

Editorial: Reflecting upon the “Theological Interpretation of Scripture”

Stephen J. Wellum

IN THE LAST decade a “movement” known as the “theological interpretation of Scripture” (TIS) has made a lot of waves in academic circles. Whole study groups at the Society of Biblical Literature have debated its merits; Baker Books has published a dictionary devoted to the subject

(*Dictionary for the Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer [2005]) and is in the process of publishing an entire commentary series devoted to TIS (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible); academic journals have discussed it at length (e.g., *International Journal of Systematic Theology* [2010]); and numerous books and articles have broached the subject from a variety of angles. Numerous names and even schools of thought are associated with the

movement—names and schools that represent diverse theological backgrounds and communities: the so-called Yale school associated with

Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, Brevard Childs, and others; Francis Watson, Stephen Fowl; and evangelicals such as Joel Green, Kevin Vanhoozer, Daniel Treier, and so on. Given the attention TIS has received, we thought it wise to devote an issue of *SBJT* to introducing our readers to TIS by noting what it is and why it has arisen, what it proposes, and its overall value for the church in our study of Scripture and doing theology.

First, what is it and why has it arisen? All those involved in TIS admit the difficulty in defining precisely what it is. In our articles and *SBJT* Forum a number of definitions are given which attempt to nail down precisely what TIS is. Probably at this point, it is best to characterize TIS as a broad and diverse movement comprised of biblical scholars and theologians who are mainline Protestants, Roman Catholics, and evangelicals and who are attempting to recover the authority of the Bible and to return it to the church. Obviously this raises the question as to what TIS is recovering the Bible from and the answer to this question helps describe why it has arisen. In a nutshell, TIS

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is attempting to recover the authority of the Bible for the church from the debilitating effects of the “assured results of biblical scholarship” identified with the Enlightenment and modern eras which sought to squeeze the Bible within the alien worldview assumptions of methodological naturalism (e.g., Deism, naturalism, process theism) associated with the historical-critical method. That is why, a majority of those in the TIS movement arise out of non-evangelical circles since, like Karl Barth before them (who is often viewed as the “founder” of the movement), they are attempting to recover the Bible’s voice by rejecting the liberalism they were taught and raised in.

Second, what is the TIS alternative? Once again, the answer to this question is as diverse as the person you talk to, but there are some common features which unite the movement. In light of the various legitimate criticisms postmodernism has leveled against modernism, TIS is not interested in treating the Bible merely “as any other book” to be dissected under the rules of *general* or philosophical hermeneutics, rather it approaches the Bible theologically in the sense that it takes the divine author seriously and it does not shelve Christian theological assumptions as it reads and applies Scripture. In this way, TIS strongly endorses a *special* or theological hermeneutics rooted in a larger Christian theology. In addition, TIS rejects the historical-critical method of merely reconstructing what is behind the text of Scripture and instead wants to read Scripture theologically, i.e., in its final form and as a unified, canonical whole. Furthermore, TIS does not reject “pre-critical” readings of Scripture as if we are merely the first people to interpret Scripture or better in our doing so. Instead, we must read Scripture in light of the history of the church with the goal of edifying the church. We must interpret Scripture within the “rule of faith,” particularly the early Trinitarian and Christological confessions of the church and recapture a spiritual use of Scripture, even at times an allegorical reading, as the church has done throughout the ages. In this sense, Scripture does not have a single meaning limited to the

intent of the original author, but multiple complex senses given by God, the author of the whole. In all of these ways, TIS’s alternative is to read and apply Scripture as God’s Word for the church and not merely as isolated, independent, autonomous interpreters with alien theological assumptions.

Third, what is the overall value of TIS for the church? Anytime a movement encourages the church to take seriously Scripture as God’s Word, it has value. But in truth, this emphasis is not new for evangelicals, even though it may seem new for many within the academic guild. However, as much as we applaud TIS in attempting to recapture the Bible’s authority, to read Scripture as a unified whole, and to apply it to the church’s life, evangelicals must also demonstrate caution. One of the most important outstanding questions which must be addressed honestly is the precise nature of Scripture; not everyone in TIS agrees on this. Many accept the final form of Scripture and its authority not always for the right reasons. The right reason to accept Scriptural authority is because Scripture is nothing less than God’s Word written, the product of God’s sovereign action in and through human authors, so that what they write is precisely what God wanted written and thus fully authoritative and inerrant in all that it affirms. Rather, specifically in the postliberal and even postconservative camp within TIS, Scripture is received as authoritative because it is the church’s book but this does *not* entail its reliability and theological accuracy in all matters. But if this is the case, then within TIS there is still a great divide over the most fundamental question: What is the nature of Scripture and why? It is on this question that evangelicals must not fudge. Scripture in all of its divine authority and reliability must be affirmed; indeed, it must be lived out in every aspect of life.

It is my prayer that the articles in this issue of *SBJT* will not only introduce TIS but also wrestle with other aspects of a proper theological interpretation of Scripture for our good, the health of the church, and the glory of our Triune God in the face of our Lord Jesus Christ.