the Bible contains the living Word which, starting from the heart of God, reaches and touches the heart of man. Criticism of other authorities comes only in the second or third place, according as it is deemed useful or necessary to set off the importance of the Bible as recognized (rather than defined). And this criticism itself remains secondary to the opposition to the illuminism of the sects, which substitutes for the authentic Word of God, in its full transcendence, an illusory message, a fantasy created by

⁴⁰ Quoted in Farrar, 327.

⁴¹ See Ebeling, 82. For Ebeling, the methodological immaturity is evidenced in Luther’s readiness to dismiss the law in favor of Christ, i.e. justification by faith, without also making clear what this principle means for theological procedure.

⁴² Bouyer, 116-17.

the heart of man shut up in itself. Indeed, throughout the history of Protestantism, the preaching of the Word of God remains, in its essence, the proclamation of a living 'good news,' which ultimately is always identified with Christ, considered as living and acting within us.⁴³

If we find Bouyer's description acceptable then we may conclude that, at its heart, the Protestant movement was not founded upon the rejection of traditional ecclesial authority. Instead, it was (and is) seated in a fundamental rejection of traditional *religion*, in that it was driven by the living intuition of a heart touched by God through Christ. It is in keeping with this intuitive mode of knowing that Luther's affirmation of the Bible's supreme status and its clear *sola fide* concentration were taken by the Reformers to be in need only of recognition, not definition.

To conclude this look at the germination of *sola Scriptura* hermeneutics, let us encapsulate the key principles undergirding this phase of the hermeneutic movement at the dawning of the Protestant Reformation. The democratic impulses of humanist thinking in the late 1400s fueled the spreading conviction that ecclesial authorities receive no supernatural assistance in illuminating the Word of God that is not granted to every believer (and it is this conviction to which I refer as Protestantism's "low church" sensibility). Driven by that conviction, the Reformers of the early 1500s claimed the Bible as the site where the individual accesses God's Word most directly. Specifically, taking cues from Luther's teaching, the early Reformers deemed Scripture to be self-interpreting for the believer in true accord with the Holy Spirit. In keeping with that belief, they considered theological commentary to be unnecessary and disputes over textual obscurity as indicating the sinful limitations of the human audience. The Reformers agreed that there must be an overarching theological or "spiritual" sense of the biblical texts that functions as Scripture's self-interpreting norm. Luther defined that normative content as the *sola fide* Christological concentration, disclosed most fully in the *sola gratia* message of the cross availed to faith alone. For these early Protestants, the orienting nexus of the above-listed facets of the *sola Scriptura*

⁴³ Bouyer, 118.

movement seems to be a common intuition of the heart sincerely open to and experiencing the address of God's living Word through the Bible.

Arguably, that intuitive sensibility is the point from whence Protestantism's, and specifically *sola Scriptura* hermeneutics' strengths and vulnerabilities circle and return. The vulnerabilities are evidenced by Protestantism's early history, as *sola Scriptura* adherents followed the new hermeneutical program beyond the advent of the Reformation. As they enjoyed the freedom of individual responsibility for scriptural interpretation, an unnamed politics held sway in their corporate gatherings around magnetic leaders such as Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli. That politics was volatile by virtue of the fact that the Reformers' agreement upon the *sola fide* scriptural concentration relied upon common sense recognition rather than traditional processes of arriving at doctrinal consensus through councils and creeds.⁴⁴ Luther and his adherents had rent apart the connected binaries of metaphysical/physical, metahistorical/historical, and special revelation/natural thinking in such a manner that "only *one* bridge remains," Ebeling surmises: "the Word alone—and indeed, lest any misunderstanding should arise, the Word interpreted as salvation *sola gratia, sola fide*."⁴⁵ In their agreeing upon this spiritual sense concentration of Scripture, one can detect certain long-standing thought-habits of the old metaphysical framework lingering in the Reformers' view of Scripture. Though they had abandoned its attendant hierarchies and no longer defined Scripture as warranting the mediation of clerical interpretation, they still treated the Bible as if it were a *sui generis* artifact, speaking humanly yet outside the context of original sin by way of its self-interpreting character. Their doctrinal foundation for continuing to do

⁴⁴ Wolfhart Pannenberg notes that, for Luther and his followers, the notion of "*communis iudicium*," "the judgment of common sense," entailed that the "light of the universal judgment of reason" alone was needed to see the manifest facts of Scripture's content. "Luther directed his thesis about the outer clarity of Scripture particularly against the idea that Scripture needed an additional factor besides its literal sense in order for its content to become evident," Pannenberg explains. "The inner clarity about the *res* of Scripture which leads to . . . inner judgment," on the other hand, is provided by the Holy Spirit. See Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology: Collected Essays: Volume I*, trans. George H. Kehm (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 63 (subsequently cited as *BQ I*).

⁴⁵ Ebeling, 36.

so was that of verbal inspiration: God giving God's people special words by the Holy Spirit's presence. They simply concentrated biblical revelation wholly in justification through faith in Christ, which they maintained Scripture presents by way of verbal inspiration.⁴⁶

The Reformers' appeal to the intuition of faith has remained prominent in the Protestant conception of the Bible and its authority, but the course of that appeal's outcomes in history throws into relief the profound vulnerability emanating from the appeal to faith-intuition as foundational for right interpretation. The Reformers bequeathed to their Protestant descendants their common perception of Scripture's spiritual sense concentration without any metaphysical framework that might have sustained those assertions within the Christian community as it faced new interpretive challenges. As common sense perception began to shift, Protestants had no doctrinal basis for setting church tradition alongside Scripture to relieve the tensions arising from its exposition. The question soon became, "Who gets to decide what is scripturally orthodox and why?" Contending Protestant parties fragmented and became susceptible to moving toward two polar extremes: on one hand a tendency toward illuminism emerged, which, Bouyer notes, "while preserving the idea of the Word of God as a living reality, refused to admit any objective criterion, and so fell into the error of admitting individual inspiration, incapable of being verified."⁴⁷ On the other hand there arose a reactionary fundamentalism, "a Protestant doctrine which restricted all communication from God to man to the letter of the Scriptures, so hardening the religion of the Word into a religion of the book."⁴⁸

As Protestant factions continually disagreed and broke away from one another over matters of interpretation, efforts to uphold the Reformers' positions on verbal inspiration and Scripture's

⁴⁶ It is thus little wonder that, as Ebeling notes, in Protestant circles the doctrine of verbal inspiration eventually "received an intensification and a fundamentalistic significance that were hitherto unknown" (32).

⁴⁷ Bouyer, 121. "It was a way which might lead to an uncontrolled mysticism," he notes, "but also...to an ultimate rationalism with little trace of mysticism" (ibid.).

⁴⁸ Ibid.

claritas resulted in the notion of biblical inerrancy or infallibility, which was developed during the so-called period of “Protestant Orthodoxy” or “Protestant Scholasticism” (a movement in Lutheran and Reformed theology that saw its prime from the late sixteenth-century until the early 1700s, although Protestant Orthodoxy and the doctrine of biblical inerrancy have remained powerful forces in Protestantism ever since). At the doctrine’s origin, Protestant theologians concerned with reuniting factions who no longer shared an intuitive sense of Scripture’s core content decided that the answer must lie in objective discernment of right doctrine. They began to teach that the scriptural text was dictated word for word by the Holy Spirit, explicitly identifying the words of the Bible with the Word of God and denying any distinction between Scripture’s *res* and *verba*. Insistence upon Scripture’s primacy won the day, but time would tell that this hermeneutic position could not stand up under shifting thought-paradigms throughout the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment periods in Europe. Generally speaking, Protestantism’s long history of fragmentation and polarization due to unyielding theologies has been fueled by the prevailing conception that each believer is individually capable of rightly identifying and interpreting Scripture’s normative content. Hence, the liability which has beset *sola Scriptura* hermeneuts from the beginning begs the enduring question of the proper role of the collective body of believers in discerning the norms of revelation.

It is worth noting that, for thinkers like Bouyer, the negative manifestations of the Protestant appeal to intuition are not indelibly bound up with its admirable aspects, which Bouyer associates with Protestantism’s “biblical spirituality.” In “spite of all its possible defects,” he muses, “Protestantism has lived by, and handed down . . . a living practice of recourse to [the Bible], of drawing nourishment from it as from a source of life, of finding in it personal contact with Christ, while interior experience is constantly referred to it as to the highest ideal.”⁴⁹ That living practice has attested to the Holy Spirit’s illumination continually taking the expressive forms it needs, with

⁴⁹ Bouyer, 122.

the remarkable power to sustain the spiritual life of every believer. Interwoven with Protestantism's fraught heritage, then, is a remarkable spiritual disposition wherein "belief is not an idea but a history affecting oneself," and wherein "the Church is recognized as the people . . . whom he [God] does not cease to call and fashion, breathing into it the breath of his mouth."⁵⁰ Bouyer thus touches upon a valuable point that ought not be overlooked in attending to Protestantism's history of splintering along lines of interpretive discrepancy, for it may well be that the spiritual resources *sola Scriptura* readers have made use of need not be eliminated along with the unsustainable aspects of the hermeneutic approach. My own stipulation in this dissertation, which I will articulate in its concluding chapter, is that this biblical spirituality is the aspect of Protestantism's personalistic turn to Scripture that "low church" readers ought to retain—or, better yet, *refine*—as they come to terms with the unsustainable features of the *sola Scriptura* program.

The evolution of the Protestant reliance upon "living intuition" serves as the contested inheritance of Barth's own scriptural hermeneutic approach, and thereby results in what I will finally identify by this chapter's end as the contemporary "Protestant interpretation problem." Barth rejected what he took to be the failings of both Luther and the liberal theologians of his day: their presumption of human spheres of reasoning autonomous from revelation. A helpful framework, therefore, for situating the shifts in *sola Scriptura* thinking from Luther to Barth may be found in tracing the evolution of post-Reformation theological-hermeneutic dilemmas, beginning in the mid-seventeenth century. Those quandaries and their proposed solutions formed deep philosophical roots during the Enlightenment and evolved into modernity, coming to hold sway in biblical and theological studies, and eventually meeting Barth's resounding and influential "Nein!" in the early twentieth century. To a broad overview of that evolution, let us now turn.

⁵⁰ Bouyer, 124.

Modernity and the Rise of the Hermeneutic Question

As noted in the preceding section, early Protestantism's setting the Bible above every other authority originated as a rebuke intended for those who had ostensibly placed human authority over God's—a rebuke contested by the voices of the Counter-Reformation, which vehemently maintained that the Roman Catholic Church upheld Scripture's primacy above all. This conflict attests to the ubiquitous conception in Europe at the turn of the sixteenth century of fundamental accountability to the divine authority mediated through the biblical text. The post-Reformation period of the seventeenth century, however, saw the burgeoning of significant advances in astronomy, physics, and mathematics, ushering in the era that came to be called the Scientific Revolution. One of its leading figures was Sir Isaac Newton, whose work forged the way for common belief that God's universe was mechanical and thus predictable. Newton's influence engendered growing allegiance to rationalistic worldviews, articulated by thinkers such as Francis Bacon, Rene Descartes, John Locke, and Baruch Spinoza. Significantly, the rationalists questioned the *a priori* starting point of belief in the Bible's authority as defined by church teaching. They instead declared reflective reason to be the reliable norm for human convictions, stressing the "reasonable" aspects of Christianity as the norms for interpretation of the Bible. The appeal of the rationalists' challenging a naïve approach to Scripture was fueled by ongoing scientific discoveries, many of which undermined traditional biblical understandings of the natural world.

By and large, Lutheran, Reformed, and Roman Catholic orthodoxies alike were hostile towards the demands of the new rationalist thinking.⁵¹ They held to dogmatism, claiming their

⁵¹ Jeanrond explains that some theologians attempted to respond to the challenges of rationalism by developing a moderate Cartesian approach to theology, which depended on separating the methods of scriptural/theological knowledge from those of philosophical/scientific knowledge. These thinkers proposed to resolve contradictions between scriptural and scientific accounts of the natural world by way of a "theory of accommodation, according to which the Holy Spirit through the biblical authors had to speak about nature in a way that was accessible to the 'prejudice' of the people of the time" (37). However, this moderate approach was rejected by orthodox Christian thinkers as going too far to accommodate the inroads of science, while the new scientists rejected it for not going far enough.

doctrines' supposed "rationalist transcendence of the tension between the text as authoritative object and the reader as a thinking and critical subject."⁵² Eventually, however, the rationalistic fervor of the times became inhospitable to appeals to traditional dogma or human fallibility, particularly when readers encountered tensions in the historical accounts of the gospel texts. Over the course of the eighteenth century, allegiance to the principal concepts of reason's primacy, humanity's basic moral goodness, and nature's mechanistic laws spread throughout Europe's "enlightened"/educated middle class, who thereby questioned absolutist institutions and practices. The Enlightenment critique of all unsupported authority demanded that theologians demonstrate the reliability of their sources and methods of research, exhibiting their freedom from institutional dogma.⁵³ By the end of the Enlightenment, the pressing question for biblical interpretation and theological reasoning was whether or not humanity had evolved beyond the need for religious institutions.

Historians David A. Rausch and Carl Hermann Voss note that, during the 1700s, philosophical and theological "crosscurrents" also arose that countered the basic premises of the Age of Enlightenment.⁵⁴ Within Protestantism in particular, one of those currents was the previously referenced Protestant Orthodoxy or Protestant Scholasticism, which held fast to creedal formulation, biblical infallibility, and theological systematizing. Another was Romanticism, which Rausch and Voss identify as "the secular ally of both Pietism and Revivalism."⁵⁵ In opposition to the norms of rationalist philosophy, Romanticism's proponents (most notably Jean Jacques Rousseau and Samuel Taylor Coleridge) upheld the epistemic value of emotive response and subconscious experience. The closely related Pietist and Revivalist movements in Protestantism countered

⁵² Jeanrond, 38.

⁵³ See *ibid.*, 122.

⁵⁴ Rausch and Voss, 68.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 68.

Protestant Scholasticism's dogmatist treatment of Scripture by appealing to interior faith experience as the basis for theological knowledge gained in scriptural study. While Pietism and Revivalism freed Christian faith from rigid reliance upon the infallibility of either Scripture or reason, the Romantic epistemology undergirding these movements evoked difficult questions regarding the proper role of human reason in biblical understanding.⁵⁶

At the end of the eighteenth century, Immanuel Kant waded into these swirling philosophical and theological crosscurrents. Influenced by his Pietist upbringing and David Hume's critique of empiricism, Kant came to criticize rationalist metaphysics, asserting that humans possess neither purely objective knowledge nor innate ideas, and that rationality could not prove the existence of God because God cannot be given as an object of thought. This was not to deny God's existence or the supreme status of Christianity. Kant simply "found it necessary to deny reason to make room for faith," as he famously proclaimed in the preface to his *Critique of Pure Reason*. Placing morality at the center of the relation between faith and reason, Kant proclaimed that the human's only access to God is through "practical reason," severing moral law from its supposed ground in nature and planting it instead on the grounds of individual freedom and social responsibility. Thus went Kant's Copernican Revolution for religious reason, which held enormous implications for the advent of Liberal Protestant Theology, a movement largely founded in the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher. Responding to Kant—with whom he agreed that God cannot be cognized as an object of rational thought—and influenced by Romanticism and idealism,⁵⁷ Schleiermacher maintained that religion was neither a form of knowledge nor a system of moral

⁵⁶ Cf. Jeanrond, 37.

⁵⁷ Schleiermacher was particularly influenced by G. E. Lessing's idealism. Lessing was one of the first Enlightenment thinkers who publicly questioned the historical standing of the biblical sources. He believed that "religious truth was of a different order from historical events" (Rausch and Voss, 62). Rausch and Voss go on to explain that, in his early form of idealism, Lessing believed "humankind had entered...a stage beyond 'childish guidelines' of faith and morality," instantiated in the Old Testament law, with the second stage of human development being the New Testament's "ideals of sacrifice and surrender" (ibid.). Upholding a natural religion, Lessing maintained that the third, "adult" stage "was geared to reason and its accompanying responsibilities" (ibid.).

action, but should be defined as rooted in the person's God-consciousness, an innate "feeling of absolute dependence"⁵⁸ universally experienced by humankind. For Schleiermacher, Christianity is distinctively characterized by its adherents' attraction to Jesus Christ's particular God-consciousness, which attraction they corporately experience in the context of the worshipping community.

Schleiermacher believed that human action, reflective knowledge, and feeling all inform one another, and so he endeavored to synthesize the personal appropriation and scientific study of a religious text within the framework of a general philosophical theory of understanding. He was convinced that only such a framework would provide a stable foundation for specialized interpretation, such as biblical exegesis. Schleiermacher proceeded by proposing that human communication—in both its production and reception—always involves a combination of general linguistic conventions and individual applications of those conventions. He understood a text as a phenomenon wherein a complex of such individually applied conventions intermingle to create a new, meaningful whole. Schleiermacher took meaningful expression and interpretation as always individualized, since the objective/grammatical aspect of the text and the subjective/psychological aims of the writer and interpreter are constantly intermingling and evading one another.⁵⁹ Thus maintaining that a text can never be completely understood, Schleiermacher contended that hermeneuts can only ever arrive at approximations of a text's overall sense. For Schleiermacher, Jeanrond notes, "this interpretative approximation towards the sense of a text must be guided by certain rules in order to safeguard the critical and responsible character of the interpretative

⁵⁸ Schleiermacher coined this famous (and often misunderstood) phrase in *The Christian Faith*, published in 1821. With it, he fundamentally intended to communicate the universal human experience of our *relative* freedom: the reality that, because one is always situated within an ongoing pattern of circumstances that she did not create, "I am not God." "God" here only means the counterpart or source of the feeling of absolute dependence, which is a relational feeling. In the respect that he took the feeling rather than the cognition of God as primal, Schleiermacher's proposal countered Kant's.

⁵⁹ Jeanrond explains that Schleiermacher "insists that the personal or *subjective* dimension of the process of understanding must always be accompanied by a proper regard for the linguistic nature of the object to be understood, i.e. by an *objective* dimension" (45).

process.”⁶⁰ In other words, while approximate interpretation is inevitable, that approximation can and should be well-informed regarding the objective/grammatical aspects of the text and the possible subjective/psychological aims of the writer and interpreter.

Although Schleiermacher is now hailed as “the father of modern hermeneutics,” his synthesis model did not take root in the biblical scholarship of his day. There, the assumed divide between scholarship and faith only became further solidified as biblical interpretation underwent a “turn to history,” the result of intensified interest in tracing historical processes taken to be productive of particular material and psychological phenomena. This turn may have been due to the influence of G. W. F. Hegel, which was more profound than Schleiermacher’s during their lifetimes. Driven by his conviction that the process of reason mapped directly onto historical reality itself, Hegel had underscored historical progression as an expression of the Absolute. Within biblical studies, critics such as David F. Strauss and Julius Wellhausen contended in (more or less) Hegelian fashion that the biblical texts presented only incomplete forms of the truth, warranting their content’s reevaluation according to modern philosophical and scientific advances. Historicist investigation of this nature became the dominant framework for biblical understanding, resulting in interpretive quests such as Albert Schweitzer’s for the historical Jesus. The tenets of special revelation were subsumed under the pronouncements of scientific historical research, which was taken to be infallible both as a method in its own right and as a means for accounting for the reality of faith.

These various movements in philosophical, theological, and biblical hermeneutics all contributed to the emergence of theological Liberalism in the 1800s and early 1900s. While many Christians questioned whether or not they should discard biblical faith in favor of a new principle of faith, Rausch and Voss explain that “Liberalism was the attempt of one segment” of the Protestant

⁶⁰ Jeanrond, 46.

movement “to adjust the ancient faith to the modern world.”⁶¹ Schleiermacher had established the conviction that no external sites of traditional authority—such as church dogma and the Bible—took precedence over the believer’s religious experience, but rather were derived from that experience as its secondary accretions. Liberal Protestant theologians embraced this view, underscoring the tenet that Christian believers assert Christ’s divinity based on subjective “data” unavailable via historical-critical findings, rationalist proofs of God’s existence, or church dogma.

For example, employing a critical Neo-Kantian framework,⁶² students of seminal Liberal theologian Albert Ritschl construed Christianity as an essentially moral religion, emphasizing the ethical theme of the kingdom of God as Christian theology’s regulative principle. Recommending the disposal of the “fantastical” elements of the Gospels, Ritschlians prioritized the practical transformation of worldly experience that occurs in one’s encounter with Jesus Christ’s unique personality, which is presented in the objective historical figure of Christ as portrayed in the New Testament by persons of faith. Ernst Troeltsch, another monolithic Liberal Theologian, critiqued the Ritschlians’ position as representing a “half-way house” on the way to a fully historicist account of the Christian faith in its subjective reality.⁶³ With a bow to the experiential-expressivism advocated by Schleiermacher, Troeltsch endeavored to construct that fully subjective account of faith by examining the “many Christs” that have emerged over the course of Christianity. He proposed that Christians can only develop a kind of intuitive appreciation of those images’ family resemblances (so to speak) and then engage in their own creative acts of reformulating Christ in their current contexts.

⁶¹ Raush and Voss, 93.

⁶² Renewed attention to Kant arose in the wake of anti-Hegelianism, with Neo-Kantians reclaiming Kant’s argument that our only access to transcendent reality is via our moral reasoning.

⁶³ For instance, Ritschlian thinkers turned to the Reformation, retrieving Luther along with Jesus as a “high point” in history for retrieving the Kingdom of God ethic against philosophical corruption. Troeltsch critiqued the Ritschlians for merely lifting these figures out of history and attributing absolute value to them due to their practical status in the community.

In view of this history, Ebeling astutely notes that while modern Liberal theology utilized hermeneutics as a lever for unveiling the real tensions between the biblical text and the Word of God that Luther and the Reformers had failed to treat with methodological diligence, the unfavorable result was that it finally “called in question the concept of the Word of God itself,” threatening that concept’s unqualified dissolution.⁶⁴ In summary, the Reformation had left “low church” Christians in the vulnerable state of relying upon individual common sense to discern the spiritual concentration ostensibly self-evident in Scripture by virtue of the Holy Spirit’s “all-simplest” design. With the advent of modern scientific thinking, Enlightenment thinkers questioned the rational reliability of biblical dogma. “Orthodox” Protestants responded by working to secure the Bible’s primacy by collapsing the hermeneutic distance between the Word of God and the words of Scripture—and, along with it, the gap between exegesis and dogmatics—through rationalist means. Kant eventually facilitated the paradigmatic philosophical turn to the experiencing, projecting subject as the center of theological knowledge. Schleiermacher established that subject as one with a core religious intuition (which ought not be mistaken for the secondary accumulation of religious knowledge), also highlighting the personal appropriation of religious texts. Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century thinkers generally employed critical historicism or philosophical hermeneutics to uncover historical processes and ideologies cloaked by any supposedly closed or “self-evident” interpretation of the Bible. In response, some Protestant groups withdrew into enclaves of biblical fundamentalism. Meanwhile, in the various expressions of Liberal Protestantism, the reconstruction of Christ’s inward experience and/or the Christian community’s existential experience of transformation throughout history became the focus of research and reflection. The higher authority of the Word of God had all but dissipated for these thinkers who accepted the tension between the human knower and the divine object of inquiry.

⁶⁴ Ebeling, 308.

Issuing a remarkable challenge to this trajectory in Liberal Theology, there arose within Protestantism the so-called “Neo-Orthodox” movement. In the wake of the catastrophic first World War, the European “Neo-Orthodox” theologians fundamentally questioned Liberalism’s optimistic view of human nature. Reformed theologian Karl Barth became this movement’s prolific voice when he published his *Römerbrief* in 1919. Like Martin Luther, Barth had opened the Book of Romans and found that it was God—not human intuition, history, or culture—speaking through the Apostle Paul’s words and directly into Barth’s own historical situation. In that experience Barth and his associates also discovered God as “Wholly Other,” evoking the crisis of all natural theological methods and philosophical apologetics. They thus advocated a recovery of Protestant “Word of God” theology for the modern era.

Reflecting upon Barth’s rebuff of philosophical apologetics, Ebeling notes that if modern theology had threatened the dissolution of the concept of the Word of God, then the Barthian “transition to a theology of the Word of God was in danger of regaining this Reformation theme at the cost of thoughtlessly overlooking the hermeneutic problem”⁶⁵—that is, the history-laden gap between the modern reader’s perception and that of the ancient community from which the text originated. Indeed, such was the pronounced consensus of the *Römerbrief*’s reviewers at the time, who said that Barth had simply not done justice to the real content of Paul’s epistle, reading too much of his present situation into the text rather than accounting for its historical and literary distance from him.⁶⁶ Overall, however, such has not remained the consensus. Ebeling himself joins those convinced that, in truth, the origins of Barth’s “return to the theology of the Word of God resulted from a passionate wrestling with the hermeneutic problem,” and who accept Barth’s assurance to his readers that his retrieval of the Word of God theology “is not to be a case of

⁶⁵ Ebeling, 308.

⁶⁶ For a number of examples offered to this point, see Richard E. Burnett, *Karl Barth’s Theological Exegesis: The Hermeneutical Principles of the Römerbrief Period* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 17-19.

breaking with modern, critical historical hermeneutics, but only of necessary corrections to it.”⁶⁷ To sound out Ebeling’s premise and evaluate the nature of Barth’s endeavor toward that end, and to evaluate the legacy Barth bequeaths to Protestant hermeneutics, are the goals of this chapter’s third and final *tranche*, to which we now turn.

Karl Barth’s Iteration of *Sola Scriptura*

In the post-Reformation Enlightenment era, one of the seminal factors propelling the ubiquitous shift away from reliance upon religious authority and towards the privileging of autonomous reason was the proliferation of scientific discoveries—specifically, discoveries that undermined traditional biblical construals of the natural world and thereby raised questions concerning the Bible’s reliability as an account of historical events. Wolfhart Pannenberg points out that, for Luther, in accordance with the pre-critical views of his day, “it could not have been otherwise than that the report of a source that had once become accepted would coincide in substance with the historically ascertained course of events.”⁶⁸ That is, Luther and his contemporaries assumed that historical events and scriptural testimony neatly corresponded (evidence of the fact that they aligned with the medieval doctrine designating the literal interpretation of Scripture as historical).⁶⁹

Barth, on the other hand, read Scripture in light of what nearly all people had come to accept in the wake of Enlightenment-era scientific inquiry: the gap between textual witness and the course of actual occurrences to which it refers. Hence, when Barth provocatively asserted in his

⁶⁷ Ebeling allows that the hermeneutical impulse Barth shows in his preface to *Romans* is not directly treated in a systematic way. However, says Ebeling, “the *Church Dogmatics* presents over and above [that treatment] an implicit answer to the hermeneutical problem” (310). He goes on: “The hermeneutic problem in Barth (as far as his intentions are concerned) has been taken up without remainder into the discussion of the subject-matter of theology” (310, fn. 1).

⁶⁸ Pannenberg, *BQ* I, 62.

⁶⁹ See *ibid.*, 61, fn. 119.

Römerbrief that if he “had to choose” between the modern historical critical method and “the old doctrine of inspiration” he would “resolutely choose the latter,”⁷⁰ it was not with the intent to shun historical-critical treatment of biblical texts in favor of reverting to a pre-critical view of Scripture’s literal historicity. In fact, Barth elsewhere explicitly stated that the “vulnerability of the Bible, i.e., its capacity for error,” which “extends to its religious or theological content,” is linked to the fact that all of what the biblical writers say “is historically related and conditioned.”⁷¹ When he championed the old doctrine of inspiration over the modern historical reading of Scripture, he simply intended to reject the *dominance* of scientific-historical critique in biblical exegesis, on the grounds that that dominance issued from a short-sighted historicism. Famously saying, “The critical historical people are not critical enough for me” in the preface of the second edition of his *Römerbrief*, Barth specifically maintained that historical scholars were not *self*-critical enough. He was concerned that they had set up historical criticism as an absolute reading of Scripture, falling short of attending to what the divine Subject of Scripture demands from its audience: submission.⁷²

Barth’s attention to the reader’s personal disposition when engaging Scripture may initially appear to resonate with Schleiermacher’s hermeneutic position, given that the latter proposes that a text’s objective aspect and its interpreter’s subjective aims inform one another to produce a kind of hermeneutic synthesis. On those grounds, Schleiermacher had argued that the Bible ought not be uniquely identified as an inspired document apart from the interpreter’s experience of it as such; a “*dogmatic* decision about inspiration,” Schleiermacher said, “. . . rests itself on interpretation.”⁷³

⁷⁰ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1968).

⁷¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vols. I - IV, trans. G. W. Bromley and T.F. Torrance, ed. Frank McCombie (London: T&T Clark, 2009) (subsequently cited as *CD*). Here *CD* I/2, 509.

⁷² Cf. Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, 8.

⁷³ From Schleiermacher’s *Hermeneutik*, quoted in Jeanrond, 49. “For Schleiermacher,” Jeanrond explains, “religion could ultimately be based only on direct human experience of the divine and on the interpretation of this experience through the light provided by the documents of the religious tradition.”

Barth agreed with the basic premise that personal decision impacts interpretation. He parted ways with Schleiermacher, however, regarding the theological character of that appropriative move. In his essay “Concluding Unscientific Postscript on Schleiermacher,”⁷⁴ Barth voices those reservations with Schleiermacher’s empathic hermeneutic approach, on the grounds that Schleiermacher presumes that the human being possesses an innate capacity for direct psychological experience of the divine. “In Schleiermacher’s theology or philosophy,” Barth muses, “do persons feel, think, and speak . . . in and from a sovereign consciousness that their own beings are conjoined, and are indeed essentially *united*, with everything which might possibly come into question as something or even someone distinct from them?”⁷⁵ Suggesting that this is in fact the case in Schleiermacher’s work, Barth evaluates this belief as leading to the anthropomorphizing of God and failing to recognize the real subject matter of the Bible, which is the God who addresses humankind as its utterly distinct Other. After all, Barth contends, human worship can only properly be directed toward an “indispensable [*unaufhebbar*] Other, in accordance with an *object* which is superior to [the person’s] own being, feeling, perceiving, willing, and acting, an object toward which adoration, gratitude, repentance, and supplication are concretely possible and even imperative.”⁷⁶ The human could not directly or intuitively experience such a being, Barth argued, because that being could not share any ontological features with the human.

Thus driven by his conviction that the Creator’s being ought to be understood as absolutely distinct from the creature’s, Barth rejected Schleiermacher’s attempt to synthesize personal appropriation and scientific study of Scripture—along with the entire wave of liberal scriptural hermeneutics that had developed since Schleiermacher—for failing to understand Scripture’s

⁷⁴ “Concluding Unscientific Postscript on Schleiermacher” in *Karl Barth: Theologian of Freedom*. Ed. Clifford Green (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

objective content by operating under the presumption that “human feeling, thinking, and acting occur . . . primarily in relationship to a *general* reality whose nature and meaning have already been derived and established in advance.”⁷⁷ In another telling instance of that rejection, Barth was notoriously wary of Rudolf Bultmann’s existential hermeneutic approach. Bultmann had attempted to alleviate the crisis of meaningfulness posed by the biblical texts’ historical distance from the modern reader by working to decode Scripture’s “mythological” content within an existentialist philosophical paradigm. That decoding was to be informed by reflection upon one’s own existential experience situated in contemplative relation to the “mythological forms” of the biblical texts. In an essay Barth wrote on Bultmann’s work, Barth identifies the guiding logic of such an interpretive project:

The New Testament message, Bultmann thinks, in the historical forms in which it is enshrined in the texts, is a mythological expression of a distinctive human self-understanding. That is why the New Testament demands interpretation and its records require translation. . . . [The mythological form] can easily be detached from the message itself, which is the specifically Christian self-understanding.⁷⁸

Barth rejected Bultmann’s demythologizing endeavor, reasoning that readers cannot properly interpret *any* given text, “ancient or modern, if we approach it with preconceived notions about the extent and the limit to which it can be understood.”⁷⁹ He maintained that the key to understanding a text, including the Bible, “must be sought from the text itself, and moreover from its spirit, content and aim,” and he thus posed the critical question: “Is not Bultmann’s very concept of myth, the infallible criterion which dominates his hermeneutics, quite alien to the New Testament?”⁸⁰

⁷⁷ “Concluding Unscientific Postscript,” 86. Barth poses this as what may be inferred from Schleiermacher’s theology, in which case he says he “would immediately have to issue protest.”

⁷⁸ Barth, “Rudolph Bultmann—An Attempt to Understand Him,” in Hans-Werner Bartsch, ed. *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, vol. 2 (London: SPCK, 1962), 83-132. Here 106-07.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* The quandary this leads to, says Barth, is this: “Apparently the kerygma must suppress or even deny the fact that the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the total Christ event, is the event of our redemption, that it possessed an intrinsic significance of its own, and that only because it has that primary

In this fashion, Barth evaluated experiential-expressivist approaches to biblical interpretation as falling into the same anthropocentric snares that historical criticism had, by seeking to purge the Bible of its “inessentials”—including the miracles surrounding Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection—so as to arrive at a more fundamental understanding of the biblical authors’ mindsets and the phenomenon of Christianity. Notably, however, Barth did not indiscriminately lump all of these approaches together. In his contribution to the essays of *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, Barth distinguished between the works of thinkers like Schleiermacher and Bultmann as compared with those of mainstream liberal historicists, observing that the latter are invested in “*eliminating*” the “indigestible elements” in the Bible, including God’s utterly unique revelation in Jesus Christ, while Schleiermacher and Bultmann are interested in “*interpreting* them.”⁸¹ In this respect, Barth says, many liberals would have suspected Schleiermacher and Bultmann of being “too orthodox.”⁸² Nonetheless, from Barth’s vantage point, approaches like theirs share with historicist criticism the misguided presumption that human interpreters can devise autonomous strategies for finding out the meaning of Scripture. For Barth, that supposition is built upon and perpetuates the illusion that human means of discernment are sufficient for receiving God’s Word.

Barth’s stance on biblical testimony providing the proper anchor-point for unified hermeneutics issues from his conviction that humans can claim neither any immediate or “special” experience of divine reality nor any point of autonomy from it. In Barth’s thinking, the only sense in which God “co-operates” with the creature is by “preceding, accompanying, and following all its being and activity,” so that the entirety of the creature’s action “is primarily and simultaneously and

significance has it a derived significance here and now” (ibid., 109-110). Thus, to Barth, Bultmann’s “demythologized New Testament looks suspiciously like Docetism” (111).

⁸¹ Barth, “Rudolf Bultmann—An Attempt to Understand Him,” 106. Emphasis added.

⁸² Ibid.

subsequently [God's] own activity, and therefore a part of the actualization of His own will revealed and triumphant in Jesus Christ."⁸³ God's gracious will is therefore "unconditionally and irresistibly fulfilled" in human action without compromising its integrity as freely and entirely human.⁸⁴ In summary we may say that, for Barth, all that is creaturely is secular, and yet God is sovereign over all. In order for this relation to hold, Barth maintained, human thought-structures can never open to God naturally: they may only do so when God freely grasps them via a phenomenal form with which God has identified.⁸⁵ The freedom of God's decisive grasping means that that act remains irreconcilable with any general process of human analysis. It also means that all objects of human knowledge—including nature, history, even the words of the Bible—remain relative and fallible as sites of God's self-disclosure. There is, in other words, no neutral basis for comparing and contrasting sacred and secular hermeneutics, for there is no traceable relation between divine and creaturely activity. The nature of divine self-disclosure in the creaturely sphere is not that of a unique nature or capacity awakened in or given to the human; it has the character of a miraculous gift, coming entirely from beyond us, through a transformative encounter between entirely dissimilar subjects.

To dispel a potential misunderstanding on this point—which is to suppose that, because Barth's doctrine of revelation eschews independent human means of determining the meaningful content of God's Word, it is thus anti-rational—it is worth noting that Barth maintained that the full extent of the notion of God's communication to us entails intellectual, even rational, implications.⁸⁶

⁸³ *CD* I/2, 105.

⁸⁴ *CD* III/3, 117.

⁸⁵ Cf. *CD* I/2, 458: "Now that the content of the biblical witness is before us," Barth says, "we see better than we did that the actual recognition of this witness and the willingness to follow it will always be something which takes place miraculously and very simply, without any special claim. . . . We will leave it to the Bible itself, if we are obedient to it, to vindicate itself by what takes place. . . . Where the lordship of the triune God is a fact, it is itself the basis, and a sufficient basis, for obedience."

⁸⁶ See *CD* I/1, 140.

Barth expressly looked for theological knowledge as “objective knowledge, not experiences and feelings,”⁸⁷ rejecting Bultmann’s demythologized kerygma for being unable “to say anything about God’s having condescended to become this-worldly, objective and . . . datable.”⁸⁸ Ebeling insightfully suggests that the basis of Barth’s qualms with Bultmann in fact lies in the two thinkers’ shared concern to abolish the distinction between sacred and profane hermeneutics. Barth simply brought out “the unity of hermeneutics by claiming general validity for the hermeneutics dictated by the Bible,” while Bultmann, in the tradition of Schleiermacher, approached the theological hermeneutic problem from a standpoint offered by general hermeneutics.⁸⁹

Maintaining the above convictions, Barth grappled with the crisis of the Bible’s historical meaningfulness for the modern reader by asserting that the hermeneutic question cannot be properly articulated via principles formulated independently of our being grasped by God. He believed theologians must begin with the question, “What is the Word of God?” And if they take seriously the declaration of John 1—“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”—then they should understand God’s Word primarily as the living act whereby God comes to us through Christ’s personal presence. Only secondarily ought the Word be understood as what is said. As it concerns the modern crisis of biblical meaning, Barth essentially called for a distinctive conception of the reader’s subjective involvement in interpreting revelation: the interpreter should begin, not by reflecting upon human appropriation of the revelatory artifact

⁸⁷ Clifford B. Anderson’s translation from Barth, *Der Römerbrief (erste Fassung)*, 1919, ed. Hermann Schmidt (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1985), 12. Found in Clifford B. Anderson, “A Theology of Experience?” in *Karl Barth and American Evangelicalism*, eds. Bruce L. McCormack & Clifford B. Anderson (Cambridge, UK: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011) 91-111. Here 102.

⁸⁸ “Rudolph Bultmann—An Attempt to Understand Him,” 108.

⁸⁹Ebeling, 310-11. Ebeling cites Barth’s *CD I/2*, 465 f.: “It was with the only possible exposition of holy scripture in mind that we laid down the principles of exposition just given,” Barth says. “Certainly not in the belief that they are valid *only* for the exposition of the Bible, but fully believing that *because* they are valid for the exposition of the Bible they are valid for man’s word *in general*, and that they thus have a claim to *general* recognition. . . . There is no such thing as special biblical hermeneutics. But precisely the general, and only valid hermeneutics must be learned by means of the Bible as the testimony to revelation.”

but, rather, by seeking correspondence to God's living Word by submitting to being interpreted by *it*.⁹⁰ Only in the midst of that submission may the interpreter authentically begin to identify how the Word of God stands in relation to the historical mediums of Scripture and church dogma.

In accord with his conviction that God's Word is a living address, and that the proper starting point of theology is submission to that address, Barth did not begin his theology with an investigation into whether there is any such thing as revelation and what it must be if we experience it. Rather, as La Montagne points out, Barth simply "takes it for granted that we have been encountered by God in revelation and that all theology is a *post hoc* investigation of what we encountered in revelation and who we must be because we have encountered it."⁹¹ A significant feature of Barth's labor toward that end is a hermeneutic paradigm, most evidently instantiated in his *Church Dogmatics*, wherein he presents Scripture as a Christic and so-called "actualistic"⁹² vehicle for the divine-human encounter. In the following section, I will outline Barth's actualistic view of mediated revelation—giving specific attention to how he understands that revelation to occur via Scripture—in order to reflect upon how Barth's hermeneutic paradigm functions as a reprisal of Luther's *sola Scriptura* teaching, in manners both useful yet stubbornly troublesome for contemporary Protestant readers, leaving us with the contemporary "Protestant interpretation problem" that is the focus of this dissertation's analysis.

⁹⁰ See Barth, *CD I/1*, 295f.

⁹¹ La Montagne, 114. See Barth, *CD II/1*, 4-5 & 69.

⁹² This term refers to the "act-character" of existence and stands in contrast to the "substance" ontology that has characterized the Western metaphysical tradition. In Barth's work, "actualism" is evident in the premise that human thought-structures opening to God when God grasps them via a phenomenal form with which God has identified.

Barth's Actualistic Vision of Revelation

As established above, Barth maintained that divine self-disclosure within history will always strike its human recipient as absolutely mysterious,⁹³ for all creaturely forms of communication—including the words of the Bible itself—are wholly insufficient containers for the Word of the God who is radically “Other” from human beings.⁹⁴ On what grounds, then, does Barth also claim that revelation takes objective form—that “Holy Scripture as the original and legitimate witness of divine revelation *is* itself the Word of God”?⁹⁵ The key for resolving this apparent conflict in Barth’s view of scriptural revelation is to keep in mind that, when Barth says that Holy Scripture “is” the Word of God, he intends to identify its life-altering function as revelatory witness rather than to name a static quality inherent to the textual content. That intention is situated squarely within the larger framework of his doctrine of revelation, wherein Barth’s audience finds him making use of the Kierkegaardian notion of “contemporaneousness.”⁹⁶ The contemporaneous understanding of revelation maintains that the Word of God is something that *occurs*; it is an event whereby God takes hold of us. Correspondingly, phenomenal forms can be identified as the Word of God in the sense that God freely utilizes those forms to become personally present to the human audience, with perception-transforming results.

As another point of review: for Barth, the contemporaneous relationship between divine revelation and phenomenal forms (including creaturely expressions) persists precisely because the Creator’s action is of “a completely different order”⁹⁷ from the creature’s. He maintains that, within creation, God affords the creature “space and opportunity for its own work, for its own being in

⁹³ *CD* I/2, 458.

⁹⁴ See Barth’s wording in *The Epistle to the Romans*, 19.

⁹⁵ *CD* I/2, 502.

⁹⁶ Kierkegaard’s use of the term can be found in his *Philosophical Fragment*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New York: Princeton University Press, 1985).

⁹⁷ *CD* III/3, 135.

action, for its own autonomous activity.”⁹⁸ Meanwhile God’s activity, graced through and through, “conditions absolutely the activity of the creature.”⁹⁹ Barth is hardly singular in designating the Creator’s action as being of an order totally distinct from the creature’s, with God absolutely conditioning the human’s freedom; this assertion is a standard tenet of the creation *ex nihilo* doctrine considered orthodox throughout Christian thought-history.¹⁰⁰ Barth’s deployment of the teaching is distinguished by his added avowal that that Creator-creation relation was subject to the incursion of the “ontic particularity” of evil.¹⁰¹ That intrusion brought about the fundamental (hence “ontic”) *opposition* of creation to God’s reign. This is a key principle of Barth’s teaching that human actions and thought-structures can only open to God in contemporaneous fashion, when God grasps them externally.

Barth’s use of the contemporaneous principle is also anchored to his understanding of the relation of divinity and humanity in the person of Jesus Christ. With regard to the relation of the Christological two-natures, Barth adhered to the traditional Reformed notion that Christ’s human and divine natures are *indirectly* related through the “person of the union,” i.e., that Jesus Christ’s human nature was not “divinized” through its union with the divine Logos.¹⁰² Bruce McCormack is helpful in spelling out this doctrine’s crucial implication for Barth’s conception of revelation: “In

⁹⁸ *CD III/3*, 91.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 113. The entirety of the creature’s activity, says Barth “is primarily and simultaneously and subsequently His [God’s] own activity, and therefore a part of the actualization of His own will revealed and triumphant in Jesus Christ” (*CD I/2*, 105).

¹⁰⁰ Justo L. González’s entry on “creation” in his dictionary of theology offers a concise summary of this point: “By affirming that things exist as a result of God’s will—and not as an emanation of the divine essence—this doctrine affirms that there is an ontological difference between creator and creature, and that the entire creation is contingent,” i.e., “is the result of God’s will.” *Essential Theological Terms*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 41-42.

¹⁰¹ See Barth, *CD III/3*, 353.

¹⁰² For the textual basis in Barth’s work for this claim, see Bruce L. McCormack, “Revelation and History in Transfoundationalist Perspective: Karl Barth’s Theological Epistemology in Conversation with a Schleiermacherian Tradition” in *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 21-39.

and of themselves,” McCormack explains, “the media of God’s self-revelation are not revelatory—that is the key point.”¹⁰³ In other words, if God remains ontologically distinct from the creaturely medium God takes up to reveal Godself in the incarnation, then the divine Subject of revelation remains hidden from view even while self-disclosing through the media of ordinary history. This conviction shores up Barth’s assertion that nothing of God can be directly known by natural human observation.

Barth envisions God’s worldly self-disclosure occurring in a threefold movement: the act of revelation itself in the personal presence of Christ (“the Word revealed”), the witness to that act in the words of Scripture (“the Word written”), and the preaching of that witness in the life of the worshipping community (“the Word proclaimed”).¹⁰⁴ The latter two are the human speech-acts which God assigns to become the Word. In developing this line of thinking, Barth made use of the *verbum reale* principle, noting that God’s pronouncement entirely effects what it announces: “The Word of God is . . . essentially creative,” Barth says, “and its creative power knows no other limitation than the power of the God who speaks.”¹⁰⁵ We humans are never fully able to communicate our intentions (other than an intention to communicate *something*), but God’s intention and expression are one. Thus, God’s proclamation brings about what it pronounces.¹⁰⁶ This is why God’s act of announcing humanity’s forgiveness in Christ actually effects this new reality, even through the fallen media of human embodiment and speech.

A key distinction (which I will further examine in the section to follow) between Luther’s and Barth’s deployments of the *verbum reale* principle lies in their contrasting manners of setting

¹⁰³ Bruce L. McCormack, “Afterword: Reflections on Van Til’s Critique of Barth” in *Karl Barth and American Evangelicalism*, 366-80, here 373. I am indebted to McCormack’s entire essay for distilling the relation of Barth’s Christology to his doctrine of revelation in my own analysis.

¹⁰⁴ See *CD I/1*, 98-135.

¹⁰⁵ *CD I/1*, 148-49.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. *CD I/1*, 2, 516, 518; *CD II/1*, 4-5.

up the Holy Spirit's role in the relation of human words to the divine Word. In the terms of Barth's revelation doctrine, God does not bring about certain human speech-acts to function as a sort of this-worldly *verbum reale*, whereas for Luther, God does just that. We might say that, for Luther, God's Word as *verbum reale* provides particular human speech-acts—including Scripture—that in turn bring about God's graced intent to save sinful humanity.¹⁰⁷ The Spirit, "the all-simplest writer that is in heaven or earth," ensures that provision and its effectiveness, producing the *sola fide* concentration of the Bible as well as guaranteeing its *claritas* by opening the heart of the believer to that message. Hence, Luther does not see any significant distance between God's Word and human words when the latter is inspired by the Spirit. For Barth, on the other hand, the ontological distance between God's Word and our words cannot be overcome. The human expressions constituting Scripture's testimony and the church's proclamation are no different from any other creaturely phenomena in terms of their potential for participation in bringing about God's graced intent to commune with humanity, which God alone brings about. The distance between God's Word and our experiential understanding, however, can be overcome—by way of the miraculous gift of the Spirit, which is synonymous with the Word's "revealedness." When Scripture functions as revelatory, it is because the Word's revealedness breaks through the linguistic medium that God has assigned as the means whereby the Word should grasp the interpreter's mind. That communion is the new interpretation, and Scripture's form testifies to it by warranting our submission to the divine will if we endeavor to understand its message.

Barth accordingly understands the miraculous event of revelation—wherein divine intention, address, and effect cohere—as our experiencing the very triune nature of "God, the

¹⁰⁷ We can see an example of his conviction on this account in "The Sacrament of Penance" (1519), where Luther reflects upon the priestly speaker's role in the administration of the sacrament, bringing the sinner to absolution: "the priest does no more than speak a word," he says, "and the sacrament is already there." Translated by E. Theodore Bachmann. *LW* 35: 17.

Revealer,” who “is identical with His act in revelation and also identical with its effect.”¹⁰⁸ That is, for Barth, the unity-in-distinction of the Father, Son, and Spirit is the texture of our living encounter with God as “Revealer, Revelation, and Revealedness.”¹⁰⁹ It is the Spirit’s response to the Word that constitutes the reality of “revealedness” within history, Barth contends. This third aspect of God in the act of self-giving—the Spirit’s response as the “Revealedness” of the Word—is a touchstone for Barth maintaining his stance that human activity remains autonomous from God’s activity (and, consequently, utterly subjective as a site of revelation) yet fully subject to God’s sovereign will (and, thus, also the site of God’s objective self-revelation). Like Luther, Barth understands God’s operative/efficacious grace¹¹⁰ as God’s very presence, and vice versa. On this basis, it is solely the divine presence that evokes and sustains our faith-response when we encounter the living Word: our faith “is not a determination of human action which man can give to at will or maintain at will once it is received,” Barth explains; rather, “. . . it is the gracious address of God to man, the free personal presence of Jesus Christ in his activity.”¹¹¹ Just as God as Son becomes indirectly identical with the creaturely media of divine address to us—including Christ’s human nature and the human speech-acts in Scripture and preaching—God as Holy Spirit becomes indirectly identical with “the historical effectiveness of his revelation, the lively response evoked by this event,” because God makes Godself truly known to us through that response.¹¹²

Thus, Barth explains:

¹⁰⁸ *CD* I/1, 296.

¹⁰⁹ *CD* I/1, 295.

¹¹⁰ Barth takes up this theological framework with the conviction that believers should keep in mind that the graced act of revelation is operative rather than cooperative in nature, else they may fall into the illusion that they have sort of immediate experience of divine reality and/or that their faith is something they determine for themselves.

¹¹¹ *CD* I/2, 466, 469.

¹¹² Joseph L. Mangina, *Karl Barth: Theologian of Christian Witness* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 37-38.

God opens our eyes and ears for himself. And in doing so He tells us that we could not do it for ourselves, that of ourselves we are blind and deaf. To receive the Holy Spirit means an exposure of our spiritual helplessness, a recognition that we do not possess the Holy Spirit. For that reason the subjective reality of revelation has the distinctive character of a miracle.¹¹³

The point bears repeating, for it is pivotal to Barth's treatment of Scripture: God as Trinity in the act of self-disclosure gives to human perception what it cannot have on its own—true correspondence to God's own act of revelation—so that without our experience becoming any less subjective, we are nonetheless given real knowledge of God. Barth thus accounts for the human's subjective experience and expression, which are the obstinate facts at the heart of the modern crisis of biblical meaning, by asserting that the human witness and response to revelation remain humanly flawed, but the believer's faith-response to the divine address is assured by the personal presence of God in that address.

Hence, in Barth's actualistic vision of mediated revelation, humans are gifted with salvific participation in the historical event of God's self-disclosure without the presumptions that they contribute to that revelatory experience or that it somehow divinizes the human participant or medium of participation. For this reason, Barth does not exactly agree with Luther's *sola Scriptura* conviction that the Bible self-interprets. He does give credence to the long-standing Protestant commitment to the notion that Scripture possesses the *facultas semetipsam interpretandi*—which “at any rate,” he says, “means the power sooner or later to throw off every foreign sense attributed to it, to mark and to expose its perversity, and in contrast to assert itself in its own characteristic meaning.”¹¹⁴ He also identifies the power of Scripture to assert its own meaning as evidenced by the Reformation recovery of the biblical theme of salvation by grace alone after centuries of other interpretations.¹¹⁵ But for Barth the Word's “revealedness” does not issue directly from or into

¹¹³ Barth, *CD I/2*, 244.

¹¹⁴ *CD I/2*, 681-82.

¹¹⁵ See *ibid.*, 684.

Scripture itself; it results from and as God's sovereign decision that revelation should assert itself in the knowing relation by way of encounter with Christ. As La Montagne articulates it, for Barth, Jesus Christ is both "how the unintuitable becomes intuitable" and is always "the particular, concrete, and specific Jesus Christ as witnessed to in the testimony of the prophets and apostles."¹¹⁶ Scripture and preaching are our very human attempts to bear witness to that relational encounter, and doctrine is to be tested against the characteristic tenets of that witness. It is only this very specific sense that the biblical witness possesses the potency to assert its own distinctive meaning.

Accordingly, Barth maintains that human discernment of biblical meaning ought to arise out of (and remain informed by) the actualistic experience of God as Revealer, Revelation, and Revealedness. Practically speaking, this means that Scripture-readers must keep steadily in mind the obedience that the divine Subject of the Bible demands of its audience. They should do so in hopes that they may continually receive the graced presence of the Spirit, the mediator of the Word received in obedience, whose power as "revealedness" overcomes the human tendency toward appropriation of Scripture's subject matter, which results in eisegesis. Barth accordingly recommended that interpreters replace a hermeneutic of suspicion with a hermeneutic of trust. We must *listen* to Scripture's words, he insisted, believing that God's Word may speak to us through them and so transform our subjective response via the Holy Spirit, whom we never possess, but whose miraculous presence we ever await.

Barth's Actualistic Formula: An Irrational Approach to Revelation?

In summary, Barth's Word of God theology entails that the human encounters revelation via phenomenal forms but may only interpret it rightly via the gift of faith, which is the operative grace of the Holy Spirit's presence. But is this a satisfactory account of the objective forms that revelation takes in history? Before agreeing with Ebeling that Barth's revival of the Word of God theology "is

¹¹⁶ La Montagne 105, 191.

not to be a case of breaking with modern, critical historical hermeneutics, but only of necessary corrections to it,”¹¹⁷ we must consider that Barth’s actualistic formula for revelation has steadily been met by skeptics, many of whom say that Barth does not attempt to correct modern hermeneutics but merely embraces utter subjectivism. W.W. Bartley, for instance, critiques Barth’s insistence upon the primary necessity of full submission to the Word living in Christ: “If the character of the Jesus or the Word of God to whom assent was required was indefinite,” Bartley muses, “and if such commitment was required no matter what Jesus was and did, at best the subjective commitment itself would be definite. Its object would be an ‘I know not what and I care not what’—perhaps a less than satisfactory object for worship.”¹¹⁸ In short, and in keeping with much criticism of Barth’s project, Bartley’s worry is that Barth appeals to an authentic philosophical concern for the limits of rationality only to defend an unfounded commitment to an irrational dogmatic position.

Is such an irrational commitment to Christ the “interpretation problem” with which Barth’s Word of God approach endows contemporary Protestantism? Or is Ebeling correct that Barth’s iteration of the Word of God theology is a case of “necessary corrections” to modern historical-critical hermeneutics rather than a drastic break from them in favor of a naïve realism? In response to this set of questions, I would argue that Bartley’s critique may be unfair, and Ebeling’s defense sound, with regard to whether Barth’s position is fundamentally irrational. On this account it is vital to understand Barth’s position as neo-Kantian. In the light of the evidence for that fact, I will further propose that Barth has, in fact, cunningly constructed a more communally sustainable *sola Scriptura* approach than did Luther. Nevertheless, I will conclude that Barth’s hermeneutic approach still bears some blameworthiness for its subjectivity, by virtue of the nature of his construal of creaturely bodies (individual, corporate, and cosmic/historical), which offers little

¹¹⁷ Ebeling, 310.

¹¹⁸ W.W. Bartley, *The Retreat to Commitment* (London: Open Court, 1984), 48.

check against individualistic interpretative impulses. That limitation is the “interpretation problem” endemic to the *sola Scriptura* heritage that Barth’s revelation doctrine of revelation has reinforced for contemporary Protestants.

Barth’s Non-Foundational Account of Religious Experience

In his rejecting the possibility that humans can make theoretical use of the effects of divine grace, Barth had taken up Kant’s reasoning that transcendent reality, or the noumenal “thing-in-itself,” functions beyond the phenomenal realm of sense experience to which our theoretical knowledge is limited. What sets Barth apart from many other Kantians is that he did not turn from that conviction to correlate divine revelation with internal religious experience, embracing experiential-expressivist theological methods, as did his theologically liberal colleagues.¹¹⁹ Unlike the Liberals and logical positivists, Barth does not take justified belief to require sensory verification.¹²⁰ His concern was “to point to an object that refuses to be confined to the categories of human thought, no matter how broadly or formally conceived.”¹²¹ Clifford B. Anderson points out that Barth made an identifiably *neo*-Kantian move at this point of departure.¹²²

Barth closely studied the work of the Marburg Neo-Kantians, a school of thinkers who sought to avoid psychological reductionist use of Kant’s critical philosophy. In accord with that goal, the Marburg scholars purportedly esteemed Kant’s transcendental method “so highly that they

¹¹⁹ Neil MacDonald emphasizes this point, noting that Barth’s eschewal of religious experience as a source for theology is what fundamentally sets Barth apart from Kant. See Neil B. MacDonald, *Karl Barth and the Strange New World within the Bible: Barth, Wittgenstein, and the Metadilemmas of the Enlightenment* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 2000). See especially pages 210-213.

¹²⁰ I am indebted to John Hare for this insight. See John E. Hare, “Karl Barth, American Evangelicals, and Kant,” in *Karl Barth and American Evangelicalism*, ed. Bruce L. McCormack and Clifford B. Anderson (Cambridge, UK: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 73-90. Here p. 80.

¹²¹ La Montagne, 3.

¹²² See Anderson, “A Theology of Experience?”, especially at 102-04.

found it necessary to correct the master in places,”¹²³ specifically by arguing that Kant’s critique of pure reason should best be understood as a critique of the concept of empirical experience. The Marburg scholars believed Kant’s transcendental method effectively transformed the notion of empirical experience “from what we naively take ‘experience’ to refer to, namely, the psychological stream of experience of everyday life . . . by aligning it with the concept of *scientific* experience.”¹²⁴ In other words, they believed Kant’s method had uncovered a new concept of observable experience. It is not a given, the result of “the ‘raw feels’ of perception”; rather, experience is already an expression of knowledge achieved on the basis of certain necessary presuppositions.¹²⁵ What makes this concept of experience expressly scientific is that modern scientific method accepts as a given that every observer perceives the same object from different perspectives. All experience includes this character of subjective interpretation, and that fact is “merely a ‘symptom’ of this single experience” rather than the fabric of experience itself, as we naively tend to presume.¹²⁶ For the neo-Kantians, all of this amounts to the fact that epistemology is properly concerned with the natural conditions of knowing a particular *object*, not with the appropriative act of knowing itself. It should begin with the shared object of experience rather than with the particular acts of perception by which observers experience those objects.

Anderson notes that Barth never fully embraced the Marburg Neo-Kantian’s insistence that all experience is identified with science, on which grounds the human’s subjective appropriation of

¹²³ Anderson, 96. Anderson notes that Kant’s “transcendental method” is the form of argumentation Kant employs in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, wherein he “reasons from a given actuality to its conditions of possibility” (94). Kant starts from empirical representation and seeks to show how certain *a priori* concepts or “categories of understanding” are necessary (i.e., ontological) conditions for the possibility of that empirical experience. For Kant, those concepts supply the forms of knowing that enable us to order sensible experience.

¹²⁴ Anderson, 96.

¹²⁵ Alan W. Richardson, “Conceiving, Experiencing, and Conceiving Experiencing: Neo-Kantianism and the History of the Concept of Experience,” *Topoi* 22 (2003): 60, quoted in Anderson, 97.

¹²⁶ Anderson, 97.

the object of observation is entirely a matter of psychology.¹²⁷ Barth originally diverged from the Neo-Kantians on this point in his *Romans* commentary, wherein he asserted that the *a priori* of subjective religious experience entails our sense of death in sin and need for grace in the face of divine revelation. Barth did eventually follow the Marburg School's lead, however, by considering in his *Dogmatics* the conditions of possibility for the actual human encounter with the Word of God. In neo-Kantian fashion, in the *Dogmatics* he maintains that the starting point for theological epistemology is to be reflection upon the presuppositions of the "fact" of the church's proclamation of God's Word revealed in Christ (rather than the presuppositions of subjective religious experience in general). The task of dogmatics then becomes analyzing the presuppositions of that gospel claim and evaluating the church's practices in light of those presuppositions.

In such a fashion, Barth did not accept the neo-Kantians' general identification of experience with science,¹²⁸ but he did agree with their premise that epistemologists should attend to the conditions of knowing a particular object rather than the subjective act of perception. In form, then, Barth employs a neo-Kantian transcendental argument in the *Church Dogmatics*, but that argument is rooted in faith that the church's proclamation is truly that of God's Word. This faith is not taken to be or belong to an *a priori* category of understanding intrinsic to the human knower; rather, it comes entirely from beyond us, via (the impact of) our miraculous encounter with the revelatory object, which impact may be understood as the presence of the Spirit or the Word's Revealedness. The trinitarian God thus supplies us with a new interpretation of God rather than tapping into or gifting us with an innate capacity for understanding divinity.¹²⁹ Thus, in the end, Barth's appeal to Kantian epistemic limits serves a non-(or post-) foundational starting point for theological

¹²⁷ See Anderson, 111.

¹²⁸ Such a position would likely lead to a hermeneutic position akin to Schleiermacher's, one wherein the phenomenon of revelation is constituted by a synthesis of subjective religious experience and its object.

¹²⁹ Cf. La Montagne, 108, and Barth, *CD II/1*, 21 & 30. See also *CD I/1*, 246.

reflection rather than an absurdist one.¹³⁰ It is the epistemological correlate to his theological understanding of the Word disclosed in the Christic “person of the union” as an act wherein God remains totally hidden from yet completely identified with the human condition.

In a cogent bit of analysis of Barth’s use of yet divergence from Kant’s epistemology with regard to faith-knowledge, McCormack explains that, for Barth,

if God (who is unintuitable) is nevertheless to be intuited (and therefore, *known* in the strictest theoretical sense), God must make himself to be phenomenal, that is, God must assume creaturely form. But at this point a further problem arises. In making himself phenomenal, God has entered into the subject-object relation in which the constructive role played by the Kantian categories of the understanding make the human knower the ‘master’ in any and every knowledge-relation. So the problem is: how can God remain God (i.e. the subject of the knowledge of God) even as God takes on phenomenal form? The answer has everything to do with the fact that God does not make himself directly identical with a phenomenal magnitude, but only indirectly so. What occurs in revelation is that the divine Subject lays hold of or grasps the human knowing apparatus through the phenomena from the other side. In this way, the limitations placed on human knowing by the Kantian subject-object split are overcome by a transcendent, divine act.¹³¹

In short, Barth appreciated Kant’s modest depiction of the human knowing apparatus as appropriative and human knowledge as limited to the phenomenal realm. He was also convinced that faith is the condition for our experiencing the “fact” of God’s Word through the church’s proclamation. But Barth was troubled by the implication (which he found particularly in Kant’s Christology) that, as it is, Kant’s philosophical theology absolutizes the limits of human knowledge and is thus “closed to God from the inside,” leaving “man [as] the measure of all things.”¹³² Barth did

¹³⁰ I am saying that Barth’s theology is non- or post-foundational though not anti-realist. And I agree with La Montagne’s assessment that “it is important to note that what is here called postfoundationalism would be regarded by some as simply one of the varieties of nonfoundationalism. The division between realism and anti-realism is not entailed in the division between foundationalism and nonfoundationalism” (La Montagne, 5, fn. 10).

¹³¹ Bruce L. McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 111.

¹³² Barth quoted in Hare, “Karl Barth, American Evangelicals, and Kant,” 87. Barth concludes that because Kant translates Christ within the boundaries of mere reason, Kant takes man to be “the measure of all things,” including God. “Barth sees in this the beginning of a straight line to Albrecht Ritschl”—that is, to theological Liberalism (ibid.).

not believe authentic faith-knowledge of God to be subject to those conditions. He resolved this problem Christologically, according to God's indirect manner of identifying with humanity in the "person of the union." By implication, God identifies with all creaturely phenomena in the same manner—from beyond them—providing faith by way of the Word's personal impact or pneumatological "Revealedness." Barth was thus able to accept the basic depiction of human knowledge in Kant's epistemology while maintaining that the worldly phenomenon of revelation does not arise in any sense from humanity's potential or projection but remains miraculous.

Given that Barth utilizes Kantian epistemic limits to describe faith rather than justify it, it seems sensible to agree with Ebeling that Barth's hermeneutic endeavor does not stand as a return to pre-modern naïve realism but, rather, as an attempt to correct modern historical-criticism. Barth had, after all, evaluated the historical critics as needing, not to be silenced, but to be more self-critical. According to his understanding of authentic faith-knowledge as issuing from a source utterly external to the human, the historicists had simply overstepped their discourse's boundaries by offering *ordinary* historical accounts of claims concerning *extraordinary* realities. In a reversal of this perceived misstep, Barth took religious experience itself as an object of faith rather than of science¹³³ and, accordingly, constructed a non-foundational account of that experience. In what sense or to what degree Barth's hermeneutic framework is fruitful for Scripture-readers is a matter of significant contention, and any decision on this account should be offered on the basis of clear criteria. With this goal in mind, I now turn to conclude this chapter's broad survey of Protestant hermeneutics. I do so by contrasting Luther's and Barth's versions of *sola Scriptura* and considering where the latter leaves post-Barthian readers, particularly those who are somehow invested in the primacy of the Bible as well as the priesthood of all believers who read the sacred text.

¹³³ Cf. Anderson, 111. See also Barth's *Protestant Thought*, 196: here Barth cites the significance of Kant's stipulation that "the Biblical theologian proves that God exists by means of the fact that he has spoken in the Bible" (qtd. in La Montagne, 103). In other words, the theologian begins with the validity of the believer's religious experience of certain "facts"—such as God speaking to us—and this starting point is, itself, assumed by faith.

Luther's vs. Barth's Sola Scriptura Options: Hermeneutic Opportunities and Quandaries

In this concluding segment, I propose that Barth's actualistic revelation doctrine is not only a retrieval of the Reformers' Word of God theology—with its emphasis on God's absolute initiative in speaking to us in a saving manner—but Barth's teaching also offers a new iteration of the Reformation-era *sola Scriptura* premises of biblical primacy and accessibility to all. I also suggest that there are solid reasons why Barth's *sola Scriptura* approach may likely stand the test of time in a manner that Luther's could not. And yet, for all its strengths, Barth's approach does not overcome the limitation endemic to the history of "high Scripture/low church" interpretation: a tendency toward individualistic discernment of revelation's norms. In Barth's case, this individualist thrust is the correlate of the actualistic formula's inability to conceive of positive theological contributions offered in and through bodily contexts (corporeal and corporate). The resulting subjectivity is what I call the "Protestant interpretation problem," and its Barthian instantiation begs our seeking alternatives to the "body-forgetting" actualistic vision of revelation. That search is the guiding purpose of the remainder of this dissertation. But first, let us consider what makes Barth's endeavor a reiteration of *sola Scriptura*, and, arguably, one better suited than Luther's for facing the hermeneutic challenges coinciding with the flux of history.

In overview: Luther and his followers were concurrently convinced that *sola fide* is the spiritual sense concentration any Spirit-led believer would discover in Scripture and that there is no need for the church hierarchy to function as overseers of either the sacraments or the Bible's true meaning. The Reformers' common sense agreement upon the Bible's doctrinal concentration sustained their insistence upon these principles to the point of their breaking from the Roman Catholic fellowship. That consensus did not stand the test of time, however, as Protestants continued reading Scripture with the expectation that its central meaning would make itself clear to them and began splintering along lines of interpretive disagreement. The ensuing Scientific

Revolution, Enlightenment, and post-Enlightenment eras witnessed the rise of numerous efforts to find reliable foundations for theology in resources naturally available to all thinkers rather than in Scripture and dogma. By the twentieth century, Liberal Protestant theologians and biblical critics were focusing upon subjective religious experience as the source of scriptural and theological production. In these circles, scholarly intellectuals had more or less become the administrators of the text's "real" meaning. Barth and the Neo-orthodox theologians boldly evaluated the liberal theological trajectory as an anthropocentric dead-end, pronouncing that the only trustworthy foundation for theology must come entirely from beyond the creaturely realm. They attested to their belief that, as declared by the Bible and church proclamation, this very miracle had occurred in Jesus Christ, and this knowledge is wholly provided by the indwelling Spirit.

The Neo-orthodox theologians thus revived the Reformer's Word of God approach to theology by directing theology's attention back to revelation's object—God's Word—and by insisting upon God's sovereignty in issuing that Word, highlighting the human's utter inability to secure the salvation given *as* and *to* faith alone (rather than meritorious actions). Barth's project stands as a kind of modern *sola Scriptura* option, in that it calls for submission to the Bible's distinctive mandates in relation to God, its supreme Subject, and effectively wrests revelation's meaning away from the modern intellectual hierarchy by envisioning that meaning as the free gift given by the Spirit to any believer who sincerely seeks God's will. The early Reformers were convicted by the "low church" claim that ecclesial authorities receive no supernatural assistance for interpreting God's Word that is not granted to every believer. Accordingly, they shunned traditional metaphysics with its sacerdotal tendencies and claimed the Bible as the self-interpreting site of revelation for all Spirit-led believers, drawing strength for this position from Luther's notion of grace as solely operative upon, rather than also cooperative with, human nature. Barth also eschewed metaphysics and utilized the "operative only" understanding of grace. He maintained these positions in keeping with his understanding of revelation as the contemporaneous act of God

who comes to us indirectly. Hence, Barth too shunned sacerdotal tendencies, but in his case under the pronouncement that human thought-structures only open to divinity when God grasps them via a phenomenal form with which God has identified, such as the Bible.

In summary, we may agree with Ebeling that Barth wrestled passionately with the hermeneutic problem, for his acknowledging the historical subjectivity of interpretation is the very context of his neo-Kantian turn to revelation's object and non-foundational construal of faith-knowledge.¹³⁴ Like Luther, Barth identified an overall theological message of the Bible; namely, as Jeanrond points out, what was "'justification by faith' for Luther, is 'God's otherness' (yet closeness) for Barth."¹³⁵ What makes Barth's approach far better suited for the historical tests of contextual variance is that, in comparison with Luther's need for communal agreement upon a fundamental doctrinal content that the Spirit makes clear in Scripture, Barth's approach to the Bible's Spirit-given signification accounts for—better yet, it actually *anticipates*—the reality of hermeneutic discrepancies amongst believers. Such signs of subjectivity are woven into the fabric of human testament to the impossible possibility of God speaking to us. They are even a key feature of revelation's historical occasion, pressing us to turn away from ourselves and listen for how God is speaking into our present situations. Barth achieves this in several pivotal moves.

First, Barth assumes the *sola Scriptura* starting point—that is, championing the Bible's authority over any human's—in full acceptance of the modern insight that the human plays an indelible role in constructing knowledge of interpreted objects. It seems that Luther's *sola Scriptura* pronouncements were fundamentally fueled by the democratic sentiment of his day, evidenced in the fact that he eschewed the neo-scholastic metaphysical hierarchal system in favor of the *verbum reale* approach, but he did not set aside the epistemic confidence that human rationality is fully conformed to things as they really are. This is why he and his contemporaries saw no need to

¹³⁴ Recalling that Barth acknowledges that all of what the biblical writers say "is historically related and conditioned" (*CD* I/2, 509).

¹³⁵ Jeanrond, 130.

distinguish between things as they appear and as they are historically. Neither did they think it necessary to distinguish between God's will and human expression or interpretation when that person is under the pneumatological influence of operative grace. By contrast, Barth had wrestled with the questions raised by modern historical science and philosophical hermeneutics and held to the Kantian position that human interpreters are inescapably cut off from the noumenal "thing-in-itself." Barth continued to believe in God's providence within history, but he did not believe that God's plan could be read plainly off of the face of phenomena—not even the words of Scripture—because he was aware that humans (even under the Spirit's influence) only ever perceive things as they appear to us and play a constructive role in meaning-making. (Luther, in keeping with his anti-metaphysical convictions, would have agreed that human perception is limited to the surface of things; but he did not understand that perception to be subjectively construed.)

In this fashion, Barth manages to establish Scripture's primacy as a site of revelation while also accounting epistemologically for the distance between human words and the divine Word. Luther evaded grappling with that distance by treating the Bible as if it were a *sui generis* artifact, speaking humanly (with its partially unclear *verba*) yet without original sin (via its self-interpreting "spiritual sense"). He anchored this position to the doctrine of verbal inspiration—God giving God's people special words and understanding via the Holy Spirit's presence. But his understanding of inspiration depends upon the Spirit making revelation's central meaning equally clear to all of the saved and is therefore unable to cope with interpretive incongruities amongst the confessing community. Barth did not maintain, by contrast, that a certain doctrinal concentration of Scripture is made clear to the Spirit-led reader. He rather claimed *sola fide* as the hermeneutic dynamic and gift given in the living encounter with God's Word through the Spirit.

Consequently, a crucial distinction between the sustainability of Luther's and Barth's hermeneutic programs resides in their manners of construing the pneumatological aspect of God's self-disclosure, which are tied to their distinctive understandings of Scripture's mediating God's

graced presence to us. For Luther, in keeping with the anti-metaphysical *verbum reale* teaching, there is no peering behind the surface of created things to view the essence of God, which is always hidden. But God's self-interpreting Word is always present to us on the surface of things, especially the sacraments and the Bible's *verba*, when we are guided by the Spirit. Scripture does not mirror Christ in a two-natures fashion; it simply presents him, in all of his saving influence, via verbal inspiration. From Barth's vantage point, Luther's standing as one of the most important theologians in church history could not be overstated; and yet he found Luther's *verbum reale* framing of Spirit-afforded revelation connected with problematic assumptions regarding the manifest distinction between sacred and secular spheres on earth. Barth worried that Luther's views of the relatively autonomous orders of state and church, secular text and sacred text—with the latter of each pairing functioning as special sites of God's repeated *verbum reale*—wrongfully set the church apart from the secular world.¹³⁶ The alternative Barth embraces is a view wherein the church and its speech-acts are fully part of the secular world, sacred only in their being phenomena God elects as sites of the contemporaneous experience of the Word's Revealedness. For Barth, all created things exist with equal Christic potential for being used as media for the contemporaneous encounter with the living God.¹³⁷ The human speech-acts of Scripture and church preaching thus speak in "secular" fashion, even as they testify to the concrete portrait of Christ. God has elected to grasp human perception via that concrete portrait, interrupting our typical reasoning and pointing us toward

¹³⁶ "Barth thought that Luther's distinction between the hidden God and the revealed God threatened to destroy the unity of God," explains Luther-scholar Bernhard Lohse. Lohse goes on to note that, over against Luther's view of the separation between law and gospel, Barth "emphasized the primacy of the gospel over the law" envisioning it as the law's "inner kernel," just as "Christianity is the inner kernel of the secular community." In Luther's ascribing autonomy to the orders of creation and to the state, "Barth felt that the almost inevitable result of this was the separation of the law from the gospel, of nature from grace, and of the secular government from the spiritual government. . . . He thought that Lutheranism had not sufficiently emphasized the importance of [the] sovereignty of Christ." Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther: An Introduction to His Life and Work*, trans. Verlag C. H. Beck (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986) 228.

¹³⁷ Thus, while Luther applies the *verbum reale* notion of God's self-giving masks to creation *and* the mediums of revelation, Barth applies it only to creation, and only in terms of God's *will* being fulfilled in all worldly occurrences.

something new. This is why he says we must see that “precisely the general, and only valid hermeneutics must be learned by means of the Bible as the testimony to revelation.”¹³⁸

On the whole, then, we find that one of the keenest insights of Barth’s revelation doctrine lies in its offering an epistemological correlate for the claim that the Spirit “breathes where it will,” rooted in the fact that “the Word of God, in its aspect of *Rede*, thing said, cannot be absolutely isolated from its aspect of *Wort*, the act of saying. ... It cannot become something ready-made, an independent reality, that man may handle, use as he pleases, separating it from Him who has said it, from his act, always actual, of saying it.”¹³⁹ Moreover, built into the event-framework is something of a methodological premise for scriptural interpretation: believers must remain in submissive pursuit of revelation in their historical situation rather than resting in confidence that they have secured understanding of it.¹⁴⁰

For all of Barth’s cleverness in drawing subjectivity up into the objectivity of revelation, his *sola fide* reading of the Bible also instantiates an ongoing vulnerability of Protestant interpretation (which traditionally expects the Holy Spirit to render Scripture’s meaning equally clear to all) that leaves the community ill-equipped to *resolve* ramifying interpretive divisions. From Luther to Barth, we find a version of the same circular argument at play: that the Bible attests to the fact that receiving God’s Word via the operative grace of the Spirit provokes a decision of faith, and only on the basis of that extrinsic gift can the reader engage in faithful scriptural interpretation. Granted, the suggestions that satisfactory biblical interpretation is only possible once the interpreter has opted for the spiritual mode of existence, and that the biblical content somehow attests to that principle, do not in themselves constitute circularity. The circularity resides in one’s asserting the Spirit’s extrinsic provision of the vision of revelation that one presents. According to Luther,

¹³⁸ *CD* I/2, pp. 465 f.

¹³⁹ *CD* I/1, 141-43.

¹⁴⁰ See *ibid.*, 163-64.

Scripture's doctrinal concentration is provided by the Spirit to God's people through operative grace. Barth insists on the subordination of all meanings to the scriptural figure of Christ while also maintaining that the Spirit only supplies us with an interpretation of that figure extrinsically. Once again, what was "'justification by faith' for Luther, is 'God's otherness' (yet closeness) for Barth."¹⁴¹ In the latter case, the Holy Spirit simply prevents eisegesis actualistically rather than in the form of an identifiable doctrinal concentration.

Ironically, given Barth's intentions to ensure humility in the interpretive act, the latter point is why Barth's hermeneutic approach may be seen as *effectively* standing as what Sarah Coakley calls the "the reverse side of Kant—through an appeal to biblical authority which reaches into the realm of what Kant called the noumenal, if only by fiat."¹⁴² Barthian sympathizers could protest that Barth is not claiming Kantian epistemological limits so as to assert, through pure projection, what is the knowledge of God provided by historical revelation; they might say that he rather appeals to those limits in order to turn theology's focus back to the object of revelation. Furthermore, they may ask, could not an approach like Schleiermacher's indeed be overly optimistic about subjective appropriation as an unproblematic aspect of interpretation? Is Barth not simply following out the notion of God's radical Otherness in contrast to human finitude and sin? The counter-response is to ask why, even in light of God's transcendent supremacy and holy Otherness, the graced gift of revelation must function contemporaneously rather than cooperatively. Must God's self-disclosure utterly dismantle the world's attempts to arrive at truth, or may it both judge and fulfill them?

¹⁴¹ Jeanrond, 130.

¹⁴² Coakley, *GSS*, 40, fn. 4. It may be of interest to the reader that John Hare proposes that the "vertical dimension" of Kant's philosophy of religion has been too often overlooked or dismissed, including by Barth. Hare invites his reader to reconsider the *constitutive* aspect of Kant's thought, particularly attending to Kant's declaration that he had found it necessary to deny knowledge to make room for faith, "which includes belief in the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God" (Hare, 82).

Barth always remained suspicious of such claims that would support the efforts of natural theology. Driven by his resistance to the possibility of divine and human activity intermingling, he refused to propose any constructive or contributing role for corporeal or corporate forms in inviting or facilitating the revelatory disclosure provided by the Spirit. Thus, however well Barth's *sola Scriptura* option might withstand contextual shifts as a point of applied theology, in practical terms it is akin to Luther's teaching in that it requires intuitive recognition, not definition, to be accepted. Along these lines, it could be that Wolfhart Pannenberg makes a shrewd assessment not only of Barth's revelation doctrine, but of the entire "low church/high Scripture" tendency from Luther to Barth, when he says that—whatever Barth's intentions—his non-foundational approach to theologizing only actually succeeds in articulating an elaborate (albeit enticing) explanation of personal faith, best functioning in a personalist sense.¹⁴³ All said, Barth's system is vulnerable to such criticisms focused on his resistance to God-human intermingling in any medium (as attested by his having been much critiqued for obscuring the biblical content's vital role in disclosing the Word,¹⁴⁴ as well as for presenting a weak pneumatology¹⁴⁵ and an insubstantial ecclesiology).¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ See Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, trans. Francis McDonagh (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1976). He says: "The critical question by which to judge Barth's theological foundation is whether he has succeeded in making God and his revelation anything but the postulate of our (or his) consciousness" (266).

¹⁴⁴ I examine this critique in chapter two of this project.

¹⁴⁵ Suzanne McDonald articulates this concern: "Barth's radical concentration of the whole of election in Christ means that the outworking of the *filioque* effectively issues in a subordination of pneumatology to Christology in election ... the significance of the Spirit's role has been radically relativized. ... Barth is clear that the participation of all in Christ's election need not include the Spirit's work. The Spirit's work simply delineates one manner of that participation but not the other" ("Evangelical Questioning of Election in Barth," 262-63). For a similar analysis, see Reinhard Hütter's assessment that Barth's Holy Spirit is simply "Christ's mode of action" and is "accorded no work of its own in relation to church doctrine." *Suffering Divine Things: Theology as Church Practice*, trans. D. Scott (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 115.

¹⁴⁶ For instance, Keith L. Johnson says that because, for Barth, "the objective work of Christ includes within itself the subjective realization of that work," the result is that "the church does not continue the being of Christ in a changed form, distributing Christ's benefits in history by means of its practices"; rather, its subjective participation in Christ's God-human reconciliation "simply has 'the character of *revelation*, of the *Word* of God demanding expression' in the lives of the humans who hear it" (citing *CD IV/3.1*, 38, in "The Being and Act of the Church: Barth and the Future of Evangelical Ecclesiology" in *Karl Barth and American Evangelicalism*, 201-26; here at 225). Deciding what that expression entails for the corporate body warrants

It has been this chapter's aim to throw into stark relief the "interpretation problem" endemic to *sola Scriptura* hermeneutic practices from Luther to Barth, which we see as the tendency toward individualistic interpretation on the basis of the claim that revelation simply asserts itself in the individual's knowing relation to God through the presence of the Holy Spirit. In the remainder of this dissertation, I search for ways beyond this constellation of issues that amount to the post-Barthian Protestant interpretation problem. I begin in chapter two by looking into Pannenberg's proposed alternative, as well as the one offered by Hans Frei. Both of these prominent twentieth-century Protestant theologians are sympathetic with "low church/high Scripture" commitments and are aware of the complexities of these commitments in the post-Barthian milieu. They are worthy of this project's close attention because they work to preserve revelation's objectivity (that is, they eschew subjective experience as the starting point for theological inquiry) as well as to offer positive accounts of the corporate body's role in discerning revelation's norms without recommending a sacerdotal model. In the posture of appreciative-yet-critical inquiry, I invite my reader to turn with me to consider their doctrines of revelation as potentially demarcating paths beyond the Protestant interpretation problem.

intercommunal adjudication between competing claims, but because Barth allows no role for cooperative grace and unfolding embodiments of Christ in history, it is difficult to envision how that adjudication could properly happen—or, indeed, to imagine what the corporate gathering actually *is* other than an occasion of subjective faith expression. For additional critiques of Barth's ecclesiology for lacking a tangible vision of the church, see Nicholas M. Healy, "The logic of Karl Barth's Ecclesiology: Analysis, Assessment, and Proposed Modifications," in *Modern Theology* 10, no. 3 (1994); and Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001).

Chapter II

Protestant Alternatives in Wolfhart Pannenberg and Hans Frei: New Angles of the Interpretation Problem

The previous chapter left us with the conclusion that, while today's *sola Scriptura* devotees would (almost uniformly) agree with Barth that the living person of Jesus Christ is the crux of divine revelation and should thus orient biblical interpretation, what Barth takes this to mean epistemologically proves troublesome for communities seeking consensus regarding biblically-attested truths. In keeping with Barth's insistence that humans cannot cooperate with the Word's "Revealedness," i.e. the Spirit, to contribute to the church's true identity, Barth's hermeneutic doctrine effectively allows for interpretive agreement informed by intuitive recognition rather afforded through the community's painstaking processes of arriving at consensus. In other words, if equipped only with Barth's actualistic depiction of the revelatory process, the interpreting community is essentially left relying upon gut instinct regarding which interpretation is Christocentric—a reliance that could fuel the idealization of certain charismatic teachers rather than call the community to refine one another's understandings through the efforts of dialogical discernment.

This hermeneutic difficulty inherent to Barth's revelation doctrine highlights the fact that some version of this "Protestant interpretation problem" (PIP) has stayed with the *sola Scriptura* movement since Luther's day; that is, uncertainty regarding the proper role of a "priesthood of all believers" in discerning the implications of revelation has endured. The current iteration of that challenge entails a complex set of considerations. Given our post-Kantian hermeneutic awareness, how are today's Protestants to move beyond their inherited gridlock regarding how the Bible functions vis-à-vis the community? Are the only viable models for doing so those of adopting a hierarchical teaching office (thus abandoning the hermeneutic premise of the priesthood of all believers), or embracing a Liberal constructivist model (by giving up on the notion that Scripture somehow delivers the address of a God who is humankind's utterly distinct Other), or accepting a

Barthian actualistic paradigm (thereby disavowing a human capacity to cooperate with the Spirit towards defining the normative content of biblical testimony and ecclesial identity)?

In the present chapter I consider two promising alternatives to these three options, which I identify in the works of Protestant theologians Wolfhart Pannenberg and Hans Frei. Both are worthy of this project's close consideration, not only because they engage the challenges of contemporary hermeneutics within Protestant contexts, nor even because they also are prominent among the twentieth-century theologians who have been hailed as offering viable alternatives to Barthian and Liberal theological paradigms. Pannenberg and Frei are particularly noteworthy within the scope of this project because both in some fashion adhere to the Protestant "low church/high Scripture" insistence that God's Word is made available in Scripture to all who seek it, while also expressing robust commitment to ongoing conversation (both internally and externally vis-à-vis the community of believers) towards the end of identifying the unfolding implications of Christocentric revelation. Pannenberg and Frei manage to hold together these commitments because they embrace, on the one hand, the Barthian assertion that interpreters should seek to understand the biblical text by attending to its own "spirit, content and aim"¹; and, on the other hand, they discern that text's spirit, content, and aim as directing theologians to eschew (what Pannenberg calls) the Barthian presumption of "intrinsic limits between a realm of supernatural knowledge and a contrasting realm of so-called natural knowledge."² That eschewal enables them to delineate non-hierarchical, Scripture-honoring, discussion-oriented options for Christian communities gathered around the Bible in search of its implications for their life together and in constructive relationship with their unconverted neighbors.

¹ Karl Barth, "Rudolph Bultmann—An Attempt to Understand Him," in Hans-Werner Bartsch, ed. *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, vol. 2 (London: SPCK, 1962), 83-132. Here 108.

² Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology: Collected Essays*, Volume I, trans. George H. Kehm (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 13 (subsequently cited as *BQ I*).

The following exploration of Pannenberg and Frei's expansive works is necessarily, albeit regrettably, limited to identifying their manners of holding together the two key principles noted above: first, that the revelatory, Christoform content of Scripture is available to any who truly conform to what the text asks of them; and second, that that content specifically discloses the fact that Christoform revelation unfolds within history in a manner that warrants inter- and extra-ecclesial discourse for the sake of discerning its implications in shifting contexts. This examination should additionally make it clear that, although both thinkers stake their founding claims upon a sort of middle ground between Barthian and Liberal theological trajectories, Pannenberg and Frei's "low church" approaches to biblical revelation also vary significantly, and both thinkers' hermeneutic schemas exhibit unique merits and drawbacks. In light of that fact, it is this chapter's aim to look carefully at their projects not only to uncover potential resources for addressing the PIP, but also to delineate more sharply the interpretive challenges facing Protestants who share the basic values defining their middle-ground "low church/high Scripture" approach.

By this chapter's end, I hope to have demonstrated that the means of preserving the comparative advantages of Pannenberg and Frei's approaches while also evading their drawbacks is not simply to pose each as a corrective to the other. Granted, each thinker's insights do press the other's towards accounting for certain overlooked angles of the hermeneutic quest for Scripture's revelatory content. Nevertheless, I propose, neither of their hermeneutic approaches adequately accounts for the believing interpreter's *subjective* participation in the mediation of revelation. In this regard, Pannenberg and Frei both fall short of addressing key challenges facing the interpretive body* (corporeal and corporate). I conclude this chapter by stepping back from that shared omission to consider what it implies for the sake of building upon their insights to move beyond the Protestant interpretation problem.

Pannenberg: Theologian of Critical History

I begin this work by attending to Pannenberg. Arguably, the key to understanding the distinctions between Pannenberg and Barth as theologians of scriptural revelation lies in the fact that, as Avery Dulles notes, Pannenberg critiques Barth for belonging to the group of theologians (including the likes of Søren Kierkegaard) for whom “the decision of faith is a purely subjective act that can scarcely escape the charge of being arbitrary and whimsical.”³ As Dulles explains, by contrast, “Pannenberg wishes to offset the privatization that occurs when faith is presented as a mere wager or a groundless commitment rather than as a response to objectively sufficient evidence.”⁴ Pannenberg’s absolute conviction is that faith must not be charged with capriciousness. That conviction coheres with his expressed understanding that God’s will “does not occur at the expense of human activity, but precisely through the experience, plans, and deeds of men, despite and in their sinful perversion.”⁵ This view of the God-human relationship, which stands in sharp contrast with Barth’s,⁶ is the outcome of Pannenberg’s understanding of the Christiform picture of human access to revelation within history. Interestingly, however, Pannenberg’s doctrine of revelation amounts to an applied handling of the Bible that is not unlike Barth’s own, which is to treat it as something of an expendable means to an end—a transit point on the way to saving knowledge. That feature serves to highlight that, although Pannenberg’s paradigm affirms

³ Avery Dulles, “Pannenberg on Revelation and Faith,” in *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg*, ed. Carl E. Brazen and Philip Clayton (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988), 169-87. Here 169-70.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ *BQ* I, 79.

⁶ To remind the reader of the content covered in chapter one, Barth maintains that human activity ever remains autonomous from God’s activity and yet is fully subject to God’s sovereign will. In Barth’s picture of revelation, God as Trinity gives to human perception what it cannot have on its own: true correspondence to God’s own act of self-giving, so that without human experience and expression becoming any less subjective or flawed, we are nonetheless given real knowledge of God. Pannenberg, by contrast, maintains that God’s activity unfolds through human activity. In revelation, God discloses to us what we could not otherwise apprehend but, despite our residual flaws, we can understand via the same epistemic equipment we have always employed.

discursive discernment of revelation's content, it ultimately privileges the intellectually-elite participants in that discussion to the neglect of other sources of theological knowledge within the body (corporeal and corporate). The following section on Pannenberg's work builds a case for these claims.

* * *

A ready entry point into this analysis is Pannenberg's own efforts to distinguish his understanding of divine revelation in history from Barth's. Fundamentally, Pannenberg rejects Barth's conviction that only "the eyes of faith" could perceive God's self-revelation in Christ's historical fate. Regardless of Barth's would-be insistence that God provides the "eyes of faith," rather than our being able to project belief in Christ, Pannenberg's point is that such a claim is still indecipherable from projection, rendering Barth's doctrine of revelation little more than an explanation of personal faith.⁷ For Pannenberg, this is characteristic of the mid-twentieth century Protestant projects associated with "kerygma theology." Adherents to this movement, he explains, are convinced that one may have an experience of the biblical proclamation of Jesus that "frees one who has been overcome by it from every attempt at historical comprehension."⁸ Fueled by renewal of the Lutheran dogma of "the Word of God," kerygma theology supports the presumption of freedom from historical inquiry by emphasizing that God's Word is "primarily the preached Word, the Scripture being understood as the written residue of this."⁹ In such a framework, the unity of historical events can be seen as existing only in God, history's transcendent origin, rather than also in those events' interworldly coherence. Such is the nature of positivism, says Pannenberg, which demands that theological "continuities be derivable from the observations of the particulars" and

⁷ See Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, trans. Francis McDonagh (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1976), 266.

⁸ *BQ* I, 82.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 83.

effectively banishes theological inquiry “to the field of a supra- or primal history,”¹⁰ as Pannenberg believes Barth has done. Barth’s taking history’s unity to exist only in its transcendent origin is unfortunately characteristic of Protestant theology overall, which is plagued by an objectionable presumption of “limits between a realm of supernatural knowledge and a contrasting realm of so-called natural knowledge,”¹¹ says Pannenberg.

Pannenberg elsewhere admits that, as with all good scientific investigation, Barth believes that the object of inquiry—which is, for Christian theology, the Word of God—takes precedence over its methods;¹² and so, in this respect, he shares with Barth a concern for how well the method of theological understanding that Christians construct fits the object of knowledge. For Pannenberg, Barth simply misunderstands Christian theology’s transcendent object with regard to the nature of God’s claim over historical reality. Barth believed that the all-encompassing nature of God’s revelation in Christ warrants the total subordination of all human structures of knowledge to the concrete person of Jesus, encountered through Scripture and preaching. That encounter allegedly provides a faith which, as Pannenberg describes it, “must be satisfied with the kerygma and may not seek false security by inquiring behind the kerygma for the event attested by it.”¹³ To Pannenberg’s mind, this premise attests to Barth faltering, along with other kerygma theologians, by evaluating the biblical witness as dealing not with “general religious truths—or with any other kind of general truths—which would be accessible at other times, but rather with very definite, most particular events which they attest to be acts of ... the biblical God who is completely without

¹⁰ *BQ I*, 78. Cf. *BQ I*, 15-16: “This assumption of a suprahistorical kernel of history...which still lives today especially in the form of Barth’s interpretation of the Incarnation as ‘pre-history’ (*Urgeschichte*), necessarily depreciates real history just as does the reduction of history to historicity.”

¹¹ *BQ I*, 13.

¹² “According to Barth,” Pannenberg says, “theology is scientific in its ‘proper treatment of its object,’ ‘its conformity with its object or its appropriate treatment of it’” (*Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, 267).

¹³ *BQ I*, 85. Along these lines kerygma theology assumed an “autonomy of the kerygma over against its historical basis,” removing Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection from all other history as an eschatological event (*ibid.*, 87).

analogy.”¹⁴ In contrast to such a position, Pannenberg envisions Christian theology’s capacity to “tak[e] every thought captive into the obedience of Christ”¹⁵ not as stemming from such a death-and-resurrection dynamic; rather, he is confident that the biblical picture of reality affords rational bases, “in the sense of an all-embracing theology of history,”¹⁶ that demonstrably support Christian revelation’s claims to universality for the unconverted.

For starters, Pannenberg maintains that the presumptions of the supra-historical approach are unbecoming of the logic of the Incarnation, which is nothing if not “an entrance of God into our mode of existence.”¹⁷ If one truly believes this entrance truly happened in the person of Jesus Christ, Pannenberg says, then “it will be impossible in principle to reject out of hand the idea that historical investigation of this event, even in its particularity, could and must discover its revelatory character.”¹⁸ In other words, because any historical object demands “verification through subsequent testing by observation of the particulars,”¹⁹ Pannenberg deems it crucial that the Christian “discover as far as possible the links between all other events and this one”—that is, the attested life and fate of Jesus Christ—“in order to know the universality of the God of Israel and his revelation in Jesus of Nazareth as verified.”²⁰ On these terms, the “revelatory character” of this historical incident belongs to the event itself; it is not perceived there because faith has somehow first projected it in a positivistic manner. If we are to believe in the Incarnation, then the historical event attested in the Gospels must exhibit its revelatory character precisely as a historian would portray it.

¹⁴ *BQ I*, 83.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 78.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 79.

Pannenberg acknowledges that the historical inquiry he proposes inevitably “involves a selection”²¹ conditioned by the theological position that the historian takes. However, Pannenberg’s orienting conviction is that one is protected from *arbitrary* selection if one takes seriously God’s universal claim over reality. Granted, this means that the historian he has in mind is one concerned not only with this or that particular phenomenon but also with a view of history as a whole.²² (Pannenberg is not troubled by this, for he finds it unlikely that serious historians will ever give up the assumption that history has a unity, given that “it is the horizon of world history which first makes it possible to appreciate the full significance of an individual event.”²³) Those unifying frameworks are unavoidably hypothetical in nature; “a conjecture about the relationships, the historical circumstances, guides one’s interest from the beginning.”²⁴ If the historian truly believes that history has a unity of some sort, however, she must interpret her conjectural projection of that unity “as a spontaneous reproduction of a previously given unity of history, which, to be sure, only becomes conscious of itself in this reproductive act.”²⁵ Consequently, for Pannenberg, the sort of historical inquirer who will be able to detect the revelatory character of the Christ-event is one who employs a hypothetical unifying viewpoint and seeks to test the soundness of that hypothesis.

With concern for testing our unifying concepts of historical reality, and given our finite situation in the midst of history, Pannenberg insists that “a projection of the course of events must be so constructed that it does not exclude the contingency of the historical.”²⁶ This is easier said

²¹ *BQ I*, 78.

²² See *BQ I*, 66-67.

²³ *BQ I*, 69.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 71.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 72.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

than done, he points out. Nearly every major attempt to account for historical contingency while projecting history's course has resulted in the over-determination of either historical unity or historical contingency. To avoid those pitfalls, Pannenberg argues that history's unity must be grounded in a certain sort of God-concept, for two key reasons. First, Pannenberg contends, the modern historian must agree that to talk about God at all is, in a way, to talk about everything, and vice versa.²⁷ (He says that a failure to see this fact could be attributed to confusion caused by radical historicists in the field of religious studies, who have reduced notions of God to sociological constructs.²⁸) The idea of God implies the whole of historical reality, even though that whole is not presently available for understanding but exists as a still open future.

Pannenberg identifies this *telic* notion of history as a tenet of modern historical consciousness, a fact that lends philosophical credibility, he believes, to "Israel's understanding of its history as revelatory history," which understanding represents "the condition of the possibility of regarding the continuity of history as grounded in the unity of God."²⁹ On this point Pannenberg takes a cue from Wilhelm Dilthey, who adopted Hegel's thorough-going historical framework and assertion that the final whole of experience is truth. But we should note that, for Pannenberg, "the appeal to final coherence works better as a semantics than as a logic," as Philip Clayton explains.³⁰

²⁷ I found help for clarifying this point in David H. Kelsey's notes on Pannenberg in *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 53-54.

²⁸ Pannenberg explains the perceived nature of that failure in *BQ I*, 77: "For as man fails to account for the uniqueness of individual religious experiences when he tries to understand them as merely a function of other psychological phenomena . . . so does he also fail to account for the uniqueness of the changes in religions in their history when he takes them to be merely functions of other, perhaps sociological, changes."

²⁹ *BQ I*, 77. In other words, the modern search for meta-historical unity, which begs a theological question, is indicated by the ancient Hebraic conception of history guided by God, which envisions linear events moving *telically* towards a future fulfillment in their transcendent source.

³⁰ Philip Clayton, "Anticipation and Theological Method" in *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg*, ed. Carl E. Brazen and Philip Clayton (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988), 122-150. Here 134. Clayton further explains that Pannenberg eschews Hegel's historicized notion of being itself, which he thought "remained imprisoned to rational necessity rather than the vicissitudes of actual human history." Clayton goes on to point out that this rejection of idealism is what links Pannenberg with Heidegger, for whom the future is the locus of the possibility of *Dasein's* wholeness or completion. "Existing means

Clayton notes that on this point Pannenberg shuns Hegelian idealism and draws upon Sartre's existentialism, protesting that we only reach "a sufficiently broad horizon" for interpretation in a final future, which alone "could provide a totality which is truly total and unsurpassable by any further history."³¹ In sum, for Pannenberg, "philosophical considerations themselves lead to a concept of universal history which can only be fully grasped from a theological—more specifically, an eschatological—perspective."³²

This brings us to Pannenberg's second reason why history's unity must be grounded in a certain sort of God-concept. Pannenberg explains what a satisfactory theological/eschatological perspective should entail:

The God who by the transcendence of his freedom is the origin of the contingency in the world, is also the ground of the unity which comprises the contingencies as history. . . . It seems that only the origin of the contingency of events can, by virtue of its unity, also be the origin of its continuity without injuring its contingency. . . . [The] indwelling connection between [historical events] is grounded in the transcendent unity of God, which manifests itself as faithfulness.³³

In other words, an honest combination of historical contingency with historical unity does not imply something like a discernable development of historical events. We can only authentically posit history's continuity as the faithfulness of God, understood as history's *free* source and end, without losing the genuine contingency of reality.

All said, when the historian in search of a unifying historical framework brings these criteria to her assessment of the Judeo-Christian conception of God, Pannenberg is confident that that historian will conclude that only this unifying picture of historical reality proves satisfactory. She will see that the Christ-event, culminating with Christ's *resurrection*, is "proleptic": history's end breaking into history's "middle," disclosing the final fulfillment of all worldly possibility in the

projecting oneself onto the future, anticipating one's possible wholeness in the future" (135).

³¹ Clayton, 135.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, 74-75.

midst of history's unfolding. In *Theology as History* Pannenberg explains what this means: "It is not true that the *revelatio*, the self-disclosure of God, falls from heaven ready-made," he says. "Nor must it be the starting point of all knowledge of God, as if one could not otherwise know anything about him. There is rather, speaking metaphorically, a veiled God in the beginning, and only in the end is the veil taken away, i.e., the *re-vel-atio* takes place."³⁴ In some sense, then, we already experience ultimate reality—God—as history unfolds; but in the midst of history our perspective remains finite and thus "one-sided and distorted."³⁵ Any definitive self-revelation of God within history would be an unveiling of historical reality's final conclusion, which conclusion will be "the self-unveiling of the God already provisionally known through all the obscurities of the veiling."³⁶

Reflecting upon Pannenberg's proposal, Dulles rightly observes that at its heart "lies a crucial distinction between direct and indirect revelation."³⁷ Because Pannenberg takes the idea of God to imply the whole of finite reality, he maintains that God self-reveals indirectly via historical facts and will be revealed directly only in the eschaton, which is history's final culminating event rather than its radical interruption and remaking.³⁸ That final event is the single vantage point from which it will be possible to see in retrospect history's completed totality.³⁹ Christ's resurrection gives a view of that totality, and that view grounds Christian hope; but only at the

³⁴ Pannenberg, "Focal Essay: The Revelation of God in Jesus of Nazareth," In *New Frontiers in Theology*, Volume III: *Theology as History*, eds. James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, Jr. (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1967), 101-33. Here 118.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ See Dulles, 171. See also Pannenberg, "Introduction," *Revelation as History* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 15.

³⁸ This fact is notable because it speaks to Pannenberg's conviction that God's mode of being and our own are not antithetical. From this perspective, full disclosure of absolute truth *may* and *will* occur only at history's conclusion, at which point one will finally be able to view the total "framework of the history which God has with humanity and through humanity with his whole creation" (*BQ I*, 15).

³⁹ See Kelsey, 53, fn. 84.

very end will that totality make complete sense of history, in other words. Pannenberg accordingly grounds in that phenomenon a theological projection of history that, though “historically verifiable,”⁴⁰ does not claim to be read straightforwardly off of the bare details of historical events. Rather, it persists in the manner of “a scientific investigation” that “can admit assertions only to the extent of treating them as problematic and trying to test their claims.”⁴¹ The defining event of Christ’s resurrection exhibits its revelatory character precisely as *this* historian would portray it, Pannenberg might say.

Consequently, Pannenberg is not an idealist, lauding rationality over historical particularity. In fact, Dulles observes, Pannenberg rejects natural theology, insisting that “God cannot be known at all except through revelation, that revelation must be historical, and that the sole historical revelation is that given in Jesus Christ. In some respects, therefore, Pannenberg remains close to Karl Barth.”⁴² However, Pannenberg definitively sets himself apart from Barth by declaring not only that “revelation is contained in a historical event of the past” but also that “there is no other mode of access to a past event than historical research.”⁴³ Pannenberg’s critique of Barth as a positivist also attests to the distinctions between his and Barth’s views of the God-world relationship and its implications for the nature of God’s self-disclosure. For Barth, God’s being is so radically Other from our own that the Incarnation is an eschatological event, wherein what is utterly extrinsic to worldly potential takes up earthly reality *in* and *as* a miraculous disruption of it. Conversely, Pannenberg views the God-world relationship disclosed by the Incarnation as

⁴⁰ *BQ I*, 78.

⁴¹ Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, 364. As Clayton explains it, for Pannenberg, “since the theme of theology is the reality of God, even within theology statements about God retain their problematic status” (132).

⁴² Dulles, 170. Clayton pursues a similar point: “Pannenberg insists that there is no separate prolegomena to decide the truth question, no natural theology to serve as foundation for a ‘science of faith,’” he explains (123). Pannenberg looks to philosophy not for a natural theology but for “a nontheological exposition of his central theological tenet, anticipation” (*ibid.*, 132).

⁴³ *BQ I*, 66.

revealing that our modes of existence are not so antithetical that God's self-revelation undoes worldly reality; rather, it is its culmination. Pannenberg's corresponding theological epistemology includes the premise that "faith is not something like a compensation of subjective conviction to make up for defective knowledge"; rather, "faith is actually trust in God's promise, and this trust is not rendered superfluous by knowledge of this promise; on the contrary, it is made possible by it for the first time."⁴⁴ Pannenberg thus maintains that the historical phenomenon of Jesus Christ's life, death, and particularly his resurrection affords knowledge of history's meaning for the observer. That knowledge enables faith, rather than the phenomenon affording faith which enables knowledge.

Pannenberg articulates his primary concern regarding biblical interpretation in light of his convictions regarding theology's deep-seated connections to historical science. He also notes his belief that this concern is the fundamental one for today's historically-conscious Christian readers. For this present-day audience, Pannenberg says, the "unified 'essential content' of Scripture which, for Luther, was the basis of its authority, is . . . no longer to be found in the texts but only behind them, in the figure of Jesus who is attested in the very different writings of the New Testament in very different and incongruous ways."⁴⁵ Given that recognition, along with this audience's general acceptance (in the wake of the failed "historical Jesus" projects of the twentieth century) of the fact that the only access readers have to that historical figure is through the biblical testimony, Pannenberg says that the contemporary Christian's central hermeneutic concern may be expressed as a question: "How can the horizon of our present consciousness be fused with that of the primitive Christian writings without effacing the difference between them and us, without diminishing their historical individuality, and without forcing the thought of the present age into

⁴⁴ *BQ I*, 64-65.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

the conceptions of a past age?"⁴⁶ Otherwise said, in the search for the "essential meaning" disclosed by scriptural testimony regarding Jesus Christ, how are contemporary Christians to negotiate the gap between modern historical sensibilities and those of the original kerygmatic community in a manner that is both responsible and meaningful? In the following section, I will outline Pannenberg's proposed answer to this question and evaluate its bearing upon the set of closely related issues identified in this project as the "Protestant interpretation problem" (PIP).

Pannenberg's Approach to Scriptural Revelation: A Solution to the PIP?

Pannenberg's solution to the hermeneutic problem he identifies is rooted in his understanding of faith-knowledge: it has a thoroughly rational connection to scientific knowledge, eschewing any notion that faith is "a merely subjective conviction that would allegedly compensate for the uncertainty of our historical knowledge about Jesus."⁴⁷ The latter proposal is the false solution he finds theology offering in an attempt to flee the inroads of "critical-historical investigation as the scientific verification of events [which] did not seem to leave any more room for redemptive events."⁴⁸ Hence, where Barth calls for today's historical-critics to be more self-critical, Pannenberg calls for people of faith to see that the revelatory character of the historical Christ-event in fact belongs to the event itself. David Kelsey elucidates this claim by noting that Pannenberg rejects any declaration that events need to be "interpreted" in some spiritual or existential sense. For Pannenberg, Kelsey says, events "carry their revelatory meaning with them . . . precisely because 'events' always occur, always are just what they are, in the context of a

⁴⁶ BQ I, 9.

⁴⁷ Pannenberg, "The Revelation of God in Jesus," 131.

⁴⁸ BQ I, 16.

‘tradition’ which thus is integral to the event.”⁴⁹ Pannenberg accordingly asserts that the revelatory significance of Christ’s resurrection remains bound to the meta-historical perspective or “thought-horizon” of Jesus’s originating community.⁵⁰

For Pannenberg, then, present-day readers’ “efforts to discover the continuity of reality that is grounded in God” as they pore over the ancient texts should lead them to the decision of whether or not to adopt the Judeo-Christian meta-historical perspective, given that that viewpoint is not “judged as a theological-Christian perspective external to the historical material itself . . . which could be played off against some other perspective as being of equal historical value.”⁵¹ On the contrary, its guiding notion of history is to be accepted or rejected as “the only appropriate view” of that historical material—indeed, of historical reality itself.⁵² The Judeo-Christian claim is that the eschaton has entered history itself. What that claim offers us, Pannenberg maintains, is not a model like Hegel’s rational necessity of historical existence, nor is it a conjectural theory of anticipation; rather, it offers a “strong, ontological interpretation” of history, founded on the claim that the “knowledge of God is made possible on a path guided by God himself—by a history—[which] was already known to Israel.”⁵³ This knowledge has “strong, ontological” bearing because it claims that “we do not merely hope in a possible future outcome; rather, the future is in some sense present in the present, in such a way that it proleptically determines and gives meaning to that present.”⁵⁴ For

⁴⁹ Kelsey, 53, fn. 84. Cf. Pannenberg, *Revelation as History*, trans. David Granskou (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 145, 149, 155.

⁵⁰ Pannenberg explains the import of that “horizon”: “the claim of Jesus was not an isolated and arbitrary one. It belongs together with a specific past and a specific future. Only by understanding its roots in Israel’s tradition and anticipating its future confirmation by God himself could the Israelite audience of Jesus respond to his claim” (“The Revelation of God in Jesus,” 111).

⁵¹ *BQ I*, 77-78.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ “The Revelation of God in Jesus,” 118.

⁵⁴ See Pannenberg, *The Idea of God and Human Freedom*, trans. R. A. Wilson (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973), 132.

Pannenberg, in other words, the biblical view of history's end breaking into its middle makes way for an ontology and a philosophy of history rooted in the notion that the end of time has become present within time as the essential truth of temporal reality.⁵⁵

Given Pannenberg's convictions that the heart of the church's proclamation is that the revelatory end-event happened proleptically in Jesus Christ's resurrection, and that one can and must abstract from this proclamation an ontologically and philosophically robust theory of anticipation, he evaluates the function scriptural witness to that event as follows:

Biblical narrative is not itself revelation. It is rather 'promise' before God's historical action, setting the tradition that is constituent in the revelatory events; or 'forthtelling' of the moral and social implications of revelation, in which case it presupposes that God is already known and so is not itself revelatory; or 'report,' e.g., the *kerygma*, of revelatory events, in which case it is our sole source for reconstructing the events (including their constituent traditions) in which God was known.⁵⁶

At this juncture, it may be useful to recall that Pannenberg takes the idea of God to imply the whole of historical reality, and so God self-reveals *indirectly* via historical facts and will only be revealed *directly* in the eschaton, history's culminating event that makes sense of all finite reality.⁵⁷ As evidenced in the passage above, Pannenberg finds the Bible vital to our accessing indirect revelation because the historical events through which God indirectly self-reveals are always traditionally-situated. Here he also draws upon one of his founding convictions, that "revelatory events are not ambiguous in themselves and do not require an inspired interpretation for their meaning to be discerned."⁵⁸ And so he insists that the words of Scripture do not *add* to the meaning of the events on which they build. As a result, Pannenberg believes that biblical narrative ought to be taken as "the authoritative aspect of scripture because it provides the sources for

⁵⁵ See Clayton, 136.

⁵⁶ *Revelation as History*, 152-153.

⁵⁷ Recalling that, at this point, one will finally be able to view the total "framework of the history which God has with humanity and through humanity with his whole creation" (*BQ I*, 15).

⁵⁸ *BQ I*, 15.

reconstructing the history of God's acts wherein God is revealed"; and, furthermore, that the one event that really must be reconstructed is Jesus' resurrection, for—once situated in its original Judeo-Christian thought horizon—it certifies Jesus' ministry as the eschatological event and therefore as the basis on which the totality of history may be read as revelation.⁵⁹ To say it again: for Pannenberg, biblical narrative is an authoritative access-point to revelation; it is not itself revelatory.

What might all of this amount to as a potential solution to the Protestant concern with identifying a "low church" communal process for discerning scriptural norms? Speaking in the broadest terms, Pannenberg would recommend the community adopting a biblically-attested hermeneutics of totality, the primacy of which is the eschatological future. They would take that future to have been disclosed proleptically in Jesus of Nazareth, who is "the end of the still uncompleted history, and just for this reason is for us (as those who still wander along the way) the inexhaustible center of meaning."⁶⁰ Essentially, while Barth maintains that in Christ the end of history has already *happened*, Pannenberg says that in Christ the end is disclosed or *anticipated within history*, and so, "far from doing away with history, actually forms the basis from which history as a whole becomes understandable."⁶¹ Its capacity to do so is the measure of this theological affirmation's importance, and it must provide that wholeness "not merely as a theoretical fiction, but in rational confidence of future success, a confidence inspiring the attitude of the present moment."⁶² Nevertheless, out of respect for the vicissitudes of history, he specifies that Christians should still understand themselves as those "who still wander along the way,"⁶³ that

⁵⁹ See Kelsey, 53-54, fn. 84.

⁶⁰ *BQ I*, 77.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 36-7.

⁶² *The Idea of God and Human Freedom*, 139.

⁶³ See fn. 60, above.

“our participation in this event, the hope of our own resurrection, is still hidden under the experience of the cross.”⁶⁴ In other words, “no one can make the eschaton into a key to calculate the *course* of history.”⁶⁵ In this manner, forging a way between Hegelian idealism and Barthian positivism, Pannenberg would encourage the “low church” community of Protestant interpreters continually to engage moments of discernment with confidence in our natural modes of ratiocination towards the end of discerning “a Biblically grounded understanding of being and truth.”⁶⁶

To explain a bit further, for Christian communal discernment of Christocentric norms in ever new historical contexts, or even in adjudicating the Bible’s own intertextual tensions, Pannenberg would recommend that believers engage in intellectual discourse of every sort with confidence in the coherent development of meaning that evolves from the individual to the whole. As Clayton explains, this is a rational “movement to ever-broader frameworks [which] admits no arbitrary breaking-off until one has attained the most comprehensive horizon, that of history as a whole.”⁶⁷ That comprehensive horizon—God’s final self-revelation—is to be consistently framed as unfolding toward a future still-hidden yet *anticipated* in Jesus’s fate, the knowledge of which remains anchored in the original apocalyptic horizon of Jesus’ history.⁶⁸ What “low church” Protestants may find most helpful in Pannenberg’s approach to discernment processes is his resistance to the privatization that easily accompanies faith treated as groundless commitment,

⁶⁴ *BQ I*, 36.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 37. Emphasis added.

⁶⁶ “The Revelation of God in Jesus,” 132. He believes that doing otherwise would be to bring “‘foreign’ frameworks to the origins of Christianity,” cutting us off from authentic knowledge of Jesus. “Where such a new basis has been sought,” says Pannenberg, “Jesus again and again has become merely the example of a Gnostic or a philosophical idea whose truth is ultimately independent of the history of Jesus.” *Jesus—God and Man*, 2nd ed., trans. Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), 83.

⁶⁷ Clayton, 134.

⁶⁸ “If this horizon is eliminated,” says Pannenberg, “. . . then Christology becomes mythology” (*Jesus—God and Man*, 83).

rooted in his dedication to Christian truth-claims having universal validity and thus being subject to rational inquiry amongst believers and non-believers alike. In this regard, they may find Pannenberg's doctrine of revelation refreshingly attuned to the Christian's corporate belonging, not only to a faith community but to the larger societal and global network in which that community is imbedded. However, they may justly hesitate before declaring Pannenberg's work the final solution to the PIP. The following section explores why that may be the case.

Pannenberg's Oversight: Discounting Extra-Rational Sources of Understanding

Because Pannenberg believes that revelatory events are unambiguous and so do not require an inspired interpretation for an audience to discern their meaning, "word-revelation in Pannenberg's theory has no independent status,"⁶⁹ as Dulles notes; the biblical text itself is not a medium of revelation for Pannenberg. Rather, the text serves as an *introduction* to the revelatory events that occurred within the Judeo-Christian horizon of understanding. It is a vital and authoritative introduction, because the historical facts do not exist apart from the traditionally-inscribed words that present them in their revelatory significance (and which occasionally develop their moral and social implications for human conduct), but it does not remain vital after having served that introductory purpose. This frees Pannenberg from defending Scripture as inspired, authoritative testimony. The problem with his approach to scriptural revelation is indicated by the fact that, ironically, the *practical* result of his teaching is not unlike Barth's: in eschewing the text as itself a site of revelation, Pannenberg effectively (and unapologetically) entrusts its authentic meaning to the elite interpreter—namely, the philosopher-theologian (while, I have argued, in Barth's case the text's meaning is effectively entrusted to the charismatic preacher/teacher).

How reliable is Pannenberg's privileged philosopher-theologian for discerning and communicating the biblically-grounded, Christ-oriented truth in unfolding historical contexts? This

⁶⁹ Dulles, 172.

question is first concerned with Pannenberg's claim that *comprehension* is both the key content and saving end of divine self-revelation. He says:

Revelation is not the starting point, but the end of a long path, which began with still indistinct and inadequate notions of God. . . . But at the end of the veiled way revelation from God can occur, the self-unveiling of the God already provisionally known through all the obscurities of the veiling. The self-unveiling of God, however, is salvation to mankind because only in God's proximity, in community with God, does human existence find its fulfillment.⁷⁰

Here Pannenberg employs an age-old theological conception, that of "community with God" being humanity's proper end and the goal of God's graced act to save us through Christ. However, he diverges from that ancient tradition by construing "God," not as a supra-personal Other toward whom human desires are oriented, but as synonymous with a universally comprehensive *concept* unfolding with the passing of time and made finally and fully available at history's end.⁷¹

Accordingly, for Pannenberg, God's salvific purpose in self-revelation ultimately involves inviting humans closer to the final, authoritative understanding of history that has been anticipated in Christ's resurrection and will be fully apparent in history's conclusion.

Christians who would protest such a soteriological formula include those who would note that, by equating saving relationship to God with conceptual intelligibility, Pannenberg fails to attend to the more opaque aspects of faith-knowledge that flow into and out of rationally-articulated norms, features which may be grouped under the heading of *habitus*. These aspects are rooted not in abstract thought but in practicing bodies (speaking both corporately and individually). They would include the sort of intuitive knowledge that may only be available by way of sustained involvement in practices such as contemplative and petitionary prayer, *lectio divina*, liturgical gathering and ritual, and acts of solidarity with marginalized persons. They also include the sorts of theo-logic which take experiential wisdom as a primary point of departure,

⁷⁰ "The Revelation of God in Jesus," 118.

⁷¹ See for example *BQ* I, 76, wherein Pannenberg presents God as the rational concept that "makes it possible to conceive the unity of history in a way that maintains the peculiar characteristics of the historical."

developed by those who have been systematically excluded from formalized institutional discourses. Those theo-logics have flowed into and out of robust strategies of biblical interpretation, as in, for example, African American slave religion in the Antebellum South⁷² and today's womanist biblical hermeneutics.⁷³ If for no other reason listed above, many Protestants would balk at the suggestion that there is no soteriological truth-value connected to the intuitive sense of the heart, which (as explored in the first chapter of this dissertation) has traditionally been the orienting energy of Protestant Bible-reading practices. In short, by reducing salvific faith-knowledge to conceptual understanding, Pannenberg's doctrine of revelation fails to account for the extra-rational contributions of communal and physical bodies in the processes of intercepting and expressing the content of God's self-disclosure.

For theologians like Hans Frei, a striking shortcoming of Pannenberg's rationalist construal of revelation and faith would be that it overlooks the revelatory quality of biblical narrative, precisely *as* narrative, rather than as an expendable resource for historical-cum-philosophical reconstruction. There are further connections to be drawn between Pannenberg's discarding the narrative and his oversight of the bodily, or *habitus*-informed, aspects of faith-knowledge. To enrich those connections I turn to the work of Frei, a theologian who places a high theological premium on the biblical narrative as a site of revelation for readers who desire to know Jesus Christ's personal character. Having sketched an outline of Frei's hermeneutic project, in the following section's closing remarks I will consider Frei's doctrine of scriptural revelation as another possible (yet ultimately problematic) solution to the PIP by comparing and contrasting it with Pannenberg's.

⁷² See Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford UP, 1978), especially at 242-43.

⁷³ Pannenberg hardly leaves positive room, for instance, for womanist biblical scholar Clarice J. Martin's incisive point that "experiences of oppression, like all human experience, affect the way in which women decode sacred and secular reality." "Womanist Interpretations of the New Testament: The Quest for Holistic and Inclusive Translation and Interpretation," in *I Found God in Me: A Womanist Biblical Hermeneutics Reader*, ed. Mitzi J. Smith (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015), 20.

Hans Frei: Theologian of Christ's Narrative Identity

This section will survey two prominent and interrelated themes in Hans Frei's work that are present in his doctrine of scriptural interpretation.⁷⁴ The first is an inclination to "materialism" as a reaction to the dominance of quasi-idealistic modes of thought. Under influence of Gilbert Ryle and Karl Barth (particularly of the *Church Dogmatics* Volumes III and IV), Frei came to reject any picture of the human self as a hidden and elusive presence hovering somewhere behind the embodied words and acts of a person's concrete life. This orientation came to inform his "materialist" option for personal identity and self-disclosure. The second theme grows out of the first, and is Frei's Niebuhrian insistence on the "accessibility" of the "full personal being" of Jesus in the Gospel narratives, in opposition to a form-critical dissolution of any link between the biblical portraits of Jesus and his historical reality. At issue here is the matter of how access to reality is always mediated by differing descriptions, which descriptions Frei argues need careful interrelation through painstaking, non-systematic interpretive procedures, with no procedure being taken as foundational to any other.

In *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays*,⁷⁵ Frei reflects on his overall theological program, covering a range of modern theology from the seventeenth through twentieth centuries, continental and analytic philosophy, hermeneutics, and literary criticism—all in the service of a hermeneutic project he aims to distinguish by its "high Christology." Frei takes a decidedly critical posture toward much of post-Enlightenment theology, which he evaluates as overly informed by a preoccupation with accommodating the content of revelation to modes of modern thought.⁷⁶ To Frei's mind, that accommodationist tendency effectively broke faith away from normal human

⁷⁴ For my summation of these points of Frei's work, I am indebted to Paul DeHart's incisive reading of Frei in chapters three and five of *The Trial of the Witnesses: The Rise and Decline of Postliberal Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006).

⁷⁵ Hans W. Frei, *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) (subsequently cited as *TN*).

⁷⁶ See DeHart, 133.

patterns of meaning-making, relegating “revelation” to a non-objective and thus non-informative experience of the divine. Along those lines, Frei identifies two limits of the German Romantic and idealist heritage in Protestant theology (evidenced in the works of Schleiermacher and Hegel, respectively): first, the tendency to isolate the human self and its productions of meaning into an ontologically distinct realm of “spirit”; second, the transfer of the divine from a realm accessible to metaphysical/analogical description into a transcendental “ground” of the human self, cut off from the Kantian subject confronting objects.

Frei’s alternative theological agenda is governed by a Kierkegaardian insistence that “existence is not a system,” coupled with the Barthian insight that, if existence is not a system, then neither is God’s self-revelation. On this basis Frei also agreed with Barth’s adamant critique of any attempt to discover in language—whether unconverted *or* converted—some sort of inherent tendency toward transcendence, arguing instead that genuine reference to God can only occur when God graciously enables such reference.⁷⁷ But Frei wanted to nuance Barth’s insistence upon God’s provenience in the distribution of grace when it comes to the implications for theological method. As Paul DeHart helpfully summarizes Frei’s reservations, “one can grant with Barth that any successful witness in human language is a matter of that language’s appropriation by God . . . without drawing the consequence for theological procedure that all correlations with ‘worldly’ meaning lead to anthropocentric perversions of witness.”⁷⁸ Frei endeavors to resist the latter conclusion, pursuing a strategy of correlation rather than of “actualistic” subordination or liberal accommodation. Accordingly, on the one hand, he remains philosophically suspicious of totalizing ideologies or theoretical frameworks regarding the essence of nature and history, echoing Barth in

⁷⁷ See Frei, *TN*, 163-65.

⁷⁸ DeHart, 258. DeHart notes that for Frei (following H. Richard Niebuhr), the question for Barth is this: “Is the object of revelation so semantically absolute that no broad complex of human meaning can really resonate with it or illuminate it? Will it accept in tribute only piecemeal, radically reconfigured or re-contextualized fragments of meaning?” (256).

finding it theologically irresponsible to attempt to make Christian belief understandable on such terms. He is, therefore, consistently apprehensive of any attempt to parse out an “essence” of faith from its materialization in texts and dogma. On the other hand, Frei resists any approach to revelation (including Barth’s) indicating that human nature and history are so marred by sin that they must be entirely remade when the revelatory act of God occurs in their midst.

On the latter point Frei took a cue from his teacher H. Richard Niebuhr. From the early works of Barth, Niebuhr had imbibed a robust suspicion of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century liberal theological orientations toward a historically reconstructed Jesus, toward faith-claims informed by skepticism, and against metaphysics. Meanwhile, Niebuhr shared Troeltsch’s thoroughgoing conviction of the variety and integrity of historically-situated cultures, and that Christian faith in its shifting forms is unavoidably embedded within them. The result of Niebuhr’s particular allegiances to Troeltsch and Barth was Niebuhr’s developing a relativist and confessionalist orientation in theology. Niebuhr thus showed a finely-tuned sensitivity to the centrality of “stories,” both in the constitution of self-understanding in human selves and communities, and in the scriptural identification of the Christian savior. Niebuhr’s thinking along these lines helped Frei solidify his own materialist orientation and concomitant suspicion of any attempt to separate an “essence” of religious faith over against its linguistic and dogmatic embodiment in scripture and tradition.⁷⁹

In summary, Frei became convinced that Christology was the key theological sphere wherein the nineteenth-century German Romantic and idealist heritage must be contested. He also remained unconvinced by Barth’s suggestion that the Christological object of revelation is incompatible with extant structures of human meaning in the sense that they cannot possibly participate in the Word’s unfolding significance within history. In the solution that he sought, Frei

⁷⁹ Cf. DeHart, 11. Here he notes Frei’s having found in Erich Auerbach “a new way of articulating the abiding ‘force’ of the scriptural portraiture in terms of its narrative literary structure,” and Frei’s equally important “anti-idealist understandings of the human self and its linguistic nature” having been decisively influenced by his discovery of the so-called “ordinary language philosophy” in Ryle and Wittgenstein.

conjoined Niebuhr's focus on the narratively portrayed, utterly singular person of Jesus Christ as soteriological touchstone with Barth's "high" Christology—that is, where Christ is not simply an instantiation of God's salvation, but the unconditioned locus of its worldly actuality. Frei envisioned the Holy Spirit as mediating the unfolding of Christocentric revelation over time, through faithful interpreters' appropriations of it in and through socio-cultural modes of expression. The section that follows below examines in closer detail the methodological and epistemological tenets of Frei's positions as they concern the believer's hermeneutic relationship to Scripture.

* * *

Though Frei's allegiance to Niebuhr eventually waned,⁸⁰ he remained a consistent supporter of Niebuhr's appeal to the New Testament's narrated portrait of Jesus Christ as concretely identifying the personhood of the savior, and Frei expressly advocated a focus upon those biblical narratives weaving the definitive portraits of Christ. Frei insisted that those narratives possess the enduring capacity to critique every systematic theory that humans construct and the fecundity to continue disclosing something new in shifting semantic contexts. Although Frei critiqued Barthian subordinationism, he also took serious issue with the trends of liberal scriptural interpretation in vogue in his day, on the grounds that they propagated an approach wherein the hermeneutic method takes over the text, eclipsing the "realistic" content of the biblical narrative (a term to which I will return momentarily). To Frei's mind, biblical students were not learning Scripture's content; they knew only a theory of interpreting it, which could easily lead to the hermeneutic or social theory of choice becoming what the text "means." Reflecting upon his reaction to this eclipse of the text's content, Frei tellingly mused: "My sense of

⁸⁰ Frei came to evaluate Niebuhr as compromising the import of Christ's role by overly subordinating the incarnate role of the Son to that of the Father in the Godhead, with the dualistic result of setting human agency over against God's. See DeHart, 10.

the matter, though I'm not antiliberal, was that you can revise the text to suit yourself only just so far."⁸¹

In accord with his materialist orientation, Frei eschewed general theories of biblical interpretation under the claim that "for the Christian interpretive tradition truth is what is written, not something separable and translinguistic that is written 'about'."⁸² Frei elsewhere expounded upon what he meant by this assertion, stating that "there really is an analogy between the Bible and a novel writer who says something like this: I mean what I say whether or not anything took place. . . . It's as simple as that: the text means what it says."⁸³ Hence, the fact that the Gospels are presented as historical, testimonial claims is an external fact that should be taken into account only after interpreting is complete. For Frei, this is how we ought to receive the "realistic narrative" within Scripture, i.e., its history-*like* aspects, features common to both historical description *and* the classic novel's narrative.⁸⁴ In other words, Nicholas Wolterstorff surmises regarding this feature of Frei's thought, "the literal sense of a text may be a realistic narrative without the story, the narrative, having occurred."⁸⁵ The presence of realistic narrative in Scripture ought not immediately set the reader on a course in search of the accuracy of its referential or propositional content. Rather, the particular way in which the story is told should be taken as vital because, as a communicative act, it is not aimed to perform some other purpose. On such grounds, Frei

⁸¹ Frei, "Response to 'Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal,'" in *Trinity Journal* 8:1 (1987), 21-24. Here 21-22. In this we hear echoes of Barth's critique against Bultmann's demythologizing program.

⁸² Frei, *TN*, 109.

⁸³ "Response to 'Narrative Theology,'" 22.

⁸⁴ For this line of argumentation, see especially chapter two in *Theology and Narrative*, "Theological Reflections on the Accounts of Jesus' Death and Resurrection," pp. 45-93. Frei therein explains, for instance, that the "drastic focusing of Jesus' unsubstitutable identity in the crucifixion-resurrection sequence makes this part of the story not a mythological tale but something much more like the realistic novel . . . For this type of literature depicts the plausibility of character and situation in their interaction precisely by means of the singularity or unsubstitutability of both" (59).

⁸⁵ Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Will Narrativity Work as Linchpin?: Reflections on the Hermeneutic of Hans Frei," in *Relativism and Religion*, ed. Charles M. Lewis (London: Macmillan, 1995), 71-107. Here 82.

consistently punctuated the Bible's literary integrity, maintaining that consensus interpretation of its central character is possible because the text's "meaning" is the narrative structure itself, to which all have access.⁸⁶

In terms of interpretive procedure, Frei argued that it is best for readers to approach the Gospels initially by suspending commitment even to the existence of a historical person named "Jesus," reading the narratives simply as the delineation of a *character* by that name. Frei maintained that readers come to know a literary character as they do any person: from the character's actions, on the supposition that "who a person is, is first of all given in the development of a consistent set of intentions embodied in corporeal and social activity within the public world in which one functions. . . . A person's identity is constituted (not simply illustrated) by that intention which he carries into action."⁸⁷ The narrative sequence of the person's actions expresses that person's authentic identity. Only after such an interpretation of Jesus is completed should believers consider whether the historical Jesus existed and actually possessed these characteristics, and what the significance of those characteristics are for their personal faith.⁸⁸ Giving this sort of proper attention to the Bible's realistic narratives (culminating in the Gospels' portraits of Christ) means focusing our attentions on the text's "literal sense." Precisely what Frei took the literal sense of a text to be, he never specified.⁸⁹ He simply spoke of the "literal" sense in contrast with the spiritual or allegorical senses, the meanings hidden beyond the text's "surface."⁹⁰

⁸⁶ These themes are prominent in Frei's *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975).

⁸⁷ *TN*, 63.

⁸⁸ See Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 133-34 (subsequently cited as *Eclipse*).

⁸⁹ See Wolterstorff, 77.

⁹⁰ Allegories are one of Frei's favorites examples, wherein there is both a literal and a hidden sense. And in either case, the sense is what belongs to the text; it is not to be conflated with the "significance" it has for the reader who decides whether or not to believe its confessional claims. He says in one passage: "The aim of an exegesis which simply looks for the sense of a story (but does not identify sense with religious

It is also worth noting that there is a distinction between the “plain” sense (or reading) of a text and what Frei calls a “literal” sense: as Frei construed it, the plain sense is the “rule for reading” the text that is generally established or accepted within the community. It is the “sense” on which the readers are expected to focus their interest. Frei finds significance in the fact that the literal sense has long been the plain sense, that “the tradition of the *sensus literalis* is the closest one can come to a consensus reading of the Bible as the sacred text in the Christian church.”⁹¹ To his mind, the eclipse of realistic biblical narrative in favor of general theories of interpretation searching for translinguistic truth represents a regrettable seismic shift in Christian thought with regard to “the direction in the flow of intratextual interpretation.”⁹² That flow used to be “that of absorbing the extratextual universe into the text, rather than the reverse (extratextual) direction.”⁹³ Frei provides an example of this old way of interpreting by citing a passage from literary critic Eric Auerbach, contrasting mythology with Old Testament narrative: “Far from seeking, like Homer, merely to make us forget our own reality for a few hours, it [Old Testament narrative] seeks to overcome our reality: we are to fit our own life into its world, feel ourselves to be elements in its structure of universal history.”⁹⁴ Now, Frei bemoans, Scripture-readers try to fit

significance for the reader) is in the final analysis that of reading the story itself. We ask if we agree on what we find there, and we discover its patterns to one another. . . . Realistic stories, perhaps unlike some other texts . . . are directly accessible. As I have noted, they mean what they say, and that fact enables them to render depictively to the reader their own public world, which is the world he needs to understand them, even if he decides that it is not his own real world” (*Identity of Jesus Christ*, xv).

⁹¹ Frei, “The ‘Literal Reading’ of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does it Stretch or Will It Break?” in Frank McConnell, ed., *The Bible and the Narrative Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 37. “It is Frei’s thesis,” Wolterstorff notes, “that in the case of the Christian community the literal sense of its scriptures, especially of the Gospels, has traditionally been the established sense, or at least prominent among the established senses—though Frei thinks that that is no longer the case in the liberal wing of the Christian community” (75).

⁹² Frei, “The ‘Literal Reading’ of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition,” 72.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ He continues: “Everything else that happens in the world can only be conceived as an element in this sequence; into it everything that is known about the world ... must be fitted as an ingredient of the divine plan.” Auerbach quoted in Frei, *Eclipse*, 3.

Bible and its world into the reality beyond the text, which they understand according to the norms of secular science. Because Frei finds the latter project both philosophically and theologically untenable, he urges modern-day Christian readers to recover the intratextual direction of pre-critical interpretation.

Frei grants that that recovery cannot mean a simple return to the past. He notes that early Bible readers—we may think of Martin Luther and his contemporaries—attended to the text’s literal sense by assuming that, as Wolterstorff frames it, “history-likeness reflects historicity: ‘the realistic feature had naturally been identified with the literal sense which in turn was automatically identical with reference to historical truth’.”⁹⁵ Wolterstorff also points out that wary modern-day interpreters who recognize with Frei that current hermeneutic practices “eclipse” Jesus Christ’s identity will likely also note his exception, “perhaps, for the practices of those on the ‘right’ who operate in pre-critical fashion, not acknowledging the consensus of historical-critical scholars that very little can be said with confidence about the life of Jesus.”⁹⁶ To be clear on this point, Frei stipulated that, though today’s readers should work to recover the pre-critical practice focusing upon the text’s “history-like” aspects as an end in themselves, pre-critical practices of *appropriating* the text must inevitably be amended, for readers cannot ignore the historical-critical conclusion regarding the text’s inability to afford us access to history. Historical reconstruction of a biographical Jesus is simply too lean for robust theological elaboration.

Frei draws upon that conclusion as evidence that Christians should abandon the quest for historical-critical foundations for Christology. Frei *did* believe that the narrative of the Gospels yields access to history, but, as Wolterstorff explains, he maintained that “it yields epistemologically responsible access only to a very narrow slice of history—namely, to the identity

⁹⁵ Frei, *Eclipse*, 11; quoted in Wolterstorff, 81.

⁹⁶ Wolterstorff, 102.

of Jesus of Nazareth” concretized in the realistic narrative.⁹⁷ That identity only ever comes to us couched in the terms of confession, with Jesus of Nazareth presented not merely as a historical figure but specifically as a *divine* historical figure. Thus, for Frei, while the Bible’s history-likeness is not mere fiction, it is also not fundamentally linked to historicity by modern scientific meaning. Rather, it is linked to historicity by the same sort of “spiritual understanding” that informs a view of history such as figural interpretation. On this point, Frei cites Erich Auerbach’s explanation of figural extrapolation. Auerbach says:

Figural interpretation establishes a connection between two events or persons in such a way that the first signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second involves or fulfills the first. The two poles of a figure are separated in time, but both, being real events or persons, are within temporality. They are both contained in the flowing stream which is historical life, and only the comprehension, the *intellectus spiritualis*, of their interdependence is a spiritual act. . . The connection between occurrences is not regarded as primarily a chronological or causal development but as a oneness within the divine plan, of which all occurrences are parts and reflections.⁹⁸

This is how the Gospels’ portrait of Christ connects with history—that is, the portrait requires from the audience an act of *intellectus spiritualis*, spiritual perception, to discern the connection between the confessional portrait of Jesus and historical life in light of an overarching divine plan. That act is analogous to an aesthetic receptivity rather than the scientific-empirical awareness required for modern historical-criticism, for if one believes in these texts as Scripture, that decision will have been made in response to their literary shape and its capacity to make sense of one’s own reality.

Frei knew that questions of reference—what “actually happened” and its importance for faith—will arise. He was simply convinced that the referential potential of the gospel texts (indeed, of any text) is highly elusive. Frei specified that “if one is to make the mysterious and always problematical transition from literary description to judgments both of historical fact and of faith

⁹⁷ 101. “Frei’s underlying contention,” Wolterstorff continues, “is that the community should both treasure and be content with that narrow slice” rather than attempting to pry apart from it a historical figure rendered according to modern historical-scientific standards.

⁹⁸ Auerbach quoted by Frei in *Eclipse*, 28-9.

concerning this particular story and its significance, it is at [the] climatic point of Jesus' resurrection that one must do so."⁹⁹ This is the case, he argued, because it is in the resurrection sequence that the distinctive character of Jesus is most evident; and the "question of factuality" about a narrated individual's life "is bound to arise precisely at the point where his individuality is most sharply asserted and etched."¹⁰⁰ But, in light of those impending questions, Frei maintained that "no matter what the [internal] logic of the Christian faith, actual *belief* in the resurrection is a matter of faith and not of arguments from possibility or evidence."¹⁰¹ Christians therefore have little business speaking "speculatively or evidentially about the resurrection of Christ, while nevertheless affirming it as an indispensable Christian claim."¹⁰² Frei thus punctuated his conviction that the narrative shape of the texts identifying Jesus as the Christ logically precedes all questions of reference or application. Highlighting the fact that the *raison d'être* for questions of reference is a faith-commitment to the narratively portrayed Jesus as the Christ, Frei remained convinced of the power of that portrait to withstand (and, in fact, "speak" a transformative word into) the intricate and ambiguous maneuvers of reference.¹⁰³

Hence, Frei consistently promoted as a primary interpretive standard that believers should ascertain Jesus's objective, "singular" and "unsubstitutable identity" in the Gospels' literal sense

⁹⁹ *Theology and Narrative*, 47.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹⁰¹ *Eclipse*, 152. (Emphasis added.) Frei admits that such immediate believing on testimony would *not* be justified in light of "reliable historical evidence *against* the resurrection" or against Jesus' obedience in the face of his death.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, xiii. Frei also says, in his "Theological Reflections on the Accounts of Jesus' Death and Resurrection," that there is no factual evidence or rational possibility to move us smoothly from literary to faith judgment, "both because what is said to have happened here is, if true, beyond possible verification (in this sense unlike other 'facts'), and because the account we have and could most likely expect to have in testimony to it are more nearly like novels than like history writing, there is no historical evidence that counts in favor of the claim that Jesus was resurrected" (*Theology and Narrative*, 86).

¹⁰³ DeHart includes a helpful discussion of this feature of Frei's work in *Trial of the Witnesses*, 125-26.

before hypothesizing Christ's historical actuality or soteriological function. Frei thus envisioned the hermeneutic process as follows:

We start from the text: that is the language pattern, the meaning-and-reference pattern to which we are bound, and which is sufficient for us. We cannot and do not need to 'transcend' it into 'limit' language and 'limit' experience. . . The truth to which we refer we cannot state apart from the biblical language which we employ to do so. And belief in the divine authority of Scripture is for me simply that we do not need more. The narrative description is adequate. 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself' is an adequate statement for what we refer to, though we cannot say univocally how we refer to it.¹⁰⁴

In response to this final point—that is, the premise that “the truth to which we refer we cannot state apart from the biblical language which we employ to do so”—many of Frei's readers have aligned his call for intratextual reading with that of George Lindbeck's, under the banner of Postliberal Theology. DeHart makes a carefully argued case in *Trial of the Witnesses*, however, that such an alignment is in many respects indiscriminate.

Lindbeck's model of “intratextuality,” DeHart points out, envisions Christian discourse as a stabilized, readily comprehensible semiotic system, when in fact Christian practices of meaning-making are “too plural and informal, too contingent and locally constructed” to adhere to Lindbeck's ideal.¹⁰⁵ Frei, by contrast, recognizes that plurality and contingency, maintaining that religious language shares semantic traits with non-religious language—otherwise, religious terms could not be evaluated theoretically. Nevertheless, Frei also maintained that the Christian semantic network cannot be flatly converted into or founded upon the terms of an unconverted semantic order.¹⁰⁶ Frei sustained his station between these positions on the grounds that the image of Christ evokes the depth of meaning at each site of encounter between it and worldly discourse, but

¹⁰⁴ “Response to ‘Narrative Theology’” 22, 23. By this reference to “‘limit’ language and ‘limit’ experience” he is referring to existentialist and empirical interpretations of reading experience.

¹⁰⁵ DeHart, 184.

¹⁰⁶ See DeHart, 234-35.

always in an *ad hoc* manner that cannot be anticipated beforehand.¹⁰⁷ Consequently, Frei avoided the accommodationist impulse of liberal theology by advocating the non-generalizable correlation of internal (religiously-committed) and external (otherwise-committed) modes of discourse. Meanwhile, he also evades the fidiestic impulse of Lindbeck's neo-orthodoxy by highlighting the symbiosis of those two modes of discourse and the semantic encounter's capacity to enhance the believer's understanding of Christ's universal significance by affording glimpse of it from a new vantage point.

We thus find that Frei's characteristic insistence that the narrative description is "adequate . . . for what we refer to, though we cannot say univocally how we refer to it," as well as his urge to bring extratextual reality "into" the intratextual world of the Bible's narrative, should both be understood in light of his promoting the Niebuhrian project of *occasional* and *experimental correlation* of non-Christian and Christian discourses. That promotion demonstrates Frei's understanding (contra Barthian subordinationism) that biblical revelation corresponds to semantic reality outside of the text, and so (contra Lindbeck) the church's witness is *not* the self-governing application of a condensable, stable framework of meaning but rather is what DeHart calls "the always unfinished interlocutive process of rediscovering the Christ in light of the 'ad hoc' encounter with the church's cultural sites."¹⁰⁸ Frei recommended that theologians return to the traditional mode of scriptural interpretation, if only because the literal sense of Scripture has for so long been the "plain" sense for the believing community, a fact which speaks to the interpretive potency of that narrative's fundamental categories for the believer's own rendering of reality. But

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 136-37.

¹⁰⁸ DeHart, 244. DeHart builds a case for this particularly at pp. 256-59, explaining that, for Frei, Barth's subordinationist schema seems to hold to an objectionable view of meaning-making that resonates with Wittgensteinian fideism. Meanwhile, "Niebuhr's theology suggests that Christian meaning is always more of an . . . improvisation which speaks somewhere at the margin between 'converted' and 'unconverted' culture," and so "ecclesial interpreters are constantly testing out or experimenting with the language their culture makes available . . . in the hope that God will work in and through the community's appropriation of these cultural means, in their very difference, in order to align them with the object of witness" (256).

all said, for Frei's hermeneutic strategy, the crux of all semantic categories is Christ, whose image can induce the depth of meaning at each socio-cultural site of correlation between intrabiblical and extrabiblical reality, acquiring new meanings in the process.¹⁰⁹

Frei's Approach to Scriptural Interpretation: A Solution to the PIP?

Much of Frei's hermeneutic project is promising for "low church" Protestants seeking a sustainable approach to the challenge of biblical interpretation in democratic communities of readership. That promise is indicated in three of its primary features. First, Frei's approach to Scripture neither inadvertently nor explicitly entrusts the text's true meaning to an elite interpreter or group of interpreters. This is because it focuses upon an intratextual category that contains meaningful theological content that is impervious to the intellectual machinations of historical investigation as well as protected from the subjectivity of individual faith-perspectives. Instead, the realistic character of the text's literal sense is accessible "to all reasonable people who know how to relate genus, species, and individual case properly."¹¹⁰ To put it otherwise, Scripture's meaning is available to any and all who possess the common proficiencies necessary for identifying and comprehending a realistic narrative.

Second, and by extension of the first point, Frei's paradigm upholds an opportunity for the interpretive community to arrive at consensus regarding biblical norms. This is possible because "normative" interpretations of "aesthetic or quasi-aesthetic texts" (such as the Gospels are, at least

¹⁰⁹ See DeHart, 264 ff. He evaluates Frei's construal of that unfolding phenomenon as having a trinitarian character (although Frei never developed this perspective beyond a few remarks and intimations), one wherein the Father is the font of all historical existence and significance; the Son is that font's inexhaustible Logos, the order of all meaning in the world; and Spirit is the arbiter of that Word abroad, within the church's witness but also in cultural activity beyond the church, working "in, with, under, or through human acts" to find its home in relation to the Word made flesh. DeHart points out that Frei's trinitarian leanings are evident in his resistance to Niebuhr's "radical monotheism," which subordinates Christology to the doctrine of God as creator and sustainer of the cosmos. Frei found this lacking a developed account of the Holy Spirit's role in providing not only "first order" Christian speech of witness but also the "second order" discourse of unchurched theoretical reflection upon that witness.

¹¹⁰ "The 'Literal Reading' of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition," 73.

“in part”) are achievable by virtue of the fact that realistic narrative’s meaning “remains the same, no matter what the perspective of succeeding generations of interpreters may be,” Frei says, with a critical eye to liberal theological impulses. “. . . In other words,” he continues, “the constancy of meaning of the text is the text and not the similarity of its *effect* on the life-perspectives of succeeding generations.”¹¹¹ Once again, the intratextual category of realistic narrative safeguards meaningful theological content from the subjectivity of various personal responses to it. Third and finally, Frei’s hermeneutic approach offers Protestants a pragmatically-balanced image of the community’s involvement in interpretation according to its “intuition of the heart,” tempered by the ongoing process of intra- and extra-communal conversation. Frei manages this by maintaining that the epistemic mode for accepting Jesus’s biblically-rendered identity is that of *intellectus spiritualis*, attributing that spiritual knowledge to the Holy Spirit who mediates the unfolding of Christological revelation, not only in believers coming to faith but also through *ad hoc* attempts at faithfully appropriating that revelation within diverse modes of socio-cultural expression.

Frei’s project is not without its critics. In response to his insistence that we must be satisfied with the realistic narrative as the closest we can get to referring to the historical occasion attested in the Gospels, Frei’s detractors have asked if such a claim gives up scriptural revelation actually corresponding to reality outside of the text.¹¹² As articulated in the preceding section, Frei does *not* give up that correspondence, advocating an understanding of biblical language that confines Christian speech to performative meaning within its own society. He instead relies upon a conviction that Christ’s significance ramifies endlessly into all sites of extra-textual and extra-

¹¹¹ Quoted in Wolterstorff, 95. Wolterstorff critiques Frei on this point, noting that just because there is an established reading does not mean that there is interpretative consensus. “There may be disputes over which is the sense-function whose value in a given case we should concern ourselves with,” Wolterstorff says, and “there may also be disputes as to the content of a given sense. Both of these are regularly called disputes over the interpretation. But they take place at different levels, with different considerations being relevant for resolving the dispute” (75-76).

¹¹² See Jason A. Springs’s chapter titled “But Did It Really Happen?: The Challenges of Critical Realism and Historical Reference” in *Towards a Generous Orthodoxy: Prospects for Hans Frei’s Postliberal Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

ecclesial signification. However, Frei's project may run into trouble on related grounds, when he envisions Bible-readers bracketing off literary description of Jesus from historical and personal judgments in the process of coming to faith. Frei thought it possible to locate "categories of understanding detached from the perspectives we bring to our understanding, including our commitments of faith,"¹¹³ and that judgments about the referential truth of the text's propositional content ought not and need not intrude upon our delineating its theological significance.¹¹⁴ Appealing as this vision may be for those seeking a democratic process of arriving at consensus readings of Scripture, it could be that it is built upon questionable hermeneutic expectations. The following section will consider that possibility.

Frei's Oversight: Suspending Illocutionary Concerns

Frei declares that, given the findings of historical science, responsible modern-day readers should find that the history-likeness of the biblical texts is linked to actual historicity by faith rather than by empirical meaning. He accordingly asserts that it is the literal sense of the narrative—which is, for Frei, its content that is available for literary analysis, free from historical considerations or the subjective influence of existential experience—that holds *theological* value. The vital implication for Scripture-readers transpires at the point of appropriation, Wolterstorff explains, where interpreters must keep "sharply in mind that meaning is not reference"; i.e., "that issues as to the truth or falsity of the literal sense of the narrative are not to intrude into one's interpretation. Only *after* one has finished interpreting is one to ask whether the propositional content of one's interpretation is true."¹¹⁵ By this point, faith has already been decided in response to the text's literal sense. Though one can look to Frei's comments regarding figural extrapolation

¹¹³ Quoted in Wolterstorff, 95.

¹¹⁴ See "Theological Reflections," 290; in Wolterstorff, 97.

¹¹⁵ Wolterstorff, 93. Cf. Frei, *Eclipse*, 11-12.

to outline his understanding of the *nature* of belief in the biblical testimony's fact-value, Frei says one cannot justify the difference of response, for "why some believe and others do not is impossible for the Christian to explain."¹¹⁶ In sum, Frei is convinced that the text's objective, literal sense is both its content that evokes a faith-reaction and, by extension, its theologically significant material.

Wolterstorff notes a problem with this set of assertions, focusing on the fact that Frei speaks of the sense (literal or otherwise) of a narrative as if it were a sequence of neutral propositions.¹¹⁷ Wolterstorff points out, however, that this definition of a "sense" overlooks the fact that "sayings have illocutionary force as well as (in most cases) propositional content."¹¹⁸ A narrative's "sense," Wolterstorff argues, is "a sequence of sayings—of speech actions. In the case of the authorial sense of a work of history, those sayings will be, for the most part, assertions. . . . In the case of the authorial sense of a work of fiction, those sayings are . . . for the most part invitations to imagine; the fictioneer invites us to imagine such-and-such."¹¹⁹ In other words, a speaker or writer is always performing a speech-act that involves the audience, such as ordering them to do something, instructing them regarding certain behaviors, asserting certain fact-claims for their evaluation, inviting them to imagine a scenario, etc. Accordingly, "the world of a work (with respect to a sense) is more expansive than the propositional content of that sense."¹²⁰ Frei

¹¹⁶ *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, 152.

¹¹⁷ Wolterstorff explains that a modern thinker like John Locke "explicitly thought of sentences as expressing propositions, and divided propositions into the true and the false" (90). But Frei says in his "Theological Reflections" that there is no factual evidence or rational possibility to move us smoothly from literary to faith judgment, most likely "both because what is said to have happened here is, if true, beyond possible verification (in this sense unlike other 'facts'), and because the account we have and could most likely expect to have in testimony to it are more nearly like novels than like history writing, there is no historical evidence that counts in favor of the claim that Jesus was resurrected" (quoted in Wolterstorff, 99).

¹¹⁸ Wolterstorff, 103.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹²⁰ It "is to be thought of as what is said and verbally suggested plus what is appropriately extrapolated from that." (Wolterstorff, 83).

maintained that interpreters best approach the Gospels' locutionary content by initially suspending illocutionary concerns; however, on Wolterstorff's reading, Frei has simply not given appropriate weight to the biblical narrative's rhetorical aspect as it impacts its literal sense.

Wolterstorff's critique is convincing. The reader of the Gospels is not being invited to imagine; she is clearly being given a set of assertions regarding extratextual reality (even though those assertions are profoundly impacted by faith). It thus seems untrue to the intratextual "world" of the Bible to expect issues regarding the truth or falsity of its claims not to weigh into one's foundational reception of its content, according to which reception one is drawn into faith. Moreover, by implication, the reader should give account for such issues when delineating the text's theologically significant content. In view of these complications with Frei's treatment of Scripture, Pannenberg's hermeneutic framework appears to be beneficial in certain noteworthy respects. Placing their interpretive paradigms alongside one another for comparative examination, the section to follow identifies the benefits Pannenberg's approach offers Frei's, as well as Frei's project's own capacity to shore up Pannenberg's points of vulnerability in turn.

Reading Pannenberg and Frei as Correctives to One Another: Another Impasse

There are instructive points of overlap and agreement between the interpretive frameworks employed by the two prolific theologians examined in this chapter. Given the insights of historical critics about how little can be said assuredly about Jesus of Nazareth's biography, Frei is convinced that the pre-critical assumption that the Gospel narratives' history-likeness is directly linked to historicity should be amended. Pannenberg also takes seriously the fact that scientific-historical inquiry can produce only the slimmest evidence for constructing a biographical picture of the historical Jesus. Granted, he establishes a significant place for historical-critical concerns in the architecture of belief in the gospel proclamation; but he does not do so at the expense of acknowledging that historical reality is always mediated by traditionally-situated linguistic

description. Pannenberg is not convinced by the historicist assumption that a more authentic picture of reality may be found beneath the linguistically-mediated surfaces of tradition. Accordingly, his position agrees with Frei's regarding the affirmation that Christian faith is invariably embedded within culturally-situated and historically-altering forms, and that the Bible yields epistemologically-reliable access to history precisely by way of that portrayal of Jesus Christ.

Both thinkers also hold to positions asserting that the biblically-rendered Christ is not just an instance of reality's truth; rather, Christ is the pinnacle of divine truth's worldly unfolding and therefore the key to all worldly meaning. For Pannenberg, eschatological totality has been disclosed proleptically in Jesus of Nazareth, who is "the end of the still unconcluded history, and just for this reason is for us (as those who still wander along the way) the inexhaustible center of meaning."¹²¹ We thus find Pannenberg asserting that "the totality of reality is constantly coming to light in ever new ways through the influence of Jesus on the hermeneutical process of the transmission of the Christian tradition."¹²² He holds that affirmation in hand with the claim that "our participation in this event, the hope of our own resurrection, is still hidden under the experience of the cross," which amounts to the fact that "no one can make the eschaton into a key to calculate the *course* of history."¹²³ Nevertheless, he maintains that his premises are "historically verifiable," entirely open to rational dialogue.¹²⁴ Frei's approach to theological engagement similarly relies upon a conviction that the image of Christ transformatively takes on new significance at every site of the church's socio-cultural engagement in formulation of its witness. For Frei, God's Spirit prompts this semantic unfolding in and through those *ad hoc* cultural processes of meaning-making, ever in a manner that cannot be anticipated. Thus, when it comes to the Protestant question of communal discernment of

¹²¹ BQ I, 77.

¹²² Ibid., 158.

¹²³ Ibid., 36-7. Emphasis added.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 78.

biblical norms, Pannenberg and Frei alike prompt attention to the Christocentric pattern of revelation's unfolding, both in the church and the world at large—not for the sake of delineating or projecting a codifiable content of Christic revelation, but for ongoing renewal and expansion of saving knowledge of God in Christ.

For this project's purposes, however, the similarities between the two thinkers may not be as noteworthy as their differences. Frei asserts that we cannot ever “get behind” the linguistic surface of biblical expression to a more foundational meaning for faith, whereas Pannenberg finds it theologically pertinent to uncover the meta-historical core of the biblical depiction of reality. Their contrasting convictions reside in the fact that Frei believes that “for the Christian interpretive tradition truth is what is written, not something separable and translinguistic that is written ‘about,’”¹²⁵ while Pannenberg maintains that, though written tradition is central to the event of revelation and its “self-contained” meaning, that tradition’s “thought-horizon” bears the universal meaning implied in the tradition’s theological rendering of history. That thought-horizon is a site of profound revelatory significance. Returning to Wolterstorff’s critique of Frei’s rendering of the text’s literal sense, we may find Pannenberg’s approach providing a useful alternative account of how Bible-readers could recognize the narrative’s unfitness to connect us directly with historicity and yet still allow referential inquiry to influence our belief in the biblically-portrayed Jesus as the apex of divine self-disclosure within history.

Meanwhile, Frei’s work presses Pannenberg to account for certain aspects of biblical revelation that he fails to acknowledge. Frei’s attention to the narrative structure of the literal sense bespeaks his conviction (and his hope to recover the conviction for the church) that God uses the text *itself* as an instrument of ongoing revelation. Frei recovered “the importance for Christian theology of taking biblical narrative as authority precisely as *narrative*, and not either as source for historical reconstruction or objectification of the inner existential history of its authors or its

¹²⁵ Frei, *Theology and Narrative*, 109.

believing readers,” as David Kelsey sums up Frei’s approach in *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*.¹²⁶ The scriptural narrative is not merely instrumental for Frei, in other words, as it is for Pannenberg—who, in his effort to make Christian belief intelligible to secular historical science, claimed that “Biblical narrative is not itself revelation. It is rather ‘promise’ before God’s historical action.”¹²⁷ Dulles notes that, at one point, Pannenberg does acknowledge that the “unction” of the apostolic writings in canonical Scripture “is still able to awaken faith in readers who remain quite unpersuaded by the findings of academic history. The inspired words of the prophets and apostles are not mere reports of historical events,” in other words. “Charged with the power of the divine pneuma, they symbolically evoke the sense of the transcendent.”¹²⁸ But, as Dulles points out, this appeal to sensibility is “a departure from his [Pannenberg’s] earlier position that the word of proclamation is not revelatory by reason of its quality as a call or challenge but only ‘on the basis of its content, on the basis of the event that it reports and explicates.’”¹²⁹ Thus, although Pannenberg does in this instance attribute a kind of faith-evoking quality to the aesthetic experience of the narrated word, it is a minority report within his overall corpus, which generally and emphatically construes the Bible as a vital avenue for accessing the tradition’s “thought-horizon.” That fact highlights a troublesome aspect of Pannenberg’s theological epistemology, which arguably over-privileges rational comprehension as the means and end of faith-knowledge and theological judgement. By contrast, Frei recognized that the decision to believe in the faith-claims of the text is significantly impacted by one’s appreciation for its literary shape, with this portrayal of “God with us” transfixing the believer at the intuitive level of metaphor.

¹²⁶ Kelsey, 54, fn. 84.

¹²⁷ *Revelation as History*, 152-153.

¹²⁸ Dulles, 182.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, fn. 35; citing Pannenberg’s “Dogmatic Theses.”

In summary, Frei's treatment of Scripture endows the Christian reader with an appreciation for its literary portrait of Christ but little direction for perceiving its bearing upon critical historical issues, while Pannenberg's scriptural paradigm provides those connections but does so at the expense of recognizing the literary text's revelatory value. Practically speaking, the vulnerability for Frei's followers is the community interpreting Scripture according to common sense consensus without grappling with the text's connection with referential truth questions, enabling the community's withdrawal into enclaves of ecclesial discourse. Meanwhile, Pannenberg's disciples would be vulnerable to interpreting Scripture according to philosophical analysis, effectively entrusting its meaning to the intellectual elite. Does this all point to the fact that setting Pannenberg and Frei in corrective conversation with one another will produce a viable option for resolving the "PIP," which is this dissertation's orienting concern? Might a synthesis of their strengths afford for Protestants a path toward interpretive consensus regarding Scripture's norms—particularly a path that embraces the corporate body's processes of discernment, however taxing those processes may be?

In the final pages of this chapter, I propose that such a solution would be misleading. Pannenberg and Frei cannot simply correct one another's oversights because, in similarly unrealistic efforts to secure an objective content of biblical revelation from the subjective influence of its readership, both thinkers discount the import of the particular instincts that compel readers to adopt the Bible as authoritative for their lives (i.e., as Scripture). One could begin this analysis by summarily recalling the senses in which Frei and Pannenberg discount certain instincts that motivate Christian belief. Frei proceeded on the assertion that the believer responds in faith to Christ's narrative identity, in a separate move from reflection upon Christ's historical or salvific modes of presence. He accordingly recommended that theologians attend to Christ's literary character before engaging concerns of historical reference and spiritual experience; were the latter to take precedence theologically, it would be an infringement of modern preoccupations upon a text

that reliably offers only an imaginative portrait of Christ. The problematic aspect of this interpretive approach resides in the postulation that historical and existential inferences about the text's propositional content do not intrude upon faith-responses.

That assumption's status as unrealistic is perhaps best attested in Frei's construing the text's "literal sense" as if it made neutral proposals instead of propositions that evoke referential interests (at the reader's initial reception of it). In actuality, though the reader *is* being invited to share the Gospels' confessions regarding the uniquely-portrayed Jesus of Nazareth, the text's referential claims are integrated with the confessional portraiture. The literal sense calls the reader to accept, amend, or reject those claims; and so this response is not automatically an interference of modern preoccupations. Hence, Scripture's first-order assertions do not exist at a remove from determinations of reference (which, in this instance, cannot be assigned as "second order" discourse because they are endemic to the texture of the Bible's "first order" speech), and neither does the conviction that Jesus is the Son of God.¹³⁰

From such a vantage point, Pannenberg was astute in identifying the theological significance of the text's referential reach into history. Contesting Frei's doubt that one can identify "historical or other evidence that lends strong . . . support to the likelihood that this event . . . belongs to a credible type of occurrence,"¹³¹ Pannenberg's apologetic approach to the Judeo-Christian narrative in light of "meta" interests borne out by the study of history instantiates the fact

¹³⁰ Wolterstorff offers an example that lends illuminating support to this point. He says: "The picture one gets from Frei is that only in the modern period have interpreters within the Christian community allowed the pressures of canonicity to shape the interpretations they offer. But in fact this is as old as the Christian community itself. Though the members of the ancient church were extremely open-minded about the occurrence of 'wonders' in history, they had very firm views about the nature of God. They believed that since God enjoys perfect being, God is a-pathetic. Accordingly, when they came across passages of scripture in which the apparent literal sense was the ascription to God of emotions, they concluded that the apparent literal sense could not be the real literal sense, for they were not willing to concede that their scriptures might not be accurate in speaking about God. A lot of what makes scriptural interpretation in the modern world different from what it was in the ancient world is that we more readily conceded that God suffers than that God works 'wonders'" (Wolterstorff, 104).

¹³¹ *Eclipse*, 151.

that belief in the biblical “world” *can* be a case of inference. And yet, Pannenberg’s work makes very little of the fact that the gospel proclamation also evokes faith by virtue of its literary quality. He remained convinced that the biblically-attested phenomenon of Jesus Christ’s life, his death, and (most definitively) his resurrection affords knowledge for the observer which enables faith, rather than affording faith which enables knowledge. That knowledge is, essentially, a foretaste of our salvation that will be realized at history’s end, when we are fully brought into God’s presence. Pannenberg thereby dismisses what Frei appreciates: that faith in the Christ portrayed in the Gospels involves an *intellectus spiritualis*,¹³² a kind of spiritual vision which is integral to producing and accepting the confessional language Christians use to refer to transcendent reality. Pannenberg affirms that there is some aesthetic quality to the text that makes it compelling, as well as some subjective element of “selection” that occurs in arriving at belief; but he disregards the *habitus* elements informing those experiences as central to receiving revelation, effectively neglecting “bodily” or extra-rational sources of theological disclosure.

In the end, then, a synthesis of Pannenberg and Frei’s hermeneutic positions begs further reflection upon the subjective nature of human participation in the worldly mediation of God’s self-disclosure. Both thinkers stopped short, each in his own fashion, of fully accepting and exploring Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutic principle, which—as Sarah Coakley summarizes it—entails that “all interpretation involves a ‘fusion of horizons’ which is never *merely* the recapitulation of the original meaning of a text or work of art.”¹³³ Although both theologians embrace the fact that the historical Christ-event is indelibly given to us in the precise terms of the Judeo-Christian tradition, their hermeneutic frameworks are invested in the supposition that the tradition’s Christocentric

¹³² Recall that Frei cites Auerbach’s explanation of figural extrapolation as an example of the *intellectus spiritualis* that previous interpreters embraced when they saw the interdependence between two events or persons in history “in such a way that the first signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second involves or fulfills the first” (Auerbach quoted by Frei in *Eclipse*, 28-29).

¹³³ *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay ‘On the Trinity’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 193.

meaning is somehow stabilized within or by way of that tradition's inscriptions. That supposition operates on the omission of certain "horizons" of interpretation which the believing audience brings to its reception of the biblical material. If this analysis is right, then Pannenberg and Frei's hermeneutic efforts call for careful engagement with a residual challenge for *sola Scriptura* interpreters who share their resistance to Barthian "actualism." That challenge may, in fact, be narrated as a refined iteration of one left to Protestants by Barth's approach: If we acknowledge the extensive and complicated nature of human participation in revelation's linguistic mediation, must that acknowledgment preclude the community's hope of working together to identify the Bible's uniquely authoritative matter—that is, its content that interrupts and transforms our understandings in a manner deemed salvific? Or is there some option for acknowledging the former without sacrificing the latter, and if so, how can it be reflected in the believing community's hermeneutic practices?

It certainly cannot be argued that Pannenberg and Frei altogether missed the import of this challenge, which fundamentally concerns the manner in which divine and human agencies coalesce in the semantic mediation of Christoform revelation. Frei lucidly identifies that issue as a pneumatological one, saying:

There is no causal law and no law of theological perspective that would allow 'response' to become part of a matched pattern of the interaction-in-one of divine and human agencies. . . . The center of the 'disequilibrium' lies in the question whether 'interpretation' is to be understood finally as a wholly autonomous response or whether, like agency, it is under the mysterious pattern of the divine Spirit.¹³⁴

Frei here calls attention to the fact that the pattern of the Spirit's indwelling activity remains enigmatic, and yet our response to revelation is subject to such a pattern if it is neither fully autonomous from nor absolutely pliable to divine direction (in the sense assumed by scriptural inerrantists, for instance). Reflecting upon the work of H. Richard Niebuhr, his great influence, Frei

¹³⁴ *TN*, 225.

notes that Niebuhr inspires him to refuse a “Christo-monism” that emerges from Barth’s construal of God’s trinitarian action, which action Barth so completely identifies with revelation in Christ that, “far from providing an interpretation of God’s redemption of his fallen creature, it points rather to the annihilation of the creative process by redemptive grace.”¹³⁵ A similar refusal to flatten all creative human processes in relation to a Christomonism may be detected in Pannenberg, according to whom—contra the German idealism he detects in Barth—God’s triune life does not function as the unfolding of one divine subject, but of three unique ones, distinguished in their other-oriented actions. The Father gives the kingdom to the Son, and the Spirit draws human history into the unfolding of that kingdom by teaching us to “know the eternal Son of the Father in Jesus of Nazareth, and moves our hearts to praise God. . . . The Spirit is at work already in creation as God’s mighty breath, the origin of all movement and life.”¹³⁶ Accordingly, the Holy Spirit is the arbiter of divine meaning in the world—a meaning that finds its orienting disclosure in the proleptic event of Christ’s resurrection, certainly, but is authentically unfolding in and through human historical activity nonetheless.

It could be argued in summary that, though they acknowledge it, Frei and Pannenberg did not do full justice to the complexity of the pneumatological God-human cooperation toward the end of unfolding Christoform meaning, by virtue of their too quickly bracketing or oversimplifying the subjective features of the human processes of constructing scriptural content and meaning. Pannenberg and Frei were both philosophically resistant to idealism, and that resistance may account for their reticence regarding the finer points of the Spirit-guided processes of human perception and signification of divinely given content. They wanted to avoid what they perceived as the liberal idealist tendency to encourage the exegete to assimilate the object of interpretation into

¹³⁵ Hans Frei, “The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr” in *Faith and Ethics: The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957) 65-116.

¹³⁶ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, and Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), 1.

her own subjective experience too quickly, thereby foreclosing that object's potential to disclose anything new to her. Although their reservations on this account serve as a fair warning to biblical interpreters—it is a warning that would undoubtedly resonate within “low church/high Scripture” communities—acknowledging the complex blending of interpretive horizons at every stage of the Bible's composition and interpretation calls into question the credibility of a stable, objective core of Christofom meaning that these thinkers envision as either given in or by way of the biblical accounts.¹³⁷ (That fact could suggest that, though they resist a Christomonist picture of revelation, Pannenberg and Frei prioritize the primacy of the *logos* in unfolding revelation to the point of subordinating the work of the Spirit to that of the Son.¹³⁸ Adequate exploration of this possibility would extend well beyond the scope of the current project, so I will not undertake it here.) We accordingly find that a vital stage in moving beyond the PIP is that of identifying hermeneutic frameworks that might preserve the observed strengths of Pannenberg's and Frei's paradigms while offering more nuanced account of the subtleties God's Spirit's working in and through the processes by which humans appropriate and construct reality-representations.

¹³⁷ Those canonical accounts were themselves, after all, formed over time out of the fusion of worship experience, intertextual and socio-cultural influences, and the rationale of authority figures; that history punctuates the dubiousness of any expectation that subject-inflected rational and extra-rational features of perception need not intermingle in interpretive reception.

¹³⁸ Because Frei did not develop a systematic account of the Spirit's work, this evaluation would be based upon the implied role of the Son and Spirit in his depiction of revelation's unfolding, wherein the Son is the order of all worldly meaning and Spirit cooperates with human activity to shed light on fresh contours of that meaning *contained* in the Son rather than *unfolded* by the Spirit.

Looking to Pannenberg's systematics, one could more directly infer a subtle privileging of the Son over the Spirit tied to Pannenberg's emphasizing, in reference to the Gospel of John, that the Father and Son “work together in sending the Spirit” (*Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, 5). As Robert Jenson summarizes Pannenberg's view of the Spirit's function within the trinitarian economy of salvation, “the Son points away from himself to the Father as to the one God, the Spirit praises the Son as in his obedience one with the Father, the Father gives over his kingdom to the Son, so that now the Son is the power and wisdom that makes godhead” (Robert W. Jenson, “Jesus in the Trinity: Wolfhart Pannenberg's Christology and Doctrine of the Trinity” in *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg*, 188-206. Here 201). Once again, we find an image of the Spirit working through human activity to illumine the meaning apparently *contained* in the Son.

Conclusion: Looking to “High(er) Church” Resources

For both Luther and Barth, humans may accept and interpret revelation only by way of the extrinsic gift of efficacious or operative grace in the form of faith. In this they part ways with the line of Christian thought that maintains that justification involves an infusion of operative grace but converts the soul to God through *cooperative* means. While the hermeneutic strategies of Pannenberg and Frei made helpful moves in closer keeping with that cooperative trajectory with their correlationist affirmations, they remained focused on a stabilized object of interpretation as the source of theo-logic. In terms of equipping “low church” Protestants to construct adequate strategies for discerning Scripture’s meaning in community—particularly those who seek viable means of treating Scripture as authoritative in full view of post-Enlightenment insights and questions—we find Pannenberg and Frei’s approaches lacking satisfactory account of the bodily* nature of human partnership with the Spirit who guides the subjective processes of interpretation. Neither of them articulated something like an “onto-epistemological” approach to theological knowledge, rooted in lived practices that somehow transform the scope of objective perception.¹³⁹

In conclusion, then, these *aporias* in Pannenberg and Frei’s hermeneutic paradigms beg a close consideration of what occurs when humans partner with the Holy Spirit in acts of interpretation, bringing the full complexity of their rational and extra-rational concerns, instincts, and desires to the semantic encounter with Christ. By extension, the interpretive community needs an account of what it means to affirm that that interpretive experience *can be* one of divine-human agencies cooperating, and how it is that humans may open themselves to this cooperation, in hopes of enriched perception of Christoform revelation *within* (and its transformative bearing *upon*) ever-

¹³⁹ The basic use of “onto-epistemology” in philosophy signifies a belief that what we know of the world and what it is materially cannot be considered independently. In seeking an onto-epistemology for this project I am not advocating for foundationalism—that is, I am not working to identify or demonstrate the existence of self-demonstrating, universal rules of thought (nor am I trying to demonstrate that there *are* no such necessary rules of thought). Rather, I am arguing that it is important for theologians to account for the impact that existence has upon perception. Moreover, as will become evident, I am promoting their including within that account the age-old insight of the “rule of prayer”: that committed participation in certain activities renders cognitive results not otherwise accessible.

changing historical contexts. It is with these goals in mind that Protestants may see value in resourcing theologies that work outside of traditionally Protestant frameworks. Namely, at this stage of this dissertation's inquiry, looking to theologians of revelation who make use of "onto-epistemic" paradigms in reflecting upon the role of cooperative grace in Christian experience of revelation could prove markedly helpful.

With those aims in mind, in chapters three and four, I turn to Hans Urs von Balthasar and Sarah Coakley: two prodigious modern theologians who deal with the function of cooperative grace in revelation by way of the "spiritual senses" tradition, and both of whose works have significant bearing upon the doctrine of Spirit indwelling corporeal and corporate bodies toward the end of discerning divine self-disclosure. The "high(er) church/high Scripture"¹⁴⁰ resources they offer also have bearing upon the question of the ongoing import of Protestant resistance to sacerdotalism, which resistance is traditionally rooted in an approach to revelation that does not account for cooperative grace. In other words, in this quest for close examination of subjective human participation in revelation's mediation while maintaining the expectant hope of biblical authority, the possibility of abandoning the democratic "low church" feature of Protestant commitment is "on the table," as it were. I hope that the following chapters' look at Balthasar and Coakley's hermeneutic approaches will shed light on how far Protestants should be willing to go with that possibility. I also hope that this analysis will instantiate the tacit benefit of seeking theologically productive conversation-points between "high(er) church" and "low(er) church" interpretative traditions.

¹⁴⁰ As noted above, in chapter one, by "high(er) church" I mean to signal that Balthasar and Coakley express more positive views of the revelatory value of the ecclesial body than do the Reformed and Lutheran theologians (traditionally), and yet they themselves have varying commitments regarding the reliability of the magisterial figures' dictates—namely, as my analysis will hold to light, Balthasar has a decidedly "higher" view of the church in this regard than does Coakley.

Chapter III

Balthasar's Contemplative Option: The Allures and Hazards of a "Christophorous" Hermeneutic

The previous chapter examined how Protestant theologians Wolfhart Pannenberg and Hans Frei are both helpful toward the end of eschewing subjectivist readings of Scripture that result from Karl Barth's hermeneutic paradigm. Barth took the interpreter's thoroughly subjective appropriation of revelation as inevitable, and, punctuated by his view of the dire effects of human sinfulness, understood that appropriation as warrant for God's radical reconfiguration of extant structures of human meaning for revelation to occur in the creaturely realm. Pannenberg and Frei contested that feature of Barth's approach for relegating Christ's universal significance to the confines of the church's speech. They believed that revelatory meaning must be present on the public, linguistically-mediated surfaces of history, evidenced by way of the Christocentric pattern unfolding in Scripture, the church, and history. Choosing correlationist models of theologizing over Barth's actualistic model, they call for theological discernment as an ongoing dialogical process, one involving attentive engagement with all discourses in light of Christian tradition so as to align with the Spirit's ongoing disclosure of God's Christoform Word. Their projects accordingly free *sola Scriptura* readers from personalist interpretation by envisioning revelation as a phenomenon wherein human efforts at understanding and representing divine truth play a cooperative role with the Spirit's activity.

Chapter two also noted problematic features of Pannenberg and Frei's hermeneutic frameworks. Both maintain that the revelatory aspects of the Christ-event are somehow stabilized or secured in that event as it is attested by biblical testimony. They do so by over-simplifying the believer's complicated involvement in constructing and receiving that attestation. Pannenberg does not take seriously the imaginative and affective features of faith-perception, subordinating *habitus*-knowledge and the Bible's integrity as a literary work to his rationalist account of the Christ-event's universal significance. Conversely, in a questionable rendering of the Bible's semiotic functions, Frei

emphasized the imaginative texture of faith and the literary integrity of the Gospels while relegating interests in their referential force to secondary concerns with little (if any) theological import. In short, Pannenberg and Frei both endeavor to delineate scriptural revelation's objective Christoform content without accounting satisfactorily for the interpreter's subjective contribution to that content's production and meaning. One might say that, in their efforts to identify the epistemologically secure contours of the Christoform Word, Pannenberg and Frei both focus on the content of Christian belief to the neglect of the theological significance of that belief itself as a subjective experience. In that regard, their works leave *sola Scriptura* readers still at a loss in the face of the subjectivity of biblical interpretation.

Chapter two's analysis essentially left "low church" Protestants who seek a correlationist (rather than a Barthian actualistic) approach to biblical revelation with this question: if believers acknowledge the far-reaching and complex nature of subjective human participation in revelation's linguistic mediation, on what grounds might those believers still hope to identify together the Bible's normative content? In other words, *can* Christians take fuller account of their subjective involvement in revelation's mediation without acquiescing to the self-reflexive tendency to which Barth, Pannenberg, and Frei all were resistant (which is the penchant to absorb the object of interpretation into the believer's subjective faith-experience)? In theoretical terms, this inquiry is fundamentally concerned with how God works providentially in and through contingent human acts of interpretation, with specific implications for the nature of cooperative grace in the form of pneumatological guidance of human processes of meaning-making.¹ This inquiry's trajectory is also practical, because it bears implications for the concrete entry-points of praxis for the believing community pursuing such a hermeneutic approach. In this project's context, those implications

¹ I thus acknowledge that I am pursuing an interpretive approach that conflicts with Pannenberg's conviction that the theologian can establish rational bases outside the perspective of faith that support Christian claims to universality. I hold to a religious epistemological position more in keeping with Frei's premises and the critical realist implications of his ad hoc approach.

especially concern any changes “low church/high Scripture” Protestants should or should not make to their traditional manners of polity and liturgy.

The following two chapters of this dissertation are dedicated to pursuing the inquiry described above by way of the field of formal theology committed to uncovering the interrelationship of theology and spirituality (compelled by Chapter two’s closing observation that Pannenberg’s and Frei’s frameworks would benefit from conversation with such approaches). These chapters draw upon the work of two seminal and quite different figures in that field, both of whom have grappled with Barthian approaches to revelation and have looked to the bodily experiences of religious and aesthetic contemplation as central theological resources: Roman Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988) and Anglican theologian Sarah Coakley (1951-present). In a passage that anticipates the benefits (in the quest to move beyond the “PIP”) of their manners of resourcing contemplation, Coakley reflects upon her choice of theological method, which she calls “*théologie totale*,” as one bringing together our “semiotic” and “systematic” faculties of knowing:

It is possible . . . to avoid the stuckness of a theory in which the so-called semiotic realm fails in any substantial or transformative impact on the systematic. For the contemplative method of *théologie totale* of course already welcomes what is here called the semiotic at more than one level: it welcomes it in the very act of contemplation, in which practices of unknowing precisely court the realm of the unconscious; and it welcomes it in the arts, as a way into those levels of doctrinal truth, via the imagination and aesthetic artifacts, that more drily intellectual theology often misses.²

For this dissertation’s purposes, Coakley’s statement hints at the potential benefit to be gleaned from these contemplative approaches: they promise a hermeneutic framework that accounts for and even invites the interpreter’s subjective contribution to first and second-order theological expression while remaining oriented by the Christic object of revelation. The two following chapters are composed with the intent of identifying that potential in Balthasar’s and Coakley’s

² Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay ‘On the Trinity’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 50-51.

contemplative approaches, as well as with the intent of critiquing their positions—most emphatically Balthasar’s—and thereby complicating any thought of an *easy* solution to the “PIP” by way of contemplation. The concluding chapter then provides the stage for synthesizing the insights gleaned from the analyses of chapters one through four, with the final trajectory of identifying generative insights for moving beyond the Protestant interpretation problem in practicing communities.

The remainder of this chapter examines Balthasar’s construal of the God-human interrelation in revelation’s mediation, attending to his teaching’s advantages and drawbacks for addressing the Protestant interpretation problem by accounting for revelation’s subjective and objective features. The first move of this investigation outlines and evaluates the theological epistemology undergirding Balthasar’s contemplative paradigm. It especially focuses on that paradigm’s framework for connecting intuitive perception with referential concerns in the hermeneutic process of coming to theological understanding of biblical testimony to Christ. In this respect, Balthasar’s revelation doctrine seemingly offers a helpful corrective and useful alternative to the subjectivist, rationalist, and materialist approaches to scriptural interpretation thus far associated with Barth, Pannenberg, and Frei.

Having identified the promise of Balthasar’s interpretive strategy, the second move of this chapter goes on to highlight the theoretical and practical troubles that arise with Balthasar’s own application of that strategy, particularly evidenced in his rendering of Christic *kenosis* and the “Marian” profile of the contemplative body* (both corporeal and corporate).³ Balthasar’s formulations, arguably, tend to be *romantic* to a fault; that is, they ostensibly result from the contemplative visionary having overcome the ambiguities of (and, with them, the demands for a rational accounting for the proposed content of) revelation given to and through the signifying

³ From here on, this dual indication for “body,” i.e., in both a corporeal and corporate sense, will be signalled by the asterisk next to the word (i.e., body* or bodily*).

human body* of believers.⁴ Moreover, as feminist analysis holds to light, Balthasar’s romantic vision—which is symbiotic with his uncritical situation vis-à-vis the Magisterium of the modern Roman Catholic Church⁵—bears markedly stultifying implications for feminized subjects. Traces of Balthasar’s romanticism thus signal the pitfall lurking beneath the pleasing surface of an aesthetic contemplative paradigm such as he constructs: it does not take full enough account of what the contemplative contributes to the semantic rendering of the revelatory experience. This chapter concludes by turning to Coakley with the question of whether *any* contemplative paradigm that takes “translucence to God” as humanity’s ultimate fulfillment (as do Balthasar’s and Coakley’s alike) can afford authentic passage beyond the “PIP.” Toward that end, let us begin by considering the founding tenets of Balthasar’s doctrine of revelation as an entrée into this conversation.

Balthasar’s Key Insight: Humanity’s Self-Expropriation in Theodramatic Revelation

Central to Balthasar’s construal of revelation is his call for a revival of theology carried out not only in light of truth and goodness but also in light of *beauty*, the attractiveness of the mystery of being.⁶ He reminds his audience that “the same Christian centuries which masterfully knew how

⁴ My basic account of Balthasar’s romanticism aligns with Hilary Mooney’s analysis of some of Balthasar’s epistemic assertions in *The Liberation of Consciousness: Bernard Lonergan’s Theological Foundations in Dialogue with the Theological Aesthetics of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Frankfurt, 1992). She notes that Balthasar’s presumption of the self-evidence of the *Gestalt* of revelation’s aesthetic form relies upon a model of revelation as the “free self-opening of God in love for humanity, and faith is the free and loving acceptance of this love. . . . Such a love ‘appears.’ One does not measure it against one’s own needs nor can one resolve it into its constituents” (248). Reflecting upon this account of the knowledge afforded through romantic love, Mooney declares: “Von Balthasar’s reluctance to tackle the matter of the rationality of the propositional beliefs which lovers may hold on the strength of their love is, in the opinion of the present writer, problematic” (249). I share Mooney’s assessment, and below I will provide reasons for doing so.

⁵ Roman Catholic theologian Francis Sullivan notes that, “in the vocabulary of the medieval schoolmen, Magisterium came to mean the authority of one who teaches.” This could include the “bishop in his cathedral” or “the professor in the university.” In modern Roman Catholicism, however, the Magisterium is used to refer to the hierarchy’s teaching authority, often designated as the fundamental proprietors of the office in accord with God’s Word. See Francis A. Sullivan, S.J., *Magisterium: Teaching Authority in the Catholic Church* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983) 24.

⁶ Taking up the longstanding Neo-Platonic identification of beauty with truth and goodness as the three unified “transcendentals,” Balthasar maintains that—because they are intrinsically connected to beauty—goodness and truth have a similar capacity to draw the desirous soul toward themselves and point it

to read the natural world's language of forms were the very same ones which possessed eyes trained, first, to perceive the formal quality of revelation by the aid of grace and its illumination and second (and only then!) to interpret revelation."⁷ Today's theologians should strive to cultivate a similar aesthetic sensibility, one neglected in the contemporary West (where, he says, beauty is generally relegated to material appearances). That sensibility entails a poetic proclivity for wholeness, apprehending "both the figure and that which shines forth from the figure, making it into a worthy, a love-worthy thing."⁸ On this basis, Balthasar maintains that revelatory experience is analogous to aesthetic experience.

Along these lines, as evidenced in his reflections in *The Theology of Karl Barth*,⁹ Balthasar was a great admirer of Barth's theological project. He agreed with Barth that modernity's turn to the subject was fatal for theology, and so he particularly appreciated what he called the "objectivity" of Barth's work: its zealous attention to the object of revelation, God revealed in Christ. Balthasar similarly maintains that Christian theology's foremost task is to discern that objective form shining forth within concrete, historical human existence. Balthasar-scholar Aidan Nichols notes that what makes Balthasar distinctive from Barth on this point is his conviction that the graced enlightenment enabling faith "breaks forth from *within the revelatory form itself*" rather than simply illuminating

toward God, whose Being is the mysterious unity holding together all reality. Balthasar notes that he has "tried to construct a philosophy and a theology starting from an analogy not of abstract Being, but of Being as it is encountered concretely in its attributes... And as the transcendentals run through all Being, they must be interior to each other: that which is truly true is also truly good and beautiful and one." Quoted in "Hans Urs von Balthasar's *Theo-Drama*: A Contribution to Dramatic Criticism" by Ed Block, Jr., in *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar*, eds. Edward T. Oakes, S. J., and David Moss (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), 177.

⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press; 1982-89). Here at *Volume I: Seeing the Form* (1982), 29 (subsequently cited as *GL*).

⁸ *GL I*, 20. For Balthasar this means that we must develop a taste for wholeness, which has to do with our readiness to be evangelized (since, because of sin, we are more attuned to the fragmentary).

⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. John Drury (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1971).

the mind at the “innermost point of . . . personal subjectivity.”¹⁰ To put it otherwise, in contrast with Barthian actualism (crudely construed), Balthasar does not understand revelation as cognitive content that is miraculously infused into the human mind. Rather, for Balthasar the recipient of revelation is *contemplative*, receptively outward-oriented. Balthasar accordingly takes up the view that revelation must be sought out beneath its mediated surfaces: nature, history, and—the center of all mediated form—Jesus Christ. This seeking is a weight to bear, but those who endure it “will receive eyes to behold the primal form of man-in-existence,”¹¹ he is convinced. Essentially, according to Balthasar, all persons can detect divine glory shining forth from nature’s form; and if they pursue that glory through history to the point of encounter with the incarnate Christ, therein they will find that glory taking up *a* form, one that transfigures and makes sense of all of nature and history in its light.¹²

Balthasar was also not unlike Barth in that he dismissed cultural and philosophical hermeneutics as necessary for theological perception of Christ, insisting that Christ’s intrinsic authority exists independently of the subjective conditions necessary for perceiving him as revealing the Father’s essence. “If Christ is what he claims to be,” Balthasar explains, “then he cannot be so dependent on subjective conditions as to be hindered by them from making himself wholly understandable to man nor, contrariwise, can man, without his grace, supply the sufficient conditions of receiving him with full understanding.”¹³ For Balthasar, one who is both God and man

¹⁰ Aidan Nichols, *The Word Has Been Abroad: A Guide Through Balthasar’s Aesthetics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 25.

¹¹ *GL I*, 26. Later Balthasar goes on to explain that Christ’s appearance is God’s “measure of grace and not of judgment, as a freely conferred measure which no one can arrogate to himself but which is given in such a way that anyone so desiring can take it to himself” (*ibid.*, 478).

¹² As Nichols explains Balthasar’s thinking, in the event of the incarnation the “personal substance of the Father in his Word is now lavished on the world. And yet, because the creation was from the beginning oriented towards its own supernatural elevation . . . it follows that the self-manifestation of God in Jesus Christ brings the form of the world to its perfection, and in that way uncovers the fullness of its significance for the first time” (35). Cf. Balthasar, *GL I*, 432.

¹³ *GL I*, 465.

naturally draws what is universally true and good in human existence to himself by way of his pleasing “measure and form;” he does not require some existential feeling or category with which to correspond in order to be revelatory. Revelation’s luminous quality issues from Christ’s Logos character: as the Word incarnate, he is the all-in-all content of creation, and so his form is that which has the power to make sense of all other forms. However, like a work of art, that phenomenon does not impose itself upon the knower; it only testifies to its own ordering power. Thus, while Balthasar allies with certain Barthian concerns,¹⁴ and with Scholastic teaching regarding the fundamental distinction between God and the world,¹⁵ his theological aesthetics take the opposite direction of Kantian aesthetics. This is to say that, for Balthasar, the fallen human is not cut off from perception of the transcendent behind a veil of ignorance. Instead, the pleasing form is such that “the light does not fall on this form from above and from outside, rather it breaks forth from the form’s interior.”¹⁶ Christ shines as most beautiful among all forms, and even the positivist and atheist should be able to see that great beauty when they catch sight of the phenomenon of Christ, he says.

For Balthasar, then, the vision of faith is subjectively *and* objectively enabled in us by way of the revelatory form of Christ. The incarnation first catches our attention by appealing to our natural *eros* for beauty and ecstatic experience in relation to it; hence, revelation’s attractive radiance is the

¹⁴ One may summarily say that, like Barth, Balthasar was influenced by Erich Przywara’s concept of the radical God-human distinction within a Christocentric framework in its implications for the objectivity of the transcendent form, though he did not share Barth’s positions regarding the actualistic implications of the teaching. Balthasar says, in view of Przywara’s insights, that “philosophy is not a purely formal framework into which we inject the content of theology. Every concrete philosophy must be measured in terms of its yes and no to the supernatural order of Revelation and the one God in Christ” (Balthasar, *Theology of Karl Barth*, 230).

¹⁵ In the interest of space I can regretably give only cursory reference to this classical teaching, which deals with the complicated notion of God alone being “pure act,” the only instance of being and essence coinciding. Human creatures (along with all created beings), by comparison, exist as instances of general essences. The distinction between God’s mode of existence and the human mode of existence is fundamental because God is the act of being itself, whereas the created order has its being as a gift from God. I will return to consider related aspects of this teaching in relation to the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*.

¹⁶ *GL I*, 151.

subjective evidence that enables human interpreters to contemplate the divine object. Balthasar took that alluring illumination as afforded by—and our ecstatic response to it as cooperating with—the ministering presence of the Holy Spirit, who Nichols explains “lends that human and all-too-human desiring, thirsting, longing, his own divine enthusiasm and inspiration.”¹⁷ This experience shows the contemplative that the very structure of reality is sourced in the *kenosis*, or self-emptying love, which characterizes the inner life of the Trinity. That kenotic life becomes evident as the very glory that shines forth from the concrete form of Christ—most luminously from Christ’s paschal body, which overcomes sin, death, and hell by including them in divinity’s dramatic act of self-expression. Balthasar believes that, in an act of incorporating believers into the Trinity’s own self-giving movement, the Spirit inspires in them a responsive appropriation of Christ’s *kenosis*, expressed in their self-ceding love for God. Balthasar finds a fitting metaphor for that receptivity to be that of a nuptial encounter between humanity and God’s Word, with that encounter personified in the relationship of Mary, Christ’s mother, to the Word made flesh via her self-ceding openness to it.

Given his rejection of cultural and philosophical hermeneutics on the basis of Christ’s self-attesting authority, it is of little surprise that Balthasar objects to much contemporary academic study of the New Testament. Balthasar critiques biblical scholars who bifurcate the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith for failing to apprehend the “wholeness of the image” of Jesus Christ in Scripture, which is what the Church Fathers knew makes every element of the Bible “plausible.”¹⁸ “The gospels are the fruit of contemplation,” says Balthasar, “brought forth from the womb of the

¹⁷ Nichols, 26. Cf. Balthasar, *GL I*, 166, where he lends credence to the fact that “the deepening and reviatlization of the person which occurs within the act of faith (as a living act which includes love and hope) has been described by . . . the whole tradition as the unfolding of the Spirit of God in the spirit of man.”

¹⁸ Balthasar, *GL I*, 467.

primitive Church....”¹⁹ This process involved the Church birthing forth Scripture “from herself” by reflecting upon her *memoria* of Christ, which is not merely subjective but rather “hearkens back to the objective interpretation of the whole of revelation by the risen spiritual Christ.”²⁰ Scripture is therefore “the ‘likeness’ of the original image of Jesus Christ; the canonical form of the New Testament reproduces what the disciples perceived of the form of revelation in him.”²¹ When scholars fail to detect the *trinitarian* dimensions of Jesus’s form, Balthasar says, they render the scriptural texts beyond the Gospel narratives unintelligible—not only missing that the Old and New Covenants contain persuasive echoes of the Word’s form, but also that the form of Scripture itself is Christic. Accordingly, the identity of Christ cannot be abstracted away from the gripping encounter with the form of Jesus mediated by New Testament testimony and the Church’s sacraments and dogma. For biblical studies to bear fruit for ecclesial faith and practice, they must begin and end with contemplative attention to that singular form, which emerges from the array of diverse biblical texts and theologies viewed as an aesthetic whole.

Balthasar’s prescription for acquiring this wholeness of vision, for “seeing the form,” fundamentally entails one’s cultivating a Christoform lens by way of Christoform living. As Nichols describes it, for Balthasar, “to perceive Jesus as the Word incarnate, the very image of the Father, familiarity with his life-form is needful, . . . an ‘abiding’ with and in Christ.”²² Balthasar conceptualizes this aesthetic-spiritual sensibility as a kind of “Marian” sensibility—that is, likened to Christ’s mother’s contemplative pondering of the Word, the full meaning of which is born

¹⁹ Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology*, Vol. I: *The Word Made Flesh*, trans. A. V. Littledale and A. Dru (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 197.

²⁰ Balthasar, *GL I*, 540.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Nichols, 5. Here we find his characteristic move of emphasizing submission to the Object of revelation, for as it concerns discernment, he maintains that “the more obediently one thinks the more accurately he will see” (Balthasar quoted in Nichols, 32).

through a life of ardent availability to the Word's unfolding mission.²³ Balthasar thus argues that proper exegesis of all reality—including Scripture—arises out of such submissive faithfulness and attention to the Word. As believers are thereby incorporated into the life of Christ, they come to have a kind of synchronicity with the gospel message, in which they come to share in Christ's "own vision and knowledge."²⁴ Such is how he frames human reception and expression of revelation in the terms of a subordinationist theological epistemology. It is not subordinationist in the Barthian actualistic sense, relying upon the full dismantling of existing structures of meaning when surrendering them to the biblically rendered category of Christ. It is instead guided by the conviction that, when humans engage in deliberate capitulation to God's worldly mission, the Word cooperates with extant meaning-structures, transfiguring rather than obliterating them.²⁵

Balthasar thus utilizes general aesthetics as analogous to a theological ontology to explain the appearance and attraction of Christ's form. He grounds his subordinationist theological epistemology in the picture of divine-human relations offered in Henri de Lubac's nature-grace thesis.²⁶ According to de Lubac, modern secularism originated in late medieval nominalism, most evidently in the neo-Scholastic view that human beings have two separate ends: one that is "purely natural" and another that is "supernatural," intrinsically disconnected from the natural. Rejecting

²³ Balthasar also describes this interpretive principle as "Marian" because he takes Mary to be the paradigmatic personification of the fruit-bearing life of devoted availability to the Word. I will address this theme in Balthasar's work below.

²⁴ Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology* I, 203.

²⁵ Balthasar connects this phenomenon with the Hebrews 1:2-3 affirmation that in Christ, who "bear[s] the very stamp of [God's] nature," God has authoritatively spoken in a manner that contrasts with the "manifold and fragmentary ways in which God spoke of old to the fathers through the prophets" (*GL* I, 435). With a nod to Maximus the Confessor, Balthasar says that Christ could not be the "point of intersection of all partial words of history and of all individual words of Being if he were merely either the 'factual' man Jesus or the suprahistorical, all-sustaining Logos" (*ibid.*). Christ's status as both explains, for Balthasar, why Christ's concrete image has the power to transfigure all other sites of meaning in the world, even as those sites disclose to us something of Christ's image that we might not have yet known.

²⁶ For my summary of these points I found much help in Rodney Hosware's distillation of de Lubac's thought and its impact upon Balthasar's work in his first chapter of *Balthasar: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), at 8-18.

this heritage as a misguided understanding of the early Christian sources, de Lubac contributed to the movement countering neo-Scholasticism that came to be known as the *ressourcement* school. The *ressourcement* thinkers endeavored to demonstrate that, according to the tradition of the Patristics and High Scholasticism, human beings do not have two separate ends but a single one: to see God by participating in the self-knowing of the divine Trinity. Accordingly, there is no point in human experience of utter autonomy in relation to the order of grace—and, appealing to the medieval notion of degrees of participation in God, there is also no assured point of neutrality relative to belief in God. De Lubac drew upon these sources also to emphasize to modernist transcendental thinkers that the newness of the Gospel-event highlights the fact that grace does more than simply “make explicit and complete what is already potentially present in nature.”²⁷ This is because our intrinsic orientation toward God is not itself already “graced” or “supernatural” but is dependent upon the gratuitous gift of grace in Christ for its completion.

De Lubac maintained that these two convictions—human nature and supernatural grace work toward the same beatific end, and yet the human’s natural orientation is not itself already “graced”—are held together in the paradoxical character of the human condition: *we are naturally oriented toward an end that we are not naturally equipped to achieve*. Balthasar adopted this position, emphasizing the epistemological implication that God respects the natural order’s autonomy relative to the supernatural order, preserving humankind’s freedom to pursue revelation in a human way.²⁸ However, Balthasar does not see himself as simply repeating the *ressourcement* project. Rather, he describes his theological venture as following the contemplative way of those “overwhelmed by the Word of God in the way the beloved is overwhelmed by the declaration of the

²⁷ Henri de Lubac quoted in Howsare, 15.

²⁸ See Howsare, 54.

lover.”²⁹ Balthasar thus presents humanity’s intrinsic *eros* for what goes beyond oneself as that natural inclination which God’s *agape* for humans appropriates in the downward reaching movement of grace, thereby drawing them into the self-sharing movement of God’s triune life. Throughout his work Balthasar takes up this Augustinian line of thought: the restless human soul seeks its place in God, the ground of its own being, toward which it naturally gravitates. He also construes theology as a dialogue rooted in an amorous exchange between a “bridegroom”—Christ—and his “bride,” the church. For that framing of revelation and theology, the key point for Balthasar’s theological epistemology, grounded in the de Lubacian nature-grace paradigm, is this: divine revelation takes up and transfigures our religious longings, practices, and constructions because grace need not annihilate human nature to do its work. Because the trajectory of our natural desires and expressions is not inherently antithetical to the movement of grace, grace can transform rather than eliminate them as we draw into closer intimacy with the Three-In-One for whom we are intended but are not naturally equipped to approach.³⁰

Balthasar argues that, since Luther’s day, Protestants have overlooked the human’s orientation toward grace, neglecting the aesthetic harmony that exists between humanity and divinity, natural and supernatural. Under the force of Luther’s viewpoint, Balthasar says, we find that “every form which man tries to impose on revelation in order to achieve an overview that makes comprehension possible...must disintegrate in the face of the ‘contradiction,’ the concealment of everything divine under its opposite, that is, of all proportions and analogies

²⁹ Balthasar quoted in Howsare, 33. Howsare notes that Balthasar’s overt purpose in this statement is to distinguish himself from the *ressourcement* school.

³⁰ Hence, Balthasar aligns with Barth in not presuming foundations for proper theological reasoning prior to or beyond the concrete content of biblical revelation. He disagrees with Barth’s skepticism, however, concerning the *analogia entis*, or analogy of being. In chapters three and four of his *Church Dogmatics* Barth asserts that the commonality between God and world is created by God through faith, resulting in the *analogia fidei* relationship between God and humanity. Balthasar contends that this analogy of faith is only legitimate on the basis of the *analogia entis* as depicted in de Lubac’s nature-grace thesis.

between God and man in dialectic.”³¹ He applauds Barth for offering a corrective to these tendencies, advocating at least a *kind* of contemplative approach to Scripture by connecting divine glory with God’s objective trinitarian form. Balthasar critiques Barth, however, for remaining reticent to *establish* the trinitarian dimension of revelation and the Marian aspect of human receptivity to it, effectively undermining the place of contemplation for arriving at faith and theology. On Balthasar’s terms, we could say that Pannenberg’s and Frei’s emphases on the human capacity to discern the Christoform pattern impressing itself upon historical reality provide another check to the Protestant tendency to miss the aesthetic harmony between God and humankind. However, because neither of them adequately thematized the role of human desires in the Spirit-led process of historical revelation, it also appears that their hermeneutic frameworks also fall short of giving contemplation its due.

Like Frei and Pannenberg, Balthasar asserts that, on the basis of a Christocentric pattern, “mutual enlightenment” can and should exist between thought-categories internal and external to faith-informed discourse. But Balthasar diverges from them by drawing upon the Scholastic metaphysical formula, which he sees as key to expressing the truth that shapes Christian existence.³² Frei, for instance, resists the romantic reification of the self by taking up a materialist line of thought, maintaining that Christian theology has been given a set of stories that make history-like claims as its most basic access to the identity of its Lord.³³ Properly interpreting those

³¹ Balthasar, *GL I*, 48.

³² Balthasar holds with Thomas Aquinas that, because of God’s transcendence over the nexus of created being, human philosophy, which works backwards from effects to their cause, can provide knowledge *that* God is but not understanding of *what* God is (see Howsare, 54). Only revelation can provide the latter. Balthasar thus endeavors to re-open the way in Christian theology for traditional metaphysics as opposed to integrating theology into modern secular philosophy. Balthasar’s efforts on this account are evidenced in his use of Neo-Platonic categories of thought as well as those of Romantic Idealism; see his early work in *Apocalypse of the German Soul* where he endeavors to re-Christianize German Romantic idealism.

³³ To review material from chapter two, above: according to Frei, Christ is to be understood above all as a portrayed individual. There is no point of access to Christ’s identity that lies “behind” his literary portrait in the Gospels as some shared human possibility, as in Schleiermacher’s Christological starting point with

stories warrants imaginative engagement with a concrete and unfolding history-like drama, not with an account of Christ's or the believer's internal experience. The problem we have encountered with Frei's materialist approach to scriptural interpretation is that it highlights the faith-evoking potency of the image of Christ but does not propose how this image relates to external reality; hence, it cannot account for the impact of the confessional community's referential concerns in identifying Christ's form. Balthasar, it seems, supplies for that lack—not in rationalist terms, but in metaphysical ones, by asserting that “the form as it appears to us is beautiful only because the delight that it arouses in us is founded upon the fact that, in it, the truth and goodness of the depths of reality itself are manifested and bestowed.”³⁴ Balthasar orients his systematic theology according to that conviction. His trilogy of aesthetics, dramatics, and logics is, in other words, built upon the mutual enlightenment he finds existing between theological categories and the philosophical transcendentals. What one identifies as the qualities of Being permeating every existent (i.e., goodness, truth, and beauty) seems to him to open up into the mysteries of Christian theology.

The latter conviction does not place Balthasar in easy alignment with Pannenberg either, for Balthasar roots perception of divine truth in states wherein the human's rational faculties are informed by the apprehensions of the ecstatic³⁵ and *habitus*-oriented features of her perception. Balthasar, in contrast with Pannenberg, accounts for the *kenotic* movement of desire for God as integral to our perceiving the “facts of revelation” in the first place, punctuating his conviction that God's self-disclosure emanates from Christ both objectively (through the Logos) and subjectively (through the Holy Spirit). Nichols explains:

“the feeling of absolute dependence.” Hence, all soteriological speculation is to be tied to and tested against this portrait.

³⁴ *GL I*, 118.

³⁵ That “ecstatic” quality is what he calls “the spirit's native condition always to have gone outside itself in order to be with another” (*GL I*, 21).

At the risk, then, of confounding the respective roles of reason and faith in the reception of divine revelation, he [Balthasar] will underscore the difference made to reason by its encounter with revealed form. Though there is, he accepts, such a thing as the *preambula fidei*, which he defines as an appropriate pointing up, in multiple ways, of the form of divine revelation (and here, no doubt, the philosophy of religion, and historical study of the evidences of special revelation, would come into play), it is a path where the *ambulans*, the walker, is already affected by the divine light—affecting him not only subjectively, from within, but objectively, from without, from the object which it is his intention to investigate as he looks at the truth-claims the Christian revelation makes.³⁶

Here we see a Romantic³⁷ orientation in Balthasar, in that he takes finite structural forms as possessing inexhaustible depth-dimensions. In accord with that orientation, he says: “The freedom of the spirit that is at home in itself . . . is simultaneous with the ‘keyboard’ which it has appropriated and which allows the spirit self-expression. Such simultaneity is possible because it is the spirit’s native condition always to have gone outside itself in order to be with another.”³⁸ In such a fashion Balthasar strives to avoid a rationalistic dualism where spirit and matter are only

³⁶ Nichols, 28.

³⁷ This “Romantic” tendency ought to be distinguished from the more generally “romantic” quality I refer to as a tone that often characterizes Balthasar’s writing. Nichols notes that Balthasar aims to balance his Romantic emphasis with a more classical one, which focuses on “the profound intelligibility of form” and seeks a perfect form which “contains all the profundity one might ever wish for” (24). He explains that Balthasar works to combine the approaches of Baroque Neo-Scholasticism (characterized by attending to the intrinsic rational credibility and convergence of “the historical signs and the manifestations of an acting God” within Christianity’s form) with Alexandrian and Augustinian theology (characterized by attending to Christianity’s form as the “self-attesting of God’s eternal truth which, as the inwardness of absolute Being, is itself the proper, if ultimate, object of the striving of the human spirit toward the real”) (31). Balthasar attempts this combination by way of the basic categories of a theological aesthetics, in which visible form does not merely point *beyond* itself to mystery; rather, Balthasar says, “form is the apparition of this mystery, and reveals it while, naturally, at the same time protecting and veiling it”; therefore, “the content does not lie behind the form but within it. Whoever is not capable of seeing and reading the form will, by the same token, fail to perceive the content. Whoever is not illumined by the form will see no light in the content either” (quoted in Nichols, 31-32).

Interestingly, Mooney (see fn. 4, above) numbers among those who find this attempt in Balthasar’s work unconvincing. Noting Balthasar’s concern that revelation determine the conditions for examining its truth, Mooney wonders if Balthasar has developed criteria adequate to “all the issues which occur with respect to the unfolding of the form before the eyes of the believer,” specifying that “he tends to downplay the role of the existential subjective context within which a form is perceived” (246). For Mooney, the problem resides in Balthasar’s suggestion that the aesthetic form “does not integrate all other forms within itself”; rather, “it illuminates them from outside. Yet the question whether there is a recognizable correlation between the Christian revelation and truth which we can know in other ways is central,” she continues, “not only to an *apologia ad extra*, but also to the attempt to make believers aware of the rationality of believing in the God of Jesus Christ” (247). In agreement with Mooney, I would thus suggest that Balthasar’s use of German Romanticism may be seen as epistemic justification for his more diffuse romanticizing tendencies.

³⁸ *GL I*, 21.

incidentally related, as well as a materialism where spirit may be seen merely as an epiphenomenon of matter.

Balthasar aims to resist the flights of Romanticism by insisting that the captivated witness cannot enter the mysterious depths of the revelatory form if she intends to leave that form itself behind. For Balthasar, “form” is the unification of spirit incarnate—of physical structure with interior radiance and freedom—which holds true in the fundamental reality of body and soul. God’s historical epiphany in Christ bears the *Anschaulichkeit* or “vivid discernability” of the divine essence in this fashion.³⁹ Although God’s essential nature cannot be reduced to God’s style, for Balthasar the two are integrally related, with the latter being the indispensable indication of the former. This is why contemplation of Christ’s form takes precedence over ratiocination for theological discernment, and the concrete particulars of that form should retain primacy in any account of the divine essence. Constant reference to the distinctive manner of God’s historical materialization, as attested in Scripture, is crucial if the radiant divine nature is to be spoken of truly.

To draw this section to a close by returning to the Protestant interpretation problem, specifically as iterated in light of the works of Pannenberg and Frei, we might conclude that Balthasar’s approach to revelation provides a potent alternative to their hermeneutic approaches in many respects. He too detected and sought to avoid the anthropocentric danger that Barth, Pannenberg, and Frei recognized in Romantic philosophies’ tendency to treat faith illuministically.⁴⁰ On Balthasar’s terms, however, neither Pannenberg nor Frei adequately acknowledges the metaphysical import of the inner subjective experience in perceiving the objective Christ-portraits as revelatory—namely, they do not account for faith in the biblical Christ-portrait as resulting from grace taking up the universal human desire for the transcendentals. For Balthasar, it remains

³⁹ Balthasar quoted in Nichols, 27.

⁴⁰ That is, “as the mere operation of a religious *a priori*, which simply finds in the data of religion whatever it is in the evolutionary development of the human spirit that it needs to encounter there” (Nichols, 31).

fundamental that the “facts of revelation are perceived initially in the light of grace, and faith grows in such a way that it allows the self-evidence of these facts—an evidence that itself was ‘enrapturing’ from the outset—to continue to unfold according to its own laws and principles.”⁴¹ In order for those facts to continue unfolding for the believers, they must invite the Spirit’s cooperative grace by conforming to God’s manner of appearance in history—i.e., via practices mirroring the kenotic form of life extending from the portrait of Christ. Along these lines, he illuminates for modern readers a hermeneutic approach that accounts for “the life of the saints [as] theology in practice”⁴²—that is, it explicates how one’s theological understanding and one’s way of life go hand in hand. We cannot make sense of Christ’s form dispassionately, Balthasar reminds us, if the very object of theology is human participation in God. “From God’s perspective,” Balthasar muses, divine-human intermingling “is actualized as ‘revelation’ (culminating in Christ’s Godmanhood)” and “from man’s perspective, is actualized as ‘faith’ (culminating in participation in Christ’s Godmanhood).”⁴³

Balthasar’s contemplative approach to theology thus appears useful for moving beyond the “PIP” on the basis that it allows for referential and literary modes of perceiving Christ’s objective form without seeking to bracket off subjective human participation in apprehending and representing that form. That participation, in fact, resides at the heart of the revelatory phenomenon for Balthasar, because it is not just driven by illusory projection. Balthasar is convinced that what God gives humanity in Christ is “offered in such a way that man can see it, understand it, make it his own, and live from it in keeping with his human nature.”⁴⁴ In sum, the mysterious, subjective move of faith turns on our fully human act of cooperating with the

⁴¹ *GL I*, 126.

⁴² *Explorations in Theology I*, 204.

⁴³ *GL I*, 125.

⁴⁴ *GL I*, 121.

movement of God's trinitarian life, which is our "participation in Christ's Godmanhood."⁴⁵ With this participatory approach to perception, we might say that Balthasar's hermeneutic paradigm invites practitioners to widen the boundaries of their objectivity rather than embrace an escalated subjectivity (which Balthasar, like Pannenberg, and Frei, perceives in the moves of Existentialism and transcendentalism).⁴⁶ He offers the believing community a welcomed "higher church" approach to theological discernment, one that seeks biblical revelation's authoritative norms first and foremost by submitting to Christoform truth's power to shape the life of the interpretive body*, eschewing the bankrupt assumption that theological correctness depends upon the reader's objective grasp of the subject matter. Before leaving my reader with such an enthusiastic recommendation of Balthasar's contemplative paradigm as a way beyond the PIP, however, prudence begs for examination of its material results (potential and actual). Balthasar's extensive corpus of theological analysis and construction proves a ready starting place for that examination. With that intention, let us transition to the second major move of this chapter's broader investigation.

Balthasar's Paradigm, Applied: A (Theo)Dramatic Eschewal of Christoform Ambiguity

Balthasar's doctrine of revelation is driven by his conviction that, in all of its potency for human transformation, supernatural revelation is freely given so as to be freely received. This means that "humanity is taken seriously as God's partner both in the event of redemption and in its preparation"⁴⁷; the human response to God's initiating activity is integral to revelation's unfolding.

⁴⁵ Ibid. In the following section of this chapter I will explore the trinitarian character of this participation more fully, and in chapter four I will give particularly close attention to the role that Balthasar envisions the Holy Spirit playing in that trinitarian economy.

⁴⁶ This assesment anticipates a point I will later draw upon in Sarah Coakley's work. See *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 26.

⁴⁷ *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988-1998) Volume I, 8 (subsequently cited as *TD*).

Balthasar's various expositions of faith "as a living act which includes love and hope"⁴⁸ also consistently maintain that proper human interception of revelation is participatory in the Son's own knowing in God, and that that participation is fundamentally informed by moving in step with Christ's missional life. Balthasar accordingly construes the Christological connection between human perception and divine initiation as having a fundamentally *dramatic* character, leading to what he calls theological dramatics, or "theo-dramatics." As Brendan Leahy helpfully explains it, for Balthasar,

a true theology of redemption must steer a course between a radical theo-monism (where it's all God's doing and humanity counts for nothing) and a Promethean human titanism (where human action seems everything). For von Balthasar the key to this is what he calls a 'theo-dramatic' framework, where redemption is viewed in terms of a drama involving God and humanity as the main actors. It is a drama that unfolds around the theme of the inter-relationship between the infinite freedom of God and humankind's finite freedom. ...In Jesus Christ there is neither confusion nor separation; there is, rather, unity in distinction between humanity and God. This vertical communion establishes the true horizontal co-existence of humankind.⁴⁹

Otherwise said, for Balthasar Jesus Christ is the paradigm of this God-human intermingling, not in terms of God and humanity sharing an essence, but of the inter-relationship between infinite God and finite humanity in all contexts. The Chalcedonian Christological formula illuminates the fact that there is never "confusion nor separation" between divine initiation and human response. That interrelation is, for Balthasar, most closely analogous to a "theo-drama," which, he explains, "(as distinct from merely human drama) is only possible where 'God,' or 'a God', or some accredited representative of God, steps onto the stage of life's play as 'a person' in the action, separate from the other characters."⁵⁰

⁴⁸ *GL I*, 166.

⁴⁹ Brendan Leahy, *The Marian Profile: In the Ecclesiology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (New York: New City Press, 2000), 51.

⁵⁰ *TD II*, 189. This is why he endeavors "to use the categories of drama to illuminate Christian theology" (*TD I*, 25). In *TD IV*, for instance, he examines how the aesthetic categories of Gestalt, form, and symbol are taken up into the dramatic categories of play, role, and narrative.

Balthasar finds it theologically poignant that, in a play, the contributions of author, director, and actor all involve a distinct tendency to submit all of the participant's capacities to the service of mediating the drama, and that submission is at the same time a kind of fulfillment. Ed Block explains that this aspect of Balthasar's work in *Theo-Drama* "gives new meaning and force to the claim that drama...illuminates existence through an ecstatic involvement and 'surrender' of all participants: author, actors, director, and audience,"⁵¹ all of whom are related to the drama via self-abandoning roles that abide with one another. In this fashion, the drama's "ecstatic involvement opens the participants to the meaning of existence, a vision of the transcendent, and an imitation of the Christian mystery."⁵² For Balthasar, the perfecting significance of the Incarnation is manifest *in* such a dramatic event *as* the "becoming visible and experience-able" in history of "an infinitely determined super-form": the divine Trinity.⁵³ In keeping with this insight, Balthasar uses dramatic categories to highlight the trinitarian form of reality disclosed in the Gospel event of Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday. In this drama, the Father functions like the author, the Son like the actor, and the Holy Spirit like the director.

In the drama of the Incarnation, Balthasar maintains, the world's sin necessitates that God's expressive image take on a particular modality, entering into the darkness of the passion, death, and Hades. For Balthasar, then, the very self of God is not only revealed in that radical act of others-including love but is also *affected* by it: "God acts so as to take upon himself and make his own the tragedy of human existence even to the depths of [hell]."⁵⁴ This is possible, he believes, because of God's trinitarian nature, which enables the deification of that which is *not* God. Balthasar explains:

⁵¹ Block, 176.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *GL I*, 432.

⁵⁴ *TD II*, 54.

What does God gain from the world? An additional gift, given to the Son by the Father, but equally a gift made by the Son to the Father, and by the Spirit to both. It is a gift because, through the distinct operations of each of the three Persons, the world acquires an inward share in the divine exchange of life; as a result the world is able to take the divine things it has received from God, together with the gift of being created, and return them to God as a divine *gift*.⁵⁵

Balthasar thus rejects anything like a Lutheran Christology that regards the Son as one who was hidden beneath his own contrary, “made sin” when he was made human. Rather than veiling the revelatory character of Christ’s image, God’s assumption of tragedy through Good Friday and Holy Saturday becomes the superlative revelation to us of God’s self, the “existentially perfect and exemplary gesture” of God’s self-giving life.

The human role within the divine drama is to respond to God’s trinitarian mission by giving ourselves over to it in ecstatic fashion, which enables us to comprehend it and thus to represent the drama for others. Block explains that, for Balthasar, the transformative nature of our “ecstatic involvement” in the event of revelation is analogous to an audience’s involvement in the experience of a theatrical play, because that experience consists in opening up new horizons of existence, transcending the previously believed possibilities for the self.⁵⁶ Some readers may wonder why Balthasar—who insists upon the integrity of human response to divine initiation—assigns the human participants to this largely passive role, as the audience, rather than as fellow actors taking cues from the Spirit in relation to the lead actor, Christ, in the unfolding theo-drama. This assignment may be explained in reference to Balthasar’s rendering of the “Marian” principle informing human participation in the trinitarian mission.

⁵⁵ *TD V*, 475-76.

⁵⁶ Block, 186. Implied within the new horizons is both the *horizontal* horizon of finite human knowing in the parameters of space and time, as well as the *vertical* horizon of transcendence, “referring the particular drama’s questions and the whole dramatic event to a horizon of meaning that extends not only back in time but through the present and into an ultimately indeterminable future,” Block explains.

Balthasar understands the de Lubacian principle of creation's natural responsiveness to the supernatural as personified in Israel, the Church, and women, and paradigmatically typified in Mary the mother of Jesus. Balthasar professes:

The Woman—as Synagogue-Mary-Church—is the inseparable unity of that which makes it possible for the Word of God to take on the being of the world, in virtue of the natural-supernatural fruitfulness given to her. As the active power of receiving all that heaven gives, she is the epitome of creaturely power and dignity; she is what God presupposes as the Creator in order to give the seed of the Word to the world.⁵⁷

Balthasar roots this assessment in his reading of the Virgin Mother's role at the Annunciation. He sees there that, as a result of her mirroring Christic *kenosis* in submission to God, Mary becomes not only literally but also archetypically “‘Christ-bearing,’ ‘*Christophorous*’...a pure form which is immediately legible” and whereby “Christ becomes just as simply legible and comprehensible” to the world.⁵⁸ Mary's purely self-expropriating “yes” at both the Annunciation and crucifixion allowed Christ's perfect conception to occur and allows it to remain present in the Church full of not-yet-perfect persons. Balthasar explains how this occurs as an ongoing *event*:

Because [Christ] perpetually delivers himself anew [in the Eucharist], he is also perpetually delivered anew by his mother. Because he is constantly being conceived by believing albeit imperfect souls, his perfect conception in Mary remains always actual. And this conception in her was perfect because it came about in self-dispossession on behalf of all and in the name of all, and therefore the whole ever was already included.⁵⁹

By extension, the individual Christian and the Church are both called and enabled to take on the “feminine and bridal plasticity of the Daughter of Zion,”⁶⁰ emulating Mary's receptivity to God's will through the Holy Spirit, so as to become bearers of the Word.

Balthasar's rendering of Mary's “active power of receiving all that heaven gives” sheds light on how he understands the shaping power of divine revelation, articulated in his insistence that “in

⁵⁷ Balthasar, *Short Primer for Unsettled Laymen*, trans. Michael Waldstein (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), 90.

⁵⁸ *GL I*, 562. Emphasis added.

⁵⁹ Balthasar, *Maria und das Priesteramt*, quoted in Leahy, 113.

⁶⁰ *GL I*, 35.

the very form in which it addresses man, the Word of God already wants to include the form of man's answer to God."⁶¹ In Mary's self-ceding "yes," Christ's kenotic form is repeated. It is particularly evident in Mary's agonizing consent to the crucifixion at the foot of the Cross, with her repeated "yes" to the Son's incarnational activity unto death and hell becoming the archetype "of the Church's entire faith, which 'allows things to take place' ('letting be')." ⁶² This is key for Balthasar's formulation of the "active power" of human participation in the drama: it is actively *receptive*, full of trust in the divine plan unfolding on the world's stage. Balthasar understands the Church as still made up of "imperfect persons," but they are persons to whom Mary's perfect "yes" is communicated. "This total answer is all-embracing and feminine," he says, "and for this reason, it is especially adapted to the sensory realm."⁶³

He accordingly likens the Church's role in generating Scripture to that of Mary's in generating the bodily form of Christ. As Nichols explains, "the 'body' of Christ which is Scripture (an archaic, Alexandrian way of speaking . . . which Balthasar would revive), like the 'body' of Christ which is the Church . . . are like that body of his taken from blessed Mary and, in its transfigured, paschal condition self-identically given us in the Holy Eucharist": each "body" is a different mode of the form of Christ communicated to the world.⁶⁴ Scripture, says Balthasar—like the body of the Church and that of the Eucharistic elements—can do this work of graced mediation because Christ shapes the corpus of believers, "through and through, as the soul shapes the body."⁶⁵ Thus, the Church cannot claim ownership of its mediations of the Christ-form; that mediation is the work of Christic revelation in them, administered by the Holy Spirit. In keeping with the fact that "Mary's

⁶¹ *GL I*, 538. What sets him apart from Barth on this account is that Balthasar emphasizes the shaping power of Christ's form upon our own formative energies.

⁶² *TD IV*, 395.

⁶³ *GL I*, 421-22.

⁶⁴ Nichols, 47.

⁶⁵ *GL I*, 559.

faith does not generate the form of Jesus; rather, this form is given as a gift to her faith,” neither does the Church’s faith generate the form of Scripture; “rather, the Holy Spirit uses the Church’s formative energies in order to give full shape within her to the image of faith that has been bestowed on the Church.”⁶⁶ We thus find that Balthasar employs a notion of Christological revelation evoking its response from its audience through the pneumatological presence in and through bodily forms. Christ’s corporeal modes include Scripture, the Church, and the Eucharist; Christ himself animates these bodies, much as one’s soul animates one’s body, by way of the Holy Spirit, who brings them to their fullest meaning by reiterating the paschal form of Christ.

This is not to say that Balthasar upholds these bodily sites as revelatory in the same fashion as the singular form of Christ. As Nichols notes, in Balthasar’s vision of the relation between Christ’s and Scripture’s concrete forms, there is not a “straightforward *identity* but a due *proportion* between the two ... available to view only theologically, not by way of philological, literary or even historical method.”⁶⁷ In Balthasar’s view, the conflict among Scripture’s variety of testimony preserves Christians from assuming that Scripture is itself revelation. It testifies to that which transcends it: the Word made flesh. In a similar manner, Balthasar sees each bodily site of divine-human intermingling—the Church, Scripture, history, even the Incarnation itself—as ultimately pointing witnesses back to the transfigured paschal form of Christ. That form is continually re-presented in the Eucharist and re-expressed through the Spirit-inspired Marian body of the Church. Balthasar thus accounts for the perfection of Christ’s “measure and form” that he finds evidenced in Scripture, particularly in the interdependence of the four Gospels in their finally redacted state. Mirroring the paschal humility of the Christ-form, the lowly forms of Scripture, Church, and Eucharist present sensory surfaces beneath which the believer must seek out God’s glory

⁶⁶ *GL I*, 540.

⁶⁷ Nichols, 49.

submissively. Nevertheless, also like the incarnate appearance of the Son, these sensory surfaces tend towards disclosure rather than concealment of that glory.

For Balthasar, then, the dynamism invigorating each human site of revelation is their functioning like Mary did in mediating the presence of Christ: “unselfed,” and thus “Christophorous,” they provide an “immediately legible” form whereby “Christ becomes just as simply legible and comprehensible” to the world.⁶⁸ The sacramental principles at work here include, first, that Christ’s form is characterized by humility (“*Ungestalt*”), total self-abandonment, and—by effect—transparency to divine glory. The second principle is that the grace of Christ’s covertly glorious form is potent enough to shape human response to match it, “including the form of man’s answer” by way of the Holy Spirit’s ensuring that the human “yes” to God amounts to self-abandonment to God’s glory. Finally, the pneumatological means *and* Marian end of human participation in revelation are “Christophorous,” with the soteriological result of utter submission leading to freedom: Balthasar professes that “we know God, the more we are ‘in God’ and not in ourselves,” and that this “living law . . . shatters us and, by shattering us, also heals us.”⁶⁹ For Balthasar, sin is humans being closed in on themselves. This is why the Holy Spirit evokes in revelation’s witnesses the process of “expropriation” or “unselfing,” for “it is only by breaking them out of their self-enclosure that the Spirit is able to draw them into the selfless love of the Father and Son.”⁷⁰ Balthasar thus avers that Mary encounters God “in a way which does not eliminate her history, her corporality, her world but rather fulfills and surpasses her dreams. . . . She delivers herself over to God. Totally ‘expropriated,’ as von Balthasar says, she plays the unique role in

⁶⁸ *GL I*, 562. Note: Christ himself is “phorous,” a pure and immediately legible form of the Father’s glory radiating outward, transfiguring creation.

⁶⁹ Balthasar, “Pourquoi je me suis fait prêtre,” quoted in Leahy, 48.

⁷⁰ Jeffrey A Vogel, “The Unselfing Activity of the Holy Spirit in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar” (*Logos* 10:4, Fall 2007), 16-34; here 18.

history God has for her, and in this she is totally free.”⁷¹ The reader may already have some questions regarding this rendering of Marian expropriation as fulfillment. Any such reservations would, I propose, be further solidified on examining a number of points in Balthasar’s own application of revelation’s shape and implications, particularly as he connects them with the proper ordering of the Church. I sketch out those points below, all of which revolve around Balthasar’s construal of dramatic human interrelation with God via Marian participation in Christ’s *kenosis*.

* * *

At face value, the theologian who believes that God self-reveals in the midst of human reality (rather than its elimination) may appreciate that Balthasar construes Christ’s *Ungestalt* (his humble, unattractive form, connected with the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53:2), his agony and death on Good Friday, and his descent into hell on Holy Saturday all as essential to the dramatic event-form of the Word made flesh: these darkest aspects of the human condition occasion a gripping epiphany of God’s being rather than signaling God’s remove from a world that is intrinsically opposed to God. That creation-affirming theologian may also find value in Balthasar’s maintaining that, though God does not need the world to actualize Godself, God’s being-as-glory is realized in a genuinely new way through the action of the Son taking on creaturely form. But that same theologian may find it troublesome that, for Balthasar, Christ’s kenotic “letting be” indicates that relinquishing agency is the proper human mode of actively mediating the out-pouring of God’s glory in the world. Some of Balthasar’s detractors have lodged such a critique against him on Christological grounds, arguing that his depiction of Christ tends toward a Docetic reduction of Jesus’s humanity to a sheer sign of the infinite divine *kenosis*, failing to account for the concrete events of his historical existence that led to his death on the cross.⁷²

⁷¹ Leahy, 47.

⁷² For a general critique of how such an approach neglects the historical, see Francis Shussler Fiorenza, “Critical Social Theory and Christology,” *Catholic Theological Society of America*, 30 (1975), 63-110.

There are also anthropological reasons for taking issue with Balthasar's Christological endorsement of human passivity before God. We may recall that Balthasar asserts that Christ's self-abandonment is mirrored in Mary's transparent lability to God's will, demonstrated in her considering the needs of all others before her own. Leahy notes that "no one, [Balthasar] comments, pays less attention to her personal 'privileges' than the mother of Christ. She enjoys these 'only insofar as they are shared in by all of her children in the Church.'"⁷³ We thus find that, just as Balthasar eschews acknowledging Jesus's interpersonal conflicts leading to his execution as a political insurrectionist, as well as the plea of his Gethsemane prayer and his cry of dereliction on the cross, neither does Balthasar consider Mary's potential doubt or self-interest in her involvement with the Annunciation and crucifixion. Moreover, by subsuming the darkness of the cross entirely under the transfiguring luminance of divine glory, it appears that Balthasar effectively dismisses the scandal of Mary's powerlessly witnessing her son's unjust torment and death, of Jesus' anxiety in Gethsemane and apparent despair on the cross, and, echoing these, the desolation of all who cry out to God in the midst of misery and find no relief.⁷⁴ For Balthasar, the luminosity breaking forth from Jesus' Christophorous activity apparently resolves the injustice and desolation of God's apparent absence on Good Friday.

These interpretive moves of Balthasar's are, we might say, characterized by a kind of hermeneutic flight from the ambiguity of the Christocentric theo-drama. His defining Christ's *kenosis* entirely in terms of self-abandonment before the Father's glory effectively correlates with an avoidance of the vulnerabilities of human subjectivity—an avoidance further evidenced in his parallel doctrine of Marian expropriation. Consequently, as Balthasar aspires to anchor

⁷³ Leahy, 67, quoting Balthasar's *New Elucidations*, 111.

⁷⁴ See Steffen Lösel, "Unapocalyptic Theology: History and Eschatology in Balthasar's Theo-Drama" in *Modern Theology* 17:2, April 2001. Lösel notes that Johann Baptist Metz has articulated such a critique of Balthasar's kenotic teaching, which Metz fears "attempts to provide an impossible theological explanation for theodicy, thus avoiding the *scandalon* presented by the existence of suffering and evil in the world" (quoted in Lösel, 202). Lösel refers the reader to Metz's "Theologi als Theodizee?" in Willi Oelmüller, ed, *Theodizee—Gott vor Gericht?* (Munich: W. Fink Verlag, 1990), 116-117.

metaphysical speculation to steadfast attention to the concrete contours of Christ's form, one may mark overly romantic formulations of those contours serving to tidy up their boundaries and implications which might otherwise evoke tension or discomfort. For instance, one may consider that Balthasar maintains not only that the disciple's subjective faith response to revelation should mirror Christ's as did Mary's, but he goes on to claim that that response entails clearly demarcated roles for men and women in its corporate manifestation. In this instance, Balthasar's romanticized category of the Marian woman works on numerous levels to ensure mastery over fleshly desire and vulnerability.

First, Balthasar presents the "woman" as the essential form of bodily desire and receptivity,⁷⁵ the volatility of which is archetypically presented in the unruly Eve and its taming by Mary's "pure and simple" existence.⁷⁶ Furthermore, for Balthasar, the female state simultaneously belongs *to* yet is distanced *from* the male, literally expressed from his body as his "other self." All women are accordingly subordinated to all men, for only the latter's embodied essence includes the potential for transcending materiality and thereby representing divinity to others.⁷⁷ The woman is brought under the man's dominion by the prescription that she must strive to remain pliable to his guidance, and if she accepts her subordinate status and duties, she is rewarded with idealization as the male's exemplary helpmate and "the epitome of creaturely power and dignity."⁷⁸ (At this point, echoing Sarah Coakley's critique of Wilhelm von Humboldt's romantic portrait of women, the feminist might wish to say to Balthasar: "It is hardly reassuring to be told . . . that women are 'closer'

⁷⁵ Balthasar considers the Marian principle "visible particularly in women in the Church" (Leahy, 177), and he declares that what is "feminine" is "especially adapted to the sensory realm" (*GL I*, 421-22).

⁷⁶ "In the full obedience of her assent," says Balthasar, "[Mary] would extinguish what Eve's greedy disobedience had kindled. ... In the perfect poverty that put her whole being, body and soul, at the disposal of God's design, she would replace with the riches of man's original self-giving the poverty of need he was compelled to endure in his fallen state." See *Christian State of Life* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 122.

⁷⁷ Balthasar says: "The woman is not called upon to represent anything that she herself is not, while the man has to represent the very source of life, which he can never be" (*New Elucidations*, 221).

⁷⁸ Balthasar, *Short Primer*, 90.

to the ideal human than men, when it turns out that any kind of active self-assertion or manifest talent is frowned upon in their case as ‘unfeminine’”).⁷⁹

Balthasar’s manner of distinguishing male primacy within the Marian body of the Church suggests an operative view of the female body as a nexus of uncontrollable, wayward urges, one which must be brought under control via “bridal plasticity” before the husband or else be exposed and punished as that of a lurid harlot. Tina Beattie detects such a tendency in Balthasar’s use of the notion of the Church as *casta meretrix*, the “chaste whore” (a concept found in the Hebrew Bible and taken up in the Medieval theological tradition). Beattie says that, in deploying the *casta meretrix*, Balthasar

draw[s] selectively on a range of sources to put together a flamboyant rhetoric of depravity and sin associated with the prostitution of the Church, in which the full extent of his dread of the female body is exposed. . . . For example, he quotes extensively from the work of [William of Auvergne, who] condemns the clergy who, in Balthasar’s paraphrasing, ‘prostitute Holy Church, because for squalid gain they invite all and sundry to shame her. And so her nipples are cracked and her breasts torn out, in a word.’ ... The following gives a flavor of what this lengthy diatribe amounts to [for Balthasar]: . . . ‘Heretics call the Church “whore” and “Babylon” because of the appalling scandal of the Church being overrun by the degenerate and carnal, a mob so large, riffraff so noisy, that the other members of the Church are hidden and cannot be seen... We are no longer dealing with a bride but with a monster of terrible deformity and ferocity.’⁸⁰

Balthasar’s violent rhetorical shaming of the disorderly, “degenerate and carnal” feminine body in this passage aligns with an equally unsettling connotation in his lauding the virgin Mary’s self-oblating posture before God, who thereby brings about her literal and symbolic conception of the Word. Less troubling, but also worth noting, is the fact that his image of the wayward female body also has corporate implications, bolstering an understanding of the clergy’s role as that of “lead[ing]

⁷⁹ Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 96 (subsequently referred to as *PS*).

⁸⁰ Tina Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism: Theology and Theory* (London: Routledge, 2006) 155-56, citing Balthasar’s *Explorations in Theology, Vol. II: Spouse of the Word*, 196.

the bride”—here envisioned as the potentially degenerate mob of lay persons making up the Church—“to her womanly function” of quietly and obediently receiving clerical oversight.⁸¹

All said, it is evident that Balthasar’s prescription of contemplative “expropriation” or “unselfing” as the proper human posture before revelation amounts to drastically different lived implications for women and men, lay persons and clergy; and those conclusions may very easily be coordinated, with troubling implications, to a desire to minimize the vulnerabilities of intimate connection with the feminized other. That observation—particularly when coupled with the earlier reflection that Balthasar uncritically assigns orderly borders to the form of Christ in support of his theology of glory—begs two questions, both of which bearing implications for the status of the contemplative paradigm oriented toward ecstatic “self-shattering” before God. First, is it possible to sanction Christic *kenosis* as the proper mode for human activity while still somehow allowing for (rather than repressing or falsely escaping) human misgivings, machinations, and desire-inflected interests? With that question in mind, I turn to draw Sarah Coakley into this discussion, along with another feminist theologian, Anna Mercedes, by reflecting upon their contrasting dealings with Balthasar’s rendering of *kenosis*. Coakley rejects Balthasar’s position, while Mercedes defends Balthasar and criticizes Coakley’s position as unhelpful for feminist purposes. The course of this analysis will bring us to the second question raised by Balthasar’s eschewal of ambiguity, which is one concerned with the fitness (especially for moving beyond the PIP) of the creaturely *telos* that Balthasar and Coakley both endorse when they propose that the human’s proper end is “transparency” to God.

⁸¹ *Theological Explorations*, Volume II: *Spouse of the Word*, trans. A. V. Littledale with Alexander Dru (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989), 158. Balthasar’s own exercise of these sorts of dominance over supposedly female volatility are evident in his personal relationship with the female mystic Adrienne von Speyr as her confessor. Cf. Beattie, 157-59.

Feminist Engagements with Balthasar's Kenosis: A Self Expressed in Translucence?

Sarah Coakley notes in *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* that the “emptying” of *kenosis* referred to in Philippians 2 is “one of the most convoluted (and disputed) [matters] in New Testament exegesis.”⁸² Stepping into the fray, she takes issue with Balthasar’s interpretation of Christic *kenosis*, placing him among “the most influential conglomerate of ‘neo-orthodox’ and ‘post-liberal’ (male) theologians” who have lately “valorized” Christ’s vulnerability, rendering it “an admission of divine self-limitation and exposure in the face of human cruelty.”⁸³ Coakley believes that such a line of thought falters by anthropomorphically incorporating “vulnerability” into God’s life, effectively evading feminist protests in the process. In Balthasar’s case, that incorporation “merely adulates that ‘vulnerability’ and simultaneously returns the ‘female’ to ... a pedestaled place of suffering.”⁸⁴ For Coakley, the ecstatic experience of contemplative prayer points to the far stronger possibility that Christ’s vulnerability “applies to Christ’s human nature rather than to the divine.”⁸⁵ In keeping with that proposal, the fact that the kenotic “‘hymn’ of Philippians 2 was, from the start, an invitation to enter into Christ’s extended life in the church” would imply that “the ‘spiritual’ extension of Christic *kenosis* . . . involves an ascetical commitment” on our part “of some subtlety, a regular and willed practice of ceding and responding

⁸² *PS*, 6. Coakley later expounds upon the complicated state as one wherein “various exponents of *kenosis* can disagree on even such basic matters as: whether *kenosis* involves pre-existence (or not); whether it implies a temporary loss of all or some divine characteristics (or neither); whether the ‘emptying’ applies to the divine nature or the human ... and whether the effects of *kenosis* pass to the eternal nature of the Godhead (or not)” (ibid., 31).

⁸³ Ibid., xiv. Coakley counts Karl Barth and Jürgen Moltmann in this company, and cites evidence of this principle in Balthasar’s work in his *Mysterium Paschale* (Edinburgh, 1990).

⁸⁴ Ibid., xx. As evidence of that “pedestaled place of suffering,” Coakley refers to Balthasar’s account in *First Glimpse at Adrienne von Speyr* (San Francisco, 1981) of his “indebtedness” to von Speyr’s “experiences of the suffering of ‘Holy Saturday’” (fn. 35).

⁸⁵ *PS*, 38.

to the divine.”⁸⁶ Rather than assigning suffering to a divinized feminine principle, this communal commitment to *kenosis* can, Coakley believes, support liberation efforts by providing a lens for critiquing our various forms of interpersonal dependence.

Coakley’s proposal regarding Christological *kenosis* has not gone undisputed. In *Power For: Feminism and Christ’s Self-Giving*,⁸⁷ Anna Mercedes acknowledges that Coakley’s overall project resonates with her own aims, i.e., to find spiritual *kenosis* “not only compatible with feminism, but vital to a distinctively Christian manifestation of it” by way of “a feminist reconceptualizing of the power of the cross and resurrection.”⁸⁸ But Mercedes is dissatisfied with Coakley’s rendering of Christ’s *kenosis* for imaging God’s power as “non-bullying” yet still very much reinforcing “a ‘power over’ model” of divine-human relations.⁸⁹ Such hierarchal models *ipso facto* buttress politics with patriarchal overtones, she believes. In this instance, Mercedes explains, Coakley seemingly “lumps all of humanity, in Christ, into a feminized state of submission beneath a traditionally masculinized deity, thus reinstating the dichotomy of a masculine power and female submission, and between masculine divinity and feminine materiality.”⁹⁰ For Mercedes, patriarchy can only be transformed if and when we reimagine God’s supremacy apart from “power over,” allowing dependency to characterize divinity.

In a move that may shock the reader who has attended to Balthasar’s rendering of gender roles as surveyed in this chapter’s preceding section, Mercedes goes on to assert that Balthasar’s doctrine of *kenosis* is actually more helpful than Coakley’s for a feminist conceptualizing of the cross

⁸⁶ *PS*, 34. She goes on: “The rhythm of this *askesis* is already inscribed ritually and symbolically in the sacraments of baptism and eucharist; but in prayer (especially the defenceless prayer of silent waiting on God) it is ‘internalized’ over time in a peculiarly demanding and transformative fashion” (*ibid.*).

⁸⁷ Anna Mercedes, *Power For: Feminism and Christ’s Self-Giving* (London: T&T Clark, 2011).

⁸⁸ Coakley qtd. in Mercedes, 13.

⁸⁹ Mercedes, 13.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.

and resurrection. Her reasoning is that, in Balthasar's system, "the possibility of all acts of human *kenosis* is grounded in the trinitarian 'substructure',"⁹¹ which she lays out as follows:

Balthasar's depiction of trinitarian dynamism circulates between the 'Father's original self-surrender' and the Son's 'eternal thanksgiving (eucharistia), to the Father, the Source' itself 'selfless and unreserved' and equal to the Father's *kenosis*. In the shape of Balthasar's Trinity, the Spirit is the 'we,' automatic with the Son. As Balthasar describes it, 'Proceeding from both, as their subsistent "We," there breathes the "Spirit" who is common to both: as the essence of love, he maintains the infinite difference between them, seals it and, since he is the one Spirit of them both, bridges it.'⁹²

In this picture of the Father's surrender, the Son's unreserved thanksgiving, and the Spirit's bridging their difference as love, Mercedes finds that the nature of Balthasar's trinitarian substructure is such that "the *kenosis* that triggers and transforms subjectivity is a self-emptying born of desire," and that "*kenosis* comprises at the same time a self-emptying and a self-realization or revelation."⁹³ Understanding human *kenosis* as grounded in divine *kenosis*, Mercedes cites a key feminist theological resource in the notion that "self-giving may be born, not of a lack of self-interest, but of an intensity of it,"⁹⁴ with the result that the person who "tries for personhood without *kenosis*" can also "depart from the flow of kenotic power by being overly self-effacing."⁹⁵ She finds further evidence of this self-and-other-valuing principle in Balthasar's rendering of the God-human relationship in "the *pro nobis* of the Cross and Resurrection," wherein the triune God's

⁹¹ Mercedes, 72.

⁹² Ibid., 70-71.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 65. She further explains: "For Balthasar, the primal *kenosis* of the Father 'brings forth' a self of equal substance, and consequently brings forth the Trinity. Triune subjectivity—and ultimately all subjectivity—is thus born through *kenosis*. ...The 'whole divine essence' is not spilling hopelessly in *kenosis*; rather, the kenotic act conveys the essence of what it is for God to be God" (70). She also maintains that "In Balthasar, *kenosis* brings forth self and other. Thus, self-emptying is at once relational and self-creative" (73).

⁹⁵ Ibid., 74. She elsewhere states that "Kenotic subjectivity avoids the 'sin' of self-diffusion by insisting on strength both of self and of the others to whom the self devotes itself. Kenotic subjectivity also steps aside from the powers of dominion, or assuming others in the domain of one's own overpowering sense of self" (71).

“self-exteriorization” is most radically displayed, and the “dichotomy of divine transcendent power over creation” is unsettled.⁹⁶ Meanwhile, “the distance fundamental to Balthasar’s *kenosis* guards against the collapse of difference into utter solubility,” she says. “The Spirit buffers our subjectivity.”⁹⁷ Mercedes’ only problem with Balthasar’s use of *kenosis* is that “while [it] portrays the role of divine *kenosis* in subjectivity—divine and human—it does not imagine that human *kenosis* could alter or renew divine subjectivity.”⁹⁸ Supplying for that perceived lack is Mercedes’ aim in the remainder of her own project.

There are several oversights in Mercedes’ reading of Balthasar’s rendering of *kenosis*, as well as some less prominent issues with her construal of Coakley’s; both are worth examining in this chapter’s interest of evaluating their contemplative approaches to revelation. Beginning with her reading of Balthasar, one may affirm Mercedes’ assertions that, in his system, “the *kenosis* that triggers and transforms subjectivity is a self-emptying born of desire” and “the possibility of all acts of human *kenosis* is grounded in the trinitarian ‘substructure’.”⁹⁹ Mercedes is also right that Balthasar maintains Christ’s *eucharistia* in the Cross and Resurrection is the site wherein “the nature of the triune god in self-exteriorization can be seen at its greatest scope.”¹⁰⁰ However, when she concludes that Balthasar’s vision of *kenosis* is that of a self-giving “born, not of a lack of self-interest, but of an intensity of it,”¹⁰¹ and that the “dichotomy of divine transcendent power over creation”¹⁰² is disturbed by his rendering of Christ’s paschal *eucharistia*, one is given to wonder if

⁹⁶ Mercedes, 72.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁹⁹ Mercedes, 65, 72.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 72.

Mercedes is at all aware of Balthasar's view of gender essences, or his teaching that Marian expropriation is the proper human appropriation of Christ's kenosis. Five primary points of his thinking come to mind which would problematize Mercedes' assertions.

First, Balthasar maintains that, through the Spirit's indwelling, humans become the Church: inheritors and reenactors of Mary's expropriative "yes" to God's missional activity. Notably, that submissive expropriation mirrors Christ's self-immolating *eucharistia* on the cross. In other words, as Vogel summarizes it, "just as Christ's humiliation on the cross is also his glorification, so too does the believer's mortification take place simultaneously with his or her deification."¹⁰³ For Balthasar, there is no sense in which one departs from kenotic power by being overly self-effacing. Second, essential to Balthasar's glorification of the mortified Marian believer is his dehistoricized depiction of Christ's paschal fate, as well as his romanticizing of Mary's "motherly and bridal" plasticity before God. An intensity of self-interest is hardly displayed in either case. Third, when grounding that kenotic self-oblation in the trinitarian substructure, Balthasar asserts that that substructure contains both receptive/"feminine" and generative/"masculine" spiritual elements: "In trinitarian terms," he says, ". . . the Father, who begets him who is without origin, appears primarily as (super-) masculine; the Son, in consenting, appears initially as (super-) feminine, but in the act (together with the Father) of breathing forth the Spirit, he is (super-) masculine. As for the Spirit, he is (super-) feminine."¹⁰⁴ Here we find a vision of the creator God's power over what is created (or "issued forth"), with overtly patriarchal overtones. Namely, Balthasar specifies that we here find "the transcendent origin of what we see realized in the world of creation: the form and actualization of love and its fruitfulness in sexuality,"¹⁰⁵ wherein the *acting* is always the male prerogative, and the *consenting* is always the female role.

¹⁰³ Vogel, 18.

¹⁰⁴ *TD V*, 91.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

Furthermore, fourth, it cannot be said that Balthasar's kenotic Spirit buffers human subjectivity in relation to God, a fact made all the more evident by his vision of the kenotic woman's relation to the kenotic male. Leahy punctuates Balthasar's thinking on this point: "Reading the paschal mystery, together with the creation account (Eve coming from the side of Adam), in the light of the trinitarian logic," he says, "von Balthasar maintains that Christ has the feminine element within him, and it is this which flows from him as his 'helpmate' through his death on the cross. She is to be, as it were, his 'other self.'"¹⁰⁶ In *New Elucidations* Balthasar thematizes the Ephesians 5 image of the Church as Christ's bride in light of his understanding of the Church as the bridal body in relation to Christ the bridegroom, awakened to herself through his kenotic self-outpouring made present in the Eucharist.¹⁰⁷ The bodily analog of that act of self-expression is, quite literally for Balthasar, the male orgasm: "The begetting power of Jesus Christ, which is what creates the Church, is his Eucharist," he says. "... Unlike the man in the act of intercourse, Christ does not give away just a little of his substance. No, Christ gives away his entire substance."¹⁰⁸ Because the Church is the body-bride who receives that substance, "in the eucharistic celebration, the Church is not offering an 'alien' sacrifice, that is, Christ's, but is herself inwardly involved in it."¹⁰⁹

Meanwhile, "the office and the Sacrament are forms of communicating the seed [of the Church]; they belong to the male aspect," Balthasar continues, "but their end is to lead the bride to

¹⁰⁶ Leahy, 57. "It is not enough for the male to see in the female only himself, an effect of his influence, his work" says Balthasar. "For he needs the one who has come into existence from within him: She is to be his 'helpmate' for his work..." (*TD III*, 341).

¹⁰⁷ See *New Elucidations*, 212-228. "It always remains true," Balthasar says, "that in sexual intercourse it is the man who is the initiator, the leader, the shaper, while the woman's love—even if ... just as active in its own way—is still essentially receptive. We could almost say (very naively) that, through the man, the woman is somehow awakened to herself..." (216) This rendering of "sexuality that takes as its norm the relationship between Christ and his Church" (227) underscores the woman's proper function as receptive "being," or materiality, and man's as the god-like expresser of identity by shaping that malleable material.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 217.

¹⁰⁹ *TD IV*, 394.

her womanly function [of receiving the seed and bearing fruit] and fortify her in it.”¹¹⁰ Analogously, therefore, the dignity of the woman—defined as the male’s “other self”—lies in her function as the fertile vessel for bringing his seed-bearing activity to fruition in “answering fruitfulness, designed to receive man’s fruitfulness.”¹¹¹ The man needs her, “the one who has come into existence from within him,” but only as “his ‘helpmate’ for his work”¹¹²—namely, for her reproductive capacity as the vessel for his seed-bearing activity. These observations bring us to puzzle over Balthasar’s assurance that Marian expropriation leads to a freedom from selfhood that does not eliminate one’s “history, corporality, or world” but rather “fulfills one’s dreams.” It is particularly difficult to see how this could be the case for women, whose very dignity within Balthasar’s Marian formulae rests in their being purged of all fleshly desires and socially-situated concerns, until they effectively exist as physical metaphors for Christophorous transparency, pliable to their husbands’ sexual urges and spiritual instruction.¹¹³

In keeping with his vision of Christ’s paschal act as self-abandoning, of the male/female dichotomy, and of “the Woman—as Synagogue-Mary-Church” as the “inseparable unity of that which makes it possible for the Word of God to take on the being of the world,”¹¹⁴ Balthasar decisively presents the human aspect of the God-human encounter as entailing our receiving and expressing God’s glory by becoming free of self-awareness (let alone self-interest).¹¹⁵ In other words, Marian/feminine receptivity is the dynamism animating the church; it is “what God

¹¹⁰ *Theological Explorations* II, 158.

¹¹¹ *TD* III, 226.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 341.

¹¹³ I am inspired by Beattie’s insight on this point, specifically in her noticing that women in the *casta meretrix* texts function as “metaphors, not persons” (156).

¹¹⁴ Balthasar, *Short Primer*, 90.

¹¹⁵ That theological anthropological position is solidified in his affirmation that “as the active power of receiving all that heaven gives, [Mary] is the epitome of creaturely power and dignity; she is what God presupposes as the Creator in order to give the seed of the Word to the world” (*ibid.*).

presupposes as the Creator in order to give the seed of the Word to the world.”¹¹⁶ It thus appears that Balthasar’s rendering of Christ’s kenosis on the Cross does anything but undermine the notion of divine power over creation, as Mercedes hopes. Rather than “buffering” our subjectivity, Balthasar’s Spirit moves the self-expropriated Church towards the passive posture of receiving the Word given to her in Christ’s eucharistic self-expression. Rather ironically, on these accounts we find Balthasar’s kenosis doctrine guilty of the very charge Mercedes brings against Coakley: it “lumps all of humanity, in Christ, into a feminized state of submission beneath a traditionally masculinized deity,” all the while “reinstating the dichotomy of a masculine power and female submission, and between masculine divinity and feminine materiality.”¹¹⁷

That dichotomy is solidified in Balthasar’s ecclesiology. If the Church as a whole is to be Marian—unreservedly receptive to the form of Christ—then, Balthasar believes, within that body the man’s Marian activity includes obediently receiving the Form from Christ *and* passing it on to the woman, while the woman’s Marian activity is to be that of wholly passive reception. He accordingly specifies that the Church’s function as a sacrament of human unity with God contains both an objective/male/“Petrine” aspect and a subjective/female/“Marian” aspect. As Leahy summarizes it,

Von Balthasar believes that within the realm of the Church, the person-centered height and depth of the sexual difference emerges fully in the light of the Christ-Church relationship. . . . In terms of priestly ordination, von Balthasar comments that to man is assigned the task of representation whereas to woman is assigned being. Some men are called to ‘represent’ the Lord . . . but always in a way which never allows them to claim any of the divine dignity for themselves. . . . Von Balthasar sees the man-priest, therefore, as being simultaneously both more and less than himself. . . . Woman, on the other hand, reposes in herself and is entirely her own being, that is, the total reality of a created being before God as partner, receiving, bearing, maturing and nurturing his Word in the Spirit.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Balthasar, *Short Primer*, 90.

¹¹⁷ Mercedes, 35.

¹¹⁸ Leahy 180-81, citing Balthasar’s “Priesthood’s ‘Uninterrupted Tradition,’” 190.

Balthasar thus aligns the hierarchical implications of the God-world relation with that of the relation not only between Church and Christ but also between man and woman. From this material we may draw our fifth and summary point, which is that Balthasar's full doctrine of *kenosis* is hardly helpful for a feminist reconceptualizing of the cross. Balthasar's portrayal of the role of *kenosis* in interpersonal subjectivity—both divine and human—effectively secures male primacy, to the point of his literally plotting Marian submission differently onto the gendered bodies that make up the ecclesial communion. Mercedes' construal of Balthasar's vision of *kenosis* thus appears not merely short-sighted but, in recommending it for feminist purposes, downright flawed. In his system we do indeed find that "self-giving may be born, not of a lack of self-interest, but of an intensity of it,"¹¹⁹ but the glaring point that Mercedes overlooks is that such self-asserting subjectivity is only available to the patriarchal/masculine figure in interhuman, interdivine, and divine-human relations.

In order to derive a constructive point from the above analysis, we may draw Coakley's feminist approach back into the discussion, particularly as it relates to Mercedes' confessedly similar feminist agenda. Arguably, there are also several missteps in Mercedes' depiction of Coakley's work in *Powers and Submissions*, and identifying them can help us distinguish Coakley's and Mercedes' genuine insights for this chapter's purposes. First, Coakley's own move of "lumping all of humanity in Christ" is not made in order to present Christ's submission as a "feminized state" (as is Balthasar's). She quite pointedly reads the Gospel narratives' portrayal of Christ's anxieties as indicating that the state of vulnerability is not essentially feminine but, rather, a characteristic of perfect *humanity* itself.¹²⁰ Coakley also draws upon the experience of contemplative prayer explicitly to attest that authentic divine power "over" humanity is very different from that of

¹¹⁹ Mercedes, 65.

¹²⁰ "What, we may ask," Coakley says, "if the frailty, vulnerability and 'self-effacement' of [the Gethsemane and Golgotha] narratives is what shows us 'perfect humanity'?" (*PS*, 30).

traditional patriarchal masculinity, testifying that God’s power is non-coercive.¹²¹ Mercedes voices her dissatisfaction with Coakley’s “caveat that the divine is gentle and nonabusive” in keeping with her own understanding of hierarchal models as *ipso facto* bolstering oppressive political arrangements: Coakley’s caveat will not suffice because, “to put it bluntly,” Mercedes says, “a nice man in power is still a man in power—power over everyone else—and this is not a transformation of patriarchy.”¹²²

This brings us to a second weakness in Mercedes’ critique of Coakley. According to the classical theological formulation of the God-world relationship which Coakley utilizes¹²³—which is in keeping with the creation *ex nihilo* understanding of full creaturely dependence upon God as the source of existence—God is quite pointedly not at all like a “nice man in power over everyone else.” For illumination on this point, one might consider Thomist theologian Herbert McCabe’s concise reflections upon the classical understanding of creaturely dependence upon God. McCabe says:

God’s creative and sustaining activity . . . makes the world what it is. . . . God’s activity, then, does not compete with mine. Whereas the activity of any other creature makes a difference to mine and would interfere with my freedom, the activity of God makes no difference. . . . I have my own spontaneous activity not determined by other creatures, because God makes me free. Not free of him (this

¹²¹ She says: “By choosing to ‘make space’ in this way, one ‘practices’ the ‘presence of God’—the subtle but enabling presence of a God who neither shouts nor forces, let alone ‘obliterates’” (*PS*, 35).

¹²² Mercedes, 36. Essentially, Mercedes finds the dichotomous notion of one being’s “power over” another *in itself* guilty of reifying gender stereotypes, simply by “call[ing] to mind” heteronormative patriarchal dynamics—in this case, “an old-fashioned heterosexual coupling between a male (God) and a female (humanity)” (*ibid*).

¹²³ See *PS* 13, fn. 20. Coakley’s allegiance to this view is further evidenced in her essay “Creaturehood before God,” wherein she punctuates her conviction that “at the heart of any Christian doctrine of creaturehood must surely lie...the notion of a radical, and qualitatively distinct, *dependence* of the creature on God.” (*PS* 55) She goes on to reflect upon the experience of contemplative prayer, saying: “what is experienced as noetic blankness is theologically explained as ‘that-without-which-there-would-be-nothing-at-all.’ This then is radical, absolute—and so intellectually ungraspable—creaturely dependence; to grasp it would be to make God into an entity. But God is by definition ungraspable” (*PS*, 56). Balthasar likewise expresses his allegiance to biblical, Christian theology’s postulating that the Absolute power actually possesses the ability to create genuinely free beings without lessening God’s own infinite freedom. This means, conversely, that “God can be absolutely free without robbing man of his genuine freedom” (*TD* II, 192). The point for Balthasar is that God is “always both within us and over against us” (C.S. Lewis quoted in *TD* II, 193). When sin enters the picture, an abyss opens up between the “holiness of infinite freedom and the plight of finite freedom,” he says (*TD* II, 194).

would be to cease to exist), but free of other creatures. The idea that God's causality could interfere with my freedom can only arise from an idolatrous notion of God as a very large and powerful creature—a part of the world.¹²⁴

In sum, if Mercedes wants to reject Coakley's image of divine power as non-coercive on the grounds that any notion of God's "power over" creation entails a relation of dominance, she would do well to explain how she sees that as the case in the scenario McCabe describes, wherein God's activity makes the world what it is rather than competing with human activity.¹²⁵ As it is, this appears to be a misstep in Mercedes' response to Coakley.

In fact, by Coakley's analysis, rejecting the notion God's power over creation as does Mercedes bespeaks a failure of imagination. To so "conceive of divine-human relations in . . . competitive terms (where one 'individual' either repressively dominates the other or else withdraws to make space for the other's autonomy)"¹²⁶ is also actually to resonate with "the masculinist projections of writers already committed to an Enlightenment view of 'man,'" wherein God "is another 'individual,' a very large disembodied spirit with ultimate directive power and freedom."¹²⁷ Potentially in tension with her assertion that divine-human relations do not require the withdrawal of either party to make room for the other, Coakley envisions a humanity that "in kenosis, can 'cease to set the agenda' and 'make space for God to be God.' Yet what precisely is God being here," Mercedes muses in response, "and why must God require so much space and free reign

¹²⁴ Herbert McCabe, *Faith within Reason* (London: Continuum Books, 2007), 75-76.

¹²⁵ One could argue that such an understanding of the God/world relation meets Mercedes' own call for an idea of omnipotence that "find[s] expression apart from domination without collapsing into contradiction" (Mercedes, 38).

¹²⁶ *PS*, 101. In this passage Coakley is addressing the problem of evil debate within analytic philosophy of religion and critiquing its tendency "to image God as a magnified version of the *human* 'unmoved mover' ...of incompatibilist freedom, an 'individual' of unrivaled power and autonomy who takes on the traditional attributes of classical theism, but more revealingly mirrors a (masculinist) vision of self specific to the Enlightenment."

¹²⁷ *PS*, 26.

in order to be Godlike?"¹²⁸ Coakley could reply that God, in fact, does not command "space and free reign in order to be Godlike." Rather, humans need to identify and give up the "masculinist" fantasies of control over the world that crowd out their recognition of creaturely dependence upon God and interdependence upon one another. The language of "making space for God to be God" simply names that process metaphorically. Meanwhile, granting God's self-constraint in the face of human activity, particularly human *cruelty*, may only serve to legitimate abuse by valorizing suffering. Nonetheless, Coakley calls attention to the disadvantage to Christian feminism of eschewing *all* forms of vulnerability under the assumption that they are sources of victimhood.

Generally speaking, then, Mercedes' critiques of Coakley appear to be unsupported. There is, however, a key point of her contention with Coakley wherein Mercedes raises an issue that seems worthy of further engagement: "Coakley wants human subjectivity to be found in dependence on God," she says, "but where is human subjectivity when the person is 'wholly translucent'?"¹²⁹ For Coakley and Balthasar alike, the world created *ex nihilo* exists in non-competitive dependence upon God, its source of being, and human freedom achieves fullest expression in seeking ecstatic union with the Creator. They share the conviction that divine and human intermingling involves a self-emptying sourced in desire, and so that self-emptying is simultaneously a self-fulfillment. In both of their works, "translucence to God" is that fulfilling end for human subjects, achieved in our expropriative surrender to God's incorporative love. In contrast with Balthasar, Coakley emphasizes that she does not identify vulnerability in general, all too often "a dangerous or regrettable state,"¹³⁰ with Christic kenosis. Rather, in contrast with the would-be sovereignly free individual, Coakley finds that Christ "instantiates . . . the very 'mind' that we ourselves enact, or enter into, in prayer: the unique intersection of vulnerable, 'non-grasping'

¹²⁸ Mercedes, 35.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 37, citing *PS*, 18.

¹³⁰ *PS*, 33.

humanity and authentic divine power, itself 'made perfect in weakness'.¹³¹ She maintains that this Christological process of self-effacement is not "a negation of the self, but the place of the self's transformation and expansion into God" such that the human moves closer to its proper end of being "wholly translucent to the divine,"¹³² profoundly open to divine influence towards the ends of "prophetic resistance, courage in the face of oppression, and the destruction of false idolatry."¹³³

One way that Coakley calls attention to the self that is never negated in the act of kenotic prayer is by carrying out her work in full view of her conviction that "right dependence is an elusive goal: the entanglements with themes of power, hierarchy, sexuality and death are probably inevitable."¹³⁴ She demonstrates that conviction by citing myriad historical examples wherein the theme of creaturely dependence on God experiences "messy entanglement" with various sorts of human dependence, with the common result of "fatal cultural admixtures for women in Christian patriarchal society."¹³⁵ This aspect of her work discloses a point of subtlety in Coakley's recommending the embrace of absolute human dependence upon God, which she issues in the knowledge that kenotic spiritual acts are indelibly inscribed within ambiguous socio-political systems where human agendas are at play. She remains convinced that those ambiguous entanglements must be brought to consciousness so that we may, through painstaking processes of analysis and dialogue (which are kenotic acts themselves), discern the difference between "'right' vulnerability and a mere invitation to abuse; between . . . contemplative 'self-effacement' and self-

¹³¹ *PS*, 38. She maintains that, at heart, prayer involves processes wherein "discursive thought is reduced to the minimum," thus avoiding "emulating the very forms of 'worldly' power [feminists] criticize in 'masculinism'" (Ibid., 5, fn. 4).

¹³² Ibid., 36, 18.

¹³³ Ibid., 38.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 68.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 55. For instance, considering a range of literature from Gregory of Nyssa's writings to Bernard of Clairvaux's, to Origen's and St John of the Cross's, she raises the following question as a pressing one for theological engagement: "how is the ceding to the Spirit in the contemplative quest not also implicitly, for a woman, the ceding to potentially repressive and patriarchal structures in church and society?" (*PS*, 57).

destruction or self-repression; between the productive suffering of self-disclosure and the decentering torture of pain for pain's sake."¹³⁶ Accordingly, Coakley does not visualize kenotic activity as an escape from or negation of our interpersonally determined selfhood. Rather, she envisions it as a potential resource for practitioners' increased attention to their own uses of power and to the non-coercive influence of divine power.

And yet, for all of this, one cannot help but wonder if the ideals of kenotic contemplation are more likely to prompt a hazardous escapism—particularly when we recall that, in Balthasar's formulation of the God-creature, Christ-Church, and male-female relationships, his claiming translucence (or "Christophorousness") to the source of being as self-fulfillment remains convoluted at best; at worst, it promises an ominous fate for feminized subjects. Those formulae are founded upon his romantically hypostacized view of male and female natures, which he finds shining forth from the epiphanic experience of Christ. In light of Coakley's attention to doctrine's entanglements with themes of power, hierarchy, sexuality and death, it seems all the more likely that Balthasar's projection of Christ's vulnerability into God's inner life (rather than allowing it to characterize his humanity) was at least partially motivated by his own personal anxieties over fleshly fragility and desire. That motive also makes sense of his painting signs of Christ's interpersonal and spiritual susceptibility as metaphorically feminine instances of God's self-giving (rather than as points where Christ-followers are called to embrace the ambiguities of embodiment and agency as belonging to the human condition), and it explains why he stubbornly glosses over any evidence that, in the intermixing of divine and human agencies, neat borders between initiation and reception, giving and receiving, resistance and submission are disrupted. The concern this analysis raises brings us back to Barth, Pannenberg, and Frei: namely, in their concern that any hermeneutic approach to revelation that takes the subject's experience to be theologically pertinent

¹³⁶ Ibid., 36-37. "This rather special form of 'vulnerability' is not an invitation to be battered," she says; "nor is its silence a silencing. (If anything, it builds one in the courage to give prophetic voice)" (ibid., 35).

far too easily results in that subject distorting the object's meaning according to his subjective experience. Is the contemplative approach to revelation, which finds a key theological resource in the interpreter's ecstatic response to Christ, vulnerable to such flights of fancy? Does, for instance, Coakley's rendering of our move towards ecstatic union with God finally amount to a similar escapism?

Mining Coakley's work in *Powers and Submissions* with this question in mind, we may find promising hints that it does not. Beginning with her essay "The Resurrection and the 'Spiritual Senses,'" ¹³⁷ we find Coakley looking to patristic theologians Origen and Gregory of Nyssa with interest in the "epistemic conditions for 'seeing' the risen Christ."¹³⁸ She notes how the early spiritual senses tradition of Origen and Nyssa is capable of explaining for contemporary theologians why "the closest recognition [of Christ] (involving dark 'ecstasy' in Nyssa or actual mingling with the Word in Origen) will often...involve long years of moral and spiritual preparation, prolonged practice in 'sensing' the presence of Christ."¹³⁹ Human agency, in this context, is called to ongoing, intentional exercise, a "regular and *willed* practice of ceding and responding to the divine."¹⁴⁰ That practice involves progressive epistemic transformation by way of our desires' "purgation" which, Origen and Nyssa attest, results in the integration of our affective and noetic capacities.¹⁴¹ Coakley

¹³⁷ *PS*, 130-52.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 130.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 34. Emphasis added.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 140. She explains that in Origen's work that progression is born out in stages that culminate with *enoptiké*, contemplation of the divine. Characteristically Platonic, Origen's depiction of this contemplative state is one wherein "the mind, purified and passing beyond everything material...is made divine in what it contemplates" (Origen's *Commentary on John*, XXXII. Xxvii; qtd. in Coakley, *PS*, 136, fn. 17) and wherein the noetic and erotic are properly integrated, for "after realizing the beauty of the divine Word, we can allow ourselves to be set on fire with saving love, so that the Word itself deigns to love the soul in which it has encountered longing for it." (From Origen's *Prologue* to the *Commentary on the Song*, qtd. in *PS*, 137.) By contrast, Nyssa roots the spiritual state of perception precisely in the physical (arguing that "the [fleshly-minded] wisdom hidden in the Song of Songs leads to a spiritual state of soul" (Nyssa's *Commentary*

examines the transformative effects of that purgation more closely in “The Eschatological Body: Gender, Transformation and God,”¹⁴² wherein she again draws upon the work of Gregory of Nyssa. This time she does so in order to speak to the postmodern interests in gender fluidity and subversive agency, which Coakley thinks signal an underlying cultural “yearning towards a more elusive eschatological goal,” that is, “transformation into the divine.”¹⁴³ Drawing upon Nyssa’s *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, particularly his rendering of increasingly closer relation to Christ through ascetic advancement in virtue and contemplation, Coakley maintains that “eros finds its truer meaning in God” than in physical pleasure, “and gender switches and reversals attend the stages of ascent.”¹⁴⁴ In the course of that transformation, Coakley affirms Rowan Williams’ assessment that there appears to be “no such *thing* as the soul in itself; it is always implicated in contingent matter,” and the “polyphony of our intentionality” is bound only by our “fundamental eros for the endless God.”¹⁴⁵

Similarly, in “Visions of the Self in Late Medieval Christianity: Some Cross-Disciplinary Reflections,”¹⁴⁶ Coakley troubles the expectation of there being a stable definition of “selfhood” at all, as evidenced in a wide range of divergent possibilities for construing the locus of the self in Eastern and Western Christendom over time. Coakley admits that she finds herself aligning with a Wittgensteinian interpretation of selfhood, noting that “how we carve up the self—and for that matter reassemble it—is a matter of actual ‘use,’ and is rooted in a whole complex of social

on the Song of Songs, qtd. in *PS*, 138.) and portrays contemplative apprehension of the divine as occurring not in clear visualization but in the darkness of Christ’s intimate embrace.

¹⁴² *PS*, 153-67.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 156, 157.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 165.

¹⁴⁵ Rowan Williams, “Macrina’s Deathbed Revisited: Gregory of Nyssa on Mind and Passion” in *Christian Faith and Greek Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, eds. Lionel Wickham and Caroline P. Bammel (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1993), 244. Quoted in *PS*, 165.

¹⁴⁶ *PS*, 71-88.

arrangements, rituals, assumptions and ideology.”¹⁴⁷ Coakley thus does not envision one’s kenotic surrender to God as an abandonment of one’s own presence (as Mercedes fears, “Christ’s full presence as our own full absence”¹⁴⁸). Rather, envisioning desire as the driving force of the individual’s socially constructed “selfhood,” Coakley identifies the contemplative process as the “use” of that self that entails the utterly unique fulfillment of our desire returning to its source in the trinitarian God. That journey progresses not into illumination of essences but, finally, to a darkening of the mind in a state of supreme intimacy. Consequently, in Coakley’s model for “translucence” to the divine, the fitting sexual metaphor would not be Balthasar’s vision of the bride’s self-denial before the bridegroom seed-giver, but rather the lovers’ ecstatic loss of a bounded sense of self in the love-act, which is at the same time a fulfillment of their yearning for one another.

What seems oddly absent from Balthasar’s unreserved talk both of copulation and of desire’s fulfillment is precisely such loss of clear boundaries between giver and receiver, initiation and response, that is inherent to these experiences. That absence is made all the more strange by the fact that many of Balthasar’s own inspirations, such as Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, and Pseudo-Dionysius, acknowledge and wrestle with the porous boundaries of human yearning as it fuses with divine desire.¹⁴⁹ From these essays in *Powers and Submissions* we can at least confirm that Coakley joins Nyssa in endorsing a sort of *non*-Christophorous property as characterizing “the transformed epistemic sensibilities of those being progressively reborn in the likeness of the Son.”¹⁵⁰ In contrast with Balthasar’s option for illuminated essences and easily defined boundaries, Coakley envisions kenotic contemplation integrating our affective and noetic capacities in a manner

¹⁴⁷ *PS*, 85-86.

¹⁴⁸ Mercedes, 151.

¹⁴⁹ For instance, when Balthasar images the sexed picture of desirous human response to divine revelation, his work is nearly entirely missing any reference to the erotic play that Gregory of Nyssa considers at length in his commentary on the *Song of Songs*.

¹⁵⁰ *PS*, 131.

that illuminates rather than eschews the ambiguities of human embodiment and agency. Now coming full circle with our look at Balthasar's and Coakley's contemplative paradigms, we are left to ponder how Coakley's understanding of our being reborn in the Son's likeness might supplement and correct Balthasar's, particularly to the benefit of "low church" Protestants grappling with the subjectivity of biblical interpretation. For this inquiry, which bears particular significance for the pneumatological theme of God-human mingling in human interpretation of Christoform experience, we happily have more than Coakley's work in *Powers and Submissions* to draw upon. Let us turn to the fourth chapter of this dissertation with the aim of setting her contemplative approach alongside Balthasar's once more—this time looking to Coakley's innovative systematic work in *God, Sexuality, and the Self*—in hopes of identifying practical insights for "low church" Protestants anxious to invite the Holy Spirit's cooperative presence into their communal interpretive endeavors.

Chapter IV

Incarnational Unfolding through Pneumatological Incorporation: Balthasar's Linear Model and Coakley's "Spirit-Led" Alternative

At the end of chapter three, we considered whether Coakley's option for "self-effaced" humanity uniting with "authentic divine power" to the teleological end of "translucence to God" effectively challenges Balthasar's paradigm, wherein humans are ideally the passive ("Marian") recipients of divine self-disclosure, resulting in their hierarchal relations in the modern Roman Catholic Church. To that end, I examined how Coakley maintains that the human elusively yet decidedly experiences selfhood—albeit a fluid selfhood—in the contemplative process, which culminates in the obscurity of divine-human intimacy. I also noted that she takes up the line of thought that human agency is displayed in willful practices of ceding control to God (or not), and that we ought not assume that humans can or should reach a point of reception to the divine that is purged of all signs of our embodiment. Coakley grounds these claims Christologically, asserting that Christ instantiates "the unique intersection of vulnerable, 'non-grasping' humanity and authentic divine power, itself 'made perfect in weakness.'"¹ To those ends, she endorses ascetic denial of bodily desires for the sake of transformation at all levels of intellectual and existential practice. These stances run counter to Balthasar's patriarchal romanticizing of vulnerability as an essentially feminine characteristic, sourced in (and thus analogous to) the self-giving aspect of God's triune life. Coakley's construal of the contemplative process of regeneration into Christ's image further challenges Balthasar's indications that, in the human encounter with the divine Christ-form, the unwieldy ambiguities of human subjectivity and embodiment² are all absorbed into and resolved by the radiance emanating from it. Her theological rendering of the self-other fluidity experienced in

¹ Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 38 (subsequently cited as *PS*). She maintains that, at heart, prayer involves processes wherein "discursive thought is reduced to the minimum," thus avoiding "emulating the very forms of 'worldly' power [feminists] criticize in 'masculinism'" (*PS*, 5, fn. 4).

² What Coakley calls "the weakness and distractions of human desires and human tragedy" (*PS*, 26).

experiences of sexual intimacy counters Balthasar's construal of the same experience as a site disclosing the static essences of gender that undergird his patriarchal models of power and existence.

Chapter three left us with the question: what is the significance in all of these contrasts, particularly for practical wisdom in discerning the norms of scriptural revelation within a contemplative framework? For this dissertation's purposes, this question is posed in the interest of "low church/high Scripture" Christian practitioners who are eager to overcome the Protestant interpretation problem (PIP) by delineating how God's Spirit cooperates with the agential activities of human bodies* to produce mediations of revelation, and utilizing that discernment to invite the Spirit's leading partnership into those agential actions. My contention in this fourth chapter is that, as expressed in the first volume of her systematics,³ Coakley's trinitarian vision of human adoption into Sonship through the Spirit's leading presence challenges a Balthasarian rendering of the human as a passive recipient of revelation. It thereby provides a helpful starting place for answering the question bestowed by chapter three, toward the end of moving beyond the PIP.

As this look at Coakley's work will serve to demonstrate, the heart of the contrast between her model of human participation in revelation's unfolding and Balthasar's is expressly pneumatological, seated in their divergent treatments of the Holy Spirit's incorporative role in revelation's trinitarian economy. Both Balthasar and Coakley take their place among those Western theologians who accentuate the Spirit's role in rendering believers attentive,⁴ specifically by the process of grafting them into the movement of the interdivine life, which results in mediated

³ Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) (subsequently cited as *GSS*). This is the first, and as yet only, installation in Coakley's systematic theology, *On Desiring God*, which is to have three more volumes.

⁴ Cf. Jeffrey A Vogel, "The Unselfing Activity of the Holy Spirit in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar" (*Logos* 10: 4, Fall 2007), 16-34; here 16. This pneumatological theme is one "more commonly encountered in the East," Vogel notes. In this chapter's analysis, we will find that Coakley aligns more closely with the Eastern theologians in this regard than does Balthasar.

expressions of revelation. They consider pneumatology under the attendant question of the epistemological relation between the subject and the object, and both envision the Spirit as bringing the believer to epiphanic knowledge of Christic revelation afforded by a purgative spiritual process of bodily incorporation into the inter-trinitarian exchange. I will examine how, for Balthasar, that purgative incorporation occurs through disciplined submission within the Roman Catholic ecclesial body, whereby the Spirit communicates to believers the grace given to Mary and illuminates the fixity of dichotomous categories. For Coakley, on the other hand, incorporation occurs through ongoing bodily*⁵ practices of self-opening to the Spirit's interruption. The categorical "certainties of this world" are transfigured in the process, infused with "an eschatological hope" tied to the realization that "what is fallen can be redeemed and sanctified—indeed rendered sacramental by participation in Christ."⁶ As Coakley sees things, the Spirit creates in us what it created the Word incarnate, drawing believers with its obscure movement further into the dazzling darkness of divine embrace that is always taking Christomorphous shape in the world. To a closer look at these distinctions between their contemplative options, and the implications for practitioners, we now turn.

Contrasting Balthasar's and Coakley's Doctrines of the Incorporative Spirit

In the material to follow, I first outline how Balthasar's Spirit incorporates human participation in God's life through Christophorous⁷ activity toward the end of "Christophorous-

⁵ As noted in preceding chapters, the asterisk after the words "body" or "bodily" signals dual layers of the word, that is, both *corporeal* and *corporate* implications.

⁶ *GSS*, 55, 54. As she elsewhere explains the results, "the 'apophatic turn' has the capacity not only to undermine gender stereotypes, but to lead to a form of ever-changing modellings of desire for God" (*ibid.*, 342).

⁷ Balthasar defines the "Christophorous" form as one that is "pure" and "immediately legible," one whereby "Christ becomes just as simply legible and comprehensible" to the onlooker. See *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. I: *Seeing the Form* (1982), (San Francisco: Ignatius Press; 1982-89), 562 (subsequently cited as *GL*).

ness” (so to speak), ever within and towards the reinforcement of the concrete embodiments of the Roman Catholic Church. For Balthasar, the Spirit’s work transmitting the Word through Mary’s perfect faith and the *ekklesia* that results from her “nuptial” union with Christ ensures that revelation’s mediated form remains “untainted” by the imperfect human touch. I then go on to contrast Coakley’s approach to the incorporative Spirit with Balthasar’s, noting specifically how her vision of the Spirit is that of its incorporating us into the incarnation, a reality which is unfolding in and through our imperfect responses to the Spirit’s purgative promptings.

Coakley’s assessment amounts to a “lower” view of the hierarchal institution of the Church and its mediations of revelation without recommending their dissolution, which bears promise for this project’s aim to move beyond the PIP. In thinking through those implications, I propose that her constructive *théologie totale* method could also inspire a creative transfiguring of Balthasar’s Marian principle for human reception of and response to God’s presence through the corporate body of the church, with rich implications for the church-world and God-world relations in the economy of divine self-disclosure (saving closer attention to the church-Christ relational significance for chapter five). In light of that engagement, I conclude this chapter by raising the possibility that Coakley’s contemplative paradigm could be helpfully supplemented by a sacramental appraisal of language as a site of offering oneself to God and neighbor. Such an appraisal holds promise for a generative synthesis of the strengths of the various theological approaches to Scripture which I have identified over the course of this dissertation, and it will be my work in this project’s concluding fifth chapter. At this juncture, let us return once more to Balthasar’s theological corpus, particularly at the point of his doctrine of the Spirit’s role in revelation, to consider how his feminizing of the Spirit is a critical thread that holds together his romantic construal of the God-human and Church-world relations.

Balthasar's (Super)Feminine Spirit and the Production of Marian-Petrine Union

In Balthasar's pneumatology—which is comprised in a scattering of theological fragments rather than as a cohesive essay—we find the heart of Balthasar's characteristic claim that trinitarian revelation is like a drama in which humans must participate in order to comprehend it. In accordance with his conviction that (as Vogel puts it) “we are able to ‘see’ the truth of Christ only from within, only through an appropriation of his openness and obedience to the Father,”⁸ Balthasar asserts that the Holy Spirit is the unique member of the Godhead that is “simultaneously present in the objective mystery on which we meditate and in the subjective depths of our own selves as the bridge that leads us over into the mystery.”⁹ By way of its presence in our subjective depths, Balthasar believes, the Spirit incorporates us into the very life of the Trinity. As the hypostasis of the Father-Son love, the Spirit evokes our longings and transfigures them, forming us in the Son's kenotic likeness until our desires express what the Spirit ever tends towards, that is, the eternal self-giving love of Father and Son.

A defining feature of the Spirit's work as simultaneously present in the object of revelation and in the subjective depths of human longings is what Balthasar calls its “super-feminine” quality. That assignment is displayed in the trinitarian formulae he lays out in *Theo-Drama*, volume five. He asserts:

In trinitarian terms . . . the Father, who begets him who is without origin, appears primarily as (super)masculine; the Son, in consenting, appears initially as (super) feminine, while later, in his issuing forth the Spirit—who thus appears (super) feminine—the Son becomes (super)masculine, and there is even something (super) feminine about the Father too, since . . . in the action of begetting and breathing forth he allows himself to be determined by the Persons who thus proceed from him.¹⁰

⁸ Vogel, 18.

⁹ Balthasar, *Christian Meditation*, trans. Mary Theresilde Skerry (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 31

¹⁰ *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. V (1998), trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988-1998), 91 (subsequently cited as *TD*).

Balthasar thus sees in the Father and Son both a masculine and a feminine principle, according to his interpretations of these gender essences along the lines of male generativity and female receptivity. The Son is “feminine” because his being is generated by, and in receptivity to, the Father; he is “masculine” in relation to the Spirit, who he and the Father mutually issue forth into the world. (Balthasar here finds the Son as the original model for both human masculinity and femininity, thus ostensibly affording both archetypes the same dignity.) Even the Father, the One without origin, can be seen as “feminine” in the sense that he is—or, more specifically, he “allows himself to be”—determined by those who proceed from him. Lastly, in keeping with his interpretation of femininity as the signal of receptivity and derivative identity, Balthasar sees in the Spirit only a “super-feminine” principle.

The Spirit, “simultaneously present in the objective mystery on which we meditate and in the subjective depths of our own selves as the bridge that leads us over into the mystery,”¹¹ is to be considered “feminine” because it proceeds into the world from the Son, as the love between Father and Son. It has in the world the unique capacity to evoke a repetition of the self-offering love between Son and Father that has been disclosed in Christ. Balthasar explains the latter principle of the Spirit’s economic identity as follows:

The Father has created [the world] ‘in the Son’ and for the glorification of the Son; while the Son has both created it and redeemed it for the glory of the Father, in order to lay it perfected at the feet of the Father (I Cor 15: 24-28); the Spirit transfigures it, not in order to reveal himself, but to reveal to the creation the infinite love between Father and Son, and to bestow on creation the form of this love.¹²

We here see in Balthasar’s economy of trinitarian revelation how the Spirit is the hyposticized means and end of Christophorousness itself, we might say. It “does not wish to be seen but to be the

¹¹ Balthasar, *Christian Meditation*, 31.

¹² *Theological Explorations*, Volume III: *Creator Spirit*, trans A. V. Littledale with Alexander Dru (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993), 12 (subsequently cited as *Explorations III*).

seeing eye of grace in us”;¹³ it is “little concerned about whether we pray to him, provided that we pray with him, ‘Abba, Father,’ provided that we consent to his unutterable groaning in the depths of our soul,” says Balthasar.¹⁴ (Balthasar’s working out of this economy of trinitarian revelation also aligns with theologies that take a “linear” approach to the relations between Son and Spirit; I will return to this observation and consider its import in material below.)

Having thus envisioned the Spirit as the self-offering movement of the Father-Son love which the Christ-image radiates, Balthasar maintains that our “consent” to its “unutterable groaning” becomes our means of interpreting revelation: by way of the expansion in us of the Spirit’s own Christophorous desires, “everything that is at all capable of being illuminated becomes clear and transparent.”¹⁵ In keeping with Balthasar’s insistence that we enjoy that illumination only through a dramatic appropriation of Christlikeness, he maintains that the Spirit endlessly labors “to reveal to the creation the infinite love between Father and Son” by “bestow[ing]” upon it the Christoform shape of this love.¹⁶ This shape takes on very specific bodily contours, for, as Nicholas Healy explains, Balthasar believes that it is precisely “in becoming the (ecclesial) body of Christ” that “creation itself is able to express and mediate the mystery of the reciprocal love between Father and Son.”¹⁷ In other words, for Balthasar, the Spirit’s enlightening work of transfiguring creation into the likeness of Christ specifically entails its bringing humans into the temporal, corporeal mission of the ecclesial body—and not just any ecclesial gathering, but explicitly that of the Roman Catholic union.

¹³ Balthasare, *Theo-Logic, Volume II: the Spirit of Truth*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 26.

¹⁴ Balthasare, “The Unknown Lying Beyond the Word,” in *Explorations in Theology, Volume III, Spiritus Creator* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 111.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 31

¹⁶ *Explorations III*, 12.

¹⁷ Healy qtd in Vogel, 20. Emphasis mine.

Recalling material covered in chapter three, we can note an analogue between the “feminine” work of the Spirit in generating the Church and the role played by Mary, Christ’s mother, the paragon of feminine receptivity for Balthasar. Balthasar takes the inner-worldly process of the Spirit’s indwelling and incorporation to proceed as follows: first, Mary received the grace of pre-redemption in Christ via the Spirit’s gift of perfect self-dispossession.¹⁸ That grace enabled her unadulterated “yes” to God’s initiating activity at the Annunciation and Christ’s perfect conception to occur within her. Christ’s living interpretation of God’s life culminated with his death on the Cross—to which, significantly, Mary uttered her second purely receptive “yes”—his descent into Hell, and his resurrection. Because the Paschal Christ thus transfigured the darkest aspects of human existence, and because Mary remained receptive to God’s will throughout that entire process, the Spirit-inhabited grace informing Mary’s “yesses” could then be poured out upon Christ’s disciples at Pentecost, so as to lead them into “all the truth” concerning revelation.¹⁹ That grace remains within the community of disciples, inspiring it with the Marian principle of self-expropriation before Christ, leading it toward convergence “in a single consciousness, opening in Mary to Christ, and through Christ to the Holy Spirit of the three-personal God, who in the beginning overshadowed Mary and, since Easter and Pentecost, dwells in the Church.”²⁰ That community is assured by Christ that the grace of Christ’s presence will remain with them until the eschaton (see Matthew 28:20). For Balthasar, this specifically means that the Spirit “will always be in the prayers and sacraments and charisms of the Church.”²¹ Thus, faithful submission to

¹⁸ Balthasar-scholar Brendan Leahy elucidates this principle, explaining that, for Balthasar, Mary’s “yes is . . . fashioned in advance as a gift from God’s treasure-house. . . . Through the work of the Spirit, Mary’s pre-redemption in Jesus Christ ensured a yes of love, which would adequately respond to God the Father (‘Here I am, I come to do your will,’ Heb 10:7) in carrying out his mission.” Brendan Leahy, *The Marian Profile in the Ecclesiology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (New York: New City Press, 2000), 81.

¹⁹ See Vogel, 19.

²⁰ Balthasar, *Theological Explorations*, vol. II: *Spouse of the Word*, trans. A. V. Littledale with Alexander Dru (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989), 179-180 (subsequently cited as *Explorations II*).

²¹ Balthasar, “Empfangen durch den Heiligen Geist,” quoted in Leahy, 112.

revelation cannot be realized apart from the body of believers in which Christ's conception remains actual via the Eucharistic celebration, born of the Mary-Christ union.

As the Church endures through the Spirit's inspiring unity-in-distinction amongst Christ's disciples, Balthasar believes that various personal "profiles" emerge in that community. These profiles, which are in keeping with personal attributes of the original group of disciples surrounding Christ, include the Petrine (signifying the Church's kerygmatic and hierarchal features), the Pauline (its prophetic and charismatic aspects), the Johannine (its contemplative and synthesizing capacities), the Jocabine (the traditional and historically continuous features), and the Marian (subjective transparency to Christ). Balthasar upholds the Petrine and Marian as the Church's key profiles, informed by "super-masculine" and "super-feminine" principles of inner-divine self-giving, and complementing each other in a manner analogous to the relation of Christ and Mary, the archetypical bridegroom and bride.²² Balthasar believes that the male/Petrine principle informs the Church's "objective" holiness, manifest in institutional elements such as proclamation of the word, the tradition, the sacraments, hierarchy, and canon law. The female/Marian principle, meanwhile, functions as the all-embracing principle of Christian life. It informs believers' charismatic freedom in existential openness to the "subjective" aspect of the Spirit.²³ In Balthasar's thinking, this "freedom" of the laity's charismatic expression of its deep intuitions is to be distinguished by what Brendan Leahy describes as an "unproblematic attitude" toward the Church and its leadership.²⁴ Balthasar justifies the laity's compliant attitude on the

²² Leahy explains how Balthasar sees this playing out in terms of male-female relations: "The man-woman relationship conveys the unity in distinction of Christ and his bridal body. In his writings, von Balthasar highlights how there is a man-woman polarity running throughout the events of creation and redemption. It is one of mutuality and circularity [as in I Cor 11]" (54).

²³ For Balthasar, Leahy explains, the "great charismatic 'mystics,' especially the founders of new religious families or people with deep intuitions for the Church ... are manifestations of the Church's 'Marian' charismatic profile. ... These ever new forms emerge from the inspirations and missions from the Spirit that are pouring out in the midst of the existential Marian holiness" (128).

²⁴ Leahy, 185. Cf. 184-86.

grounds that the institutional element of the Church receives an “advance installment” of the Christoform disposition necessary for initiating the community into love.²⁵ That advance installment, he grants, does not guarantee the pastorate’s Marian perfection. Drawing upon Louis Bouyer, Balthasar allows that—in the institutional elements of sacrament, proclamation, and the pastoral function—the imperfect human element has “its greatest scope” in the Church’s pastoral occupation. “The only guarantee we have in this case,” he cites Bouyer as saying, “is that the mistakes made by the human instruments of Christ’s dominion will not be able to destroy the Church as a whole.”²⁶

Having thus acknowledged the pastorate’s human imperfection, however, Balthasar goes on to make clear that the laity is to remain subordinate nonetheless. He says:

This analogy does not justify a corresponding distrust of the institutional Church on the part of the believer. Rather it invites the individual to examine, in faith, his own conscience, which is only a Christian conscience if it lets itself be guided by the great stream of revelation—interpreted by tradition and official Church teaching and preserved in Scripture—and enters into it. Given all this, it is possible for the official Church to make demands, according to the mind of Christ, that seem unintelligible and extreme to an individual or group; there is nothing strange in Christ leading us along the path of the Cross not only in person but also, most definitely, through the institution he himself has appointed. . . . For the Church is a product of Christ’s absolute obedience, an obedience that brought him to the Cross.²⁷

So goes Balthasar’s theological justification of the (admittedly imperfect) ecclesial overseers’ imperviousness to the laity’s protest rather than encouraging reciprocity in terms of the hierarchy’s accountability to its subordinate members. Properly Marian lay persons will recognize that members of the Church teaching office are further advanced than they in “the mind of Christ,” and that the Petrine office is “the protectress of what they seek—the authentic revelation of God in

²⁵ Balthasar, *TD III*, 359.

²⁶ Bouyer, *L’Eglise*, quoted in Balthasar *TD III*, 359.

²⁷ *TD III*, 359-60.

Jesus Christ,” according to Leahy.²⁸ If subordinates experience certain magisterial dictates as unjust, they have simply encountered an occasion to advance in love by becoming better acquainted with the cruciform nature of Christoform obedience in discipleship. Balthasar thus secures clerical control in the Church, arguing that the obedient Roman Catholic is uniquely open to participation in “the great stream of revelation” by way of the Spirit’s direction, which direction first and finally takes shape in “official Church teaching.”²⁹

This material may induce the reader to recall Anna Mercedes’ assessment that Balthasar’s vision of *kenosis* is that of a self-giving “born, not of a lack of self-interest, but of an intensity of it.”³⁰ I have disputed Mercedes’ interpretation on this account, primarily in reference to evidence that Balthasar’s Marian principle of self-expropriation allows for self-assertion for men in relation to women, but not vice versa.³¹ I gave less attention to Balthasar’s material on lay submission to clerical authority (wherein I noted that we similarly find that only the male clergy may really experience any “intensity” of selfhood in relation to the feminized laity), but the present chapter’s analysis serves to solidify that connection. Just as he maintains that the woman’s integrity and “freedom” consists in her utter self-expropriation before her male counterpart, Balthasar pronounces that the laity’s dignity resides in “free” expressions of inspiration, provided that those

²⁸ Leahy, 185.

²⁹ Balthasar, *TD* III, 359-60.

³⁰ Mercedes, 74. I rehearsed and critically engaged this argument in chapter three of this dissertation.

³¹ As a quick recapitulation of that argument, I founded it upon five points of Balthasar’s teaching: 1) as the sacrament of human unity with God, the Church contains an objective/male/Petrine aspect and a subjective/female/Marian aspect, with Marian kenoticism characterizing the Church overall yet entailing different roles for the male and female persons therein; 2) women properly contain only a receptive spiritual aspect, in keeping with the female’s archetypal bodily function as only the vessel for the male’s seed-bearing activity; 3) as the male archetype, Christ contains both spiritually receptive (“feminine”) and spiritually generative (“masculine”) spiritual elements. So do all men, in keeping with their archetypal seed-giving function in the reproductive act; 4) Balthasar’s vision of *kenosis* relies upon a dehistoricized picture of Christ’s paschal act and a romanticizing of Mary’s “motherly and bridal” plasticity, presenting both as utterly free of self-interest; and 5) through the Spirit’s indwelling, humans are incorporated into kenotic self-expropriation as inheritors of Mary’s Christophorous “yes” to God’s will.

expressions do not conflict with the Church's institutional mandates.³² Balthasar's view of the ecclesial profiles (outlined above) reinforces his view that self-distinction is proper only for male figures: the Petrine, Pauline, Johanine, and Jacobine all have positive personal characteristics defining their roles, whereas the Marian is distinguished only by a negative movement of submissive transparency to Christ, manifest in her submission to male authority.

Interestingly, we find that, just as Balthasar employs the questionable rhetoric of women's and lay persons' equality to yet subordinate difference from men and clergy in the Church, Balthasar also avers the Spirit's full equality with the other two divine persons while simultaneously assigning it to a derivative role in relation to them in revelation's economy. Balthasar consistently proceeds on the assumption of polarized categories with gendered inflections: (female) charisma and (male) institution, lay and clergy, mission and message; and his maintenance of such dichotomies is symbiotic with his Christophorous renderings of Mary's "yes" in embrace of Christ, whose own revelatory activity culminates with his supreme "letting be" on the Cross (in "feminine" relation to the Father), the result of which is Christ's ("masculine") emission of the Spirit-informed Church.³³ Leahy defends these now rather embarrassing gender formulations in Balthasar's work on the grounds that, in his system, it is "a misunderstanding of the priesthood to propose it in terms of a power fundamentally inaccessible to women . . . it is love, not power, which reigns in the Christian economy."³⁴ But, as I have drawn upon feminist analysis to highlight, such a generic appeal to an economy of love all too easily enables the ignorance of pernicious political realities woven into institutionalized social arrangements. Along those lines, I have proposed that Balthasar's interpretation of Christ's and Mary's kenotic activities as embodying

³² See Leahy, 183; cf. Balthasar, *Man in History: A Theological Study* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1986), 120.

³³ "For the Church is a product of Christ's absolute obedience, an obedience that brought him to the Cross," says Balthasar (*TD III*, 359-60).

³⁴ Leahy, 181.

Christophorousness, far more likely than engendering an economy of loving reciprocity, serves to overcome masculinist anxieties around sex and gender by fixing “male” and “female” categories as symbols of kenotic self-giving and reception.

This fourth chapter’s material raises the possibility that those anxieties are also overcome by Balthasar’s construal of the Christophorous Spirit, the “(super) feminine” member of the Godhead, the hyposticized principle of enraptured self-abandonment to the loving Father-Son relationship. Given the history of trinitarian doctrine, Balthasar’s subordinating the feminized Spirit to the Logos is hardly surprising, Coakley might point out. She notes that, in the early patristic period, the tendency to subordinate the Spirit to Logos Christology was fueled by a fear of an alternative Spirit-leading approach’s potential to “lead to ‘sectarian’” tendencies, and fueled by awareness that “a special commitment to deep prayer in the Spirit (whether ‘charismatic’ or ‘contemplative’) came with the concomitant danger of the intensification of erotic power and a problematic entanglement of human spiritual and sexual desires.”³⁵ Balthasar’s own “nervousness . . . about making explicit any view of the Trinity not firmly reined back into the rationality of the Logos”³⁶ is, from this perspective, just as likely due to concern for ecclesiastical stability as it is a privileging of male priority; indeed, it is difficult to parse these concerns apart. In this aspect of Balthasar’s work we simply find a resounding instance of what Coakley sees as inevitable: “that no trinitarian language is innocent of sexual, political, and ecclesiastical overtones and implications.”³⁷

In the effort to contest the confounding claims of reciprocity that Balthasar asserts for lay persons (particularly women) in relation to the clergy and for the Spirit in relation to the Father

³⁵*GSS*, 102.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 117.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 308. We may draw further upon Coakley on this point to note that, by labeling the Spirit as “feminine,” Balthasar falls into the company of those who repeat “the persistent orthodox refrain that God, qua God, is beyond gender” while nevertheless representing God in a gendered way, “often in forms which vividly display cultural assumptions about ‘normative’ gender roles” (*ibid.*, 248).

and Son, one finds it significantly difficult to argue with Balthasar on the terms he sets. He does not provide critical norms for assessing the trinitarian form's lived implications, nor does he imagine any constructive function for disagreement with Church decree (with which his assertions auspiciously align³⁸), other than its providing an opportunity for the dissenter's spiritual purgation. He simply declares that, when guided by the Spirit's indwelling, "everything that is at all capable of being illuminated becomes clear and transparent";³⁹ and he proceeds as if he sees the hierarchical implications of revelation with such clarity. This privileged manner of speaking is a key feature of Balthasar's overly romantic rendering of the the Marian believer's epiphanic experience of revelation, wherein tidy interpretations apparently leap to one's eye (however particularly or perspectively those interpretations are situated).⁴⁰ In view of that tendency, one may also be given to wonder if Balthasar's attempt to balance the inner subjectivity of belief with the outer objective evidence by way of theological aesthetics effectively tends towards a faulty objectivism. This is a possibility to which I will turn after having set Balthasar's pneumatological incorporation teaching alongside Coakley's, which juxtaposition will highlight additional aspects of Balthasar's romantic rendering of revelation-experience that can prove problematic for practitioners.

³⁸ See, for instance, Pope John Paul II's pronouncements on Mary in his *Mulieris Dignitatem* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1988).

³⁹ Balthasar, *Theological Explorations*, 112.

⁴⁰ When I call Balthasar's manner of speaking "privileged" I am inspired by Karen Kilby's assessment that Balthasar's reader may be troubled by "something which can be articulated in terms of the theological 'voice' of Balthasar, and the implicit location of his voice," which seems to speak from an overly "unfettered" place (Karen Kilby, *Balthasar: A (Very) Critical Introduction*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012. p. 147). Kilby specifically suggests that the "absence of a sense of restraint, of a sense of theological limit, of something like theological responsibility, in Balthasar's work" may have been due to his lacking the education, students, colleagues, and editors "to hold him to account, to restrict or question him, even to make him conscious of himself as one voice among others" (148). I would add that his uncritical and prominent position within a rigid hierarchal ecclesial context could have provided another blindspot of the sort Kilby identifies.

Turning to Coakley's Non-Linear Model: A "More Apocalyptic" Option

While it may be futile to dispute Balthasar on his own terms, it is possible to contest those terms themselves, particularly on pneumatological grounds. We may find a helpful resource for this endeavor in Coakley's pneumatological approach in *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, which explicitly bolsters paradigms for ecclesiology and epistemology that contrast with Balthasar's. While Coakley's position aligns with Balthasar's conviction that there is a sense in which the Spirit "does not wish to be seen but to be the seeing eye of grace in us,"⁴¹ she would take issue with his trinitarian formula as an instance of "what might be called the 'linear' revelatory model, in which primary focus is given to the Father-Son relationship, and the Holy Spirit becomes the secondary purveyor of that relationship to the church."⁴² The linear model is founded in the Gospel of John's portrait of the three divine persons. There, Coakley points out, the Father-Son/Logos bond is prominent in Christ's earthly life, and the Spirit comes to "replace [Christ] and to remind the disciples of his teaching, after he has 'gone away' . . . The Spirit's role here is to 'glorify' the Son by (secondarily) passing on his teaching and 'declaring' it to the disciples (John 16. 14)."⁴³ Interestingly, Balthasar found in the Johanne tradition the paragon of contemplative reception of the "trinitarian mutuality in giving honor, in bringing to recognition" the mutual glorification of the Father and Son.⁴⁴ In keeping with Coakley's outline of the Johanne model of revelation, throughout Balthasar's scattering of pneumatological fragments, we indeed find him giving primacy to the Father-Son relationship, with the Holy Spirit functioning as the secondary transmitter of that

⁴¹ Balthasar quoted in Leahy, 16. It is "little concerned about whether we pray to him, provided that we pray with him, 'Abba, Father,' provided that we consent to his unutterable groaning in the depths of our soul," says Balthasar (*Theological Explorations* III, 111).

⁴² *GSS*, 111. In this Coakley's approach is more "Eastern" than is Balthasar's, that is, more in keeping with the pneumatologies of the Cappadocian Fathers.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 101, fn.1.

⁴⁴ *GL* VII, 246. See also Balthasar, *Our Task: A Report and a Plan*, trans. John Saward (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994).

relationship to the church. This is clearly the case in the *Theo-Drama V* material when he speaks of the Son “later” “issuing forth the Spirit,” in *Explorations III* when he images the Spirit as transfiguring the creation to reveal to it “the infinite love between Father and Son” that takes its form in Christ, and in the role he consistently assigns the Spirit as creating transparency to the Father-Son relationship through the Marian/Petrine ecclesial union.

Meanwhile, the contemplative approach to the Trinity that Coakley endorses is paradigmatically drawn from Romans 8. Here, she says, “the priority . . . logically and experientially speaking, is given to the Spirit: the ‘Spirit’ is that which, while being nothing less than ‘God,’ cannot quite be reduced to a metaphorical naming of the Father’s outreach.”⁴⁵ Coakley sees in the prayer experience attested in Romans 8 “an inherent reflexivity in the divine, a ceaseless outgoing and return of the desiring God”; and when we “welcome and receive this reflexivity,” she says, we find that “it is this ‘reflexivity in God,’ this Holy Spirit, that makes incarnate life possible.”⁴⁶ Coakley acknowledges that these two models of trinitarian revelation—the linear and the Spirit-led—are not absolutely distinct from one another. They can, in fact, be seen as “presum[ing] each other, given their close contiguity and entanglement within the texts of the New Testament.”⁴⁷ But the crucial point she works to demonstrate, through close examination of the Trinity doctrine’s historical development, is that when believers privilege the “linear” type they tend to overlook the Spirit’s function as “that without which there would be no incarnated Son at all, and—by

⁴⁵ *GSS*, 112. She goes on: “It is not that the pray-er is having a conversation with some distant and undifferentiated deity, and then is being asked (rather arbitrarily) to ‘hyposticize’ that conversation (or ‘relationship’) into a ‘person’ (the Spirit); but rather, that there is something, admittedly obscure, about the sustained activity of prayer that makes one want to claim that it is personally and divinely activated from within, and yet that that activation (the ‘Spirit’) is not quite reducible to that from which it flows (the ‘Father’).”

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 111. Coakley allows that a tendency to prioritize one model over the other “arose partly and originally ... from an intrinsic ambiguity in the biblical resources for the later, developed, trinitarian thinking. For the ‘ordering’ of the language of Father, Son, and Spirit is varied in the biblical witness” (101).

extension—no life of Sonship into which we, too, might enter by participation.”⁴⁸ Accordingly, although Balthasar asserts that the Spirit transfigures creation in the Son’s likeness and so incorporates believers into the trinitarian movement of self-giving love, the difference between his approach to incorporation and Coakley’s would appear to lie in the fact that Balthasar sees the Spirit as the primary *response to* the Son’s being in the world, while Coakley sees the Spirit as the primary *initiator of* the Son’s being in the world.

To better understand this distinction, and to consider the practical implications it augurs for Bible-readers, we may consider the different manners in which Balthasar and Coakley frame the Spirit as God’s outreach through the Son that incorporates humans in ecstatic return to the Father. According to Balthasar, the Spirit leads revelation’s recipients toward convergence in a consciousness “opening in Mary to Christ, and through Christ to the Holy Spirit of the three-personal God.”⁴⁹ Alternatively stated, he views incorporation occurring through the Spirit transfiguring the human witness’s subjective longings until those longings align with the Spirit’s own. That transformation fundamentally takes place “in” Mary: that is, via the believer’s proper participation in Christ’s body/bride that is the Roman Catholic ecclesial union, which emerges from Mary’s receptivity to Christ’s kenotic activity. Within that corporate fellowship, Balthasar’s incorporative Spirit evokes in believers the same impassioned response of “Marian” self-expropriation before God, by which those believers become progressively transparent to the revelation given in Christ and mediated through the “Petrine” element, the Church hierarchy.

⁴⁸ *GSS*, 56. Along these lines, she sees in the Trinity that the “‘Father’ is both ‘source’ and ultimate object of divine desire; the ‘Spirit’ is that (irreducibly distinct) enabler and incorporator of that desire in creation—that which makes the creation divine; the ‘Son’ is that divine and perfected creation” (114). She thus maintains that the Spirit is “that which, whilst being nothing less than ‘God,’ cannot quite be reduced to a metaphorical naming of the Father’s outreach” (112). That participation occurs through the Spirit’s promptings, which are “the primary means of incorporation into the trinitarian life of God” and are “constantly and ‘reflexively’ at work in believers in the circle of response to the Father’s call” (111).

⁴⁹ Balthasar, *Explorations II*, 179-180.

The dramatic dialectic between Petrine rule and Marian inspiration—which is informed, says Balthasar, by the Spirit who lives in the Church as “institution, or rule, or *disciplina*, and as inspiration and loving obedience to the Father in this spirit of adoption”⁵⁰—allows the dramatic Christ-event to become history afresh in every context. Notably, when reflecting upon the dynamic interplay of these objective (male) and subjective (female) elements that constitute the Church, Balthasar asserts that “the basis of the Church and her structure cannot grow; but the sphere of life, which is formed predominantly by the laity, can indeed grow.”⁵¹ Simply put, then, Balthasar understands Christ’s worldly presence as unfolding in history—not in terms of an unfolding of the gospel’s *meaning*, nor in terms of an evolution of the Church’s institutional *structure*; both are finalized in the Christ-event as the basis and structure of the Roman Catholic Church⁵²—but in terms of missional expansion, a proliferation of local iterations of Church structure and teaching.

In a sense, then, Balthasar’s Spirit appears to be the primary response not only to the Son’s being in the world *but also* to the judgements of the Magisterium, who has closest relational proximity to the Logos informing the Spirit-filled Church. Here we find an indication that Balthasar’s effort to balance the inner subjectivity of faith with its outer objective evidence actually tends towards an insufficient objectivism. In this case, that insufficiency is signaled by his *effectively* presenting the Gospel message as closed by affixing the “seeing eye” of the Spirit to the decree of the Roman Catholic Church’s teaching office. He says that Christ’s presence is received and enacted in new contexts by way of the interaction of ecclesial institution and ecclesial charism, wherein the (feminine) charisms are informed by the (masculine) institutional structure, and vice versa. But, in

⁵⁰ Balthasar, *Explorations IV: Spirit and Institution*, 239.

⁵¹ *Explorations II*, 331. In fact, “the duty of the laity is to be the growth and the blossoming that alone can convince the world of the truth of the teaching of Christ” (ibid).

⁵² He says: “The fullness of the divine Logos which has appeared is essentially for all times and in his filling the Church...he is incapable of being surpassed” (*A Theological Anthropology*, New York, NY: Sheed and Ward, 1967, 173).

fact, this Petrine-Marian “reciprocity” mirrors the same sort of “mutuality” Balthasar images as occurring in the epistemic relation between (male) object and (female) subject, which functions as follows in his thinking:

Insofar as the disclosure of being is a property objectively inherent in being itself, the knowing subject is obliged to conform itself to this disclosedness. . . . A proportion has to be achieved between subject and object, and the decisive measure of the proportion lies with the object. On the other hand, the purpose and mission of the subject is not simply to be a kind of machine for recording objective states of affairs. . . . Although the object remains the measure by which truth is measured, the agent of the measuring is now the subject, and this activity of measuring is a spontaneous, creative achievement.⁵³

For Balthasar, then, an object’s disclosure of being only happens in relation to a knowing subject, and in that sense its meaning lies within the subject; and knowledge occurs when the object willingly gives itself to be known by a subject, and the subject makes itself freely available to “be determined and measured” by the object.⁵⁴ This ensures that knowledge of truth is both possible (on the basis of the subject surrendering herself to its evidence in reality), yet, technically, that it is also unfinished, because the truth is continually taking on new instantiations. Because of those multiple instantiations, the truth of a thing is highly particular, Balthasar maintains; it cannot be “transposed without remainder into universal terms.”⁵⁵ This is increasingly the case as one moves up the chain of being, from studying simple organisms to free, self-conscious subjects (particularly those who have real participation in the specific way in which the “idea” unfolds in their individual cases). Identifying the universal truth of an object increasingly requires an aesthetic vision, eyes capable of detecting the universal in the particular as does an artist.⁵⁶ And the truer the worldview,

⁵³ *Theo-Logic*, vol. I: *Truth of the World*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 41 (subsequently cited as *TL I*).

⁵⁴ *TL I*, 41.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 181.

⁵⁶ See *ibid.*, 182.

says Balthasar—i.e., the more conformed it is to the shape of the final, objective truth—the more that worldview is able to incorporate other points of view.

This framework helps explain Balthasar's thinking regarding Protestant theology vis-à-vis the Roman Catholic Church: Protestant doctrines can attest to the truth disclosed in Christ; they may even show the Roman Catholic "a piece of the totality of faith which is missing or not sufficiently realized" within the Catholic Church at present, but "a member of the Catholic Church must be aware that his 'separated brothers' can alert him only to things that have always rested in the fullness of his faith, things which were merely lost or forgotten through negligence and guilt."⁵⁷ Protestant teachings do not afford the fuller knowledge of that truth afforded through participation in the Roman Catholic communion, which Balthasar takes to be the intercommunal shape assumed by the knowing subject's conformation to Christ's "disclosedness." The same may be said for non- or post-Christian ideologies. They can attest to the truth disclosed in Christic revelation, but if they try to realize the ethical aims of Christ's mission outside the Roman Catholic Church, the result is that "the Gospels and the Church are plundered like a fruit tree," and "the fruit when separated from the tree goes rotten and cannot be used," Balthasar says.⁵⁸ Balthasar thus views the Church—which is the mystical body of believers but also, equally and concretely, the Roman Catholic hierarchal institution—as a perduring entity until the eschaton, confronting and converting the world to the authentic revelation of God through obedience to its mandates.⁵⁹ Only the realm of ecclesial *charism* is actually unfolding, bringing the Church into the world through novel movements in new historical settings, ever in submissive response to magisterial dictate.

⁵⁷ Balthasar, *A Short Primer for Unsettled Laymen*, trans. Michael Waldstein (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985) 119. For instance, the Protestant critique of Catholic institutionalism is justified when the Catholic allows the institution to substitute for the *charisma* or inner dynamism afforded by the Spirit, a failure to integrate the "Marian" and "Petrine" aspects of the Church. See Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. Edward T. Oakes, SJ (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 4.

⁵⁸ *A Theological Anthropology*, 174.

⁵⁹ I am indebted to conversation with my dissertation advisor, Professor Bruce T. Morrill, for arriving at this insight.

In terms of Balthasar tending towards a dissatisfying objectivism, one could here echo a line from Coakley that I put to Balthasar in chapter three—"it is hardly reassuring to be told . . . that women are 'closer' to the ideal human than men, when it turns out that any kind of active self-assertion or manifest talent is frowned upon in their case as 'unfeminine'"⁶⁰—by saying that it hardly suffices to be assured that subjective reception of the object is "a spontaneous, creative achievement"⁶¹ of cooperation with the Spirit, when it turns out that any interpretation that challenges the *status quo* of "official Church teaching" is decried as exiting "the great stream of revelation" afforded through participation in the Roman Catholic communion.⁶² Critics like Steffen Lösel have argued that Balthasar's model of God-world interaction (which is built upon this model of subject-object relations) actually "minimize[s] the impact of God's engagement in history," and attributes no significance to God's "final and consumptive *adventus* in this world," by limiting God's historical engagement effectively to Jesus's life and particularly his death on the cross.⁶³ Balthasar has defenders on this account. Edward Howells, for instance, applauds Balthasar as avoiding Barthian supra-historicism by emphasizing the human witness's spiritual reception of the Christ-image's pneumatological depth-dimension. That contemplative reception "is to be understood as the trinitarian momentum towards incarnation received through our particular relationships with the historical revelation in Christ, bringing us into immediate contact with the universal passage of

⁶⁰ Sarah Coakley, *PS*, 96.

⁶¹ *TL* I, 41.

⁶² Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 3, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993) 359-60.

⁶³ Steffen Lösel, "Unapocalyptic Theology: History and Eschatology in Balthasar's Theo-Drama" in *Modern Theology* 17:2 (April 2001), 219. Lösel notes that Balthasar has incurred much critical response along these lines. Johann Baptist Metz, for example, has also brought such a critique against Balthasar's work, on the grounds that it reduces Christ's coming to a mere metaphor and avoids the "*scandalon* presented by the existence of suffering and evil in the world" (202).

the Trinity into creation.”⁶⁴ Ostensibly, then, the historical context in which the pray-er receives God’s self-disclosure “has the same priority as the historical form of Christ in christology,”⁶⁵ affording “a systematic basis for giving historical context a central place” in the doctrine of revelation.⁶⁶ Lösel, on the other hand, argues that such apparent basis is misrepresentative.

The problem Lösel finds in Balthasar’s model of God-world interaction is not in its rendering the economy of salvation a mere “superfluous addendum to a self-sufficient, eternal theodrama before all times”—after all, for Balthasar, “in the cross event, the inner-divine drama between Father and Son in the Holy Spirit attains a historical dimension. Thus, the cross does add a new dimension into the inner-divine life.”⁶⁷ Rather, Lösel is troubled by the fact that, when Balthasar presents all of history as culminating in the Easter event, he effectively reduces “the expectation of the second coming of Christ to a mere metaphor” because “each moment in history is equally confronted with divine eternity,” and so there is “no real *adventus* from the future which could effect any change in history.”⁶⁸ Lösel evaluates this feature of Balthasar’s thinking as characteristically “unapocalyptic,” for it represents “a theology that neither attributes any theological significance to God’s ongoing engagement throughout the course of history nor to God’s final and consumptive *adventus* in this world.”⁶⁹ For Balthasar, Lösel explains, at Christ’s death and resurrection revelation is realized, and so “the Christ event becomes normative for the history after Christ not through a further growth of revelation, but through ‘the working out of the presence of

⁶⁴ Edward Howells, “Mysticism and the Mystical: The Current Debate,” *The Way* supplement 102, (2002): 22.

⁶⁵ Howells, 21-22

⁶⁶ What distinguishes Balthasar from Barth on this point is that Barth rejects any appeal to interior states on the grounds that it conflicts with the objectivity of historical revelation. For Balthasar, the objective divine form impresses itself in all aspects of concrete human existence, interior states no less than any.

⁶⁷ Lösel, 216, emphasis added.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 218.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 219.

Christ in the Church in world history’.”⁷⁰ History is no longer the stage of *revelatory* engagement with humankind.

In sum, one may find a key to detecting as well as deciphering this “unapocalypticism” in Balthasar’s revelation doctrine by noting his “linear” depiction of the Holy Spirit’s passage into creation for the sake of glorifying Christ, evoking a repetition of his life-form and teachings through the institutional Church, whose form can only change in terms of its missional expansion, rather than its restructuring. For Balthasar, then, the Spirit simply brings to the Petrine teaching office the clarity of vision needed for discernment of Christ’s incarnate form, which is mirrored in the Church and re-iterated via Christian mission in specific historical contexts. In his system, that vision results in the polarized categories of female and male, lay and clergy, mission and message, world and Church: the trinitarian encounter affording illumination of dichotomous categories rather than upsetting their ordering. In this move, we can detect traces of his anxiety about reigning all back into the order of the Logos. Considering his trinitarian material from *Theo-Drama V* cited above,⁷¹ for instance, as Rowan Williams points out, a sterile mapping of traditional gender roles onto sexed bodies topples over into a dynamic far more analogous to the dance of erotic playfulness in this passage.⁷² Most noticeably, both Father and Son are subject to a labile flux of shifting gendered images, depending on the given vantage point or bodily function under analogous consideration. And yet Balthasar insists on construing every instance when God’s life is derivative and responsive as an instance of what is feminine, whereas when that same divine Person is initiatory, it is to be considered masculine. Balthasar apparently does not consider whether his construal of the sexes

⁷⁰ Ibid., 211, 212.

⁷¹ See fn. 10 (referencing *TD V*, 91).

⁷² Kilby makes the insightful point that the near absence of attention to erotic desire in Balthasar’s theological reflections on sex is a surprising one, both in view of the tradition and in view of his own central theological concern with the allure of beauty (see Kilby, 139).

“so overrides differences between diverse male and diverse female subjects as to allow us to assume a basic and defining polarity,” Williams notes.⁷³

All of this adds new angles to Lösel’s view of Balthasar’s approach as “unapocalyptic,” for Balthasar envisions the eschatological in-breaking of revelation in Christ through the Spirit holds no implications for the lability of (perceived) essences. One can thus see how Balthasar’s backward-looking eschatology and emphasis on obedience provides little “theological incentive for change” but rather “easily justifies an acquiescence to the status quo of the world,”⁷⁴ inadequately addressing the socio-political elements of salvation; indeed, he has been vigorously critiqued on those grounds by Liberation theologians. Coakley, in stark contrast, finds evidence in the prayer experience described in Romans 8 that

the life of ‘Sonship’ . . . is not only not restricted to Jesus’s human (male) life, but nor to the mystical ‘body of Christ’ which is the church; it is in this passage expanded even further to include the full cosmological implications of the incarnation, the whole creation ‘groaning’ to its final Christological telos in God (Romans 8: 18-21). What this underscores is the extraordinary ripple effect of prayer in the Spirit—its inexorably social and even cosmic significance as an act of cooperation with, and incorporation into, the still extending life of the incarnation.⁷⁵

Hence, Coakley understands the incorporative Spirit as evoking in all of creation an ecstatic response to God, which response constitutes the extending of the Incarnation therein, well beyond the church. “If prayer has social and cosmic significance,” Coakley continues, “. . . it certainly also has political import (see Romans 12: 14; 13: 1-7).”⁷⁶ In other words, it incorporates human agential activity, and as the whole creation “groans” in the Spirit toward its final Christological telos in God,

⁷³ Rowan Williams, “Balthasar and the Trinity” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar*, eds. Edward T. Oakes, SJ, and David Moss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 37-50; here 46.

⁷⁴ Williams, 217.

⁷⁵ *GSS*, 114.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* The cosmic scope of the Spirit-led unfolding incarnation “gives the lie, by implication, to any falsely ‘privatized’ or ‘subjectivized’ associations of prayer with mere self-cultivation which may have accrued in the modern period” (*ibid.*).

believers are incorporated into the “still extending life of the incarnation” when they groan with and for the world. Thus, while Coakley would agree with Balthasar’s assertion that the Spirit works “to bestow on creation” the Christoform shape of “the infinite love between Father and Son,”⁷⁷ for Balthasar, that bestowal means that we become dramatic repetitions of the Son’s life as did Mary, which is to become the Church; for Coakley, on the other hand, it means that the life of the Son—and, with it, revelation itself—is still unfolding, agonistically, in the cosmic expanse of history.

In a telling point of contrast with Balthasar, Coakley maintains that, when “firmly grounded in the events of Christ’s incarnation and resurrection,” a theological view of gender “has an eschatological hope,” one wherein gender is “ineradicable” (because based in relational distinction) but “not unchangeable . . . What is fallen [i.e., gender binaries] can be redeemed and sanctified—indeed rendered sacramental by participation in Christ.”⁷⁸ That remaking is evidenced not only in Christ’s passion in Gethsemane but is also fundamentally experienced in the Spirit-afforded “deepening of vision” that Coakley finds in contemplative exercises, which entails “a profound sense of the mind’s darkening, and of a disconcerting reorientation of the senses.”⁷⁹ For Coakley, that unsettling experience is the cost of a “‘love affair with a blank’, such as contemplation is,” and such a love affair innately involves “a strange subversion of all certainties, a stripping, often painful, of what one previously took for granted.”⁸⁰ As one thus suspends one’s rational agendas, Coakley affirms that “what fills the waiting over time is a kind of seepage in the self, a recognition of rich unconscious elements, a transcendence of narrow rationality.”⁸¹ Specifically, the transformation

⁷⁷ *Explorations III: Creator Spirit*, 12.

⁷⁸ Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 54 (subsequently cited as *PS*).

⁷⁹ *PS*, 19.

⁸⁰ *PS*, 342. Coakley attributes the phrase “A love affair with a blank” to Dom Sebastian Moore’s description of contemplative practice in his “Some Principles for an Adequate Theism,” *Downside Review* 95 (1977), 201-13.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

that occurs for the Christian contemplative takes place as she is incorporated into the flow of the inner-divine life, discovering that "twoness, one might say, is divinely ambushed by Threeness."⁸²

In the final chapter of *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, Coakley further explores this epistemically transfigurative process inherent to the Spirit-led incorporation by attending to Pseudo-Dionysius's work in *Divine Names*. She is particularly interested in his work with the notion of *ekstasis*, which "allows an implicit acknowledgement of love across difference."⁸³ Coakley notes that Dionysius here attributes "ecstatic yearning not only to human lovers of God, but also, prototypically, to divine love of creation."⁸⁴ In his system, she says, "the ecstatic dimension of love can operate whether or not the parties are equal. Of course, in God's case the ecstasy towards the creation is one of 'superior towards subordinate,' as he puts it."⁸⁵ Dionysius maintains that the same logic holds true between equal parties, however; and while he may not have been thinking particularly of male-female relations, Coakley wonders what may come of applying his thinking on *ekstasis* to this context, particularly in view of her rendering of the incorporative work of the Spirit: "If the divine ecstasy returning to itself allows redeemed creation to participate in it, and so signals an 'incorporative' trinitarianism," she says, "what, correlatively, might be the trinitarian implications of ecstatic love between the sexes?"⁸⁶

⁸² Coakley, "Is There a Future for Gender and Theology? On Gender, Contemplation, and the Systematic Task" in *Criterion*, 47, no. 1 (2009), 11.

⁸³ *GSS*, 316-17. Coakley is looking at chapter 4, section 13 of *Divine Names*.

⁸⁴ *GSS*, 314.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 316-17.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 317. She admits that she is taking some "exegetical liberties, albeit ... creative ones for contemporary discussion" (318).

Drawing upon Luce Irigaray's thematizing of "the transcendence of the other which becomes an immanent ecstasy" in the act of love-making,⁸⁷ Coakley reflects that we may analogously imagine how

human ecstatic loves (at their best) might ultimately relate to divine ecstatic love: not by any direct emulation of the trinitarian nature, but by the 'interruption' by the Spirit of any merely 'egological' duality inherent in their relationship, such that the human lovers are themselves aware of a necessary 'third' between them—both uniting them and protecting their integrity in their new ecstasy of exchange. What then is happening may even be a degree of participation in the divine life; but it comes with both the cost and the joy of truly 'ecstatic' attention to the other."⁸⁸

By way of this creative analysis, Coakley finds not only an analogy but a lived entry-point of the Spirit's disrupting perceived ontological boundaries, via the ecstatic experience of "thirdness." The Spirit buffers our subjectivity by incorporating us, not toward illuminated and fixed essences, but toward the dazzling darkness of intimate embrace and the noetic transformation it provides.⁸⁹ Therein, self-other distinction is enjoyed to the point of its overturning, effectively destabilizing fixed epistemic boundaries. Coakley indicates that this is one way in which the Incarnation is still unfolding in the cosmos through the work of the Spirit, given that the Spirit brings about the life of Sonship—or at least, a degree of that life—wherever persons embrace "the cost and the joy of truly 'ecstatic' attention" to one another. The theological epistemic principle operating here is that the believer's subjective experience of the Logos, the revelatory object, will be informed by this

⁸⁷ She draws upon a passage from Luce Irigaray's work wherein Irigaray is describing "the transcendence of the other which becomes an immanent ecstasy" in the act of love-making, as a "shared outpouring" and a "loss of boundary of the skin into the mucous membranes of the body, leaving the circle which encloses my solitude to meet in a shared space, a shared breath ... In this relation," Irigaray goes on, "we are at least three, each of which is irreducible to any of the others: you, me and our creation [*oeuvre*], that ecstasy of ourself in us [*de nous en nous*] ... prior to any 'child'" (Irigaray, "Questions to Emmanuel Lévinas: On the Divinity of Love," in Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley, eds., *Re-Reading Lévinas*. London: Athlone, 1991. 109-18, at 88); quoted in *GSS* 317-18, Coakley's emphasis.

⁸⁸ *GSS*, 318.

⁸⁹ "In the purgative kneeling before the blankness of the darkness which nonetheless dazzles," she says, "the Spirit is at work in . . . noetic slippage, drawing all things into Christ and recasting our whole sense of how language for God works" (*GSS*, 325).

“admittedly obscure” direction of the Spirit, resulting in the fluidity of perceived boundaries that occurs in “ecstatic” experience of all varieties.

In short, for Coakley, the Holy Spirit of divine love ministers towards the *overcoming* rather than the solidifying of categorical divisions. In her own application of this boundary-rupturing vision, we find Coakley highlighting a permeability between religious and secular reasoning, one that correlates with the fluidity that exists between rational and extra-rational faculties of perception. Coakley detects a danger in Christians imagining their discourse as a church-enclosed phenomenon: that discourse may, by virtue of that presumption, ironically come to function as little more than an obscure, community-encapsulated semantic sphere. To Coakley’s mind, the presumptions and hazards therein parallel those surrounding French psychoanalytic theory’s postulation that there is a uniquely “feminine” mode of reflection, one ostensibly

linked to the female body and female sexuality, and incapable of capture—without destructive ‘phallogentric’ distortion—in clearly enunciated forms. To attempt systematics in such forms would thus be an intrinsic offence to ‘feminine’ sensibility, and would crush the creative destabilizations that are unique to the realm of the semiotic. . . The main problem with this line of thought is that . . . the so-called ‘feminine imaginary’ . . . has to found its own, distinct, form of discourse. It is as if such pessimism, and such dogmatized gender dualism, reconsigns the ‘feminine’ to an eternal marginalization, ironically recreating the conditions of powerlessness from which it arose.⁹⁰

Coakley is convinced that, in reality—and in keeping with the breakdown of dichotomies that she has discovered through Spirit-led contemplation—there are no such unadulterated forms of discourse, be they semiotic or productions of the church. “The wider realm of ‘doctrine’ has many levels, mediums of expression, and spheres of response—not merely those enshrined in the official creeds and re-enunciated by theologians and church leaders,” she says.⁹¹ However far church members progress into inter-trinitarian intimacy, then, they will find no escape “from the messy

⁹⁰ GSS 49-50. “The more subtle exponents of this school of thought by no means intend an essentialist view of gender (which would link female bodies inexorably and normatively to certain kinds of creative, but non-analytic, thought),” Coakley notes. “Instead . . . if the so-called ‘feminine imaginary’ is accorded no worth, they argue, then psychic life remains distorted and stultifying for all.”

⁹¹ Ibid., 77.

entanglement” of theological method with “the secular and spiritual realms for those who dare to practice it.”⁹² Coakley accordingly maintains that the hermeneutics of suspicion must remain ever in play, keeping the socially-located and political complexion of contemplation and theological expression in view, for it is not possible to guard absolutely against the danger of doctrinal language being impacted by “abuse and distortion.”⁹³

In view of the “messy entanglement” of theological method with spiritual and secular domains, Coakley seeks an alternate approach to theologizing as “an irredeemably ‘male’ undertaking,” pursuing a model that actively yet carefully invites the semiotic realm to have “substantial or transformative impact on the systematic.”⁹⁴ She thus endorses theological attention not only to academic discourse, but also to ordinary bodily negotiations as they impact and are impacted by that discourse (by attending to aesthetic, liturgical, cultural, and other such creative productions), identifying this methodological approach as that befitting a *théologie totale*, i.e., a method that “aims to dig down the social tell of doctrine, even as it simultaneously purges and unifies the engaged theologian’s faculties in response to that tell.”⁹⁵ She also explains how she envisions the proper relation of Christian and non-Christian discourses as involving a “contrapuntal relationship”:

One does not need, as a Christian, to be either seduced by, or wholly averse to, contemporary secular philosophy in order to continue to engage with it, both critically and creatively: one might say that a contrapuntal relationship is what is required, but with Christian thought and practice, not secular philosophy, providing the *cantus firmus*. Outright rejection of secular philosophy is as dangerous an alternative as outright submission: there has to be a ‘more excellent way’ than the two false alternatives (fideism versus secularism) that currently feature large in the theological culture wars.⁹⁶

⁹² *GSS*, 59.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 343.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 18. Coakley’s statement that follows self-situates her position against the likes of Barth and the “postliberal” theologians: “Ironically,” she says, “Barth’s dogmatics and ordinary language (‘analytic’) philosophy—perhaps the most important developments in the twentieth century for theology and

In seeking that “more excellent way,” Coakley proposes that theological method should “fully endors[e] the significance of ongoing interaction with modern and postmodern secular philosophy—as a vital apologetic exercise, as a challenge to the internal analytic clarification of the Christian faith, and as a commitment to pragmatic, justice-seeking ends.”⁹⁷

From Coakley’s *théologie totale* vantage point, Balthasar’s declaration that the Church must “confront human history, with all of its religious or ideological alternatives, with the message of Christ”⁹⁸ is problematic—not because of what it asserts about Christ’s unsurpassability, but because of what it assumes about the manner, extent, and implications of the Church’s grasp of the epiphanic vision’s content. Regarding the manner, the problematic assumption is interwoven with Balthasar’s linear model of pneumatological incorporation, wherein the Spirit provides access to what has already been finalized in the life, death, and resurrection of the Son by drawing believers into the static Marian/Petrine categories of the Roman Catholic Church. As for the extent and implications, the reader will recall that Balthasar’s linear view of the Spirit’s incorporative work correlates with his assumption that the Spirit’s indwelling provides a clarifying repetition of the Logos, best understood according to the hierarchal ranking of the Roman Catholic Church. By contrast, in Coakley’s pneumatological paradigm, “the authority of the revelatory Word is continually and freshly encountered and expounded—by a ‘reason’ *which is itself in process of disclosure*.”⁹⁹ Thus while, for Coakley, Christ is Sonship’s supreme and orienting expression, *meaningful* contours of Sonship are still arising out of concrete contexts wherein the “thirdness” of the Spirit, the “cost and joy of truly ‘ecstatic’ attention to the other,” occurs.

philosophy, respectively—have together combined in a pincer movement to help entrench this false disjunction” (ibid).

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Lösel, 212.

⁹⁹ GSS, 88. Emphasis added.

In further contrasting Coakley's vision of the new contours of Sonship to be discovered continually—both beyond the church and in repressed contexts within it—with Balthasar's vision of revelation's unfolding in the world through the expansion of the Roman Catholic Church structure and magisterial decree, one could argue that Coakley's construal of "the still extending life of the incarnation"¹⁰⁰ through the Spirit combines a distinctly "lower" view of the ecclesial body with a rather "higher" view of the corporeal one, when compared to Balthasar's. The contrast hinges upon their divergence regarding the eschatological nature of the incarnation. In keeping with this "unapocalyptic" view of history, Balthasar sees the Spirit's role as only to illuminate within and through the Church what has occurred with finality in the incarnation. The gospel-event is completed, along with the "great stream of revelation"; theology is solidified in Scripture and tradition as interpreted by the Church teaching office. According to Coakley's assessment of the Spirit as the one who brings about the incarnation, meanwhile, the reality of the creation perfected in Christ is still unfolding through the Spirit's ongoing "interruption" of worldly certainties, and the life of Sonship is still unfolding. Consequently, we find in Coakley's contemplative paradigm a more "apocalyptic" vision of God-human intermingling in history, with a concomitant "lower" view of the church's authoritative access to the Christiform content of revelation.

Coakley's "lower" view of the church leads to another key point of distinction between her and Balthasar's accounts of pneumatological incorporation, which consists in Coakley's maintaining that our Spirit-led response to God's call is a site wherein our ambiguous bodily desires are ever displayed. For Balthasar, the Spirit-infused grace of the Church's "sacramental life . . . contains as its presupposition the dimension of perfect ecclesial faith. The perfect Marian-ecclesial act of faith completes and perfects what we have done incompletely and imperfectly."¹⁰¹ As we have found, Balthasar takes this perfecting work to have the effect of quieting the believer's unruly bodily

¹⁰⁰ GSS, 114.

¹⁰¹ Leahy, 115.

inclinations and aversions (not least by bringing the especially intractable feminized body and its urges under the rule of masculinized reason and order). Meanwhile, Coakley is emphatic that, pre-schaton, such ordering is illusive at best. “The ‘sea of faith’” is not to be likened to a lucid pool but rather to “murky, polluted, or marshy” waterways, “existing more in underground streams than in overt ecclesiastical commitment,” Coakley says.¹⁰² But, on a hopeful note that indicates that she operates with a “higher view” of the corporeal body than does Balthasar (at least, in the sense of her finding rich theological implications in attending to rather than repressing the body’s category-disrupting experiences) she continues: “its [the sea of faith’s] tide is by no means out for ever, and the ‘messy entanglements’ and detritus that we find in it deserve the closest theological attention”¹⁰³—not least because we may find in unsanitized attention to bodily acts such as love-making “the transcendence of the other which becomes an immanent ecstasy.”¹⁰⁴

In light of these contrasting approaches to the believer’s bodily participation in pneumatological incorporation, we find that when the Spirit recedes from view as the instigator of God-human unity—as it does in Balthasar’s model—then, very likely, the human’s ambiguous bodily interests, written into even revelation’s “purest” mediations,¹⁰⁵ will also be overlooked. Balthasar’s subjugating the Spirit to a firmly hierarchal ecclesiology on the grounds that “the perfect Marian-ecclesial act of faith completes and perfects what we have done incompletely and imperfectly” also flags the danger of assuming that *any* non-divine human can be utterly receptive

¹⁰² GSS, 77

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ See GSS, 317-18.

¹⁰⁵ By invoking the notion of a hierarchy of increasingly “pure” mediations of revelation, I am thinking of Balthasar’s ranking in importance the institutional elements of sacrament, proclamation, and the pastoral function, as well as the “great stream of revelation—interpreted by tradition and official Church teaching and preserved in Scripture,” all of which the lay person is to allow herself to be drawn into and formed by (Balthasar, *TD* III, 359-60).

to God in the interpretive-communicative act.¹⁰⁶ The remaining question for Coakley's approach is whether or not Christ discloses that the human *ought* to be entirely receptive in the God-human encounter; to this question I will turn in the latter portion of this chapter, after I have first examined her non-linear approach to revelation as a resource for overcoming the PIP.

Coakley's *Théologie Totale*: Out of "Stuckness" in the Knowing Subject, and Beyond the PIP?

For Coakley, the heart of the call to contemplation is not the call to illumination; it is fundamentally a call to dazzling darkness, achieved by embracing the cost of purgative submission to the Holy Spirit's interruption in order to progress in the joy of authentic attention to God and one another. On those grounds, Coakley goes so far as to call for a "subversive element" within the bounds of "church-type" Christianity so that church doctrine may be "perennially reinvigorated by response to the Spirit."¹⁰⁷ Drawing upon the work of Ernst Troeltsch, she thus declares that "the 'church' type needs the 'sect.' Both are legitimate outworkings of the gospel," she says; "yet the 'mystic' type who recalls both to contemplative practice will always stand at the edges of institutional acceptability, always be pressing to an 'orthodoxy' beyond mere propositional assent."¹⁰⁸ In this "lower church" feature of Coakley's "more apocalyptic" construal of revelation, we find her calling "church-types" to willingly and continually rethink the nature and implications of

¹⁰⁶ When I say it is dangerous to assume that any non-divine human can be utterly receptive to God in the interpretive-communicative act, I mean it as a practical warning rather than as a theological-anthropological assertion. In Balthasar's notion of the salvific pre-gift of grace given to Mary, he appears to situate her within a theological-anthropological framework that maintains that God can create beings that always freely choose the good; such is the effect of the grace afforded her, by way of a backward-reaching movement in time of Christ's atoning sacrifice, which assures her perfect "yes." My problems with Balthasar's construal of Mary's perfect receptivity concern its practical outworking in his ecclesiology, wherein the clergy's "pre-gift" of Marian love supposedly assures their fitness to guide the laity into grace. Such a position encourages the oversight of the abuses and scandals that occur on all levels of Church leadership.

¹⁰⁷ The church also needs, she says, "a concomitant hypothesis about the (relative) suppression of a 'prayer-based', or 'incorporative', doctrine of the Trinity within the 'church' type, for fear of its liberating or potentially disordering implications" (*GSS*, 266-67).

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 341-42.

boundaries of all sorts so as to invite the Spirit's ongoing disclosure of truth. Boundaries between men and women, clergy and laity, religious and secular, all remain ontologically and thus epistemologically porous under the promise of the Spirit's transfiguring "thirdness," and the message and structure of the church remain open to change because its own reason is very much *in via*.¹⁰⁹

We may also note, however, that Coakley's program is not *utterly* apocalyptic, reducing extant structures to rubble to make way for the in-breaking of God's new order. Because she is convinced that the contemplative must step "willfully into an act of reflexive divine love that is always going on, always begging Christomorphic shape,"¹¹⁰ she remains skeptical of "authoritarian ecclesiastical Christian 'orthodoxy,' cut off from the real 'sea' of lived religion by hierarchical avoidance or denial,"¹¹¹ but she remains *equally* skeptical of any proposition that radical deconstruction of long-standing institutions is essential for constructing a far better political arrangement. She maintains that we should embrace disorientation in the Spirit with the expectation of reorientation: just as contemplation "implies a loss of repressive control," she says, it also "engenders a reordering of the passions such that 'control' finds new and significant coinage as right direction and purification of the passionate nature."¹¹² Coakley accordingly defends the goodness and even ethical necessity of some sort of hierarchizing in the human realm if we are to order our values properly: that is, towards God. Such hierarchizing is not incompatible with the politics of liberation. "Anyone who has worked in circumstances of institutional chaos knows that

¹⁰⁹ "So what is being broken here," she says, "is the idea that a false patriarchal hierarchy in the Trinity should be emulated by a false patriarchal hierarchy in the church or world (that is the anti-'hierarchical' battle that must ever be fought)" (ibid., 322). For Coakley, the fact that ecstatic participation in the Godhead transforms our old ways of hierarchizing is indicated by key moments in the history of Christian thought, wherein contemplative subversiveness has pushed the masculine language of the Trinity beyond idolatrous reference to male essences.

¹¹⁰ *GSS*, 343.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 342-43.

some [hierarchical] order, organizationally speaking, is preferable for everyone,” she says; “it is worldly *sexed* subordination that feminism opposes.”¹¹³ Recalling her construal of God’s power over humans as non-coercive and thus a source for our personal empowerment, Coakley specifies that “‘ordering’ oneself to God, in contrast, . . . may precisely be the means of undermining and dissolving” the sexed subordination that feminism rebuffs.¹¹⁴ In short, Coakley sums up her position vis-à-vis the *cantus firmus* afforded by the Christomorphic shape our contemplative vision pursues, “we cannot get this vision of powers and submissions right by political or theological manipulation or fiat; we can only get it right by primary submission to the Spirit, with all the purgative costliness that involves.”¹¹⁵ That process involves a lifelong enterprise of continued discernment and ascetic practice, individually and corporately.

Thus, Coakley would agree with Balthasar that what distinguishes what is Christian from what is non-Christian is theopraxy, centered in deliberate practices of attention to the divine and human other for the sake of being formed more fully into the likeness of Christ.¹¹⁶ For both thinkers, theopraxy impacts theologizing itself, undergirding the canons of Scripture and tradition which have emerged out of the collective input of the practicing community. What distinguishes their visions of theopraxy from one another is the manner in which they evaluate the community’s

¹¹³ Ibid., 319-20. Coakley refers to anthropologist Louis Dumont’s underscoring of the necessity of a “system of ordered values” for social life, as well as to Mary Douglas’s work on cultural analysis wherein Douglas points out that the “‘hierarchical society’ is not necessarily, let alone intrinsically, a repressive top-down system,” but can be one wherein “‘every decision is referred to the well-being of the whole . . . transcending its parts” (ibid., 320).

¹¹⁴ *GSS*, 319-20. Coakley refers to anthropologist Louis Dumont’s underscoring of the necessity of a “system of ordered values” for social life, as well as to Mary Douglas’s work on cultural analysis wherein Douglas points out that the “‘hierarchical society’ is not necessarily, let alone intrinsically, a repressive top-down system,” but can be one wherein “‘every decision is referred to the well-being of the whole . . . transcending its parts” (ibid., 320).

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 322.

¹¹⁶ Balthasar describes God’s glory as ever withdrawing from the contemplative gaze and, therefore, withdrawing from immediate translation into “any neutral truth or wisdom that can be ‘taught” (*TD I*, 16). Given that withdrawal, the only way from theophany to theology, he says, is through theopraxy: total lived commitment to “that drama into which the one and only God sets each of us to play our unique part” (ibid).

processing of the trinitarian encounter occurring through interrelated theophany and theopraxy. For Balthasar, it is the living relationship between believers and Christ through the Spirit-infused Church structure that maintains the effectiveness of theopraxy, realized in the believer's trusting obedience. For Coakley, that living relationship occurs through the transfiguring interruption of ecstatic experience the Spirit, leading to novel expressions of Sonship and discoveries of Christomorphous contours that cannot be confined to Church teaching (though they may be illumined by them), and which thus produce a "subversive element" within the church structure.

Given that one finds Coakley's alternative contemplative framework convincing, perhaps the fundamental insight that her *théologie totale* endeavor affords for this dissertation's aims of moving beyond the PIP is this: If the means of scriptural discernment that Protestants have traditionally overlooked is that of contemplative "spiritual sense," affording more illuminating control to the Spirit than to the Logos, then Coakley's attention to the interruptive and "admittedly obscure" work of the Spirit warns contemplative enthusiasts that the principle of "*lex orandi, lex orandi*" ought not be evoked as assurance for facilely identifying revelation's Christocentric norms. As Coakley notes, in the historical development of the doctrine of the Trinity, we see "in the subtly different cases of Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Origen that mere appeal to such a vague implicit logic could not, as such, either predict or clarify some of the finer tuning of their pneumatologies, . . . their views of episcopal and spiritual authority, or their accompanying attitudes to gender."¹¹⁷ In light of that complex history, Coakley encourages us to conclude little more than that, on the one hand, "if one is resolutely not engaged in the practices of prayer, contemplation, and worship, then there are certain sorts of philosophical insight that are unlikely, if not impossible, to become available to one,"¹¹⁸ while, on the other hand, the effects for liberation and peace-seeking efforts are dire when

¹¹⁷ GSS, 133.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 16.

theologians take “a generically anti-secular” stance.¹¹⁹ Characteristically, her call for a “subversive element” within the “church type” doesn’t mean that the scriptural canon is to be thrown away or even thrown open; but neither should its contents, and church teaching around those contents, be viewed with romantic naïveté. Rather, compelled by “a more subtle understanding of the relation between prayer, liturgy, scriptural reflection, and rational engagement,”¹²⁰ theologians should set “the exegesis of complex scriptural texts in full relation to tradition, philosophical analysis, and ascetic practice.”¹²¹ In such an effort, secular thought and everyday incarnate realities ought not fade away from ecclesially situated interpretation; rather, they are to be fully respected as the very fabric of human relationship to God and the sites of God’s ongoing self-disclosure.

How might this speak to the *aporias* in Pannenberg’s and Frei’s hermeneutic approaches, as identified in chapter two? Coakley is insistent that “doctrine always has an embedded texture, a set of subliminal cultural and societal associations and evocations, as well as its ‘plain’ meaning,” and so, even in turning to a text deemed sacred, “often one must read between or under the lines to see what is going on doctrinally in context. The tools of the social sciences, when stripped of secularizing pretensions, are vital for any such investigation.”¹²² In her recommendation of riding social sciences of secularizing influence, it appears that Coakley would affirm Frei’s move to eschew theology’s *dependence* on secular philosophical or sociological foundations, and yet she would also caution that total withdrawal from those resources “repressively ignores the complex actualities of the lives of [Christianity’s] religious adherents”¹²³—and, by extension, the complicated lived

¹¹⁹ *GSS*, 16. Notably, Balthasar’s theological epistemology acknowledges the presence of revelatory truth in non-Christian discourses, be they religious or secular. The distinction between his position and Coakley’s on this point is that Balthasar doesn’t allow for overlooked aspects of revelation to be discovered in those contexts, in keeping with his view of revelation as the static property of the Roman Catholic Church.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 81.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 77.

realities of the faith communities out of which the scriptural texts arose. Sociology and philosophy are key tools for uncovering those realities, which have *theological* import in terms of the creative and critical enrichment of modern interpreters' understanding of biblical content.

Coakley might further warn that, while Frei's intention is not to be "generically anti-secular," his general withdrawal from the use of secular philosophy in the first stages of theologizing effectively presumes a "false disjunction" between the two discourses, with the result of banishing theology to the privatized sphere of church-talk.¹²⁴ On these grounds Coakley's doctrine of revelation is much closer to Pannenberg's, in that she champions the global-political value of a "brokered religious rationality"¹²⁵ while nevertheless maintaining that Christian thought entails philosophical insights that "cannot simply be 'conformed to the world' and its current philosophical or cultural presumptions without . . . an implicit critique of that 'world'."¹²⁶ Pannenberg would not, however, feel at home in Coakley's assertion that it is "a particular set of bodily and spiritual practices (both individual and liturgical)" that are the "pre-condition" for the sort of trinitarian philosophical insights that are central to the Christian worldview, and so "an Enlightenment-style appeal to a shared universal 'reason' can no longer provide an uncontentious basis for the adjudication of competing theological claims."¹²⁷ But it is precisely Coakley's position on this point that addresses the oversight inherent to Pannenberg's approach to scriptural interpretation, which is his not accounting for the subjective cast of faith-knowledge.

In this fashion, Coakley builds a convincing case that a "contemplative alternative" to "liberal theological stuckness in the knowing subject"—namely, a contemplative alternative that is attuned to the wisdom of a *théologie totale* approach—is exigent for opening up a much-needed

¹²⁴ *GSS*, 18.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

middle way between the dissatisfying options of fideism and secularism currently at play in Western Christian culture. Coakley's epistemological framework, which is interdependent with her vision of incorporative pneumatology, also appears to provide a vital doctrinal anchor point for *sola Scriptura* interpreters embracing the tools of the secular sciences without *de facto* succumbing to secularizing influences or theological triumphalism, relying with confidence upon the philosophical insights that become available to one via spiritual practices trained upon the Christomorphic shape of revelation. Arguably, she remains a critical realist where Balthasar slips into flights of romantic speculation in view of the marked limits to the knowledge afforded by contemplative practice. And yet, Coakley remains confident that even "Kantian nescience¹²⁸ may, under these conditions of contemplative commitment become 'dazzling darkness'; the 'limits' of knowledge may become limitless horizons of divine mystery."¹²⁹

As for the conditions of that contemplative commitment, Coakley remains insistent that they entail our "seeking to know, and speak of God, unknowingly;" and that it is also the "necessarily bodily practice of dispossession, humility, and effacement which, in the Spirit, causes us to learn incarnationally, and only so, the royal way of the Son to the Father."¹³⁰ For theological systematizing, this means giving voice to what one has discovered in contemplation and ratiocination, "but tentatively, and in a changed key."¹³¹ Coakley seeks to speak in that key, closing *God, Sexuality, and the Self* with the assurance that, "despite their format," her theses therein "are not uttered dogmatically but tentatively, for the contemplative can hardly afford to speak

¹²⁸ Coakley explains: "It was Immanuel Kant who put 'limits' (Grenzen) on what – as he argued – could be known of God speculatively in a 'scientific' metaphysics. Much of the force of the 'liberal' type of theology . . . resides in a particular reading of Kant on this point, one that declares any claims to interact directly with God to be philosophically insupportable" (*GSS*, 77, fn. 8).

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 78. "Indeed," she continues, "from this perspective the modern 'death of God' may turn out in retrospective to have been an absolutely necessary purgation of false gods, the prelude to a contemplative re-birth."

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 344.

otherwise.”¹³² From this perspective, Balthasar’s systematizing falls short of the apophatic Christian task because it declines to speak “unknowingly.” On this account, one might add that in his apophatic failure Balthasar does not live into his own avowal that God’s glory ever withdraws from the contemplative gaze and, consequently, from immediate translation into “any neutral truth or wisdom that can be ‘taught.’”¹³³ Hence, we learn from this comparison that pronouncements of apophatic commitment do not guard against the “onto-theological” danger, any more than does Balthasar’s assertion that his vision of the male-female relationship is one governed by mutuality and love.

Balthasar’s signal insight for this dissertation’s aims is his proposal that the analogy of being, when interpreted dramatically, preserves the freedom of human participation with God’s unfolding mission without conceding meaning. Unfortunately, by my analysis, Balthasar did not maintain that freedom as he applied his Spirit-afforded theologic. Perhaps he could have if he had envisioned the “great stream of revelation” as still flowing through history, according to the Spirit’s promptings beyond the doctrinal bounds of the Roman Catholic Church. Instead, he relegates the Spirit to the role of bringing believers to affirm the gospel drama as interpreted by the Magisterium and ossified in the Church’s hierarchical structures. By implication, we need a theodramatic construal of the *analogia entis* wherein humans are not merely audience members before the trinitarian drama, but are improvisational co-actors, responding to the cues of the Spirit and the leading actions of the Son. A Spirit-led model of incorporative interruption and disclosure such as Coakley’s can provide this theodramatic option, for in it the ontological connection between humanity and God is *in via*, highly mobile, unfolding through ongoing God-human intermingling.

To be more specific on this account, for Coakley, even the boundary between God and creation is rendered labile by the Spirit’s interruptive tugging at human desire for union with God,

¹³² *GSS*, 343.

¹³³ *TD I*, 16.

which is what occurs when the Word is made flesh. Under the influence of that divine pull, Coakley says:

In Christ, I meet the human One who, precisely in the Spirit, has effected that interruptive transfiguration of twoness. He has done so by crossing the boundary between another 'twoness' more fundamental even than the twoness of gender: the ontological twoness of the transcendent God and the created world. In crossing that boundary in the incarnation, Christ does not re-establish the boundary as before, nor—significantly—does he destroy it; rather, we might say that he 'transgresses' it in the Spirit, infusing the created world anew with divinity.¹³⁴

Notably, in rendering the God-world boundary porous, the Spirit's transgression does not *destroy* that boundary—like those signified by gender, and religious versus secular reasoning, God-human distinction endures under the Spirit's indwelling influence because it is rooted in relational differentiation. In the incarnation, the Holy Spirit expressly enables the transgression of the God-human boundary, and in doing so "infus[es] the created world anew with divinity" rather than re-establishing creation's inferior status before the Creator. Recalling Mercedes's concern (noted in chapter three) that Coakley's rendering of the God-world relation could bolster patriarchal arrangements between overlords and their dependents, we here find, in Coakley's approach to revelation, that the Spirit's function as the synergetic "third" of ecstatic love across difference provides another example of (and touchstone for) her framing creaturely dependence upon God as one of intimately cooperative rather than competitive relationship. This cooperation is what constitutes the incarnation's unfolding throughout the cosmos. One could say that, in the theodramatic model Coakley employs, the "Father" as author "places each 'order' of being precisely where it is destined to flourish in ecstatic response to the Spirit's own ecstatic lure."¹³⁵ Our dramatic role as participant-believers is like a Spirit-prompted improvisation upon the patterns we encounter in Christ's life, death, and resurrection. Through that improvisation, wherein we must

¹³⁴ GSS, 57.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 321.

continually and deliberately cede control to the Spirit's guidance, we experience over time our own lives expanding in ecstatic return to the authorial source.

* * *

This chapter opened by noting chapter three's query regarding Coakley's Christological affirmation in *Powers and Submissions* of "self-effaced" humanity corresponding with "authentic divine power," noting that that pronouncement could leave the reader wondering if Coakley aligns with Balthasar's position that humans are to be the passive recipients of divine self-disclosure, the audience witnessing a stage drama that they turn to reproduce in their local contexts. That curiosity is heightened by the fact that Coakley looks to silent, contemplative prayer as the context wherein humans make the crucial discovery that, when one "ceases to set the agenda," the realization of "the human impossibility of prayer . . . drives one to comprehend . . . [that] it is not I who autonomously prays, but God (the Holy Spirit) who prays in me, and so answers the eternal call of the 'Father,' drawing me by various painful degrees into the newly expanded life of 'Sonship.'"¹³⁶ The engagement with Coakley's work in this chapter supports an argument that, in the terms of Balthasar's theodramatic roles, Coakley envisions humans much more along the lines of improvisational actors upon the revelatory stage of world history, responding creatively to the Spirit's direction, "riffing on" the Son's leading action within the bounds of the Father's authorship. Given Coakley's pragmatic insistence that we cannot ever arrive at a point of church teaching that is completely protected against "abuse and distortion,"¹³⁷ these improvising believers will be wary to trust that, pre-eschaton, the desires of any non-divine human (including Mary) have been utterly receptive to the Spirit's direction and can thus communicate the benefits of that transparency to

¹³⁶ GSS, 55-56.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 343.

other improvisers in communal proximity.¹³⁸ In stark contrast with Balthasar's quietist Mary, then, Coakley's paradigmatic contemplative "will always stand at the edges of institutional acceptability, always be pressing to an 'orthodoxy' beyond mere propositional assent."¹³⁹

For all of these reasons I have identified Coakley's pneumatological epistemology as "more apocalyptic" than Balthasar's without its being *utterly* (and thus impractically) apocalyptic, given her commitment to the fluid yet extant epistemic boundaries operative in church-world and interpersonal relations. The lingering question the reader may still put to Coakley, however, is whether she understands human desire and self-expression as *intended* to be entirely receptive to God in Christ. Though such "transparency" may be wholly unrealistic for our contemplative activity pre-eschaton, is it the goal toward which the Spirit finally directs us? The concluding section of this chapter will take up this question as it concerns the God-human relation undergirding revelation and, more specifically, Coakley's *théologie totale* as a potential route beyond the PIP.

Looking Ahead: Towards a Transfigured Marian Profile

While Coakley's language about God-human distinction and comingling of desires hints at the Spirit not just allowing but actually *inviting* human expression into the economy of revelation, her emphasis on contemplative space-making leaves us wondering what it means for the human *to* be self-expressive before God. Are we at our best when our purged desires render us a blank slate to be filled with God's self-expression? This question echoes concerns taken up in chapter three: in a creation *ex nihilo* paradigm, are humans destined to be anything other than translucent recipients

¹³⁸ As Leahy explains this relation, within Balthasar's Marian paradigm, "the environment of sacramental life in the Church contains as its presupposition the dimension of perfect ecclesial faith. The perfect Marian-ecclesial act of faith completes and perfects what we have done incompletely and imperfectly. We find ourselves in a Spirit-formed and Marian transparency alongside Christ in his reception of life from the Father and response to that gift" (Leahy, 115).

¹³⁹ GSS, 341-42.

of divine self-disclosure? This is a concern central to the PIP, because it bears implications regarding the propriety of humans adding subjective textures to revelation's meaning. For example, Karl Barth's intent to train all focus upon the objective content of revelation is connected with his framing God's self-expression and its reception as a unified act of the trinitarian God. With regard to the creature's proper role in revelation's mediation, "God in Himself is neither deaf nor dumb," Barth explains, "but speaks and hears His Word from all eternity, so outside His eternity He does not wish to be without hearing or echo, that is, without the ears and voices of the creature."¹⁴⁰ Is this all that God desires from the creature's voice: an echo of God's self-expression? Another way of framing this question is as Balthasar does: "What does God gain from the world?" In answering his own question, Balthasar says: "An additional gift."¹⁴¹ But what exactly is "additional" or "gift"-like about the world's response to God is difficult to identify in Balthasar's Christophorous formulation of it, wherein the Spirit moves humans towards Marian transparency to Christ's relation to the Father, through which they echo Christ's kenotic response to the Father's love. One wonders what is being "added" by or "received" from a world that is to become utterly transparent to the Son's own transparency.

Does God desire an echo of God's self-expression from the created world? From a creation *ex nihilo* perspective, there is a sense in which the answer to that question must simply be, "yes." This doctrine maintains that God's "desire" for creation is identified with God's *willing* creation into existence. And, as says Thomas Aquinas, "God's will is to be thought of as existing outside the realm of existents, as a cause from which pours forth everything that exists in all its variant forms."¹⁴² If we accept that affirmation—and understand that God's activity is the context of human freedom

¹⁴⁰ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/1, trans. G. W. Bromley and T.F. Torrance, ed. Frank McCombie (London: T&T Clark, 2009) 50.

¹⁴¹ See *TD V*, 475-76.

¹⁴² Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's 'Peri Hermeneias'*, 1 Lect, 14. in Timothy McDermott, ed. *Aquinas: Selected Philosophical Writings* (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1993), 282-83.

rather than the action of a “bigger” agent which infringes upon our own range of activity—then, as Herbert McCabe explains, we must also accept that “wherever anything is, we can say that God is, and similarly we can say that whenever anything acts, God acts.”¹⁴³ The same holds true for the *goodness* of all existents. As McCabe goes on to note, there can be “no good achievement of anything, whether in nature or in man, which is not done by God.”¹⁴⁴ This is because God’s will is creative, “a cause from which pours forth everything that exists,” including the goodness of all things; God’s love has the potency to bring about the goodness of what God loves. God’s self-understanding which is interwoven with God’s creative loving is what the New Testament names as the *Logos*: the founding order of the cosmos and thus of all knowledge, “the light which enlightens everyone” in Johanne terms. Through the gifts of faith and charity, human creatures may come to share in that divine self-understanding and love without thereby ceding their own agential activity. Framed within this classical paradigm, then, God’s intended end for creation is very much for it to cohere with God’s self-expression in the Son, because that loving self-expression is the intended form of the world in its goodness (that is, free of the deprivations of evil).

But there are theological possibilities within a creation *ex nihilo* paradigm to imagine another sense in which we may understand God’s loving desire for creation, wherein gains something irreplaceable from creation’s distinction from God. Jonathan Edwards’ doctrine of creation could be read as offering an example. In Edwards’ view, God must be creation’s goal because God is “infinitely the greatest and best of things”¹⁴⁵ —i.e., nothing that *is* is superior to God, and God certainly does not need the world to exist in order to be God. However, because God’s very self is found in giving, God accordingly “seek[s] himself” as “diffused and expressed,” God’s life and

¹⁴³ McCabe, 86.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁴⁵ Jonathan Edwards, “*A Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World*,” in *Two Dissertations* (Cambridge: Macmillan, 1876) I: 4.

goodness shared.¹⁴⁶ God's outpouring of the creation thus functions as an *extension* of divine fullness, with God pleasuring "in diffusing and communicating to the creature,"—note, rather than finding pleasure "in receiving from the creature," in the power-over manner of patriarchal dominance.¹⁴⁷ At the risk of misconstruing Edwards' creation theology for my own purposes, in his picture of a God who creates *ex nihilo* for the delight of sharing the bounty of divine life and goodness, one could detect the analogical inklings of an erotic-type of longing in God *to be known* by a non-divine other. As created extensions of God's self-expressive life, those non-divine others are themselves centers of the relational yearning to be known; as extensions of God's goodness, they are centers of the relational yearning to know. While God's love is creative of existence itself, the creature's love is also creative, in the sense of it being a cultivating force, drawing out the expressions of creaturely others and even of Godself.

In many respects, such a model is quite similar to the paradigm Balthasar sets up with his theo-dramatic approach to God-world relations. For Balthasar, God does not need the world to actualize Godself, and yet God's being-as-glory is realized in a genuinely new way through creation, within the dramatic action of the incarnation.¹⁴⁸ However, Balthasar's rendering of the Christoform human *telos* as Christophorous renders his theo-drama a production to which revelation's recipients are merely a receptive audience who are to reproduce the witnessed drama. As noted above, Coakley's pneumatological model of the incarnation's worldly unfolding offers something far

¹⁴⁶ Edwards, "Ethical Writings," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1957-2008) 8: 459.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 448.

¹⁴⁸ As Nichols explains Balthasar's thinking, in the event of the incarnation the "personal substance of the Father in his Word is now lavished on the world. And yet, because the creation was from the beginning oriented towards its own supernatural elevation . . . it follows that the self-manifestation of God in Jesus Christ brings the form of the world to its perfection, and in that way uncovers the fullness of its significance for the first time" (35; cf. Balthasar, *GL I*, 432). The reader may also recall that Balthasar challenges Barth's assertion that the commonality between God and world is created by God through faith, resulting in the *analogia fidei* relationship between God and humanity. Balthasar contends that this analogy of faith is only legitimate on the basis of the *analogia entis* as depicted in de Lubac's nature-grace thesis.

closer to a theodramatic paradigm wherein humans are improvisational co-actors, responding to Christ's leading role through the direction of the Spirit (rather than issuing rehearsed repetition of what they encounter in Christ). In such a model, we find that God's life expands through the non-divine other by way of its creative self-expression infused with the Spirit's directive presence. The question of evil—that is, the question of *why* God would author a world wherein the creature's responsive freedom includes the possibility of rejecting the Spirit's lure toward communion with God through Christoform Sonship—is not neatly resolved here. The eschatological in-breaking of Christ's resurrection assures us that the infinitely creative God has the power to fulfill God's purposes for creation, though it does not afford knowledge of *how* the incarnational drama will unfold through our agential actions;¹⁴⁹ and we are called to take up practices that render us receptively labile to the Spirit's direction. For Coakley, this means we must doggedly attend to our fallen desires as they are manifest in and reinforced by our communicative actions, and there is no better way to go about this difficult work than by embracing the “slow but steady assault on idolatry which only the patient practices of [non-discursive] prayer can allow God to do in us.”¹⁵⁰

At this stage in our close look at Coakley's work, if we accept the notion that God somehow authors and thus delights in responsive human distinction, we may wonder if Coakley's contemplative “love affair with a blank”¹⁵¹ ought to be held more clearly in concert with some account of how our dialogic¹⁵² self-expression is also (at least, potentially) a site of transformative communion with God. Coakley comes closest to naming such a divine longing for human self-

¹⁴⁹ On this account, Pannenberg's ontology of expectation and Coakley's spiritual senses epistemology might be placed in mutually enlightening conversation with one another, perhaps with Pannenberg's ontology framed as emerging from the contemplative mode of participatory knowledge. I cannot pursue this analysis in this project, but such a project may hold promise for future attention to the philosophical principles coinciding with the hermeneutic approach toward which I am working.

¹⁵⁰ *GSS*, 325.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 342.

¹⁵² I am here employing the notion that all language is dialogical, endlessly responsive to what has already been said and in anticipation of what will be said in turn.

distinction in her look at Pseudo-Dionysius, noting that he makes a “daring metaphysical move” when he attributes “ecstatic yearning not only to human lovers of God, but also, prototypically, to divine love of creation.”¹⁵³ There is potential to extend these implications of the *ekstasis* doctrine further than Coakley does, imagining “the cost and the joy” of God’s “truly ‘ecstatic’ attention” to creation as the context wherein we are invited to speak improvisationally into the Word-event, framed as a discursive occasion.

Notably, in Coakley’s treatment of language thus far, she has primarily considered speech as a means for *referring* to God, situating it within the tradition of analogical negation tied to the kataphatic/apophatic dialectic. Drawing upon this school of thought, Coakley grants that a “symbolic bombardment,” such as that characterizing the trinitarian tradition, “should not be seen merely as a theological problem.”¹⁵⁴ Rather, as Gregory of Nyssa and Pseudo-Dionysius demonstrate, “metaphorical profusion can aid, just as much as distract from, the epistemic stripping necessary to right contemplation of the divine. We can start with . . . outrageous multiple cultural meanings and move, through contemplative purgation, to an ascetic alignment with God’s purposes.”¹⁵⁵ In the terms of this understanding of reference to the divine, the pray-er begins with a plethora of names for God as the starting place for a contemplative climb, through negation of those many references, towards wordless encounter with God. That negation movement is driven by a “slow but steady assault on idolatry which only the patient practices of prayer can allow God to do in us,” Coakley notes.¹⁵⁶ The Spirit is at work in this progressive sacrifice of meanings, which affords noetic transformation through the purgation of the contemplative’s will and intellect, ultimately

¹⁵³ *GSS*, 314.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 309.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 325.

“contributing to an expanded objectivity of standpoint, rather than an intensified subjectivity.”¹⁵⁷

On the other side of that purgative process, words are resurrected—at least, in the sense of new semantic formulae taking shape as contemplatives seek to articulate the discoveries afforded by the apophatic experience of being drawn into Christ. Coakley avows that this contemplative experience will “recas[t] our whole sense of how language for God works,”¹⁵⁸ and those semantic formulae will accordingly be offered tentatively rather than dogmatically.

It is worth pausing here to emphasize that, in taking issue with Coakley’s treatment of language, I do not question the value of apophatic contemplation as a source for divinely afforded transfiguration and transformed theological reference (and, as she elsewhere frames it, for uniquely enabling one’s commitment to justice).¹⁵⁹ On all of these accounts, I find Coakley’s recommendation that Christians invite the Spirit’s incorporative presence by submitting to the discipline of wordless prayer compelling. I do question, however, Coakley’s foremost association of “symbolic bombardment” and “multiple cultural meanings” with the need for purgative silencing *rather than also* with occasions rife with potential for facilitating ecstatic communion with God. Coakley acknowledges this potential in *certain* communicative forms when she underscores artistic representation of the Trinity that “(in its most creative and original moments) point[s] out beyond literalism and ideology to something both richly symbolic and at the same time apophatic in its imaginative dimensions.”¹⁶⁰ She thus highlights the potential in specific forms of dialogic expression—namely, here, in the representative mode of the visual arts—to hold together

¹⁵⁷ *GSS*, 26.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 325.

¹⁵⁹ Coakley says: “there is much talk of the problem of attending to the otherness of the ‘other’ in contemporary post-Kantian ethics and post-colonial theory; but there is very little about the intentional and embodied practices that might enable such attention. . . . The moral and epistemic stripping that is endemic to the act of contemplation is a vital key here: its practiced self-emptying inculcates an attentiveness that is beyond merely good political intentions. Its practice is more discomfiting, more destabilizing to settled presuppositions, than a simple intentional design on empathy” (*GSS*, 48).

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 260.

kataphatic and apophatic spiritual import by simultaneously evoking self-expression and self-opening, boundaries and their transversal, for “speakers” and their audiences.

I would press Coakley to consider that this alignment can occur not only in masterful aesthetic productions, but also in the most mundane of speech-acts. Philosophers of language, from St. Augustine to the post-structuralist “queer theorists,” never cease to draw attention to the instability of our language, to its inability to “hit the mark” toward which it aims. It seems Coakley has not detected that this vulnerability inherent to dialogic utterance presents an opportunity for the “recognition of rich unconscious elements” and the “transcendence of narrow rationality” which she finds in the practice of wordless contemplation.¹⁶¹ That is, our attempts to “say what we mean” before a listening audience—particularly in the awareness of our final inability to do so—*can* occasion a “seepage” of our selves, as well as of our dialogic interlocutors, in a manner that aligns with the “admittedly obscure” work of the Spirit. By extension, our kenotic or “Marian” incorporation into God’s trinitarian life could be envisioned in the terms of an ecstatic encounter between two speaking parties, wherein our confluence into each other’s lives has soteriological import for the human respondent to God’s self-communication. Such an account may be a needed addition to Coakley’s *théologie totale* picture of Spirit-led revelation, particularly for the sake of moving beyond the PIP, for it would address the anxieties readers have over adding subjective meanings to the Bible’s revelatory content.

We could say, for instance, that our expression’s potential to unite apophatic and communicative impulses is rooted not only in the *vulnerability* of speech-making, but also in the delight of dialogic interaction, likened to the act of love-making Coakley thematizes by way of Irigaray: our reception of another’s (namely, here, God’s own) self-expression involves a “shared outpouring” and a “loss of boundary . . . of the body, leaving the circle which encloses my solitude to

¹⁶¹ GSS, 342.

meet in a shared space.”¹⁶² And if the Spirit is analogous to that irreducible “ecstasy of ourself in us . . . prior to any ‘child’,”¹⁶³ then we might playfully say that the “children” born of this amorous union include our responsive, improvisational attempts to represent that encounter in word and deed, in our own answerable acts whereby the Spirit works to unfold the Incarnation. In two senses, then, the Spirit-led activity in incarnational revelation has enabled both the Word made flesh in Christ and the “the flesh made W/word,” so to speak: first, in the sense that we are adopted into Sonship (and so “made Word”) through the apophatic features of this incorporative *ekstasis*, and second, in the sense that our encounter with God’s self-communication results in our own discursive contribution to the meaning of this dialogic event (and so the Incarnation is unfolding as it is “made word”). Consequently, whether or not we responsibly receive that graced invitation inherent to God’s communication with us is a matter of paramount importance, one that surely underscores the value of deliberating over what sort of dialogical activity serves to further the kenotic “space-making” necessary for attending to another’s expression.

A touchstone for developing this account is, I believe, expanding Coakley’s conviction that our worldly categories can be “rendered sacramental by participation in Christ.”¹⁶⁴ One may begin that expansion by noting that, just as Christ in the Spirit crosses the ontological boundary between transcendent God and created world “transformatively, but without obliteration of otherness,” so does the Creator’s love source the mystery of distinctive human self-expression in response to divine self-communication—which, accordingly, includes our semiotic contributions to the historically unfolding meanings of the Word-event. In this dissertation’s final chapter I work to develop such a rendering of communication, suggesting, fundamentally, that communication before God can occasion transformation akin to that afforded by silent contemplation, and that what unites

¹⁶² See fn. 87, above.

¹⁶³ Irigaray quoted in Coakley, *ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ *GSS*, 54.

these two movements is a specific sort of Christoform sacramentality. As the human archetype of Sonship, Christ contains both spiritually receptive and spiritually generative elements; by extension, so too do all believers grafted into Sonship by the Spirit. Within this Christological paradigm, revelation is a dialogic event wherein the Word made flesh invites the self-expression of the human audience, and the church as a sacrament of human unity with God *makes use of* but is not to be *confused with* a corporate institution. It is, rather, a cosmic reality that occurs at all sites of communal response to Christ through the power of the Spirit, enlivened by a kenoticism which is characterized by the embraced risks of self-expression before God and others. I will suggest that such a sacramental theology of communication is helpful for explaining how the God-human encounter fundamentally evokes but also chastens human desires and constructions as it incorporates them into the unfolding Word-event through particular discursive practices in the attempt to interpret Scripture together. This exposition thus affords a desideratum for addressing the Protestant interpretation problem at a practical-ecclesial level.

As a metaphorical entrée for this analysis, I will close this fourth chapter by hinting at the promise this vision holds for a refiguring—or, perhaps more fittingly, a *transfiguring?*—of Balthasar’s doctrine of Marian participation in revelation, which will figure in my hermeneutic proposal in chapter five. This thematic decision may strike my reader as odd, considering that I have labored throughout the past two chapters to expose Balthasar’s Marian teaching as gravely stultifying for lay persons, especially women, and as problematically implicated with a view of revelation that subordinates and thus quells the dynamism of the Spirit. What’s more, many feminist thinkers find Mariology—particularly with regard to Mary’s acceptance in the *fiat* of the Annunciation scene—simply unredeemable for feminist purposes.¹⁶⁵ If they do take up the challenge of appropriating Marianism, it is often by offering creative readings of her role in the

¹⁶⁵ Coakley lucidly outlines the reasons for such rejection or skepticism in her essay “Mariology and ‘Romantic Feminism’: A Critique” in *Women’s Voices: Essays in Contemporary Feminist Theology*, ed. Teresa Elwes (London: Marshal Pickering, 1992) 97-110.

incarnation that subvert traditional androcentric interpretations—as, for instance, when Mary Daly celebrates the immaculate conception as a site of female autonomy, wherein the virginal Mary is “not defined exclusively by her relationships with men.”¹⁶⁶ Others have appealed to traditions of Marian devotion to support analyses of the female situation as a complex configuration of oppressions and unsuspected opportunities for agency. A famous example on this account is Julia Kristeva’s thematic work with Mary’s maternity in “Stabat Mater;” another instance can be found in Rosemary Radford Ruether’s liberationist reading of Mary as one who, specifically as a woman, “embodies and personifies the oppressed and subjugated *people*.”¹⁶⁷

My present commitment to a constructive “transfiguring” of Balthasar’s Marian doctrine, while not a feminist one in the strictest sense of being focused specifically upon the goal of women’s liberation, does arguably serve a feminist end, in that it builds upon the deconstruction of Balthasar’s romantic view of the feminine towards breaking open the “idolatrous twoness of the patriarchal dyad” at work in his doctrine of God-human interaction.¹⁶⁸ The final trajectory of this effort is to imagine how, through that dyad’s dismantling, it may be reconstructed in view of the “thirdness” of the Spirit’s indwelling. This seems a worthy endeavor because, I believe, the image of nuptial self-expropriation is rich in potential for an illuminating reformulation of the “Marian” (or submissive) church’s self-expressive relation to God, particularly with regard to its “maternal” role in “birthing forth” and then “nurturing” the sacramental body of Scripture, when cast in this new light.

In summary, this transfiguring of Balthasar’s Marianism by following traces of the Spirit’s “thirdness” will entail a disruption of his construal of the bodily* ceding of control to God in the

¹⁶⁶ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 84; quoted in Coakley, “Mariology and ‘Romantic Feminism,’” 99.

¹⁶⁷ R. R. Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk* (London: SCM, 1983) 155; quoted in Coakley, “Mariology and ‘Romantic Feminism,’” 105.

¹⁶⁸ Borrowing Coakley’s phrasing from *GSS*, 327.

“nuptial” embrace of Christ and his “body/bride,” the church. Mary’s “motherly and bridal” function as the archetypical believer is to be fundamentally reframed. In her “bridal” role as Christ’s partner, Mary’s function as Christ’s “other self” now bears the implication that He is also, through the Spirit’s ecstatic union across difference, Mary’s “other self,” taking her self-expression into his own as the Word incarnate. In theodramatic terms, as Mary improvises the moves of Sonship in dialogic interaction with Christ, the Spirit unfolds the expanding meanings of the incarnation in history. Meanwhile, acknowledging the ambiguity of even the voluntary maternal experience of gestating, birthing, and nurturing a child, and the multiple forms of knowing deployed in those exercises, adds generative angles to the Marian/maternal metaphor for the church’s role in bringing forth the “stream of revelation,” in the forms of the biblical canon and its interpretation. In both of these bodily analogues (bridal and maternal) for the God-human relation in the Word-event, we are compelled to image the boundaries between human self-expression and God’s self-expression just as they are disrupted, and to consider that—pre-eschaton—that intermingling is never complete, always including the destitution of waiting for life to emerge as well as ecstatic fulfillment in its doing so. This transfigured profile of the “Marian” church opens into a hermeneutic paradigm wherein the struggles that produce scriptural testimony, canonization, and interpretation are all sites of and for sacramental encounter with the trinitarian God. It thus holds promise for energizing ecclesial vocation in a world where incarnational revelation is still unfolding by the wending way of the Holy Spirit, both at the heart and the margins of discourse. In anticipation of that promise, let us now turn to this dissertation’s fifth and final chapter.

Chapter V

Word Made Flesh, Flesh Made Word: Discourse as Sacramental Site of Revelatory Encounter

This dissertation has been committed to delineating an interlocking set of hermeneutic problems that beleaguer biblical interpretation in Protestant communities—particularly those I have identified as operating with “low church/high Scripture” commitments, i.e., who have most emphatically eschewed the need for a clerical teaching office under the conviction that Scripture speaks clearly enough that it alone is needed for every individual’s discernment of God’s will. This analysis is given urgency by enduring quandaries regarding the nature of responsible interpretation and biblical authority once contemporary readers come to terms with the hermeneutic breach that exists between them and the originating communities that produced and canonized the biblical material. That urgency is heightened in view of a persistent trend in Protestant circles: that, when incompatible interpretations of the Bible arise, the ecclesial body often splinters along lines of disagreement regarding which reading is authoritative. Many of these groups have come to terms with the fact that the traditional *sola Scriptura* approaches are untenable for identifying how revelation is mediated in and through the believing *community* and its discursive practices—but the way forward is not clearly marked. They find it mired in modern-day polemics between fideistic versus accommodationist options on one side, and, on the other, between mystery-denying propositionalism versus experientialism that precludes objective truth. Such is the nature of the contemporary Protestant interpretation problem (PIP), and it calls us to ask: if these communities are to find a way out of these dissatisfying options and beyond the PIP, which of the teachings and practices associated with *sola Scriptura* demands revising? Is any worth keeping, and which might warrant abandoning altogether?

Any viable answer to that set of questions necessitates closely examining how the constellation of hermeneutic issues that constitute the PIP is anchored to an equally complex history of practical and philosophical commitments. I have endeavored to chart some of the most

prominent episodes in that history, demonstrating along the way that, while these challenges take distinctive shape in “low church” Protestant circles, they are hardly limited to that group’s concerns. Rather, these issues open into long-standing (and often contentious) conversations in Christian theology—concerning, for instance, the ambiguous relations of natural and special revelation, of theory and praxis, of human agency and divine grace, and of Christology and pneumatology, to name a few. Given these wide-ranging historical, philosophical, and theological implications—not to mention the sophisticated engagement with these hermeneutic issues taken up by theologians of prodigious intellect, only a handful of whom I have analyzed in this work—it would be the height of hubris were I to propose this closing chapter’s aim to be that of “solving” the Protestant interpretation problem. My more realistic goal is simply to build upon this dissertation’s engagement with the thinkers it has surveyed so as to enter into conversations regarding what it might take, in terms of theory and praxis, for “low church/high Scripture” readers to move beyond the interpretation conundrums that constitute the modern PIP.

In view of the hermeneutic paradigms appraised in this project, I propose that the various commitments undergirding the PIP find continuity within the Protestant movement, as well as continuity with interpretive challenges endemic to the “high(er) church/high Scripture” approaches (represented by Balthasar’s and Coakley’s projects), in their sharing a characteristic feature. It is one we may identify in terms offered in a reflection from Jacques Derrida, who says:

There is always a surprise in store for the anatomy or physiology of any criticism that might think it had mastered the game, surveyed all the threads at once, deluding itself, too, in wanting to look at the text without touching it, without laying a hand on the ‘object,’ without risking—which is the only chance of entering the game, by getting a few fingers caught—the addition of some new thread.¹

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 63. As Ellen T. Armour explains, this book by Derrida was intended to “troubl[e] distinctions between inside/outside and assumptions about texts as self-enclosed wholes,” which agenda Derrida pursues in *Dissemination* by “soliciting the idea of the book . . . in order to reveal what constitutes it and what exceeds it.” See Armour, *Deconstruction, Feminist Theology, and the Problem of Difference: Subverting the Race/Gender Divide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 53, 55.

Setting aside any of its implied association with the urge towards mastery, I would argue that the longing Derrida here identifies—that is, the desire to “look at the text without touching it, without laying a hand on the ‘object,’ without risking . . . the addition of some new thread”—is one that all of the authors I have surveyed (“low church” and “high(er) church” alike) somehow demonstrate in their interpretive approaches to the object of revelation in Jesus Christ. It is worth noting that, in a “postmodern” milieu, there is a sense in which it is incumbent upon interpreters to commend a yearning to “look at the text without touching it,” given our wariness of meta-narratives and the likelihood and dangers of blind projection in interpretive acts. Moreover, Christians who believe in the universal human need for life-long sanctification have good reason to affirm the interpreter’s desire which Derrida here describes, insofar as that desire is seated in the interpreter wishing her understanding to be directed by God rather than by her own erring will. Arguably, however, these two commitments are not incompatible with Derrida’s contention that a reader who wants to interpret without adding “some new thread” can be compelled by a misguided longing. This fifth chapter proposes that there is something in Derrida’s claim which warrants careful attention for readers who ascribe to such values—values which are, at their root, sprung from professed commitment to engage in *just* interpretation.

At the end of chapter four, I proposed that Coakley’s foremost association of “symbolic bombardment” with the stage for a climb through purgative silencing ought to be balanced with an account of that bombardment *also* being rife with potential for facilitating ecstatic communion with God; the vulnerability and desire fueling and informed by dialogical exchange *can* occasion, I contended, a “recognition of rich unconscious elements” and “transcendence of narrow rationality” like that Coakley discovers in silent prayer.² In keeping with that assertion, the misstep Derrida detects in desiring to “look at the text without touching it,” wishing to engage the object of interpretation without “risking . . . getting a few fingers caught,” urges us to consider whether this

² *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay ‘On the Trinity’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 342 (subsequently cited as *GSS*).

project's sampling of theologians have taken seriously enough the theological *value* of the human's subjective construction in interpretive acts. Could it be that the revelatory God-human encounter not only does not warrant the annihilation of human desire-filled constructions, but quite pointedly evokes and incorporates them into its incarnate form? In sounding out this possibility, I turn for a final look at the hermeneutic projects of Luther, Barth, Pannenberg, Frei, Balthasar, and Coakley, which collectively signify a wide range of hermeneutic potentialities vis-à-vis Derrida's critique. I propose that a point of commonality amongst their approaches resides in their all exhibiting a desire to "look at the text without touching it," demonstrating or demonstrated *in* their doubt that the subjectively constructive interpreter contributes anything of value to revelation's mediation.

It is important to acknowledge that this thesis is technically anachronistic when applied to the work of Martin Luther. After all, he and his contemporaries did not build their interpretation doctrines with modern post-Schleiermacherian and/or post-Kantian awareness of the human subject's constructive projection in interpretive acts. In Luther's revelation paradigm we can, however, find noteworthy indicators of the theological commitment to hermeneutic neutrality that is long-standing in the Protestant reading tradition, the modern iterations of which are discernible in the works of Barth, Pannenberg, and Frei. Furthermore, as is substantiated by reflection upon the contemplative projects of Balthasar and Coakley, the trappings of this hermeneutic orientation are not limited to the company of "low(er) church" thinkers. One might summarily say that Luther assumes an interpretive position that is freed of anything *like* constructive projection by way of the Holy Spirit's inspiration; by contrast, the theologians of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries here surveyed all accept the human tendency to construct meanings subjectively, even under the Spirit's influence. They join Luther, however, in envisioning—as a Christological ideal—a hermeneutic position wherein humans respond to divine self-disclosure without "adding threads" to that "text's" objective meaning; and they characterize the Holy Spirit's sanctifying and illuminating work in keeping with that ideal.

It is my proposal in this final chapter that the ideal of receiving revelation without “adding a thread” to it ought to be carefully revised for the sake of moving beyond the PIP (and other interpretive solecisms). For this revision to occur judiciously and not haphazardly—that is, in the service of just interpretation rather than for furthering the agendas of intellectual authority-figures—it must be continually offered to God, submitted to the transfiguring fire of the Holy Spirit’s presence, through deliberate attention to our hermeneutic presumptions and practices. Toward that end, I endeavor to conclude this chapter by outlining a practical-hermeneutic framework for the interpretive body. As a way beyond the PIP, that framework is favorable to some of the orienting commitments of “low church/high Scripture” believers and yet also calls them to relinquish other traditional commitments altogether. I work toward these ends in three moves. First, I pull evidence for the Derridean critique from my engagement with the thinkers in chapters one through four, identifying the features of their work wherein they exhibit commitment to the Christoform interpreter becoming utterly (and only) receptive of God’s self-revelation, and identifying potential evidence of the “delusion” of that commitment. Second, I draw upon theologies of the sacramental grace of embodiment so as to shed light on supports for an alternative hermeneutic paradigm, one that maintains the import of humans submitting their wills to the Spirit’s guidance in interpretive acts while also envisioning a positive place for subjective construction along that Spirit-led way. Third and finally, I revisit the transfigured Marian profile I proposed at the end of chapter four in order to propose some entry-points for this alternative paradigm to take root in the imagination and practices of “low church/high Scripture” communities who seek a way beyond the “Protestant interpretation problem.”

The Utterly Receptive Reader: A Misguided Hermeneutic Ideal

Sola Scriptura from Luther to Barth: The Delusion of Operative (Only) Grace?

Beginning with the work of Martin Luther, we can identify therein the germinating seeds of modern theological doubt—particularly of the “low church” variety—that the human interpreter could bring anything worthwhile to revelation’s earthly mediation. Those seeds are perhaps most apparent in Luther’s manner of eschewing the reigning metaphysical paradigm and its view of cooperative grace in support of his “priesthood of all believers” teaching. Luther argued that, according to Scripture, Christ acts “alone as mediator, atoning sacrifice, high priest and intercessor,”³ and all believers participate equally in Christ’s priesthood through their baptism. Hence, the principal functions of Christ’s priesthood are equally accessible to all believers as spiritual priests, including the knowledge of the Word provided by the Holy Spirit who guided the writing of Scripture; accordingly, “a layman who has Scripture is more than Pope or council without it.”⁴ Luther’s denying the need for an ordained teaching office on this basis is co-implicated with his eschewal of the Dionysian metaphysical picture of reality in favor of his intuitive understanding of Scripture’s *claritas* and *sola fide* concentration. The “delusion” in his hermeneutic position is attested in his unsatisfactory manner of accounting for the distance between the human words of Scripture (and the believer’s interpretation of them) and the divine Word to which those words attest.

Luther argued that the neo-scholastic metaphysical system erred in presuming that one must transcend material reality to contemplate the divine presence when, in truth, created things function as God’s self-giving “masks.” For Luther, in other words, there is no peering behind the surface of created things to view the essence of God, which is always present-yet-hidden in the

³ Martin Luther, *Augsburg Confession*, Art. XXI. trans. Kolb, R., Wengert, T., and Arand, C. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000).

⁴ Quoted in F.W. Farrar, *History of Interpretation: Eight Lectures Preached Before the University of Oxford in the Year 1885* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1886), 326.

world around us. This position informs Luther's *verbum reale* teaching, which similarly asserts that God's Word is always present to human witnesses on the surface of materiality, and its meaning is made clear to those witnesses when they are guided by the Spirit. Luther anchored the latter position to the doctrine of operative grace and God giving God's people special words and understanding via the Holy Spirit's inspiring presence. He acknowledged, that is, the distinction between fallen human words and the divine Word, and he also asserted Scripture's evident doctrinal concentration; the theological-epistemological framework he relied upon to support those claims was an appeal to the Holy Spirit's providing such common sense perception through operative grace.

On these grounds, Luther did not deem it necessary to distinguish between God's will and human acts of interpretation on the condition that the interpreter is under the pneumatological influence of operative grace. He consequently treated the Bible as if it were a *sui generis* artifact, speaking humanly (with its partially unclear *verba*) yet without original sin (via its self-interpreting "spiritual sense," made clear to those led by the Spirit). In view of his maintaining a *sui generis* view of Scripture, I have argued that Luther's move away from the metaphysical model of hierarchical relations in favor of personalistic soteriological categories was conflicted. He eschewed grappling with that conflict by appealing to the Spirit-afforded *claritas* of the text's concentrated meaning—be that text sacred *or* secular—which meaning is, ostensibly, produced without the human's contribution.⁵ Signs of "delusion" in this appeal to inspiration are evidenced in its depending upon the Spirit making revelation's central meaning equally clear to all of the saved by way of common sense perception. As the Reformation movement gained numbers, that expectation came to continual disappointment as its adherents witnessed the Protestant communities splintering in the midst of intercommunal disputes regarding Scripture's core meaning and implications.

⁵ As I explained in chapter one, Luther came to affirm not only that we are saved by faith alone but also that, in salvation's process, divine grace justifies us only operatively and extrinsically, rather than also cooperatively (i.e., in conjunction with the human will toward good works) and/or substantively (i.e., as a power God infuses in humans).

In this view of Luther's "*sola fide*" approach to revelation, Barth's hermeneutic approach is distinguished by his wrestling with the hermeneutic conundrum that Luther bequeathed to post-Reformation Protestants. Luther had rejected the reigning metaphysical paradigm of his day, which explained the distance between human understanding and God's Word in terms of the gradations of nature and holiness. He maintained that that distance exists, but only in terms of common human finitude and sinfulness; and he overcame that distance theologically by appealing to true believers' common reception of the Spirit's clarifying presence. This appeal failed to account for the distance between divine Word and human words, even if the human is under the influence of grace. As Barth dealt with post-Enlightenment philosophical insights, he had little choice but to reckon with this blind spot in Luther's appeal to the Spirit-ensured *claritas* of the text. Barth did not pursue a new basis for metaphysics, nor did he seek to ground theology in existential experience; rather, he anchored Christian theology entirely to the church's witness to the "impossible possibility" of the noumenal becoming phenomenal in the incarnate Word.

Along those lines, Barth's hermeneutic paradigm rather ingeniously addresses the *aporia* of Luther's approach to biblical interpretation by defining Scripture's theological sense, not as a specific doctrine made clear by the Spirit, but as a living *principle* of Christoform relation to God. That principle is apprehended solely through the act of obedient faith, which is demanded by Scripture but only truly results from having been grasped externally by the Word's "Revealedness," which is also to be understood as the Holy Spirit. On that basis, Barth soundly rejected Luther's vision of spheres of human action that are identifiably autonomous *from* or connected *with* special revelation (a vision which was enabled, Luther thought, by the Spirit-afforded *claritas* of the texts of Scripture, sacrament, and creation).⁶ The alternative Barth embraced is one wherein the church remains firmly imbedded in the secular world's ontological structures, sacred only in the

⁶ In review, Barth worried that Luther's views of the relatively autonomous orders of state and church, secular text and sacred text—with the latter of each pairing functioning as special sites of God's repeated *verbum reale*—wrongfully set the church apart from the secular world.

contemporaneous sense of God acting through it. Barth also rejected Luther's two-spheres teaching on grounds that there is no valid place for contrasting general, worldly reasoning with scriptural reasoning, for in Scripture we find testimony to revelation, and revelation is not a given content: it is an experience of the drastic reforming of our extant thinking. Barth thus believed that "precisely the general, and only valid hermeneutics must be learned by means of the Bible as the testimony to revelation."⁷ As Suzanne McDonald cogently sums up the implications of Barth's position, his is a view wherein the "believing community is to be distinguished *functionally but not ontologically*, and *pneumatologically but not Christologically*, from the rest of humanity."⁸

Barth anchored the tenets of his hermeneutic position—which include the rejection of any inference from subjective religious experience to its object, the denial of any divinizing of the media of revelation, and the denunciation of any effort to make revelation a predicate of history—all to the actualistic relation of Christ's two natures. For Barth, those natures, brought together in the "person of the union," predicated God's indirect but absolute *identification* with the humanity of Jesus in every aspect. In this manner, Barth bridged the abyss between human interpretation and God's Word Christologically and pneumatologically. Just as God indirectly identifies with humanity in Christ, Barth said, God also indirectly identifies with human's subjective responses to the revelatory encounter, which responses include speech-acts such as Scripture and preaching. The Word's "Revealedness"—i.e., the Holy Spirit—works through those media, in spite of their finite and sin-inflected limits, to grasp the human knowing apparatus, giving to it the miraculous "living interpretation" of faith in Christ. Barth therefore did not need to maintain, as did Luther, that a *sola*

⁷ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, trans. G. W. Bromley and T.F. Torrance, ed. Frank McCombie (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 465 (subsequently cited as *CD*).

⁸ "Evangelical Questioning of Election in Barth," in *Karl Barth and American Evangelicalism*, ed. Bruce L. McCormack and Clifford B. Anderson (Cambridge, UK: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 250-68. Here 261. Italics in original.

fide doctrinal concentration of Scripture is made clear to the Spirit-led reader. He instead claimed *sola fide* as the hermeneutic dynamic and gift of the living encounter with God's Word in the Spirit.

Barth championed the Bible's authority over any human's in full acceptance of the Kantian premise that humans play an indelible role in constructing knowledge of interpreted objects, for they are cut off from the noumenal "thing-in-itself." Within Barth's paradigm, humans—even under the Spirit's influence—play a constructive role in meaning-making; and because faith's divine object can never be a "predicate of [man's] existence, a content of his consciousness, his possession,"⁹ that construction naturally remains at a distance from God's being—a distance that can only be spanned by God's miraculous act of identification. In that act, the transcendent Creator remains hidden from view even while absolutely identifying with the fallen creature, and that creature's obedient faith is both the gift and mark of God's presence with us. Hence, Barth shunned sacerdotal tendencies as emphatically as did Luther, but Barth did so under the pronouncement that human thought-structures only open to divinity when God grasps them via a phenomenal form with which God has identified, such as the Bible. In this fashion, Barth maintained Scripture's primacy as a site of revelation while also accounting epistemologically for the distance between human words—even "inspired" words, attesting to the experience of Revealedness—and the divine Word.

Consequently, Barth made up for Luther's epistemological inconsistency by redefining the Spirit, moving it from the Lutheran definition (as a guarantor of clear doctrinal concentration) to the living experience of the Word's "Revealedness." As I argued in chapter one, however, it is worth noting that Barth's pneumatology has been deemed unsatisfactory by a number of his readers, many of whom would agree with Reinhard Hütter's assessment that Barth's Holy Spirit is simply "Christ's mode of action" and is "accorded no work of its own in relation to church doctrine."¹⁰ Keith

⁹ *CDI* 1/1, 214.

¹⁰ *Suffering Divine Things: Theology as Church Practice*, trans. D. Scott (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 115; quoted in Keith L. Johnson, "The Being and Act of the Church: Barth and the Future of Evangelical Ecclesiology" in *Karl Barth and American Evangelicalism*, 201- 226. Here 206.

L. Johnson agrees, for instance, arguing that “Barth offers us a disembodied and deficient pneumatology, and because he ‘never quite brings himself to explain how our human agency is involved in the Spirit’s work,’ it is unclear how human participation in the church makes any difference, or ‘counts’ at all.”¹¹ Herein the “delusion” of Barth’s hermeneutic approach is suggested: his vision of revelation accounts for personal, intuitive recognition of the Word’s Revealedness from its adherents, but finds no revelatory value in the careful definitions arising from dialogical exchange. His hermeneutic paradigm is like Luther’s in this respect, relying upon intuitive recognition and effectively leaving the community at a loss for critical entry-points for identifying the norms of revelation, which identification is needed for adjudicating between the claims of disagreeing parties.¹² It is significant that this feature of both Luther and Barth’s approaches is interwoven with their appeal to the Spirit’s presence as a mode of operative grace, working in spite of rather than in cooperation with the human’s inherent tendencies in providing the interpretation of faith. (For now, let us hold in mind Hütter’s charge that Barth’s Holy Spirit is merely “Christ’s mode of action,” picking up this thread of pneumatological subordination in content to follow.) In both of their cases, the Spirit allows transformative vision of a revelatory object that remains untouched by the human subject.

Pannenberg and Frei: The Delusion of a Stabilized Revelatory Object?

Working to elucidate how divine and human agencies intermingle is a theological effort Luther’s and Barth’s hermeneutic paradigms cannot endorse, for they both deem such an effort an

¹¹ Johnson, 206: “A breach exists between divine and human action in the church,” he explains, “so that ...human action doesn’t ‘count for something’ in the church. An action ‘counts’ in this view when it makes a real contribution to the church’s true identity, meaning, or purpose, and for Hütter, this is precisely what Barth’s ecclesiology does not allow.

¹² See Johnson, 225. He notes that, for Barth, “the objective work of Christ includes within itself the subjective realization of that work,” and the church’s “subjective participation in this reconciliation” simply has the character of the Word “‘demanding expression’ in the lives of the humans who hear it.” Because Barth allows no role for cooperative grace and unfolding embodiments of Christ in history, it is difficult to imagine what the corporate gathering of believers *is* other than an occasion of subjective faith expression.

overstep of human limits. It appears, nevertheless, that such work is precisely what their interpretive frameworks require, if the practicing faith-community is to find ways of living in unity vis-à-vis scripturally revealed norms. We could say that this is the effort displayed in the hermeneutic projects of Protestant theologians Pannenberg and Frei, both of whom remain “low church” (that is, they do not espouse a sacred hierarchy of teaching office) and yet expound upon believers’ cooperative role in revelation’s mediation. Pannenberg and Frei both maintain that Scripture’s Christiform content is available to those who truly conform to what the text asks of them. They also maintain that those who seek to live accordingly should continually converse with others, both within and beyond the church, whereby they participate in the Holy Spirit’s work of bringing about the Christocentric import *of* and *in* particular moments in history. Thus, funding their correlationist theological paradigms (in contrast to Barthian actualism or liberal accomodationism), Pannenberg and Frei both construe Christological revelation as an unfolding phenomenon within history, one wherein human efforts at understanding and representing divine truth play a vital role. For these reasons, I have proposed that Pannenberg and Frei offer the Protestant community promising hermeneutic alternatives to the Barthian interpretive impasse. I have also argued, however, that worrisome features of their hermeneutic frameworks emerge from their both operating with the epistemic supposition that the Christ-event’s core objective content is somehow stably rendered as it is attested either *by* biblical testimony or *in* it.

Pannenberg joined Barth in contending that God can only be known through historical revelation (and so there are not viable grounds for natural theology apart from special revelation), and in believing that that revelation has been definitively given in Jesus Christ. He critiqued Barth as a positivist, however, on the grounds that the God-world relationship disclosed by the Incarnation does not show faith to be “something like a compensation of subjective conviction to make up for defective knowledge”; rather, says Pannenberg, “faith is actually trust in God’s promise, and this trust is not rendered superfluous by knowledge of this promise; on the contrary, it is made

possible by it for the first time.”¹³ Pannenberg thus maintained that the historical phenomenon of Jesus Christ’s life, death, and particularly his resurrection affords revelatory knowledge of history’s true meaning for the observer. That knowledge has a historical-scientific character, and it enables faith, rather than the Christ-phenomenon affording faith which enables knowledge.

Pannenberg encouraged Christian interpreters continually to engage in theological discernment with this confidence in natural modes of ratiocination, ever further unravelling the “Biblically grounded understanding of being and truth”¹⁴ that has been disclosed “proleptically” in Christ’s resurrection and will become fully apparent in history’s conclusion. His soteriological paradigm takes God’s salvific purpose in self-revelation as that of drawing humans toward this final, authoritative understanding of history, which understanding is tantamount to communion with Godself. Pannenberg thus recommended that the community adopt a biblically-attested hermeneutics of totality, the primacy of which is the eschatological future anticipated in Jesus of Nazareth, who is “the end of the still unconcluded history, and just for this reason is for us (as those who still wander along the way) the inexhaustible center of meaning.”¹⁵ Many Christians would find (and have found) Pannenberg’s hermeneutic paradigm dissatisfying, for—by reducing saving faith-knowledge to conceptual understanding—it fails to account for the extra-rational features of knowledge operative in bodily*¹⁶ interception and expression of revelation. Pannenberg’s ideal witnessing subject is simply not subjective enough, one might say.

¹³ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology*, vol. I, trans. George H. Kehm (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 64-65 (subsequently cited as *BQ I*).

¹⁴ Pannenberg, “The Revelation of God in Jesus of Nazareth” in *New Frontiers in Theology*, vol. III, eds. James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, Jr. (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1967), 101-33. Here 132. Above, in chapter two, I point out that the Bible in Pannenberg’s thinking serves as a vital and authoritative *introduction* to the events that occurred within the Judeo-Christian horizon of understanding. It is those events that afford revelatory knowledge, not the Bible itself.

¹⁵ *BQ I*, 77.

¹⁶ The use of the asterisk denotes that I intend for the word “body” (here, “bodily”) to signal both a *corporeal* and *corporate* sense of application.

Barth did not suffer from such a presumption. On the contrary, he ascertained an epistemological situation wherein the constructive subject is mired in sin, with the human knower ever assuming the role of mastery over the perceived object. Barth therefore adamantly sought a solution for how God might assume an incarnate form without becoming subject to human projections, and he arrived at the conviction that the Word's Revealedness must grasp the human's knowing apparatus externally. Frei, as a materialist thinker, moved away from this epistemic paradigm of mastery; he followed Barth as a narrative theologian, however, in believing that "God, the revealer, is identical with His act in revelation and also identical with its effect."¹⁷ As a materialist, Frei maintained that human nature and history are not so deviant that they must be utterly remade when the revelatory act of God occurs in their midst; as a narrative theologian with Barthian tendencies, Frei proposed that the divinely given "effect" of revelation is the set of stories in the Gospels that make history-like claims about Jesus Christ, thereby rendering his concrete literary portrait. There are, for Frei, no means of access to Christ's identity that lies "behind" this portrait. Properly interpreting those stories warrants imaginative engagement with a concrete and unfolding history-like drama, not with an account of Christ's or the believer's internal experience.

The problem for the Scripture-reading community applying Frei's approach to interpretation is this: although his paradigm highlights the faith-evoking potency of Christ's literary image in Scripture, as well as identifies that image's manner of ontological reference, it does not propose how the Christ-image relates to historical reasoning in a manner that matters for faith. That is, Frei established the Gospels' literary integrity as a point of stabilized Christological meaning by relegating, to a place of minimal theological consequence, the reader's concerns regarding that testimony's referential reach into history. Such concerns undoubtedly informed the formation of the biblical canon, however, and they still stubbornly encroach upon theological

¹⁷ Karl Barth, *CD I/1*, 296. In chapter two, I explained that Frei's theological agenda is governed by a Kierkegaardian insistence that "existence is not a system," coupled with the Barthian insight that, if existence is not a system, then neither is God's self-revelation. On this basis Frei agreed with Barth's argument that genuine reference to God can only occur when God graciously enables such reference.

discussions with concern for the reliability of the Gospels' testimony as a site of truth-disclosure. Hence, Frei's approach does not satisfactorily account for the theological *import* or *impact* of the confessional community's referential concerns in identifying Christ's form. Pannenberg, on the other hand, did labor to articulate a rationalist account of the Christ-event's universal historical significance, both as its orienting point of objective meaning and as its eschatological destination. In constructing that vision, however, he virtually endorsed a new class of privileged interpreters out of the academic intelligentsia by sidelining the imaginative and affective features of faith-perception, along with the voices of the disenfranchised members of the ecclesial body.

In sum, Pannenberg's and Frei's delineations of the Bible's authoritative Christological content are predicated upon the theologian freeing that content from the believers' subjective involvement in constructing its contours and implications. They lack robust accounts of the theological impact of the desires that human subjects bring to revelation's mediation, and the results are ill-suited for funding the church's integrity as a discursive body. Hence, although in both thinkers' paradigms we find promising images of witnesses cooperating with the Spirit in the unfolding Word-event, we discover that promise stymied in virtue of the fact that those interpreters are portrayed as receiving an objective Christoform content, one stably rendered either *by way of* the biblical text (in Pannenberg's thinking) or *within* it (in Frei's case). The desire to "look at the text without touching it" is demonstrated in the undergirding vision of a biblical text whose Christic referent *can* be "looked at" without "adding some new thread," and in a presumed Christological object towards which the interpreter progresses in right understanding by setting aside subjective investments. The "delusion" of this model of revelation is signaled by the irony that, because it does not account for the full range of the interpreter's subjective contribution to the text's content and meaning, it leaves the community still at a loss regarding subjective readings when they arise.

Frei and Pannenberg represent seminal efforts within Protestantism to situate theological interpretation within a communal tradition while also maintaining objectivity (i.e., epistemic access

to the revelatory object's normative features). I have suggested that their paradigms' *aporias* raise the question of whether such expectations are, in fact, bound to the best theological account of the subject-object interpretative relation. This query is crucial if one takes the ordering object of Christian thought to be not just the person of Jesus Christ, but the fully trinitarian God who exists "beyond," "beside," and "within" human interpreters. Given the incorporative nature of that trinitarian object—which, in a sense, becomes "subject" within us—it could be that there has been a dearth in the Protestant imaginary of framing our interpretative relation to the Word in terms of the Spirit-led *ecstatic* features of human perception: that is, of attending to states of knowledge bound to what Balthasar calls the "spirit's native condition always to have gone outside itself in order to be with another."¹⁸ Balthasar himself evaluates Protestantism accordingly, arguing that Protestants have generally followed Luther in overlooking human desire's natural orientation toward grace, thereby neglecting the aesthetic harmony that exists between humanity and divinity.¹⁹ That harmony can be learned, Balthasar declares, through contemplation.

¹⁸ *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1: *Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, eds. Joseph Fessio, S.J. and Jon Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 21 (subsequently cited as *GL*). At the end of chapter two, I noted that Luther and Barth eschewed the notion that justification involves an infusion of operative grace but converts the soul to God through *cooperative* means. Pannenberg and Frei made moves in closer keeping with that cooperative trajectory, and they offered tantalizing pneumatologies toward that end; but they still appear to assume a stable Christological object of interpretation as the source of theo-logic without rooting theological knowledge in spiritual practices that transform the scope of objective perception. The latter apparently leaves their approaches lacking satisfactory account of Spirit-led interpretation. This is the "dearth" I am proposing may exist in the Protestant imaginary.

¹⁹ Notably, Balthasar applauds Barth for embracing something of a contemplative approach to revelation by connecting God's glory to the objective trinitarian form. He critiques Barth, however, for failing to establish the trinitarian dimension of revelation and the Marian aspect of human receptivity to it, thus overlooking the importance of contemplation for faith-knowledge. Balthasar's evaluation of Barth's project for failing to account for human participation in revelation may remind us of Hütter's critique: that is, that Barth's Holy Spirit functions as "Christ's mode of action" and is "accorded no work of its own in relation to church doctrine" (see fn. 10, above), thereby impoverishing the believing community's ability to discern how its own work is infused with the Spirit's. The inference to be drawn, however tentatively, by bringing together Balthasar's and Hütter's theses is that the Protestant fixation on declaring the *claritas* of the Christological object (in relation to which human witnesses are either hopelessly mired in subjectivity or unrealistically freed of it) not only discounts the import of spiritual senses of perception; it may also be implicated in "a disembodied and deficient pneumatology." The result is an impairment of ecclesial capacity to identify and thus draw upon the Spirit's active presence for the sake of missional living, including adjudicating between competing claims regarding biblically-attested truth.

Balthasar and Coakley: The Delusion of a "Translucent" Contemplative Subject?

These observations turn our attention to contemplative theology, intrigued by Coakley's confidence that resourcing the subjective experience of contemplation can ultimately "contribut[e] to an expanded objectivity of standpoint, rather than an intensified subjectivity."²⁰ Balthasar and Coakley's contemplative projects both endeavor to make such contributions to an expanded objectivity, which (they would agree) is afforded via what Coakley calls "the discipline of particular graced bodily practices which, over the long haul, afford certain distinctive ways of knowing."²¹ The outcome of such a project is not the development of an all-encompassing metanarrative. Rather, as Balthasar sees it, it is delineating the moves of an ongoing "theo-drama," which are perceived in the midst of one's moving in sync with those very dynamics. Balthasar provides a metaphysical framework to support this theo-dramatic vision of God's self-disclosure interrelating with humanity's free, responsive action in history, which God's redemptive purposes mysteriously guides toward its Christocentric end. That framework is de Lubac's vision of nature's inherent orientation towards grace, which it is not equipped to secure. This vision contrasts with the neo-scholastic two-storied universe which Luther only partially rejected.

As observed above, Luther set aside the neo-scholastic "gradation of spheres" teaching as it concerned ecclesial hierarchical distinctions; but he continued deploying that thought-paradigm in his *verbum reale* vision of Scripture as irrefutably *sui generis*, which he grounded in the doctrine of verbal inspiration. Barth effectively rejected these remaining strands of the neo-scholastic framework interwoven with Luther's presumption of autonomous sacred and secular spheres.²²

²⁰ Coakley, *GSS*, 26.

²¹ *GSS*, 19.

²² To review: For Barth, there is no valid means for identifying the church apart from the world, nor is there a legitimate place for worldly reasoning in contrast with scriptural reasoning, for "the general, and

For Balthasar, Barth was very close to the truth in his move to abolish the presumed autonomy of general and revealed knowledge. But, Balthasar believed, Barth should have coupled this assertion with a retrieval of the nature-grace relation as cooperative, leading him to a contemplative approach (instead, Barth aligned with the Reformers in construing grace's work upon nature only as operative or extrinsic). Because the operative grace model does not allow for a range of proximity in understanding relation to God through sanctifying practices, it leaves Protestants with no way out of the relativism of their hermeneutic heritage.

In comparison with what we might call Barth's "overly subjective" vision of theological interpretation and its "overly objective" responses from Pannenberg and Frei, the believing community may find Balthasar's turn to de Lubac's nature-grace thesis valuable for a more balanced approach to human participation in revelation's mediation. Within this framework, our natural desires intrinsically long to go where only the graced movement of *Agape* can take them. Accordingly, there is no point of epistemic neutrality in relation to revelation; human perception is always bound up with degrees of belief and unbelief, which determines what we are able to see. In hermeneutic terms, our interpretation of any material "part" (be it a "part" of nature, of history, or of the sacred text of Scripture) will be influenced, however subtly, by how we understand the spiritual "whole." This means that a purely scientific interpretive approach—while appropriate in its own sphere of concern—is not sufficient for discerning the spiritual significance of a form.

Balthasar likens that holistic perception to aesthetic sensibility, and in terms of the graced vision, he assigns it to the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit cooperates with our ecstatic tendencies to show us what the apostles perceived: that Jesus Christ is the orienting center of all revelation, the Form that orders all forms. As Aidan Nichols explains it, Balthasar maintains that,

just as a view must step back from a painting to 'take it in,' so the disciples could only discern the true content of Jesus' life and teaching with the benefit of hindsight. . . . What is seen thereby, with the assistance of the Holy Spirit, is the proportions

only valid hermeneutics must be learned by means of the Bible as the testimony to revelation"—that is, as witness to the contemporaneous experience of encounter with the living God.

proper to the mystery of Christ: the interior relation of divine and human, of invisible and visible. And to this belong other proportions and relationships. . . [including] with the created world as a whole.²³

Balthasar accordingly takes up the Church Fathers' belief that no part of Scripture can truly be understood if it is not eventually read in the light of Jesus Christ, and his contemplative approach forges a way between overly subjective and falsely objective options by highlighting the enduring relation between the objective form of revelation and the subjective reality of our faith response to it. That relation is seated in our intrinsic longing for God's Word—a longing which can only be satisfied by the graced guidance of the Holy Spirit. That Spirit enables our epiphanic vision of Christ, enlivens our "Marian" (i.e., for Balthasar, utterly self-ceding) receptivity to it, and ever moves us toward Christoform (i.e., kenotic) response to revelation by drawing us into the concrete life forms of the Roman Catholic Church. For Balthasar, God incorporates believers into the life of the Trinity via their belonging to Christ's bride/body, his "other self": the Church. Through this dynamic process, humans are enabled to be co-actors in revelation's worldly unfolding, which occurs as a theo-drama wherein the Father is "author," the Son is primary "actor," and the Holy Spirit is "director."

It is rather puzzling that Balthasar's contemplative approach to revelation—which depicts humankind's participation in revelation's mediation occurring expressly under the Spirit's direction—does not evade subordinating the Spirit to a logocentric tendency. I have noted that, when he sketches out his analogue of revelation as a stage drama, Balthasar tellingly places the human participants in a largely passive role—as the audience tasked with re-presenting the moves of a finalized drama—rather than as improvisational actors taking directive cues from the Spirit in response to Christ's leading action. In keeping with that analogue of a finished drama and passive audience, Balthasar's theological system manifestly accords little *truly* directive role for the Spirit. In a move that unites a subordination of the Spirit with a fortification of the Roman Catholic

²³ Aidan Nichols, *The Word Has Been Abroad: A Guide Through Balthasar's Aesthetics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 5.

Church's structure, Balthasar construes every case of the inner-trinitarian life being derivative and responsive as an instance of what is feminine, whereas when that same divine Person is initiatory, it is to be considered masculine. The same dynamic is to be reproduced in the Church, namely in the subordination of lay persons, most of all women, to male clergy. Effectively, Balthasar's system relegates the Spirit to bringing believers to witness and adhere to the Father-Son relationship, specifically as interpreted by the Magisterium and buttressed by the Roman Catholic hierarchy.

The Derridean "delusion" in Balthasar's hermeneutic approach is suggested by the fact that his "Christophorous" rendering of *kenotic* and/or Marian contemplative participation in revelation does not account for Christ's or Mary's agential participation in the Word-event. On this account, I have found help in Coakley's work to detect in Balthasar a "nervousness . . . about making explicit any view of the Trinity not firmly reined back into the rationality of the Logos,"²⁴ an anxiety easily tied to concern for ecclesiastical stability achieved by quieting subversive bodily* tendencies (i.e., both in terms of doctrinal challenges and with regard to destabilizing sexual urges). That uneasiness could shed light on the Protestant insistence upon the Spirit-afforded *claritas* of Scripture's meaning. In both cases, the operative presumption is that we can and should interpret the Christological "text" without "adding threads" to its meaning. Balthasar's contemplative paradigm accounts for subjective appropriation in reading, but promptly construes it as inoperative by way of the Christophorous Spirit.

I have wondered what might come of revising Balthasar's nuptial paradigm of God-human relations in light of an alternate view of the Spirit's incorporative work, one that embraces the epistemic implications of allowing the Holy Spirit a leading role in the economy of revelation. Such curiosity turned this dissertation's analysis to Coakley's trinitarian model of divine ecstasy returning to itself. Much like Balthasar, Coakley finds the contemplative pray-er discovering that

²⁴ Coakley's phrasing in view of this tendency in the theological tradition, at *GSS*, 117.

the “divine yearning brings ecstasy so that the lover belongs not to self but to the beloved”;²⁵ consequently, the inter-divine process “allows redeemed creation to participate in it, and so signals an ‘incorporative’ trinitarianism.”²⁶ For Coakley, in distinction from Balthasar, the Holy Spirit takes the lead in this incorporative process, drawing believers “by various painful degrees into the newly expanded life of ‘Sonship’”²⁷ as it “interrupts the fallen worldly order and infuses it with the divine question, the divine lure, the divine life.”²⁸ Such interruption and infusion is the characteristic work of the Spirit, for Coakley. Looking to the Spirit-led effects of the Incarnation, where the ontological “twoness” of the transcendent God and the created world is overcome, Coakley finds that “Christ does not re-establish the boundary as before, but nor—significantly—does he destroy it; rather, we might say that he ‘transgresses’ it in the Spirit, infusing the created world anew with divinity.”²⁹ Working to plot her *théologie totale* agenda in keeping with the Spirit-led dynamics of boundary-transgression, Coakley’s project in *God, Sexuality, and the Self* is distinguished by what I have identified as “more apocalyptic” epistemological tendency than Balthasar’s “unapocalyptic” program, with the latter serving to reinforce the status quo arrangements that Coakley subjects to critical scrutiny.

This apocalyptic (though not *utterly* apocalyptic) work of the transfiguring Spirit is significantly attested by the kenotic process of incorporation into the Son’s likeness, for Coakley. That process affords eschatological foretastes of ecstatic embrace with God, especially in the noetic darkness afforded by the control-relinquishing practices of wordless prayer. Coakley attests that the result of thus inviting the “interruptive work of the trinitarian God” is to witness fallen

²⁵ *GSS*, 314.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 317.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 55-56.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 57.

incarnate realities (such as repressive gender binaries) not *obliterated* but, rather, transformed when made “subject to the labile transformations of divine desire.”³⁰ Thus, opposed to Balthasar’s construal of binary relations (including female-male, lay-clergy, and Church-Christ) wherein there are clear boundaries between essential categories, we find Coakley evoking an ephiphanic vision whereby we *do* employ binary categories, but only properly in acknowledgement of their existing in a kind of open unity—that is, of their tentative status rather than enduring essence, and their remaining subject to transformation under the influence of the Spirit. When applying this vision for the sake of discerning biblical truths, we find that interpreters should set “the exegesis of complex scriptural texts in full relation to tradition, philosophical analysis, and ascetic practice,”³¹ taking all as sites of the Spirit’s work to render worldly categories sacramental in relation to Christ as it “darken[s] my prior certainties, enflame[s] and check[s] my own desires, and so invite[s] me ever more deeply into the life of redemption in Christ.”³²

Coakley thus offers a Spirit-led contemplative alternative to Balthasar’s logocentric-tending paradigm, with the former sanctioning the unsettling (rather than, it bears repeating, the total dismantling) of the rationality of the Logos and of ecclesiastical stability. I have proposed that she thereby offers a theodramatic alternative as well, one wherein human witnesses are not rendered labile, passive re-presenters of revelation. Rather, they are fellow actors, unfolding the form of Sonship through improvisation upon Christ’s leading response to the Spirit’s subtle prompts. In this paradigm, everyday incarnate desires and concerns do not fall away from our interpretive efforts; instead, they are the material of our embodied relationship to God and others, the very stuff that the Holy Spirit interrupts and infuses with the divine question, lure, and life. And yet, for all of Coakley’s careful interweaving of human projects with the Spirit’s subtle work of trinitarian

³⁰ *GSS*, 57.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

³² *Ibid.*, 56.

incorporation, I have also proposed that we can detect in her work a skepticism regarding the human's capacity to make positive contribution to revelation's unfolding via acts of hermeneutic construction. That skepticism becomes evident in her consistent endorsement of non-discursive spiritual activity as a primary site of union with the Spirit.

For instance, Coakley looks to the initial emergence of the doctrine of God as Trinity as indicating that

prayer (*and especially prayer of a non-discursive sort*, whether contemplative or charismatic) is the chief context in which the irreducible threeness of God becomes humanly apparent to the Christian. It does so because—as one ceases to set the agenda and allows room for God to be God—the sense of *the human impossibility of prayer* becomes more intense (see Romans 8: 26), and drives one to comprehend the necessity of God's own prior activity in it. Strictly speaking, it is not I who autonomously prays, but God (the Holy Spirit) who prays in me, and so answers the eternal call of the 'Father,' drawing me by various painful degrees into the newly expanded life of 'Sonship.'³³

Notably, in this passage, we find Coakley equating the “human impossibility of prayer” with the impossibility of our addressing God autonomously. The way out of that impossibility is our wordlessness before God. We thus find Coakley pairing trust in the Spirit's cooperative guidance of human agential action with her belief that our discursive activity—in addressing God, at least—is bound up with the illusion of autonomy. By “ceasing to set the agenda” in this manner we can perceive that it is the Spirit (and, so it here seems, *only* the Spirit) who responds to the Father's call in us.³⁴

Coakley's rendering of the “human impossibility of prayer” in this passage simultaneously bespeaks her hermeneutic paradigm's acceptance of our constructive semantic tendencies as well as a low view of those inclinations. Apparently, those tendencies number among the fallen earthly

³³ *GSS*, 55. Emphasis added.

³⁴ She elsewhere draws upon Pseudo-Dionysius's appeal to St. Paul to make the same sort of point, here in terms of the ecstatic pray-er's identity being “replaced” by Christ's: “The great Paul, swept along by his yearning for God and seized of its ecstatic power, had these inspired words to say: ‘It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.’ Paul was clearly a lover, and, as he says, he was *beside himself* for God” (Pseudo-Dionysius, *Divine Names*, IV. 13; quoted in *GSS*, 314). Coakley notes that the biblical allusion here is to II Corinthians 5:13.

realities that, if they need not be eliminated altogether, must certainly be rendered thoroughly subject to divine desire's transformations by way of non-discursive attention to God so as to be "rendered sacramental by participation in Christ."³⁵ The Derridean suggestion of "delusion" in this viewpoint is tied to the hypothesis I offered at the end of chapter four: that Coakley has not fully accounted for language's capacity to occasion an ecstatic "seepage" of the self (which is, for Derrida, tied to what Ellen Armour calls "the economy of *différance*": the "processes of differing and deferral" that both grounds naming-acts and also "ungrounds" the "full presence of what it originates"³⁶). Coakley has thereby overlooked, in a sense, the human *possibility* of prayer; that is, she has not considered closely enough that, even if the Spirit is divinity within me responding to divinity beyond me (retaining God's activity as always "prior" to mine), my perceiving this disruption of my autonomy may very well occur in the midst of my subjective attempts to respond to the "Father's" call through discourse. With this proposal in mind, the following section of this chapter seeks to recognize how our self-identifying communication-acts might themselves become sacramental by participation in Christ. The final aim of this imaging, to be taken up in closing this chapter, is enriched reflection upon the church's multiple ways of discerning revealed truth, with practical implications for moving beyond the PIP.

Flesh Made Word through the Body's Grace: Towards an Alternative Hermeneutic Framework

Balthasar maintains that the Christological object of revelation took on human semantic response to it, much as the divine nature of the Son took on flesh to be made known to human witnesses. Along those lines, Balthasar says:

The Word that is God took a body of flesh, in order to be man. And because he is Word, and, as Word, took flesh, he took on, at the same time, a body consisting of

³⁵ GSS, 54.

³⁶ Armour, 62, 61.

syllables, Scripture, ideas, images, verbal utterance and preaching, since otherwise men would not have understood either that the Word really was made flesh, or that the divine Person who was made flesh was really the Word. All scriptural problems must be approached through Christology: the letter is related to the Spirit as the flesh of Christ [is related] to his divine nature and Person.³⁷

Given this passage's content, it seems that Balthasar would understand the Spirit as incorporating something from "the letter," or human word, of the biblical text into the "text" of the Incarnation-event. This could stand as a potential solution to the problem of Coakley's negative construal of human discourse, imaging the human subject's communication "rendered sacramental by participation in Christ"³⁸ as it is incorporated into revelation's historical unfolding.

Unfortunately, this solution will not stand—at least, not according to Balthasar's presentation of the Word's wordly mediation. The reader will recall that Balthasar envisions that process as occurring in a manner wherein the site of bodily reception to revelation plays only a *metaphorical* role in the theo-dramatic event. It is presented as an utterly self-ceding vessel, purged of all signs of subjective desires, for the the Word's capacity to recreate itself in bodily form. This tendency is evidenced not only in Balthasar's Christology, but also in his pneumatology and Mariology, with each doctrinal formula re-inscribing a preference for control over the destabilizing aspects of interpersonal intimacy. Such is the commitment evidenced in his rendering of Scripture as Christologically "pure," on the basis that "in the very form in which it addresses man, the Word of God already wants to include the form of man's answer to God."³⁹ The result is that Scripture's ambiguities simply mirror Christ's perfect *Ungestalt*, ultimately serving as another catalyst for luminance. As it stands, then, Balthasar offers little more than lip service to the Word-event taking up human words as sacramental sites of divine self-disclosure.

³⁷ Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology*, vol. I: *The Word Made Flesh*, trans. A. V. Littledale and A. Dru (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 149 (subsequently cited as *ET*).

³⁸ *GSS*, 54.

³⁹ *GL I*, 538.

This section will attempt to follow Balthasar's suggestion to approach scriptural problems through Christology—relating the human word to the Spirit, as the flesh of Christ is related to his divine nature—but guided by a different construal of the sacramental occasion. This alternate approach imagines a sense in which God's self-communication "receives something" from the responsive human speech-act, with that "something" being bound to the self-expression⁴⁰ communicated in the dialogical act.⁴¹ Thus, this is ultimately an exercise in imaging how mediated revelation is a boundary-rupturing sacramental reality, one that not only transfigures human desires but fundamentally evokes and includes their subjective expression. I believe we can find the basic tenets of such a sacramental paradigm in Louis-Marie Chauvet's *Symbol and Sacrament*, in light of which we may begin to see subjective hermeneutic construction as integral to the dialogical Word-event. If we aim to embrace subjective construction, not as license to pronounce a radically particularist hermeneutic position, but rather as an occasion for "nuptial" incorporation into the life of Christ, we must then labor to cultivate the concrete realities of our situation within language toward that end. We can find help in Rowan Williams' theological reflection on sexuality in his essay "The Body's Grace" for doing so. The results afforded by this analysis can expand the re-worked Marian metaphor I touched upon at the end of chapter four, which promises practical implications for Protestant (though not only Protestant) communities desirous of cooperating with the Spirit in acts of theological interpretation.

⁴⁰ By "self-expression" I intend to designate a view of the "self" like that Hans Frei employs—that is, as a concrete nexus of desires and agency constituted by material presence and performance—with a nod to Balthasar's emphasis on the allure of being itself, in which human "selves" participate. Though the self is socially constructed it is not to be treated as a *mere* product of social narrative or behavior, in other words. We must keep in mind that, as Balthasar Francesca Aran Murphy puts it, "the person becomes a self by shared participation in being" (*Christ the Form of Beauty: A Study in Theology and Literature* (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1995), 63).

⁴¹ Instead of a solution to this such as Karl Rahner proffers, which is self-reflexive, I seek a different sacramentology because I find promise Balthasar's and Coakley's contemplative approaches' rooting the theology of revelation in the believer's ecstatic *encounter* with God through the bodily medium.

The Sacrament as Dialogical Occasion: Resourcing Louis-Marie Chauvet

In his introduction to *Symbol and Sacrament*, Chauvet establishes that his basic purpose is not to subsume the Christian sacraments into an abstract notion of “sacramentality,” but rather to consider them as “*symbolic figures allowing us entrance into, and empowerment to live out, the (arch-)sacramentality which is the very essence of Christian existence.*”⁴² Chauvet affirms Barth’s positions that “the Word of God is sovereign, that this Word gathers in Christ the entire unfolding of history,” and that the visible church is undergirded by mystery.⁴³ Chauvet does express reservation with Barth, however, on the grounds that Barth has, ironically, gone too far with this theologizing. He has thereby implied that the human can contemplate reality from some ahistorical, extemporal perspective.⁴⁴ To avoid this error, Chauvet wants to affirm with Barth that the advent of Christ highlights an “eschatological rupture” in history, but he does not want to do so to the point of absolutizing the discontinuity “between ‘profane’ history and ‘salvation’ history.”⁴⁵ Like de Lubac and Balthasar, Chauvet believes that these borders must remain fluid, for the Word *became* flesh—it did not simply “live in” the flesh as an instrumental organ. In a move that may again remind us of Balthasar, Chauvet punctuates that the flesh of the Word, wrapped up in that Word’s very reality, is necessary for our encounter with it; we could not and cannot conceive it otherwise. He is distinct from Balthasar, however, in moving from that assertion to propose that God’s Word appropriates the symbolic nexus, not as a “veil concealing the unique divine action”⁴⁶ but, rather, as a sacred

⁴² Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995), 2. Italics in original.

⁴³ Chauvet, 540.

⁴⁴ Chauvet connects his critique to a memorable observation by H. Bouillard: “What bothers us the most,” he says, “is precisely that Barth has somehow placed himself in God’s unique vantage point . . . in order to contemplate God’s work from that vantage point” (quoted in Chauvet, 540).

⁴⁵ Chauvet, 546.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 539.

space wherein to facilitate our relational encounter with Godself. Chauvet thus wants to imagine the entire corporeal realm, including language, as an “arch-sacramental” medium of grace.

In short, Chauvet understands divine revelation as expressing itself as we are grasped by it in the mediating spaces of our historically, ethically, and symbolically constituted and constituting embodiment. He believes that proceeding along these lines methodologically requires shifting away from the Scholastic metaphysical approach to the sacraments. That approach, broadly construed, understands the sacraments in terms of *causality*. To explain: unlike Barth’s approach to human signification (which overly construes it in terms of its lack), Chauvet finds Scholastic thinking assuming a natural capacity in the signifier to indicate the reality it signifies. That thinking accordingly conceives of signifiers—including the sacraments—instrumentally, i.e., as somehow able to effect the realities they indicate, and vice versa.⁴⁷ Chauvet resists this instrumentalist approach to the sacraments on the grounds that it fails to recognize humanity’s essential constitution inside language: that any presence we encounter via the system of signification always operates in tandem with its *absence*, its “going beyond” language.⁴⁸ He roots this argument in the existential philosophy of Heidegger, for whom “humans do not possess language,” Chauvet explains; “rather, they are possessed by it. *They speak only because they are always-already spoken.*”⁴⁹ Humans are tempted to secure our knowing power within the system of language by seeking purified understanding of what is present. Thus, we construct frameworks such as that offered by traditional Western metaphysics, which circumvents the distressing reality of God’s absence by way

⁴⁷ See Lieven Boeve, “Theology in a Postmodern Context and the Hermeneutical Project of Louis-Marie Chauvet” in *Sacraments: Revelation of the Humanity of God*, eds. Philippe Bordeyne and Bruce T. Morrill (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008), 5-24. Here 7.

⁴⁸ Chauvet operates with a broadly construed notion of “language,” as the verbal and non-verbal web of signifiers. It is also worth mentioning that, although I do not here take up the task, I believe Chauvet’s critique of Thomas Aquinas (though perhaps not later Scholasticism) on these accounts warrants nuance. My hunch, which I would like to pursue in later research, is that Thomistic deployment of analogy could be seen as preserving the eschatological quality of theological utterance within a symbolic register.

⁴⁹ Chauvet, 57. Emphasis in original.

of analogical negation. For Chauvet, these constructions are dangerous; for imagining we can approximate the “fixed” nature even of reality’s withdrawal from language can render theology an idol of speculation. Driving this point home, he notes Heidegger’s observation that metaphysics “believes itself to have produced an explanation of being, when in fact it has only ontically reduced being to metaphysics’ *representations*, utterly forgetting that nothing that exists ‘is.’”⁵⁰ We cannot arrive at stable knowledge of the realities beyond the system of human signification, Chauvet insists, for that system is fully constitutive of our perception.

In this manner, Chauvet argues that if we imagine our interpretive efforts as existing in fixed connection *or* contrast with an external reality, we will take up discourse in self-deception, much like those who labor to construct “short-cut onto-(theo)logical approaches” in fear of “the consequences of a fully hermeneutical theology.”⁵¹ From that “fully hermeneutic” theological perspective, Chauvet believes that we best understand the nature of the sacraments by setting aside the longing for reality’s transparency. We must find ways to accept the unknowing signaled by the withdrawal of signified reality from us, while nevertheless responding to its presence with hope-filled creativity. Such is the register of *symbolic* representation. Embracing that register ultimately means that we should take up the entire semantic nexus, not as an instrument for intellection and control over reality, but rather as something like the Israelites’ desert manna: “a question...a non-thing...a non-value,”⁵² an occasion for transformative encounter with God. Thus working to “overcome[e] all the barriers of objectifying and calculating reason,”⁵³ Chauvet promotes a hermeneutic way “inseparable from us”⁵⁴ rather than a pre-determined path.

⁵⁰ Chauvet, 26-27.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 45.

⁵³ Chauvet, 63.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

Chauvet's sacramental paradigm has been met by skeptics who press the potential of fideism or self-constructed fantasy in a hermeneutic way "inseparable from us." Lieven Boeve, for instance, voices reservations regarding Chauvet's emphasis on our coming to accept "absence," expressing concern that such a presentation of reality renders sacramental ritual too mysterious to bear real meaning for its adherents. The epistemic results, he fears, could entail faith-communities resorting to radical particularity or false universalism (here reminding us of worries over Barth's actualistic approach to revelation). Boeve accordingly wonders if Chauvet should "develo[p] a more appropriate language to express Christ's sacramental presence in the church."⁵⁵ A similar concern is evidenced in Elbatrina Clauteaux's effort to accept the tenets of Chauvet's hermeneutic way "inseparable from us" while articulating a more detailed account of sacramental presence. Her operative notion of the symbol is as dancing between *logos* and *bios*, "feed[ing] on the capacity of the cosmos to show its order."⁵⁶ That capacity is evidenced in the phenomenon of interlocutors joining in dialogical relationship regardless of difference. Clauteaux thus emphasizes what she takes to be the indelible relationship between "the real" and the symbol in Chauvet's thought, envisioning "the real" as spilling over into the "life of the symbolic," even as it (the real) "goes beyond . . . discourse."⁵⁷ In like manner, she infers, God becomes present via the sacraments' symbolic life, with the hypostatic union as the symbol *par excellence*.

For Chauvet the symbol is, indeed, a kind of meeting place of *bios* and *logos*, and so Clauteaux's suggestive description of reality's capacity to give of itself via the symbol could prove helpful to Chauvet's followers' efforts to image how God becomes present through the sacramental medium. Clauteaux's project could turn our attention away, however, from certain important

⁵⁵ Boeve, 14.

⁵⁶ Elbatrina Clauteaux, "When Anthropologist Encounters Theologian: The Eagle and the Tortoise," in *Sacraments: Revelation of the Humanity of God*, 155-70. Here 169.

⁵⁷ Ibid. Clauteaux thus interprets the "absence" Chauvet emphasizes as discourse's inability to contain the fullness of the symbol.

implications in Chauvet's hermeneutic paradigm regarding how *we* offer ourselves to God in the sacramental meeting of *logos* and *bios*.⁵⁸ It is important that, for Chauvet, that meeting does not entail the real simply "knocking up" against us as we attempt to make ordered sense of it with words and rituals. Rather, the symbol is a kind of "hyperreality," a merging of the real and our creative response to it to form a new reality. This is not to claim that Chauvet's understanding of the symbol accords with Jean Baudrillard's definition of the "hyperreal" as a simulation involving the perversion and pretense of reality,⁵⁹ for Chauvet's dialogical understanding of the symbol is rooted in his understanding of the sacramental reality of the incarnation. The point is that the incarnation discloses that the real, ever exceeding discourse, is also *shaped* by that discourse, much as the divine Word truly *took on* the flesh it became. This is why, for Chauvet, reality is not "the order of subsistent entities" but is an arch-sacramental "order of the on-going transformation of subjects into believers."⁶⁰ Interpretation is to be a way "inseparable from us" because it coheres with the way things are: we are simultaneously forming and formed by reality, and the manner in which we engage in discursive activity fundamentally shapes the content of our faith-perception.⁶¹ Given that shaping power, Chauvet specifies that we can only avoid idolatry when our thinking begins and ends with "the message of the cross,"⁶² a kind of intellectual *kenosis* birthed from a way of being that "continually requires theology to take a step backwards, a step which both disentralls it from

⁵⁸ Cf. Bruce T. Morrill, *Divine Worship and Human Healing: Integral Theology at the Margins of Life and Death* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), 116-118.

⁵⁹ See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra & Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

⁶⁰ Chauvet, 438.

⁶¹ Chauvet thus maintains that our theological concepts ought to be tested first by "the *attitude*, idolatrous or not, they elicit from us" (43).

⁶² Chauvet, 73.

itself and reopens it.”⁶³ It is only when we take up the Christic posture of self-outpouring that the infinite meets us in the symbolic medium as truly graced encounter.

Chauvet’s emphasis on *kenosis* informing dialogical activity in the sacramental occasion provides an apt site for drawing together various threads running through this dissertation’s third and fourth chapters, particularly considering how Christ’s *kenosis* could include a sense of self-expression rather than self-annihilation. Chauvet’s vision of reality as the arch-sacramental order of “on-going transformation of subjects into believers”⁶⁴ resonates with the contemplative epistemology that Coakley describes in terms of certain practices affording an expanded range of objectivity,⁶⁵ thereby granting that ultimate truth-claims are deeply informed by extra-rational features of human experience. It also resonates with Balthasar’s theo-dramatic framing of reality, wherein humans exist along a range of belief (or unbelief) in the trinitarian God, and that relational proximity ever informs their perception of transcendent reality. But, notably, Chauvet’s presentation of the interpreter’s constructive participation in the Word-event does not easily concur with Balthasar’s depiction of the contemplative audience, passively witnessing and then re-enacting the trinitarian drama. In closer step with Coakley’s Spirit-led approach that unsettles binaries, Chauvet’s paradigm is one wherein human semantic improvisation is a risk required by revelation’s sacramental dynamism. He also goes further than Coakley on this account, presenting discursive activity in a way she does not. Much as she discovers through silent prayer that autonomy from God is illusory, Chauvet perceives indication in the nature of the symbol that our subjective expression is a site of sacramental God-human mingling. The key is that discourse must be embraced not instrumentally, but *kenotically*, as an occasion of self-offering to God.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 438.

⁶⁵ See GSS, 26.

We might say, in other words, that Chauvet's vision of human expression's potential to unite self-ceding and self-expressing impulses before God is seated in the fact that our dialogical relation to God through the sacrament has a quality much like the act of love-making as thematized by Irigaray: it involves a "shared outpouring" and a "loss of boundary . . . of the body, leaving the circle which encloses my solitude to meet in a shared space."⁶⁶ Rowan Williams has made deliberate use of a similar analogy in his renowned essay, "The Body's Grace," namely in terms of the comparable impulses driving sexual and communicative advances humans make toward one another. In light of those subtle parallels, Williams' theological reflections upon sexuality can help us bring together Balthasar's de Lubacian nature-grace thesis with the Chauvetian vision of the Word-event taking up the human speech-act (in that act's full subjectivity). We may come to see that the latter is, in fact, characteristic of the nature-completing movement of grace, which informs the church's Spirit-led "nuptial" incorporation into Sonship and bears implications for its "maternal" relation to the scriptural text. This analysis can finally inform how the interpretive community structures its communicative activity as it seeks a way beyond the PIP, not through radically particularist or falsely universalist positions, but through the corporate body's ongoing self-offering to God.

The Dialogical Sacrament as Nuptial Occasion: Resourcing the Body's Grace

Williams opens his reflections in "The Body's Grace" with an observation: "Most people know that sexual intimacy is in some ways frightening for them . . . that the whole business is irredeemably comic, surrounded by so many odd chances and so many opportunities for making a fool of yourself."⁶⁷ Williams goes on to draw upon philosopher Thomas Nagel's observation of the parallel risks entailed in seeking sexual connection with another person and in seeking to

⁶⁶ Irigaray, "Questions to Emmanuel Lévinas: On the Divinity of Love," in Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley, eds., *Re-Reading Lévinas*. London: Athlone, 1991. 109-18, at 88. Quoted in *GSS*, 317-18.

⁶⁷ Rowan D. Williams, "The Body's Grace," In *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Eugene F. Rogers, Jr. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 309-321. Here 310.

communicate something to an audience. Specifically, communication (i.e., “any attempt to share, in language, what something means”⁶⁸) and sexual advances share a similar process: both are “aroused” by the presence of another with whom one wants to connect, and to whom one must expose that desire in hopes that it is reciprocated. And, indeed, that desire must be reciprocated, if it is to come to fruition. In this exchange-oriented movement, I find (if I am honest) that “I am no longer in charge of what I am. *Any* genuine experience of desire leaves me in this position,” Williams observes: “I cannot of myself satisfy my wants without distorting or trivializing them.”⁶⁹ We here encounter a reflection that can add to Chauvet’s assessment that our situation within language leaves us anxious for control. That desperation is due not only to the elusiveness of assured meaning; it is also tied to communicative desire’s exposing one’s need for others, and one’s vulnerability in the face of their potential rejection or misunderstanding of what one hopes to say.

In view of the vulnerability associated with sexual desire and its expression, it is hardly surprising that, as Williams notes, culture and religion “have devoted enormous energy to the doomed task of getting it right.”⁷⁰ (One could certainly say the same for communication as well, with another nod to Chauvet and the “short-cut onto-(theo)logical approaches”⁷¹ he decries.) To Williams’ mind, the fact that efforts to secure a risk-free approach to sexuality have proven futile is a reality with transcendent implications, for it is not in “getting it right” that we discover the graced nature of sexual desire and encounter. It is, rather, in the giving and reception of the realization that one is desired by another. Williams explains:

Grace, for the Christian believer, is a transformation that depends in large part on knowing yourself to be seen in a certain way: as significant, as wanted. The whole story of creation, incarnation, and our incorporation into the fellowship of Christ’s body tells

⁶⁸ Ibid., 312.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 313.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Chauvet, 23.

us that God desires us, *as if we were God*, as if we were that unconditional response to God's giving that God's self makes in the life of the Trinity. We are created so that we may be caught up in this, so that we may grow into the wholehearted love of God by learning that God loves us as God loves God.⁷²

In material to follow, I will reflect upon the implications in this construal of cooperative grace for imaging the inspired hermeneutic act as a site displaying human subjectivity. For now, I simply want to observe that the economy of grace Williams here outlines corresponds with a somewhat controversial understanding of our fleshly pleasures, for it is a picture of the human before God wherein the creature's joy is a graced end in itself. The point this adds to Chauvet's cautioning against instrumentalized renderings of the sacraments is this: that when we doggedly seek to make our entry-points into "the shared world of language and (in the widest sense!) 'intercourse'"⁷³ instrumental to another process, we likely do so because we are overwhelmed by the "possibility not only of pain and humiliation without any clear payoff, but, just as worryingly, of nonfunctional joy—of joy, to put it less starkly, whose material 'production' is an embodied person aware of grace."⁷⁴ We seek to make sense of our desire, and its frustration or fulfillment, in its service to a larger purpose—such as the production of children through married sex, or the production of secured knowledge of divine presence through metaphysical reasoning, or perhaps even its purgative silencing towards the end of Christoform transfiguration—but, in doing so, we easily overlook the grace of that desire's fulfillment in itself.

Williams holds fast to this surplus economy of grace, along with our need to embrace the vulnerability it induces in us if we are to learn to see ourselves as belonging to one another and as objects of "the causeless, loving delight of God."⁷⁵ His picture of the incorporative movement of

⁷² Williams, 311-12.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 312.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 318.

⁷⁵ Williams, 317.

nature-completing grace thus stands in marked contrast with Balthasar's rendering of the "bridal" Church's incorporation into Christ's life through Marian expropriation. The reader will recall that Balthasar exposit the Ephesians 5 image of the Church as Christ's bride in terms of the feminine body awakened to herself in relation to the masculine one, specifically through the male's seed-giving moment of "self-outpouring"⁷⁶: "It always remains true," Balthasar says, "that in sexual intercourse it is the man who is the initiator, the leader, the shaper, while the woman's love—even if . . . just as active in its own way—is still essentially receptive."⁷⁷ Analogously, the bridal Church receives Christ's bodily substance through his self-outpouring on the cross; she thereby finds her "Marian" identity, becoming transparent to Christ's formative self-giving and consequently able to repeat his kenoticism as his "other self."⁷⁸ Having been impregnated by the seed of Christ's self-giving, the Church is likewise enabled to take up her "maternal" relation to the biblical text, birthing it, in its Christ-likeness, as a result of this nuptial union.

Balthasar's rendering of "sexuality that takes as its norm the relationship between Christ and his Church"⁷⁹ not only reifies the woman's function as receptive materiality and man's as the shaper of identity; it also interprets God's "nuptial" relation to humanity in terms of God's self-reproduction: that is, each material site of revelation is utterly labile, instrumental to the reproduction of God's self-expressing Word. Interestingly, by contrast, Williams draws upon the observation that "sexuality *beyond* biological reproduction is the one foremost in the biblical use of sexual metaphors for God's relation to humanity."⁸⁰ In Hosea, for instance, "God is not the potent

⁷⁶ See Balthasar, *New Elucidations*, trans. Mary Theresilde Skerry (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 212-228.

⁷⁷ *New Elucidations*, 216.

⁷⁸ Thus, "in the eucharistic celebration, the Church is not offering an 'alien' sacrifice, that is, Christ's, but is herself inwardly involved in it," says Balthasar in *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. IV, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 394.

⁷⁹ Balthasar, *New Elucidations*, 227.

⁸⁰ Williams, 318. Emphasis added.

male sower of seed but the tormented lover,” one engaged in “exposing himself to humiliation” before the beloved and straying people: “God is at the mercy of the perceptions of an uncontrolled partner.”⁸¹ Similarly, Williams points out that the Ephesians 5 marital imagery, “for all of its blatant assumption of male authority, still insists on the relational and personally creative element” in the nuptial metaphor, “without using procreation as a rational or functional justification.”⁸² Balthasar’s reproduction-obsessed picture of the male-female, Christ-Church, and God-creation relations flows logically into his assertion that the grace-nature relation discloses orderly dichotomies: that is, that grace’s transfigurative taking-up of nature makes clear to revelation’s recipients the distinction between essential bodily categories. In the contrasting picture of the nature-grace relation Williams offers, God’s worldly self-disclosure occurs in a manner that wants to be “enlarge[d by] the life of others.”⁸³ God’s self-expressing Word invokes creative creaturely “collaboration” in determining the meaning of its material life, in other words; and the eschatological end of this incorporative process is “nonfunctional joy,” productive of persons aware of being desired by another, whereby we may grow into the devoted love of God.⁸⁴ It is little wonder, from this perspective, that the biblical writers repeatedly draw upon sexual imagery that represents this “complex and costly faithfulness” of God’s love affair with God’s people, rather than metaphorically punctuating God’s straightforwardly reproductive objective with those images.⁸⁵

Williams’ reflections encourage us to imagine how the entire unfolding of creation, incarnation, and our incorporation into Sonship includes God desiring human others, not only as a tormented lover longs for the affections of the beloved, but also as a speaker longs to heard by the

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., 319.

⁸³ Ibid., 313.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 318.

⁸⁵ Williams, 319.

addressee: not as by an empty echo-chamber, capable of neatly receiving and clearly reproducing that speech, but as by a complex other who receives the Word *into* and responds to it *out of* her distinctive other-ness, and who longs to be heard in turn, finding in God's responsive presence an "occasion of joy." From such a perspective, Balthasar would be right to say that, because the divine Word "took flesh, he took on, at the same time, a body consisting of syllables, Scripture, ideas, images, verbal utterance and preaching."⁸⁶ But the incarnate Word did not take on that body of language only, as Balthasar implies, so that God's addressees could understand that "the Word really was made flesh, or that the divine Person who was made flesh was really the Word"⁸⁷ (though it is certainly a benefit experienced). More fundamentally, the Word took on the "hyperreal" body of the semantic nexus because God's self-expression longs to be received, enjoyed, and reconstructed by the perception of another. Hence, the creature's subjective, self-expressive response is integrally interwoven into God's act of self-communication.⁸⁸ The Word became flesh so the enraptured flesh could be "made Word," in this fashion.

Bringing these convictions into concert with what this project has gleaned from Coakley, we could say that when humans encounter God's self-revelation—and find themselves, like Balthasar, "overwhelmed by the Word of God in the way the beloved is overwhelmed by the declaration of the lover"⁸⁹—they experience the ontological boundaries between themselves and God transgressed by an emergent quality, irreducible either to its divine source or to themselves. Christians have identified that quality as a saving, divine actor at work within us: the Holy Spirit. Under the

⁸⁶ *ETI*, 149.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ By "various manifestations of the Word" I mean to imply both natural or general revelation as well as special revelation given in the Incarnation and through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

⁸⁹ Balthasar quoted in Rodney Howsare, *Balthasar: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 33.

influence of the Spirit, which is like an irreducible “ecstasy of ourself in us . . . prior to any ‘child’,”⁹⁰ the Creator-creature distinction is vital to intimate connection across difference. Those boundaries are also disrupted as each party is ecstatically “given over to the creation of joy in that other.”⁹¹ In the dialogical union, we indeed find that the Spirit prays in us, “interceding” on our behalf “with sighs too deep for words,” for this saving union with God remains sheer gift, never of our making.⁹² Nevertheless, we also find this divine ecstasy in us enabling us “both to will and to work for [God’s] good pleasure,” and so—though we do not know the way—we affirm that the Spirit also prays *with* us as we improvisationally “work out” the implications of our graced joy with reverence and awe.⁹³ The “child” born of the God-human dialogical union could be understood as the human’s responsive, signifying words and acts, which bear the traits of both lovers (the firm markers of which are elusive, identifiable only in a “family resemblance” manner in keeping with Frei’s “plain sense” approach to the Christ-portrait). Believers thus affirm that their semantic categories are “inspired,” mapped by the Spirit into God’s own self-expression, “as if we were that unconditional response to God’s giving that God’s self makes” in the trinitarian life.⁹⁴

The resulting image of the relation between human words and God’s Word in Scripture is this: that relation is both the sacramental circumstance *and* outcome of a graced, ongoing God-human encounter, a giving and receiving of desire for the delighted presence of another, to which the Spirit draws humans into expressive response. Within this framing of revelation’s worldly mediations, we find that human interpreters cannot *but* “add threads” to the text of God’s self-

⁹⁰ Citing Coakley’s use of Luce Irigaray, “Questions to Emmanuel Lévinas: On the Divinity of Love,” in Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley, eds., *Re-Reading Lévinas* (London: Athlone, 1991), 109-18, at 88; quoted in Coakley, *GSS* 317-18.

⁹¹ Williams, 313.

⁹² See Romans 8:26, NRSV.

⁹³ See Philippians 2: 12-13, NRSV.

⁹⁴ Williams, 311-12.

expression. God retains sovereignty in shaping the terms, content, and outcome of this dialogical intermingling—not as a fellow agent, manipulating our responses by restricting our range of activity; but as the very source, context, and destiny of our agential responses. Hence, in this framing of the Word-event as dialogical occasion, if there is any residual pertinence to Balthasar’s depiction of the “Marian” believer as the recipient evoked by revelation, it lies in the insistence that the *primacy* of the dialogical exchange belongs to the trinitarian Author, Lead Actor, and Director of the theodrama.⁹⁵ This primacy becomes tangible in terms of the Bible’s “sacred” status as semantic witness to God’s Word.

As inspired speech, what sets Christian Scripture uniquely apart is its history in the community of believers. Its emergence over time was compelled by the Spirit, the “thirdness” enlivening the God-human encounter and the ongoing dialogical negotiations that occur in communities committed to life together. That Spirit, believers attest, has guided their vision to see all historical events finding their meaning in view of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. To put it otherwise: if the “child” born of the God-human dialogical encounter is human expression that bears “family resemblances” of both God and human—pointing beyond itself to both parties, in sacramental fashion—then it is in Christ that believers find the orienting feature of those resemblances, the shape that “plays in ten thousand places.”⁹⁶ On this account they can say with Balthasar that Christ is Scripture’s unifying “form,” but they would specify that it is because the person of the hypostatic union embodies God’s Word to creation *and* creation’s distinctive response to God. Points of the overlapping of or distinction between human words and the divine Word remain obscure, unquestionably; but, in Christ, we are called to receive that obscuring, not first as

⁹⁵ We might say that God “above us” is the divine Source who utters the world into existence, through the Word, out of loving delight in otherness; “God with us” dwells within that world for the sake of its reciprocated delight, speaking to it in the special language of the Word made flesh; “God within us” enlivens human response to that incarnate Word, thereby expanding its expressive meanings while transfiguring our desires, incorporating us into the Christomorphic moves of Sonship.

⁹⁶ See “As Kingfishers Catch Fire” by Gerard Manly Hopkins. *Gerard Manly Hopkins: Poems and Prose* (Penguin Classics, 1985).

an indication of human sin and ignominy, but rather of our being God's beloved children. Christians should continue to confer upon Scripture the highest non-divine authority, because its witness affords clearest glimpse of the figure that they find the Spirit prompting all of creation to reconfigure: the Text to which all texts are drawn in their own shaping power, the *cantus firmus* of our orchestral riff in ecstatic movement toward the divine source of the Word made flesh.

A Transfigured "Maternal" Paradigm: Full Bodily Knowing of the Text

Evaluating broad swaths of creative literature and exegesis, Christian literary theorist Alan Jacobs has surmised that "the loss or abdication of selfhood so prized in some interpretations of *kenosis*, as well as by other forms of mysticism, leads also to the abdication of answerability and the refusal of self-activity."⁹⁷ This chapter's analysis has borne witness to the problem Jacobs observes, highlighting (some of) the objectionable intercommunal effects that accompany a presumed or idealized "loss of selfhood" in hermeneutic approaches to revelation. The sacramental-hermeneutic alternative I have proposed, in conversation with Chauvet and Williams, establishes a place for answerability in kenotic acts of interpretation. Within this sacramental framing of the God-human relation, Christ's *kenosis* is driven by self-expression rather than self-annihilation—thought, notably, it is self-expression oriented towards ecstatic enjoyment of and in the Other rather than towards securing one's power *vis-à-vis* that Other. We can thereby conclude that, though getting our interpretations precisely "right" is a doomed task, we can certainly get them *wrong*, which we do in the quest to avoid the self-exposing risks of grace. The mishandling of biblical interpretation occurs, that is, when we use it as a tool for self-preservation rather than a means for offering ourselves to

⁹⁷ Alan Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading: The Hermeneutics of Love* (Cambridge, MA: Westview Press, 2001), 105.

be reconstructed by God's and one another's reception and response.⁹⁸ Among myriad implications, this means that we must not indulge the longing to engage revelation from a neutral or "transparent" standpoint, to receive it without "getting a few fingers caught" in the interpretive act. Grace calls us to discover our identities, not in relation to a fixed object of interpretation (built upon the illusion of control over others' reactions), but in trusting that another's—ultimately, for the Christian, the divine Other's—delight in us can fulfill our desires, and is worth the pains of acknowledging our dependence upon the other's desire for us.⁹⁹ Kenotic biblical interpretation is an occasion for finding joy in God's inviting us to "add threads" to the meaning of the Word incarnate.

This kenotic embrace is not to be mistaken, however, for an easy one. We cannot escape the fact that, pre-eschaton, the believing community's experience of obfuscation between Word and words is also inflected by anxiety, due to the systemic sins that darken our perception. Accordingly, as we walk the hermeneutic way "inseparable from us," Chauvet presses us to see that the manner in which we construct our discourses—evidenced in "the *attitude*, idolatrous or not, they elicit from us"¹⁰⁰—either forms or *deforms* our experience of God's presence in the sacramental meeting places throughout creation. No one understands this the spiritual potential and anti-potential, as it were, of our habitation through discourse so well as poet-theologian of language, Dante Alighieri. His *Divine Comedy* masterfully examines interpretation and semantic expression from every human angle, exposing the pains required though never forced upon speech-makers by the Word incarnate. If we are invited to "add threads" to the incarnate Word's meanings as we live out the

⁹⁸ From this perspective of grace, Williams says, "sexual 'perversion' is sexual activity without risk . . . the effort to bring my happiness back under my control and to refuse to let my body be recreated by another person's perception" (ibid).

⁹⁹ The need for this trust reminds us, Williams notes, of why "the community needs some who are called beyond or aside from the ordinary patterns of sexual relation to put their identities directly into the hands of God in the single life. . . . Their decision (which is as risky as the commitment to sexual fidelity) is to see if they can find themselves, their bodily selves, in a life dependent simply upon trust in the generous delight of God" (317).

¹⁰⁰ Chauvet, 43.

theo-drama in an improvised sequence of answerable acts, the fates of the characters in Dante's cosmic narrative teach us that there is a profound yet subtle difference between our *expanding* one another's meanings, and thus enlarging each other's lives, through our expressed desires, and our merely *projecting our desires* upon each other (as "texts") and upon texts themselves. The first sort of expression is offered for returning response, with authentic desire for the joy and expression of the "other," and will go to the cross for that offer; the latter sort desires an audience only so as to ensure the speaker's security *over* or *within* the corporate network.¹⁰¹ These are the sins of subjugation or enmeshment, with both including the abdication of genuine self-activity and responsibility vis-à-vis one's dialogue partners.

Dante's tale thus holds to light the grave risks *to* and transcendent rewards *of* kenotic expression in the corporate body. We may take heart in the presence of the Holy Spirit, who "will teach us everything, and remind us of all that Christ has said to us."¹⁰² Namely, emboldened by the tenets of the Spirit-led approach to trinitarian revelation, we anticipate the transfiguring guidance of the Holy Spirit whenever we root our interpretive acts in impassioned, self-offering attention. But when believers' ad hoc readings of Sonship in the text clash with one another's, what then? Having attended to the attitude elicited, and examined our desires against Christ's kenotic standard,

¹⁰¹ William Franke's work in *Dante's Interpretive Journey* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) allows us to look more closely at Dante's investigation of this ethical responsibility through his protagonist's adventures in the *Divine Comedy*. In particular, Franke explores what he entitles "Dante's Hermeneutic Rite of Passage" in *Inferno IX*, where an imperative is given to Dante: "*Turn yourself around and cover your eyes;/ for if the Gorgon should appear and you see it,/ never more would you return above*" (*Inferno IX*. 55-60). Franke explains that Dante will literally be petrified if he gazes directly at the Gorgon rather than "turning away and suffering various sorts of mediation figuring the detour of interpretive procedures" (85). Citing John Freccero's consideration of the Gorgon's function in the *Inferno*, Franke notes that the Gorgon's threat is one that "constitutes for Dante a temptation to return narcissistically and nostalgically to his past," instead of moving forward through the difficulties of the underworld (85). For Dante to give in to this temptation would leave him no longer capable of progress, for "the love involved would be terminal and idolatrous, refusing to pass beyond into the infinite love of Christian *caritas*, toward which the trajectory of the *Commedia*...is directed" (*ibid.*). Dante-writer thus suggests that self-indulgence and clinging to securities are interconnected with distortive interpretation because they are antithetical to the posture of God's self-offering love.

¹⁰² John 14:26, NRSV (pronouns adapted).

do we have any other resources for inviting the Spirit's direction into our acts of adjudication between competing claims? This is where we have consistently found the Protestant tradition falling short of the needs of the interpretive community. Recalling material from chapter one, Louis Bouyer has proposed that the intuitive convictions undergirding the Reformation's *sola* principles emanate from a core sensibility that has long informed the Protestant movement as a religion of "the God . . . who utters the Word of life." "The importance it [Protestantism] gives to the Bible, however great, proceeds entirely" from this conviction about God's nature, Bouyer says,

and from the fact that the Bible contains the living Word which, starting from the heart of God, reaches and touches the heart of man. Criticism of other authorities comes only in the second or third place, according as it is deemed useful or necessary to set off the importance of the Bible as recognized (rather than defined). And this criticism itself remains secondary to the opposition to the illuminism of the sects, which substitutes for the authentic Word of God, in its full transcendence, an illusory message, a fantasy created by the heart of man shut up in itself. Indeed, throughout the history of Protestantism, the preaching of the Word of God remains, in its essence, the proclamation of a living 'good news,' which ultimately is always identified with Christ, considered as living and acting within us.¹⁰³

Reflecting upon Bouyer's evaluation in light of this project's total analysis, Protestants can still affirm that the individual's apprehension of the divine Word in Scripture comes by way of the Holy Spirit's witness to faith, which is an unmerited gift of grace given to an open heart; but that apprehension does not occur *fundamentally* through interior, intuitive experience. Such a definition overlooks the ways Spirit-afforded apprehension is discursively and, thus, communally situated, its norms are both recognized *and* defined. This project has punctuated nothing if not this fact: that faith-knowledge is bodily, in the fully material and corporate respects of the word, and so its resources must draw upon multiple means of "knowing." This resourcing must occur in service of an "expanded range of objectivity," as Coakley discovers via contemplation, acknowledging that ultimate truth-claims are indelibly shaped by the extra-rational features of human perception.

In Coakley's *théologie totale* attention to those multiple means of knowledge, inviting the Spirit into our discernment happens first in the contemplative's non-discursive experience of

¹⁰³ Bouyer, 118.

ekstasis. This approach not only gives primacy to wordless-ness, as I have observed; it also effectively prioritizes the individual experience of divine presence over the collective experience of grace, afforded through what Williams calls the “shared world of . . . (in the widest sense!) ‘intercourse.’”¹⁰⁴ This needed balance can only be achieved, then, through careful attention to how the Spirit works through the community’s discursive engagements, accounting for how the communal struggle towards Scripture’s Christoform meaning can itself be a bodily* site of “space-making” for the Spirit. Returning to the image of the biblical text as the semantic “child” born of the sacramental God-human encounter, I want to suggest that imaging the believing community’s relation to the biblical text as a “maternal” one could help us consider the complex nature of this hermeneutic relationship—provided that the maternal image is shorn of Balthasar’s romantic illusions of the Marian mother’s “pure and simple” production and nurturing of the child. A multifaceted, feminist-maternal image of the church in relation to Scripture can, arguably, afford far better norms for the interpretive paradigm towards which this chapter has been building. That paradigm promises practical implications for the project of moving “beyond the Protestant interpretation problem.” Let us now turn to this concluding task.

* * *

*But Zion said, ‘The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me.’
Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb?
Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.” -Isaiah 49: 14-15*

*Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . . how often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen
gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” -Matthew 23:27*

Images of maternal nurturing are, alongside sexual wooing and union, another instance in Scripture of intimate physical desire for another functioning as an analogy for God’s care for God’s people: God longs for them as a nursing mother aches to feed her infant, as a mother hen yearns to shelter her young beneath her wings. Herein we find further evidence that the dynamics of

¹⁰⁴ Williams, 312.

trinitarian desire work to render one aware that I am not “in charge of what I am,” that I am unable to “satisfy my wants” on my own “without distorting or trivializing them.”¹⁰⁵ To that end, in a reflection that will recall for us the dichotomies overcome in the *ekstasis* of sexual intimacy, Bonnie Miller-McLemore says regarding the experience of nursing:

I know physically through a muscular ache. Apart from the ache, I can scarcely know. In this knowing, few abstractions come between myself and the other, mouth to nipple—no bottle, no instrument to measure birth size or fetal movement. As with pregnancy, lactation subverts artificial boundaries between self and other, inside and outside. Both undermine the integrity of my body and my self, and root me fluidly, solidly, to the depths of my body’s capacities. . . . It is important to observe that this experience is one of a continuity in difference, not one of polar opposition of feelings or the enmeshed symbiosis between mother and child. . . . I know by an affective connection that moves toward differentiation, not by comparison, contrast, and critique or by some idealized oneness or union with the child.¹⁰⁶

In this image of the lactating mother and her bond with the child, we find another analogue for the ontological boundaries between ourselves and God transgressed, infused with eschatological hope by the Spirit that gives life (under the understanding that taking up life-giving labor is to partner in the Holy Spirit’s cosmic activity).

We can also find it illuminating the nature of fervent attention to the beloved “object,” the child which is nurtured, that makes use of multiple forms of knowing. For, as Miller-McLemore goes on to say, the maternal knowing must

rely upon a bodily passion, a knowing driven by a welcomed lust or need that seeks satisfaction. . . . In this state, I learn, change, and develop; if I don’t, the child won’t. . . . Very few abstracted rules hold. In the movement between the knowing and the acting of nursing and tending an infant, I use a mode of circular reasoning, interweaving physical sensation, momentary cognition, behavioral reaction, and a physical sensing and intellectual reading of the results—a trial and error, hit-and-miss strategy.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Williams, 313.

¹⁰⁶ Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Also A Mother: Work and Family as Theological Dilemma* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1994), 147.

¹⁰⁷ Miller-McLemore, 147.

Thus, this cannot be just *any* maternal paradigm but must be one befitting the transfigured Marian profile I outlined at the end of chapter four, for the mother's is not a "passive receptive generativity, but an active engagement."¹⁰⁸ Recalling Balthasar's terms, the mother's "feminine" surrender does not arise from a passive, relinquishing reception, but a fierce desire for the life of the other. What Balthasar assigns to male and female accordingly blend in various forms of "knowing" the child and its needs, identifying and responding to it to sustain life. This undermining of Balthasar's biological essentialism also emphasizes that not all women want to be mothers, and even mothers who profess love may not give life. This feminist-maternal analogy is interested in the bodily relations that afford types of knowledge and reinforce the conditions for life. Namely, it sparks our imagining how the church body relates to the text that is "ours and not ours" through multiple forms of discernment, much as a maternal figure relates to a child.

In view of it, we can suggestively propose that the believing community should expect continually to labor in discerning the life-giving way with this beloved but often perplexing "child." Just as the mother need not embrace a poverty of self to make room for the love and life of the child, the church need not engage in passive waiting in acceptance of the *status quo*. Rather, the Spirit-beseeking community's members should put all of their knowing powers to work in seeking the Christ-form they believe plays within and makes sense of this textual body which is both theirs and God's (and must continually be offered back to God, if the church is to thrive). In seeking the life-form of the text under consideration, ever begging Christomorphic shape, the maternal paradigm promises that there is no reliable, methodological formula or hierarchy of knowledge—only a "trial and error, hit-and-miss strategy." That strategy must improvisationally deploy the full range of bodily* knowledge in the discursive situation, prayerfully and creatively drawing upon its members' gifts for the "momentary cognition" afforded by spiritual intuition, "behavioral reaction" cultured by lifelong theopraxis, "a physical sensing" acquired through occupying the margins of

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 148.

discursive privilege, and an “intellectual reading of the results” that is developed through careful noetic exercises.

In the midst of this ad hoc process, we must trust the body’s grace: that is, that the Spirit is cooperating with the conclusions of the discursive church body, which means trusting our processes of arriving at doctrinal consensus. But careful attention to the wisdom of Spirit-led bodily* life indicates that retaining potential for subverting established orders is bound up with the capacity for heeding the other-oriented call of divine desire.¹⁰⁹ Thus, the emergent forms of doctrine and institutional order must also be eschatologically oriented, held as points for ongoing re-engagement, particularly from the vantage point of previously unheard discursive partners, both within and beyond the institutions of church discourse. The hermeneutic of suspicion must be held close to the hermeneutic of trust, in other words, begging for the “subversive element” within the institution that Coakley endorses. This transfigured profile of the “Marian/maternal” church finally reminds us that the challenge of ongoing communal negotiation with Scripture—of truly listening to the text, and to one another vis-à-vis that text—is not to be underestimated. Yet it also promises that, in our discursive labors to work out Scripture’s Christomorphous meanings over time together, we can discover that the struggles which produced scriptural testimony and canonization, and which still produce its interpretation, are themselves occasions of transfiguration: sites wherein the Spirit refines us for the kenotic moves of Sonship, and thus for discerning the Word within words by way of “an affective connection that moves toward differentiation.”¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Along these lines, for instance, Williams observes that the problem with flatly approaching sexual activity from an established moral stance is that doing so “simply absolves us from the difficulties we might meet” in attempting to make “human sense” of our bodily life together (314). From this perspective, “sexual ‘perversion’ is sexual activity without risk . . . the effort to bring my happiness back under my control and to refuse to let my body be recreated by another person’s perception” (ibid.)

¹¹⁰ Miller-McLemore, 147.

Conclusion: Practical Trajectories Beyond the PIP

Concluding this project means bringing the focus back to the phenomenon I've called the "Protestant interpretation problem," at the heart of which are the questions of the biblical text's manner of authority in the "low church" setting and what it takes for such interpretive groups to move towards community-sustaining interpretation of it. In the end, my thesis—which I hope the progressive unfolding of this project has rendered convincing—is that the basic tenet of *sola Scriptura* teaching that is not sustainable within community is that of every autonomous interpreter having equal cognitive access to the text's normative content, secured by the clarifying presence of the Holy Spirit. This approach to Scripture succeeds in community only if every member who professes devotion to Christ perceives the same normative content in the text, or uniformly agrees to submit to those leaders who publically proclaim that content. Hermeneutic discrepancies persistently declare that every devoted individual is not "equally" or uniformly informed by the Spirit, and that there is much to lose in following charismatic leaders into ghettos of fideism.

The alternative is one of "higher church" inclination: it takes the Spirit to work subtly through the corporate functions of praying individuals-in-community, whose members settle upon the norms of revelation via the unfolding, untidy, ad hoc processes involved in seeking consensus. Within that dialogical body there will inevitably be functional hierarches, for certain persons whom the community identifies as having advanced in the bodily processes of acquiring spiritual wisdom will be granted weightier authority in orchestrating the communal body's discursive processes and self-expression.¹¹¹ Fleeing the demands of membership in such hierarchized bodies amounts to running from the risk, and thereby losing the rewards, of exposing our perceptions (and, thus, our

¹¹¹ Provided with this reminder from Coakley: "Anyone who has worked in circumstances of institutional chaos knows that some [hierarchical] order, organizationally speaking, is preferable for everyone; it is worldly sexed subordination that feminism opposes. And 'ordering' oneself to God, in contrast, ... may precisely be the means of undermining and dissolving such sexed subordination" (*GSS*, 319-20).

very selves) to reformation by the perceptions of others. Such acknowledgments do not, however, warrant unilaterally turning away from “low church” polity as a viable ecclesial project. Inflexible hierarchies, metaphysical formulae, and doctrinal positions emerge as another means for eschewing the risk of bodily presence in dialogical community. This observation is thoroughly political, indicting from the top-down all members of the hierarchized society whose sense of self-worth has relied upon the silencing of subordinates, whose voices could critique and broaden the community’s self-expression, were they considered worthy of and actually given attentive audience.

In either “low church” or “high church” settings, then, we find different expressions of the same sinful temptation: that of appearing to live together as the ecclesial body whose head is Christ, while in fact evading the real risks of Christiform communion. That evasion is, I have argued, symbiotic with the hermeneutic desire Derrida identifies as a longing to look at the object of interpretation without “getting a few fingers caught” in the act of engaging it—without implicating ourselves, making ourselves vulnerable to critique. Jacobs likens this hermeneutic tendency to what philosopher Stanley Cavell calls “The Avoidance of Love” in a famous essay: “It is a game in which one trades in the possibility of winning for the security of being immune to loss.”¹¹² In the light of Williams’ reflections upon the “body’s grace,” we begin to see that, if evading hermeneutic misstep necessitates avoiding the self-exposure inherent to the experience of *love*, it is also achieved at the cost of experiencing grace—that is, of seeing ourselves “as desired, as the occasion of *joy*.”¹¹³ It is not unreasonable to imagine that the other fruits of the Spirit’s presence would be forfeit as well.¹¹⁴

We thus find that, if Scripture-readers hope to order their bodily lives so that those Spirit-afforded fruits may abound, they must resist hermeneutical frameworks wherein identifying the

¹¹² Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) quoted in Jacobs, 34.

¹¹³ Rowan Williams, 312. Emphasis added.

¹¹⁴ That is, those following love and joy, according to the Epistle to the Galatians text: peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (see Galatians 5: 22-23).

Bible's authoritative meaning relies upon the audience's neutral or passive reception, or idealizes an idle subject-object epistemic relationship. We have observed that the contemplative paradigm provides a helpful starting point for embracing another theo-dramatic role: that of co-operatives in the Spirit-led process of revelation's unfolding. But in order to embody this role, we have found, believers must also identify and practice the self-sharing ways of *kenosis*. This means taking up not only silent prayer and non-discursive attention to God and neighbor, but also close attention to our manner of habitation within discursive activity. On this point, we are reminded of Chauvet's comparison of language with desert manna. Notably, Israel received manna in the wilderness with the charge of adhering to a principle of each member of the community taking only what was needed, with no one hoarding above it, in trust that God would send more. Paul later called the Corinthians to join in the "generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor" by adopting this principle of giving out of trust in the abundance of God's provision.¹¹⁵ These texts illumine the kenotic life-principle, which beckons the fruit-giving presence of the Spirit, as an economic principle of eschatological generosity: in the case of discursive exchange, of not being afraid of what might occur if we relinquish our power over or within language vis-à-vis our neighbors and our God.

Such trust pushes us to a distinctive epistemic relation to the biblical text, the "offspring" of the faith-community's ecstatic union with God. In order to understand and meet the requirements of this beloved "child," the interpretive body's members must begin by overcoming the desire to hoard meaning for themselves by evading the claims that dialogue-partners put upon them, both from and around the text. Hence, though we be called to embrace our subjective "thread-adding" as evoked and redeemed by the Spirit, we are hardly given license to read whatever we wish into the text. The biblical canon retains its central authority because it is the foundational site of the

¹¹⁵ See II Corinthians 8:9 and 8:15: "As it is written, 'The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little'" (NRSV). The quotation in verse 15 is from Exodus 16:18, specifically concerning the manna in the wilderness.

believing *community's* intermingling with divine self-expression; it is the primary bodily site around which these improvisational actors gather to discern the emergent image of Christ and its distinctive, applied features in new historical contexts *together*.¹¹⁶ It is thus vital that the community seeks to root out hermeneutic inclinations toward individualistic primacy, along with any inkling that the Spirit cooperates with human means “simply,” “plainly,” or “purely.” Believers can affirm that all Scripture is “inspired” by God’s Spirit and is “useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness”¹¹⁷ without asserting the text’s “inerrancy” or “infallibility.”¹¹⁸

Human words are, after all, “errant”: they fail to strike or usher in the full presence of realities toward which they gesture. By virtue of language’s inability to reference the reality to which it aims without “adding to the text,” Scripture’s *res* (the Word encountered in Christ) and its *verba* (human words) remain at a remove from one another—at least, in instrumental terms. But that remove is the context of sacramental encounter, for it pushes readers to discover their identities, not in relation to a controllable object of interpretation, but in trusting that God’s desire to commune with them as a people means God has taken up their imperfect responses as means of the Word’s incarnational unfolding. That discovery is costly, asking that we expose our hearts to be broken; and it means continually wrestling with the Bible’s most troublesome passages, those

¹¹⁶ Thus, the difference between the illusion of the call to hermeneutic neutrality and this impassioned embrace of the text can be articulated as an “ecclesially located theology” of reading, which biblical scholar Joshua Marshall Strahan finds of help in Augustinian interpretation. For Augustine, Strahan notes, reading from the ecclesial “location” entails, first, reading Scripture with humility and submission; second, finding the canon “essential for guiding exegesis”; and third, seeking the goal of “transformative progress in faith, hope, and love.” *The Limits of a Text: Luke 23:34a As a Case Study in Theological Interpretation* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012), 48-49.

¹¹⁷ II Timothy 3:16, NRSV.

¹¹⁸ As a reminder, the teaching regarding scriptural inerrancy arose in the so-called period of “Protestant Orthodoxy” or “Protestant Scholasticism” and has since remained prominent within Protestantism. At its origin, Protestant theologians concerned with reuniting factions decided that the key to identifying Scripture’s core content must lie in right doctrine, and they began to teach that the scriptural text was dictated word for word by the Holy Spirit, thus explicitly identifying the Bible with the Word of God and denying any distinction between Scripture’s *res* and *verba*.

places wherein its *res* seems stiflingly occluded by historically-situated expressions of cultural bias in its *verba*, as we wait for a blessing from the Lord. Kenotic interpretation of Christofom revelation appears to be an ever-complex collusion of reception and production, and so the way “beyond the Protestant interpretation problem” is not that of a comforting, pre-determined path to follow. It is a way to be learned *in via*, as we improvise the the still-unfinished meaning that belongs to God’s future, releasing our tentative expressions to one another as to the heart of the Holy Spirit’s transfiguring fire.

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