

Towards Formative Interpretation: A Theological Hermeneutical Proposal

A Thesis submitted to Middlesex University in partial
fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of
Theology

by

Andreas Hild

Middlesex University

Supervised at London School of Theology

December 2017

Abstract

How can we read the Bible to be formed as readers? This question opens a number of possible avenues of academic inquiry, but the one taken in this paper is mainly concerned with hermeneutical questions of how we read the Bible and whether we can formulate a hermeneutical framework for formative interpretation. To that end we analyse interpretative approaches of the modern era and ask whether these are hospitable or hostile to Christian formation. Our findings show the negative effects of pluralism and secularisation that dominate in the field of hermeneutics. Our work then focuses on the development of a theological hermeneutics, within which formative interpretation receives stable goals and criteria. This we achieve in three steps; one, we propose three basic hermeneutical decisions that constitute theological hermeneutics; two, we define and describe formation from a Christian perspective and use those insights as guidelines for formative interpretation; three, we describe two formal characteristics of formative interpretation. In essence, this paper sees formative interpretation as an ecclesial task that focuses on discernment of God's being and presence in the world, which Scripture witnesses of and explains. Formative interpretation is a holistic task of the reader to bring one's whole self before God in the reading of Scripture, and in that posture and practice we expect God to speak through the entirety of Scripture to use today.

Acknowledgements

To remember those that contributed to the completion of this work is a rewarding exercise. As for the appropriateness of this practice, it is somewhat ironic to remember the support of others for a task undertaken predominantly in solitude. In research one sits for the majority of the time alone, and indeed, at times it does feel like a lonely task. But as for this research, it was not born out of solitude alone, but the constant encouragement and help of others, for which I wish to thank you. My thanks goes first to my wife. You have kept me sane and it is for your faithfulness and care that I finished this work; to you I dedicate this work. My thanks goes also to friends in the research department. You have been my constant companions on the road of research and faith. Furthermore, I thank the larger college community and certainly my supervisor for their support. To study formation and to be formed are two quite different things, but I count myself lucky or blessed to have experienced both. The latter is certainly, as my research shows, predominantly a relational process to which all those mentioned, and many others, contributed greatly. Thank you for that!

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Introduction

'People don't change!' Whether we have heard this said or have said it ourselves, many of us will have encountered this saying at various times in our lives. However, there lies a certain irony with the way we use this phrase. For it appears we often use it not as an explanation of human nature – namely, that we do not change – but either as an excuse for ourselves or as a reproof for someone else's wrong behaviour: that person is not unable but unwilling to change.

Whether we use such a statement to excuse our preferred way of life, or whether we really are committed to its descriptive veracity, this work is based on the opposite observation: that humans do indeed change. Not just in the early periods of their lives, but throughout their lives do humans change their behaviour, develop their character, alter their passions, and gain new interests or lose old ones. 'People do change!'

Given the fact that we do change over the course of our lives, how, then, should we change? This paper concerns itself with a very specific form of this general question. We ask from a Christian perspective how Christians ought to be shaped through the reading of Scripture. To elaborate how this work is aiming to answer this question, a number of comments are necessary.

The title of this work, *Towards Formative Interpretation: A Theological Hermeneutical Proposal*, encapsulates two aspects of the answer: namely, what this work is about and the manner by which it presents this content. First, a comment about the formal characteristics of this work is in place. This paper has as its goal the development of a formative interpretative approach. To speak of a movement *towards* formative interpretation puts the emphasis on the process of formulating such an approach, which still lies somewhat in the future and is only partially fulfilled in these pages. In addition, we refer to our work as a 'proposal', by which we similarly stress that it is not a final solution, but a project in progress. The subjects raised will at times be incomplete and await further development. A number of issues that are addressed are in nature an extended prolegomena to the topic of formation. What this work therefore does not do is present formative interpretation with a static single focus. We rather

engage with larger issues within hermeneutics and formation. However, they constitute necessary steps to develop our subject. Thus, as a way to picture the character of this project, we suggest the image of a travel journal. A travel journal is somewhat piecemeal, but features the steady forward movement of the traveller towards the final destination. This is the nature of this work: a journey of exploration of various topics and issues, with the aim of maintaining its focus on the final destination, a vision of a formative interpretative approach.

Second, concerning the content, the progressive approach we have taken involves the following division. This work is structured into four main chapters, and begins firstly with a critical analysis of the current situation in the field of hermeneutics. The goal of this first chapter is to assess whether and how Christian formative interpretation is currently practised. Our discussion will therefore highlight obstacles that current hermeneutical approaches bring to formative interpretation. In chapter two we develop a theological hermeneutic in response to the way many hermeneutical agendas problematise formative reading. This hermeneutical framework responds to other hermeneutical frameworks, in order to provide for the possibility of a formative interpretation of scripture. Hence, we aim to define theological hermeneutics with a view to the formation of believers. However, formation and formative interpretation is at this stage in the discussion still somewhat vague, which requires us to intermit with a discussion of formation in chapter three. Thus, chapter three defines formation with regard to general scientific and theological scriptural insights. In our view, this chapter is a necessary link between theological hermeneutics and formative interpretation of scripture. The final chapter presents the last part of our journey, in which we discuss two theological hermeneutical proposals for a formative interpretation of scripture. Chapter four is where our journey ends, but hopefully not without providing the reader with a sense of what formative interpretation is all about.

Now that we have mapped out the path that lies ahead and briefly elaborated on the scenes that await us, we close with a few final words about the dialogue partners, or, in keeping with the journey metaphor, we might call them travelling companions. Our travelling companions on this exploration are mainly from the Protestant tradition, with a few exceptions from the Catholic and Orthodox sides. We acknowledge that our work finds its position largely

within the Protestant tradition. It is likely that there are certain characteristics of a Protestant approach to reading scripture formatively that are quite unique to this form of the Christian faith, and vice versa for the Catholic or Orthodox Churches. While these differences will remain behind the scenes for the purposes of this paper, a comparison of such differences might reveal important particularities about the different forms of spirituality and discipleship in the global church.

Hermeneutics and Current Challenges

To reiterate, this paper has as its goal to propose a way to read Scripture formatively. With formative interpretation we have in mind the formation of Christians by means of reading the biblical texts. The goal of this chapter is to provide the reader with the background to the current situation of biblical interpretation. However, more importantly, we aim to identify key problems that stand in the way of a formative encounter with the biblical text. Hence, this chapter evaluates whether the current discipline of hermeneutics is conducive to formative Christian interpretation and diagnoses possible obstacles.

1. Modern History of Interpretation and Pluralism¹

Before we begin our historical overview, a word about hermeneutics is required. As an academic discipline, hermeneutics discusses the necessary conditions that enable textual understanding. Furthermore, it compares and critiques different interpretative models.² In particular, '[b]iblical hermeneutics investigates more specifically how we read, understand, apply, and respond to biblical texts'.³ Following the lead of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1758-1834), biblical hermeneutics today spans numerous disciplines, such as biblical studies, theology, philosophy, literature studies, sociology, and linguistics. A historical survey lends itself perhaps most naturally to accentuate the increasing

¹ The structure of this section follows the introductory chapter of *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids; Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2000). Max Turner and Joel B. Green elucidate how biblical studies and theology moved apart. Using the common distinction of 'behind the text' (i.e. history, author), 'in the text' (i.e. literature, genre), and 'in front of the text' (i.e. ideology, interpretative communities) issues, Turner and Green describe how each of the three areas of study received its focus in the course of modern and postmodern biblical scholarship.

² Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (London: HarperCollins, 1992), 48.

³ Anthony C. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 1.

complexity of hermeneutics and to point to the emergence of interpretative pluralism in the late twentieth century.⁴

From the eighteenth century onwards modern scholarship was increasingly driven by the philosophy of rationalism, which meant that progress was perceived to come mainly by the means of supposed independent human reason.⁵ The Enlightenment saw scholars predominantly interested in 'behind the text' questions that concerned authorship, purpose of writing, occasion and circumstances, redaction, and first recipients.⁶ This 'single preoccupation with historical method'⁷ was largely an attempt to shake off old dogmatic baggage to travel unabated. What the text meant historically in its various stages of compilation became the main interest. Well-known examples are Julius Wellhausen's proposal of the Pentateuch's development (source criticism) in 1878 or F. C. Baur's view of an early church divided over its allegiance to Paul or Peter.⁸ Scholars like Johann Philipp Gabler and William Wrede were committed to discovering the history of early Christian movement (cf. the Messianic Secret in Mark's Gospel; Paul's role as founder of the Christian movement) through their critical methods of 'source criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism, authorship analysis, provenance, history-of-

⁴ Anthony C. Thiselton, 'New Testament Interpretation in Historical Perspective', in Joel B. Green (ed.), *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995), 10-36, citing 10.

⁵ Peter Stuhlmacher, *Vom Verstehen des Neuen Testaments: Eine Hermeneutik* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979), 115f.; Craig L. Blomberg, Robert L. Hubbard, and William W. Klein, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 52.

⁶ The metaphorical language of 'behind the text', 'in the text', and 'in front of the text' is a help to describe the various contexts within which the literary meaning of texts arise. These designations identify 'the locus and actualisation of meaning' in connection to author (i.e. the context of historical origin), text (in terms of linguistic connection), and reader (i.e. the context of the reader world). W. Randolph Tate, *Biblical Interpretation* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2008 [3rd edn]), 1-6. See also: Anthony C. Thiselton, "'Behind" and "In Front Of" the Text', in Murray Rae, Mary Healy, C. Stephen Evans, and Craig Bartholomew (eds.), *"Behind" the Text: History and Biblical Interpretation* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003), 97-120.

⁷ Thiselton, 'Interpretation', 10.

⁸ Blomberg, *Interpretation*, 53.

religion issues, and so forth'.⁹ Theological inquiry was considered speculative; biblical studies dominated by historical criticism were seen as pure and objective. In Germany, only a few scholars maintained the goal of engaging theologically with the Bible, such as Schlatter, Bultmann, Fuchs, Ebeling, and Stuhlmacher. Biblical scholarship in United Kingdom and United States similarly felt the force of the liberal rationalist approach of many German scholars. Ever since the rise of eighteenth-century rationalism, biblical scholarship has harboured a deep scepticism about allowing biblical studies to engage with theological and dogmatic ecclesial concerns. This divide of theology and biblical studies one might call the "ugly ditch": the gap between reason and faith, between public ascertainable history on the one hand and private valid belief on the other'.¹⁰

Overlooked areas of study kindled the interest of scholars after the excesses of purely historical inquiry. Consequently, the 1940s marked a hermeneutical shift from 'behind the text' to 'in the text' concerns (i.e. literature, genre). The New Criticism, developed by Ernst Fuchs (1903-83) and Gerhard Ebeling (1912-2001), followed Bultmann (1884-1976) by pressing 'biblical criticism as far as they can' while urging 'mythological and existential interpretation based on "experience"'.¹¹ Particularly in its existential dimension, the text was considered powerful in and of itself.¹² Other approaches followed which shared this interest in textual features. One example is narrative criticism, which views the text in terms of its literary structure, plot, characters, implied reader, narrative time, literary devices, and so forth, as famously employed by R. Alan Culpepper in his *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*.¹³

⁹ Joel B. Green and Max Turner, 'New Testament Commentary and Systematic Theology: Strangers or Friends?', in Max Turner and Joel B. Green (eds.), *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids; Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2000), 1-22, citing 7.

¹⁰ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, 'Introduction: What Is Theological Interpretation of the Bible', in K. J. Vanhoozer (ed.), *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (London: SPCK, 2005), 19-25, citing 20.

¹¹ Thiselton, *Hermeneutics*, 194.

¹² Thiselton, *Hermeneutics*, 194.

¹³ R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).

The move from the author ('behind the text') to questions in 'the text' was followed by reader-response criticism in the 1980s. As a counter-reaction to the modernist movement, postmodern interest now lies with 'in front of the text' issues. The ideological shift from modernity to postmodernity encouraged scholars to recognise that meaning (of texts) is always formed to some degree by the readers and their culture, history, and tradition (i.e. preunderstanding, presupposition pool, horizon).¹⁴ Thus, 'in front of the text' denotes the domain of questions that arise from the context of the reader. The focus is no longer on what the text meant historically for its first readership, but on what it means to the present interpretative community. These approaches are often particularly interested in how texts shape us today and how they might answer our contemporary concerns. Furthermore, deconstruction, social-scientific approaches (cf. post-colonial criticism; liberation hermeneutics) and other approaches such as canon-criticism, rhetorical criticism, and speech-act theory have flooded biblical scholarship. The subplot of this development surfaces in the discussion of whether meaning is created or discovered – that is, its location and possibility (i.e. authorial, textual, received).¹⁵ More radical postmodern thinkers (cf. Jacques Derrida, Richard Rorty, Stanley Fish) claim that authorial meaning cannot be discovered.¹⁶ Humans never transcend their historical, cultural, linguistic, and gender-shaped perception. The meaning of a text is created within and among us for our own purposes, but never discovered stably. In this view, we therefore no longer read the Bible with autonomous reason alone as the guide. Thus, in postmodern relativism, the old gap ('ugly ditch') between biblical studies and theology has further deepened and

¹⁴ Preunderstanding describes what the reader brings to the interpretation of the text. Ferguson defines preunderstanding in this way: '*Preunderstanding may be defined as a body of assumptions and attitudes which a person brings to the perception and interpretation of reality or any aspect of it.*' D. S. Ferguson, *Biblical Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1986), 6 (italics original).

¹⁵ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is there a Meaning in this Text?* (Leicester: Apollos, 1998).

¹⁶ Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of the Interpretative Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).

widened to a “muddy ditch” — the quagmire of history, language, tradition, and culture — out of which it is impossible ever to extricate oneself’.¹⁷

Our brief introduction of hermeneutics is at once exciting and sobering. There are certain advantages of having such multifaceted approaches to biblical interpretation, but also some serious drawbacks. One problem in particular, identified by Turner and Green, appears to be of detrimental consequence for formative interpretation:

The current interpretative situation in the academy is pluralistic in a double sense: (1) it advocates a wide variety of ‘in the text’ and ‘in front of text’ approaches, in addition to historical criticism, and (2) it resists the claims of any approach to arrive at objective/absolute meaning.¹⁸

We share Turner and Green’s diagnosis that our current situation in biblical interpretation is one of radical proliferation. This has a number of effects on formative interpretation. For one, the lack of integration leaves interpreters overwhelmed by the sheer number of interpretative proposals. To engage Scripture for formation requires stable goals and guidance, which is thwarted by the sheer number of interpretative agendas. The reader wonders, are we to look for the history behind the text, or are we simply to forget about history and let the text speak to us immediately? But it is not only the increasing number of particular approaches that makes formative reading difficult; additionally, the apparent absence of stable meaning renders the reader confused. Particularly for the Christian and the church community as a whole, the Bible functions as a means of God’s guidance, a notion clearly at odds with the dismissal of stable meaning. If meaning were only created, would we really meet God who speaks to us? Formative interpretation that desires the ongoing development of the church and the believers is challenged by the current pluralism. In order to respond correctly to the challenge of pluralism, we need to address the underlying cause of pluralism, which is the next step on our path.

¹⁷ Vanhoozer, ‘Interpretation’, 20.

¹⁸ Green, ‘Testament’, 8.

2. Interpretative Communities and Theological Crisis

To supplement the previous section we analyse the current academic communities and ask ourselves what lies behind the categorical division between theological and biblical scholarship. Pluralism, or scholarly tribalism, as we aim to show now, is ultimately caused by a secularisation of academia, leading to increasing diversification of interpretative communities.¹⁹ These interpretative communities carry their own ideological agenda, many of which are not interested in the church or Christian formation.

Pluralism increased with the emergence of various interpretative communities, particularly within the academic guild. Notwithstanding the recognition of each other's existence, contemporary interpretative communities function with characteristic autonomy and maintain their primary interest in their own distinct discipline. Tradition, values, and language have therefore slowly become idiosyncratic and more distinct from the other groups. Scholarly methods (cf. historical criticism, advocacy reading, narrative criticism) become normative and fixed for each community. Consequently, the findings, developments, and ruptures of one group are observed with perfect nonchalance by other interpretative communities; regular gatherings (cf. conferences) take place in isolation, and each community sees to its own survival and recruitment strategy, at times in competition and rivalry with the others.²⁰

Academia finds itself in a state of tribalism and departmentalisation. In *Text and Truth* Francis Watson identifies three distinct interpretative societies that constitute the academic community.²¹ The first dividing line singles out two major groups: one identified as theologians and the other as biblical scholars. As the history of interpretation above shows, academia bifurcated into theology and biblical studies under the pressure of rationalist scholarship in the

¹⁹ Tribalism refers to pluralism as a social and ideological phenomenon. It describes the emergence of distinct interpretative communities and the relationship between them of a typically hostile or indifferent nature. Tribalism takes place within the academic community, but also refers to the academic guild as a whole cutting its ties with the ecclesial spiritual life of faith.

²⁰ Francis Watson, *Text and Truth* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 2.

²¹ Watson, *Truth*, 2-6.

eighteenth century. Two centuries later, scholars typically identify themselves as belonging to either one of these groups. Biblical scholars have become experts in ancient biblical and extra-canonical texts of the early church and Judaism. Their work allegedly precedes theological speculation and contends itself with doing textual, historical, and sociological analysis of texts. On the other side, theologians are traditionally identified by their shared interest in the systematic and dogmatic study of the Christian canon. As systematicians (or dogmaticians), many of their considerations rely on biblical texts, but the actual object of study is philosophical in nature, often accompanied by an interest in the history of doctrine. Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, or Bultmann become their expertise, rather than biblical texts. Theologians are interested in the conceptual philosophical, and logical structure of thought, rather than local historical events. All in all, as Thiselton writes, the

*tragic gulf that divides many biblical specialists from many systematic theologians ... grows worse, at various levels. Many biblical scholars think in terms only of a historical particularity, and historically conditioned biblical passages. Many theologians, especially more than fifty years ago, tended to think in terms of hierarchical or monochrome system.*²²

Watson identifies a second separation that further divides the guild of biblical studies into New Testament scholars and experts of the Old Testament.²³ The nature of this divide is less hostile, and builds on a mutual non-interference policy. Prospective scholars have to decide for better or for worse to focus on either the New Testament or the Old Testament. New Testament scholars will then master ancient Greek and the history of first-century Judah. At best, the Old Testament is treated merely as background for New Testament theology; some even actively ignore it in their studies. For certain thinkers, such as Schleiermacher, Harnack, and Bultmann, the Old Testament represents a different religion all together, and needs to be treated as

²² Anthony C. Thiselton, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 13.

²³ Watson, *Truth*, 5.

such.²⁴ If, however, a student decides to enter the guild of Old Testament scholarship, the subject matter will be Hebrew, Aramaic, and ancient Jewish history. Accordingly, it remains a distant theological concept to view the Old Testament and the New Testament collectively. Thus, regrettably, '[s]cholars of the "Hebrew Bible" need the New Testament almost as little as New Testament scholars need the Koran; it lies beyond their normal field of vision'.²⁵ Evidently, biblical scholarship is separated into two further subgroups which refrain from regular contact.

This brings us to the central point of this discussion: the diagnosis of these divisions. One might find the cause of the fragmentation of scholarship in sociological, cultural, or political dynamics. Dividing the workload certainly played a key role in the primary formation of the distinct discipline. But while these factors might play a part in this development, the fundamental reason for departmentalisation, as we understand it, lies with the growing dislike for Christian theological commitments that the increasing secularisation of academic scholarship fosters.

First, biblical studies and theological investigation are separated because of lack of theological openness to understanding the text as divine communicative self-disclosure. Biblical scholars commonly reject such theological commitments to understanding the Bible as Scripture through which God addresses the reader in a special way. Emphasis now lies on historical particularity rather than on acceptance and trust that God may reveal himself through the text. However, the church primarily understands the Bible theologically as the Word of God, as the gospel message, not only as a historical artefact. For the church, the Bible is Scripture, since in it God communicates himself to us.²⁶

Second, Francis Watson observes rightly that the division of New Testament and Old Testament scholarship is merely a consequence of the first: the division into theological and biblical academia. The second division is 'an

²⁴ Watson, *Truth*, 127f.

²⁵ Watson, *Truth*, 5.

²⁶ Joel B. Green, *Seized by Truth: Reading the Bible as Scripture* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 5.

extension of the first',²⁷ in that it joins in with the eschewing of theological commitments. Watson explains: 'The notion of a dialectical unity between two bodies of writing, constituted as "old" and "new" by their relation to the foundational event that they together enclose and attest, only makes sense from a theological standpoint.'²⁸ Hence, once we expel theological thinking from biblical studies, biblical scholarship naturally disperses into two superficially related groups, one concerned with Jewish and the other with Christian writings. This means that the concept of the canon loses its foundation in God's salvific activity and thus becomes obsolete.²⁹ Regrettably, the reluctance of scholarship to embrace theological thinking and commitment, without which the church is reduced to little more than a rubble of self-contradictions, reveals the hostile character of current secular scholarship and its disregard for the interests and legitimacy of the Christian faith. The legitimacy of the ecclesial experience that perceives in the Christ event the salvific proclamation of God is shut off and labelled uncritical or speculative.

The theological antagonism or agnosticism that determines the hermeneutical posture of specifically Western scholarship is the focus of the following paragraphs. We share the view that the increasing departmentalisation of theological commitments coincides with an increase in academic secularism.³⁰ One mark of a secular scholar is a certain hermeneutical posture. Michael Gorman, using Tate's concept of an 'interpretative framework',³¹ presents us with five "'interpretative postures," ranging from

²⁷ Watson, *Truth*, 5.

²⁸ Watson, *Truth*, 5.

²⁹ Peter Stuhlmacher, *How to Do Biblical Theology* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1995), 2.

³⁰ Jens Zimmermann, *Recovering Theological Hermeneutics: An Incarnational - Trinitarian Theory of Interpretation* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2012), 9, 18, 146-48, 159.

³¹ Tate, *Interpretation*, 221f. According to Tate, an 'interpretative framework consists of presuppositions, beliefs, and attitudes that are ethical, doctrinal, denominational, philosophical, theological, and methodological. Obviously, these classifications constitute the elements of a person's worldview; they are not consciously categorized but exist in an ever-changing process of interrelatedness.'

antipathy to trust or consent'.³² Secular scholarship arguably has much in common with one side of the spectrum, favouring a hermeneutic of antipathy, suspicion, and non-commitment. Such scholarship refrains from existential trust or consent to biblical categories and their claims.³³ A secular hermeneutic systematically objects that the Bible reveals God in a unique way. Additionally, a hermeneutic of objection suspects that the Bible is at times inaccurate and clumsy, at times blatantly wrong, and at other times outright oppressive. This does not mean that those affiliated with secularism cannot appreciate or even at times agree with the Bible, nor does it mean that the church cannot listen carefully to their many and often valid insights and questions. The church should welcome critical questions from any side. What a secular approach to Scripture does say is that the Bible is not God's means of self-communication, is neither fully trustworthy nor safe, and therefore has to be reclaimed by advocates for marginalised groups, or has to be reread in light of radical rationalist reconstructions of history. Thus, the hermeneutic of objection receives the Bible only as a human historical artefact and charges the Bible with immorality and inaccuracy.

What accompanies this non-theological hermeneutical stance is a commitment to privatise the Christian faith altogether and thereby exclude ecclesial life from academic endeavour. It is believed that isolating faith to the private mind of the scholar is necessary to safeguard the neutrality and objectivity of academia.³⁴ One can understand the sentiment to prohibit arbitrary arguments that end with the claim: "God can do anything!" This would defeat the objective of scholarship. However, in its fervent desire to clean scholarship from simplistic irrationalism, Christian faith is removed too. Public faith has to be increasingly general and philosophical. Private Christian sentiment is all that scholars should expect to live on, if they are to function properly in the intellectual community. Hence, secularised faith becomes a

³² Michael J. Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis: A Basic Guide for Students and Ministers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 140.

³³ Gorman, *Elements*, 141-3.

³⁴ Francis Watson, *Text, Church and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 7-9.

matter of individual subjective reality. One example is Schleiermacher's 'focus on the subjective experience of the individual'.³⁵ Schleiermacher's understanding of religious experience combines the knowledge of the self as human, the feeling of utter dependence on God, and the recognition of a connection pertaining to the universe in complete fashion.³⁶ Schleiermacher's notion of 'Gottesbewusstsein' (God-consciousness) contributes to this, since it is never distinctly biblical, but rather a general philosophical description of human spiritual experience and condition.³⁷ Another example is Bultmann and his adoption of Heidegger's concept of authentic existence. For Bultmann, living by faith is entirely about an authentic existence and not about consent to a particular biblical worldview.³⁸ Bultmann's secular faith leaves behind truth-claims (or marginalises them) and focuses on faith as solely a way of life, i.e. a mode of existence. It seems then that secular faith in general pertains to a feeling of utter dependence, a sense of forgiveness, and love of a God about whom we can say nothing at all (Bultmann). Hence, secular faith could be described as

a certain sense of the mystery or wonder of existence, perhaps — a residue of a former religious commitment that has dwindled away under the impact of critical scholarship, also leaving behind a settled dislike of what is perceived as the dogmatism of ecclesial religion.³⁹

In essence, what the point about hermeneutical posture and private faith captures is the secular's devotion to free and independent inquiry – that is, academia liberated from the church community and doctrine. The interpreter sets himself up as the solicitor prepared to enter a caveat or as the referee ready to shout foul at the appropriate moment. Secular ideology assumes its role as to defend humanity, just as the solicitor does in defence of the state. A hermeneutic

³⁵ Thiselton, *Hermeneutics*, 161.

³⁶ Stuhlmacher, *Verstehen*, 136.

³⁷ Zimmermann, *Hermeneutics*, 146-48.

³⁸ Thiselton, *Hermeneutics*, 173-8.

³⁹ Watson, *Church*, 14.

of objection judges the Christian faith to be an obstacle to the critical mind, an affront to self-expression, and a hindrance to the advance of humanity.

These features of the secular mindset find expression in two ways. One strand of the secular hermeneutic of objection is passionate about a certain kind of historical critical method. Stuhlmacher, who finds himself under particular scrutiny by his contemporaries in Germany with his interest in biblical theology, comments on Jürgen Roloff's charge that he engages in simplistic and ridiculous harmonising.⁴⁰ Therein, Stuhlmacher describes how secular scholarship celebrates the divorce of academia from church, tradition, and theology, and confidently focuses on historical criticism.⁴¹ J. B. Green lists five commitments to history which are typical of this kind of historical critical scholarship, following the proposal of Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923):⁴²

1. History has existed as an object or sequence of objects outside the historian's own thought process.
2. Historians can know and describe this object or sequence of objects as though they objectively existed.
3. Historians can remove their own interests, whether theological or philosophical or political or social, as they engage in the task of doing history.
4. Historical facts are discovered in a past that exhibits a recognisable structure.
5. The substance of history can be grasped through intellectual efforts, without recourse to the transcendent.

Secular rationalist scholarship believes that history can be accessed by the human mind independently of its participation, and independently of the text presenting history. It is convinced of the innate human capacity to understand the meaning of history and truth. The purpose of historical study is to reclaim

⁴⁰ Stuhlmacher, *Theology*, x-xi.

⁴¹ Stuhlmacher, *Theology*, xi.

⁴² Joel B. Green, *Practicing Theological Interpretation: Engaging Biblical Texts for Faith and Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 46.

history and truth by secular scholarship for the advance of humanity. At the centre of the rational movement is therefore the progress of humanity by way of reason.

A second group of scholars embodies the secular desire for human progress by ousting oppression and creating new communities. As Gordon Kaufmann (1925-2011) exemplifies; it begins with the levelling of all transcendental truth claims:

Modern historical studies, together with the growing secularisation of much of our world, have enabled us to recognize that the Bible and the Christian tradition (like the other great religious traditions) are largely products of human creativity in the face of changing historical exigencies.⁴³

Consequently, Kaufmann believes that '[t]he only God we should worship today — the only God we can afford to worship — is the God who will further our humanisation, the God who will help to make possible the creation of a universal and human community.'⁴⁴ For Kaufman, the particular historical events concerning Jesus lose their significance in light of present universal ethical questions. Everything we say about Christian theology needs to be cashed into a universal ethic of humanisation. This form of advancement of humanity is what stands behind various approaches of postmodern criticism (advocacy exegesis, ideological criticism). The secular person locates that ability to measure morality within the human being. Secular postmodernists are convinced that humans have the innate capacity to judge what is oppressive and what is liberating. Hence, the purpose of this interpretative stance is the progress of humanity by way of liberation.

What then stands behind the separation of the present academic community into three interpretative communities: theologians, Old Testament scholars, and New Testament scholars? We suggest a central reason for this pluralism that further enhances the proliferation of interpretative approaches is

⁴³ Gordon Kaufman, *God, Mystery, Diversity: Christian Theology in a Pluralist World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 29.

⁴⁴ Kaufman, *God*, 29.

an ongoing crisis in theological commitments that accompanies the academic guilds. The rejection of ecclesial theological transcendentalism has shaped the hermeneutical motto of secular academia in which human independence and self-determination is central. This hermeneutic posture is committed to eschew theological ecclesial commitments and focuses on an innate human capacity either to arrive at historical knowledge to judge the Bible's factual exactitude or to access moral axioms to discern the Bible's moral uprightness. The hermeneutic of objection uses historical criticism or the plethora of postmodern approaches to replace ecclesial and dogmatic concerns with apparent concerns for humanity. Hence, the salient point of the secular belief system is the progress of humanity on its own terms. This betrays a fundamental trust in the human ability to define universals (for understanding and ethics) and generate the change needed.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have presented an overview of interpretative approaches. The historical overview demonstrates that hermeneutics is characterised by pluralism. Pluralism negates the existence of stable meaning and presents the reader with a plethora of possible approaches. We then linked the cause for pluralism to a deeper theological crisis within academia. The increasing secularisation of academia has caused a separation of faith and theology from other academic disciplines and given rise to the emergence of interpretative communities.⁴⁵ But how does this theological crisis affect formative interpretation?

Positively we have to note that the liberation from church and dogma has released a monumental force of creative and innovative engagement with the Bible. Questions that previously could not be asked have received centre stage

⁴⁵ Vanhoozer similarly shows convincingly in *Is There a Meaning in this Text?* that many of our current questions concerning meaning and method are of a deeply theological nature and require theological answers. Derrida also instructs us: 'The sign and divinity have the same place and time of birth. The age of the sign is essentially theological.' In agreement with Vanhoozer and Derrida, it is our conviction that the proliferation of methods is only a symptom of a large theological crisis in academia. Vanhoozer, *Meaning*, 198-200; Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (tr. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak; Baltimore: JHU Press, 2016), 14.

and no stone has been left unturned. The result is a sophisticated academic discourse into the nature of Christian faith and its Jewish and Hellenistic origins. Astonishing energy has been spent on the discovery of biblical manuscripts and the ancient historical settings. Later postmodern approaches (cf. reader-response strategies) have allowed students to engage with the impact texts have on themselves and the personal interests they bring to its interpretation. A fair treatment of our historical tradition of academia must acknowledge that great advances have been made to understand the history, the texts, and the interpreter. This creative liberal engagement has arisen from the Reformation movement and established itself as a powerful movement over the centuries.

However, in our view, the effects of pluralism and the separation of theology from other disciplines on a Christian formative interpretation of Scripture are mainly negative. Two reasons can be given. First, the secular (rational and postmodern) vision of formative interpretation is radically disconnected from any notion of worship and discipleship. Formative interpretation of Scripture is not a matter of following God's guidance, but depends on humanity to define its own goals. In the secular belief system progress of ethics, the formation of humans, the shaping of human societies, is done in independence from God. Hence, the rejection of theological thinking and intuition demands of ecclesial interpretation to silently witness its own deconstruction while being commanded to square the circle when engaging in 'proper' scholarship without self-contradiction. Moberly explains.

To be a Christian means, at least in part, the acceptance and appropriation of certain theological doctrines and patterns of living. Yet the task of reading the Bible 'critically' has regularly been defined precisely in terms of the exclusion of these doctrines and patterns of living from the interpretative process.⁴⁶

Hence, we see that to interpret Scripture in this way, without acknowledging the existence of God, without respect for the canon, and

⁴⁶ R. W. L. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith: A Study of Abraham and Jesus* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 5.

without expectation of God speaking through the text, is self-contradictory for the church. These theological intuitions are not fanciful add-ons but constituent elements of the way Scripture functions formatively in the ecclesial life in preaching, catechesis, liturgy, and worship. Tragically, we conclude that formative interpretation for the church is effectively prohibited in the name of critical study.

Second, secular hermeneutical approaches reject the existence of a theological standard for the interpretation of scripture. The rapid proliferation of methods combined with the rejection of Christian doctrines leads to the disappearance of any normative theological guidelines for formative interpretation. However, Christian formative interpretation orients itself at God's self-revelation (i.e. God-referential), which is formulated in doctrines. Hence, basic Christian doctrines provide the stability and guidance for what counts as a faithful interpretation and what does not. The disappearance of such theological standards results in the vanishing of distinction between that which constitutes a creative novelty and 'maverick idiosyncrasy and self-indulgence'.⁴⁷ If the line of demarcation between 'good' and 'bad' interpretation vanishes, so wanes the distinction between oppressive and submissive interpretation, or between manipulation and attentive listening. Likewise, the distinction between responsible or cynical readers wanes. Hence, the current milieu of plural and self-referential interpretation removes the most basic distinction that the Christian faith demands and provides; namely, a distinction between formative reading and self-indulgence or manipulation.

The final conclusion of this chapter is therefore this: we claim that pluralism and the separation of faith from academia stands in the way of formative interpretation. The process of Christian formation requires truthful interpretation of Scripture, for which historical study, linguistics, and socio-cultural studies are useful, if not indispensable. However, all these techniques miss the point that what constitutes the church as the people of God is neglected – that is, the reception of the text as address from God, perceiving the

⁴⁷ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine* (Grand Rapids; Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2007), 97.

message as good news from God.⁴⁸ This means, assuming that our analysis thus far is even remotely accurate, that a reassessment of hermeneutics is urgently needed, which is the subject of our next chapter. This will then lead us to discuss how formative interpretation can be envisioned in light of theological hermeneutics.

⁴⁸ Green, *Interpretation*, 20.

Theological Hermeneutics

In the previous chapter we discussed the current state of biblical interpretation and pointed out why it problematises formative interpretation. Academia favours plurality and compartmentalisation over integration of theological and critical commitments. We concluded that pluralism is a result of the theological crisis within the wider academic community which prohibits Christian formative interpretation of Scripture. In our view, the rise of departmentalisation and secularisation has had negative effects on formative interpretation, since it disables the reader from an encounter with God through the text.

This chapter is a response to current interpretative pluralism and the systematic separation of faith from academia and theology from biblical studies. The goal of this chapter is therefore to provide a theological framework for formative interpretation. Reassuringly, in recent years many scholars have similarly found the current academic situation unsatisfactory and have begun to propose new ways to structure hermeneutics. We follow one route taken by some scholars which leads us to reassess hermeneutics and to propose a form of theological hermeneutics.⁴⁹ In what follows, we focus on defining theological hermeneutics and explore three hermeneutical decisions that shape biblical interpretation. The goal is that this larger framework of theological hermeneutics illuminates how formative interpretation might become possible. While formative interpretation is what we are ultimately concerned with, this chapter is the larger hermeneutical backbone to further exploration of formative interpretation.

1. Theological Hermeneutics: Towards a Definition

1.1 *Theological Sensibilities and the Reception of Scripture*

Theological hermeneutics has experienced a kind of renaissance in academic circles since the early years of this millennium. The launch of the *Journal of*

⁴⁹ Green, *Interpretation*, 75 f.; Richard S. Briggs, *Reading the Bible Wisely: An Introduction to Taking Scripture Seriously* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011 [Revised Edition]), 2-4.

Theological Interpretation in 2007, edited by Joel B. Green, and the *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation* in 2005, edited by K. J. Vanhoozer, are signposts of the vast amount of new material that come to us in the last twenty years. But was theological interpretation ever truly absent? It appears not. Even during the height of German rationalism, certain European scholars maintained a theological interest in the Bible. Friedrich Schleiermacher, Adolf Schlatter, Rudolf Bultmann, Karl Barth, and Peter Stuhlmacher all found ample material in the Christian canon to be explored theologically. These scholars stand in a tradition that goes back to the very early moments of the Christian faith and even beyond that into its Jewish origins. Hence, theological interpretation can take many forms and is advocated by scholars of various traditions. It is therefore difficult to identify one common characteristic.

The uniqueness of this form of theological hermeneutics is perhaps best elucidated by reflecting on the way readers receive biblical texts. Reflecting on the hermeneutical process of reception sharpens our attention to what marks out theological interpretation. The process of reception is basic to interpretation. Every interpreter of texts has to acknowledge that ‘texts do not give their essential being and meaning to be known apart from the process of their reception’.⁵⁰ Reflecting on the reception process, we become aware that there is a certain circularity about interpretation. On the one side stands the shared communal vision of the subject matter (i.e. the Bible). The community of which we are part forms the way we receive the Bible, since communal traditions shape our commitments, values, and sensitivities which in turn shape our perception. The interpreter is thus trained to perceive certain problems and goals, taught to ask certain questions, and inducted in the use of methods. Conclusively, all readers receive texts within their own life context.

On the other side we find that texts have certain features that attract our attention. This concerns the content, form, and meaning of texts. One person is attracted by the historical claims of the text, another might be interested in the development of Jewish religious rites, yet another is moved by the narratives, parables, and poetry. Textual features evoke interest, attention, disgust, or confusion, all of which shape what we think about the text. Thus, the process of

⁵⁰ Watson, *Church*, 4.

reception is shaped by both how the reader's community reads it and what the community thinks about it (context) on the one side, and what the text is (content and form) on the other side. Text and reader stand in dialectical relationship.

The following examples explain the circular process of reception in which textual features and communal sensitivity move dynamically in tandem and develop both what we think about the text, and how we read it. This attunes our attention to the approach of theological hermeneutics.

The examples are a continuation of our previous chapter. Thus, we take up the basic commitments of secular scholarship as discussed before (rational neutrality and liberation) and show the impact they have on how the Bible is received. The first example concerns one secular academic reading community working predominantly within diachronic methodology by which the reader declares that the task of true understanding ought to begin by bridging historical distance through rational investigation. For example, historical criticism views the biblical text primarily as a product of an ancient local religion (phenomenon). Thus, one main hermeneutical goal is '[d]etermining what, if anything, a historical figure actually said and did'.⁵¹ The Bible is received as a historical artefact that is open to methodological rational scrutiny by pointing to its ancient historical character. This highlights that interpretative practice is one of rational autonomous mastery, dissecting history like a scientist dissects a frog. The interpreter has to master ancient languages, historical data, and analytical techniques. The communal sociological character of this approach is sufficiently highlighted when we observe the fact that the rise of historical criticism coincides with the rise of rationalist disposition in eighteenth-century German scholarship. Augustine and Origen already acknowledged inaccuracies in Gospel narratives, but for the rationalist's sensibility and disposition, minute inaccuracies in textual transmission lead to the rise of source criticism, form criticism, and scepticism.

A second group can be linked to postmodern approaches. Readers of this community agree to perceive humans not as autonomous, but as historical, linguistic, socially conditioned beings living in networks of power. This context

⁵¹ Gorman, *Elements*, 238.

problematizes all truth-claims as oppressive ideology, and vows to promote pluralistic ideology. For instance, ideological criticism aims to problematize the Bible's 'inappropriate expressions of power'.⁵² The reader's interpretative task entails sifting the text to expose oppressive ideology, which calls for a method of suspicion rather than trust. Again, their perception is occupied by particular textual features that seem to promote oppressive ideologies, which have to be tamed for the ongoing humanisation of society. This could include claims of divine judgement or promotion of androcentric culture. The goal for such readers is to promote self-expression and liberation, which requires the reader to develop sensibilities towards oppressive power structures. However, this approach has much in common with the last century's rise of postmodern philosophy promoting self-expression and anti-authoritarianism. We conclude therefore that our perception of textual phenomena is shaped by our context and our angle of vision. The features that capture our eyes (phenomena and problems), the goals that we have, and the methods that we formulate arise from within the embodied life vision and commitments the reader brings to the text. Likewise, the text remains the subject matter that demands of the reader ongoing dialogue and inquiry.

These observations make us sensitive to what theological interpretation is about and what distinguishes it from other approaches. Theological hermeneutics grows, like any other approach, out of a circular movement of internal textual features and communal reception. In this regard it shares the same legitimacy for its interest in the Bible as any other approach. Theological hermeneutics even agrees with many findings of other approaches, such as that we ought to respect the historical and literary dimensions of the Bible. However, of greatest concern to the theological interpreter are theological sensibilities of reading the Bible as Scripture. Essentially, as Joel Green writes, the basic difference between the Bible as a book and reading it as Scripture is

⁵² Gorman, *Elements*, 240.

that for the latter, the reading community receives it as an address from God – that is, it receives the Bible as means of God’s self-communicative presence.⁵³

Therefore, theological hermeneutics stands apart from other hermeneutical paradigms in two ways. First, the Bible is perceived to have one particular subject matter: God. The interpreter perceives that ‘the principle interest of the Bible’s authors, of the text itself, and of the original community of readers was theological: reading the Scriptures therefore meant coming to hear God’s word and to know God better’.⁵⁴ God stands behind the events and reveals something of himself through the text in and through human communication. This means that the biblical texts are to be read not only in a historical or even a literary context, but also in a larger theological context. Second, the reception of this revelatory address forms a unique worshipping community that lives out of this regular engagement with God through the text. When a reader receives God’s address through the Bible, the person is relocated into a new community, that is, the church. Reading ‘the Bible as a word addressed to *us* ... assumes that we are part of the same community — God’s people throughout space and time — to which the biblical text was originally addressed’.⁵⁵ The church as the recipient of God’s salvific address is therefore the unique embodiment of this message and plays a special role in the ongoing

⁵³ Green, *Truth*, 5. One could regard this as the primary theological hermeneutical intuition that a reader of this kind might become aware of in the process of reading. This theological awareness can also be regarded as the primary gift of the Spirit that imparts to the reader the acceptance that God cannot be known by an act of will, but can and does make himself known as a gift in dependence on his self-revelation. Thiselton eloquently writes, ‘listening to the God who is Other remains dependent on the priority of the Other as Giving and Given. Unless God chooses to give himself as One who is given, we listen in vain, and can “master” nothing by constructing a priori “method” in advance of understanding who it is who addresses us. This deeply theological principle, however, defines all hermeneutics. To borrow Lundin’s phrase, “a parentless, autonomous thinking agent who is dependent upon nothing outside himself” remains deaf to the giving and given Other.’ Roger Lundin, Anthony C. Thiselton, and Clarence Walhout, *The Promise of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids; Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1999), 134. Many others acknowledge this as their primary basic hermeneutic posture: Stuhlmacher, *Theology*, 64-68. J. Todd Billings, *The Word of God for the People of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 75-86. Gorman, *Elements*, 149.

⁵⁴ Vanhoozer, ‘Interpretation’, 22 (*italics original*).

⁵⁵ Gorman, *Elements*, 146f.

interpretation thereof in our relationship with God. Paul exemplifies this when he says, 'you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe' (1 Thess 2:13, *NASB*). The church becomes, so to speak, a living expression of that divine address as it enters into relationship with God.

This preliminary presentation reveals the primary characteristic of what we think about the Bible and how we ought to read it. Theological hermeneutics is not proposing a new method, but calling primarily for new sensibilities of the reader to interpret with theological openness.⁵⁶ Theological interpretation places one theological concern at its centre: a primary concern for God and God's call to humanity as understood by the church. In other words, what compels the theological interpreter are these basic intuitions: the Bible is about God and God speaks through it. God's divine address consequently creates a distinct worshipping community and is most specifically embodied in the ecclesial community.⁵⁷

Importantly, however, theological hermeneutics is not arguing for prioritising theology at the expense of historical or literary studies. Concerns for history of literature are welcomed, but only shape some of the questions involved in interpretation. It is our contention that theological context serves as the largest frame for our understanding of the world, ourselves, and the Bible. The impact of theological reflection on hermeneutics will in its progress erupt certain established consensuses in modernist and postmodernist communities. It might even lead to abandoning their sacred shrines where homage is paid to the hardline modernist obsession with historical inquiry or the postmodernist worship of the particular. Consequently, we question previous hermeneutical commitments of modern and postmodern scholarship (rational neutrality, liberation and self-expression) and find new impetus to voice our own ecclesial theological intuitions.

⁵⁶ It ought to be stressed that these basic sensibilities are not necessarily an arbitrary imposition on the biblical text, but are themselves nurtured and invited by the biblical witness. The reader is meant to encounter God through its message (Deut 4:1; John 20:30-31; Mark 4:1-20; 1 Thess 2:13).

⁵⁷ Vanhoozer, 'Interpretation', 21-2.

1.2 Theological Hermeneutics: A Definition

Moving on from our introductory discussion, a definition of theological hermeneutics is needed, answering both what we perceive the Bible to be, and how we ought to read it. Billings brings both aspects together in writing that 'theological interpretation of Scripture is a multifaceted practice of a community of faith in reading the Bible as God's instrument of self-revelation and saving fellowship'.⁵⁸ This definition highlights a useful preliminary observation prominent among some scholars.⁵⁹ It is understood that biblical texts find their natural home within the church (i.e. faith community), and the church in turn is placed in the wider social context of the world.⁶⁰ This basic distinction allows us to locate theological interpretation as practice that takes place in the church which is placed in the world.

First, theological interpretation is the ecclesial practice of interpreting the Bible as Scripture.⁶¹ Here the term 'Scripture' is perhaps best understood as designation of genre. Watson writes that 'genre is a function of communal reception and usage as well as of inherent characteristics'.⁶² For reasons explored above, the church receives the canon as a sacred collection of texts. This means the Bible begins to function as a whole (Old and New Testaments), and as a coherent whole in its final form it faithfully mediates God's address that guides the life of the faith community. Thus, to the church, Scripture is 'God's instrument of self-revelation and saving fellowship'.⁶³ The ecclesial practice of theological interpretation is not a dispassionate cerebral endeavour, but first and foremost a holistic worshipful and spiritual act performed by the

⁵⁸ Billings, *Word*, xii.

⁵⁹ Gorman, *Elements*, 146-7; Vanhoozer, 'Interpretation', 19-25, 21-23; Watson, *Church*, 1-14.

⁶⁰ Watson, *Church*, 1-14.

⁶¹ Other collections of general features of theological interpretation are found here: Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays, *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids; London: Eerdmans, 2003), 1-5; Gorman, *Elements*, 149-55.

⁶² Watson, *Church*, 227.

⁶³ Billings, *Word*, xii.

church.⁶⁴ Theological interpretation is not a narrow task, but, as Billings points out, a 'multifaceted practice'.⁶⁵ It expresses itself in liturgy, homily, catechesis, song, study, pastoral care, social programmes, mediation, prayer, and memorisation. The wide range of interpretative freedom in the process of spiritual discernment requires guidance. Interpretative freedom (contextualisation) finds guidance in the central gospel message (universality) of which ecclesial creedal (confessional) statements speak (cf. the Rule of Faith). Discerning God's voice and presence in Scripture is, thus, closely related to discerning the narrative of the gospel or discerning the logic of the Rule of Faith in each particular text and in our life context. Discerning the gospel aims to understand, commune with, and follow God in our present world and context.

Second, interpretation is also a humanistic task undertaken in this world.⁶⁶ The Bible is here understood in general terms as a historical book or a literary work, but not as Scripture. The process of exegesis takes place in a larger 'worldly' context that depends more on general hermeneutical insights. This context functions as a safeguard to the church from false pride, selfish interpretation, and premature closure. It also reminds the church to be a blessing to the world, which only happens in dialogue with the world. Therefore, theological interpretation envisions a continuous dialectical relationship with secular academic and societal conversation partners, and insists on the moral integrity of academic discourse (i.e. openness, willingness to listen). The counterpart to the Christian faith in secular academia must be a genuine interest in the witness of the Bible, not a genuine disinterest in its message. Clearly, even secular academia needs to resist methodological assumptions of careless or cynical readings (which include issues around

⁶⁴ Watson, *Church*, 4; Vanhoozer, 'Interpretation', 19-25, 21; Billings, *Word*, xii.

⁶⁵ Billings, *Word*, xii.

⁶⁶ The term 'humanistic' is understood to point to a 'rationalist outlook or system of thought attaching prime importance to human rather than divine or supernatural matters. Humanist beliefs stress the potential value and goodness of human beings, emphasize common human needs, and seek solely rational ways of solving human problems.' Judy Pearsall (ed.), *New Oxford Dictionary of English* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 893.

philosophy of language, history, anthropology, sociology, and theology,) that declare 'das biblische Wahrheitszeugnis prinzipiell als illusionär'.⁶⁷

Theological hermeneutics as a whole binds these elements together for a truthful interpretation by integrating the canon, hermeneutics, and the church life of worship and service (including ecclesial confessions, history of interpretation).⁶⁸ It also welcomes secular insights and thereby emphatically affirms that truthful inquiry of biblical texts includes academic rigour and wider philosophical considerations to invite 'self-critical reflection of Christian truth-claims'.⁶⁹ When these considerations are taken seriously, perhaps we can move towards an integrated framework within which theological and ultimately formative exegesis may succeed. The persuasiveness of this framework, as any paradigmatic framework, lies not only in its inner coherence and correspondence to reality, but also in the fruits such a paradigmatic change produces in scholarly work. The present work is therefore only a small contribution to a much larger endeavour of interpreting the Bible as Christian Scripture. As Christian Scripture, the Bible is then expected to form the faith community by mediating God's address.

2. Theological Hermeneutics: The Rule of Faith and Hermeneutics

Theological hermeneutics invites reflection on a number of hermeneutical questions using theological, hermeneutical, and scriptural resources. This section elaborates on three central hermeneutical decisions that constitute theological interpretation and will be important for a formative encounter with the text. Two of these appear in our discussion of the Rule of Faith. First, we argue that the goal of theological interpretation is to discern God. Second, we argue that the scriptural canon functions most fruitfully as a coherent witness in

⁶⁷ Stuhlmacher, *Verstehen*, 208.

⁶⁸ Stuhlmacher writes similarly: 'In dem hermeneutischen Zirkel von Schrift, kirchlicher (Bekenntnis-)Tradition und Kirche kommt der Schrift ihrer wahrheitsgemäßen Auslegung das entscheidende Gewicht zu; ohne eine genaue, wahrheitsgemäße Schriftauslegung verliert die Kirche, die selbst creatura verbi, d.h. Schöpfung des göttlichen Wortes ist, ihre Identität und ihre Legitimität als Leib Christi.' Stuhlmacher, *Verstehen*, 206.

⁶⁹ Watson, *Church*, 79.

its final form. The subsequent discussion of hermeneutics emphasises a third hermeneutical commitment: that theological interpretation welcomes philosophical or secular insights into hermeneutics and exegesis. These three hermeneutical decisions build, to our understanding, the foundation on which we can build formative interpretative guidelines.

It should be noted that many of the hermeneutical points made can be approached from numerous directions, whether exegetical, theological, or hermeneutical (philosophical). Hence, we oppose the notion that these hermeneutical decisions are the result of simplistic submissions of hermeneutics under dogma and are developed in isolation from other disciplines.

2.1 The Christian Faith and Scripture: The Rule of Faith

We commence our discussion about theological hermeneutics by analysing a basic form of the Christian faith. As mentioned earlier, what characterises theological hermeneutics are specific theological sensibilities. We read with a sense that God's self-disclosing address is mediated uniquely by the canon, and that this divine address is uniquely received and embodied in a faith community (the church). It is our goal to show that this basic faith in dialogue with Scripture gives us specific hermeneutical guidelines. We are convinced, as we engage with the early catholic faith, that we are able to formulate hermeneutical guidelines that are flexible enough to hold diverse expressions of Christianity together, while being sturdy enough to not disperse into pluralism. Crucially, ultimately these hermeneutical guidelines lead us towards a formative interpretation of the Bible.

The concept that captures the theological commitments of the early church is the Rule of Faith. The Rule of Faith is a phrase that rose to prominence in the second century AD, after the first apostles had died and the church began to formalise some of its basic beliefs. However, the phrase 'Rule of Faith' is not the only way the basic content of the Christian faith was labelled. In fact, the Rule of Faith is Tertullian's (c.160-c.225) preferred way of describing the proto-creedal form of the core narrative that summarises the Christian faith. Irenaeus (c.130-c.200) rather uses the terminology of Rule of Truth, and one of Clement of Alexandria's (c. 150-c.215) main designations is the Ecclesiastical Rule (*Stromata*

Book VI and VII).⁷⁰ But the varying descriptions do not need to distract us from understanding the common concerns these writers voice thereby.

The Rule allows the church to speak of its faith by focusing on the normative elements of the Christian faith. Tertullian, Irenaeus, Clement, and other ante-Nicene fathers, such as Ignatius and Polycarp, used such terms to refer to the basic Christian teaching, which would be faithfully passed on through the church and her writings.⁷¹ The primitive constituent elements of the Christian faith, which were the nucleus for the later creeds, were put together by Irenaeus or Tertullian in memorable ways.⁷² For instance, Tertullian in *Veiling of Virgins* (1) highlighted the congruence between creeds and the Rule:

The Rule of Faith, indeed, is altogether one, alone immovable and irreformable, the rule, to wit, of believing in one only God omnipotent, Creator of the Universe, and His Son Jesus Christ, born of the Virgin Mary, crucified under Pontius Pilate, raised again, the third day from the dead, received in the heavens, sitting now at the right of the Father,

⁷⁰ Tomas Bokedal, 'The Early Rule-of-Faith Pattern as Emergent Biblical Theology', *Theofilos Supplement* 7.1 (2015), 57-75, citing 70; Bengt Hägglund, 'Die Bedeutung der "regula fidei" als Grundlage theologischer Aussagen', *ST* 12 (1958), 1-44. For simplification in the following discussion I will mainly use the term Rule of Faith as way of referring to the basic Christian faith.

⁷¹ Kathryn Greene-McCreight, 'Rule of Faith', in K. J. Vanhoozer (ed.), *Dictionary of Theological Interpretation* (London: SPCK, 2005), 703-4, citing 703; J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (New York: Longman, 1972 [3rd edn]), 76.

⁷² Another example we find in Irenaeus: 'the Church, though spread throughout the whole world ... received (παραλαμβάνειν) from the apostles and their disciples the faith (πίστις) in one GOD the FATHER Almighty, who made the heaven and the earth, the sea and all that is in them; and in one CHRIST JESUS, the SON of GOD, who became flesh for our salvation; and in the HOLY SPIRIT, who through the prophets proclaimed the economies (οικονομία), and the coming, and the birth from the Virgin, and the passion, and the resurrection from the dead, and the ascension of the beloved CHRIST JESUS our LORD in the flesh into the heavens, and his coming from the heavens in the glory of the FATHER to capitate all things and to raise up all flesh of the whole human race. (*Haer. 1, 10.1*)' in Tomas Bokedal, 'The Rule of Faith: Tracing Its Origins', *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 7.2 (2013), 233-55, citing 238. For other summaries of the basic Christian faith see Stuhlmacher, *Theology*, 63; Robert W. Wall, 'Reading the Bible from within Our Traditions: The "Rule of Faith" in Theological Hermeneutics', in J. B. Green and M. Turner (eds.), *Between Two Horizons*, 88-107, citing 101-2.

destined to come to judge the quick and the dead through resurrection of the flesh as well [as of the Spirit]. The law of faith being constant, the other succeeding points of discipline and conversation admit the novelty of correction.⁷³

The similarities between Tertullian and Irenaeus are significant. Hence, the Rule describes the essentials of the Christian faith, the gospel message, the first kerygma, the basic beliefs ('basic theology'⁷⁴) central to the life (i.e. faith and practice) of the early church. This involves above all the commitment to the Trinitarian God as creator, saviour, and judge. The Rule of Faith is the embodied witness of the church. Another way of putting it is to point to the genitive construction of the phrase 'Rule of Faith'. 'Of Faith' or 'of Truth' means that the Rule (particularly for Irenaeus) stands for the Christian faith and truth itself. '*[T]he faith or the truth itself is the rule or norm for Christian belief and practice.*'⁷⁵

But how fixed was the faith of the early church? As one might expect, the fixity and fluidity of form and content of the Rule of Faith have produced their own body of research. From the New Testament material we can say that the Rule is flexible and allows for a variety of forms, depending on the purpose of writing. There are in particular three forms of early formulas: one-membered (cf. 'Jesus is Lord' cf. 1 Cor 12:3, Rom. 10:9; or 'Jesus is Christ' in Mark 8:29), two-membered ('one God ... and one Lord' cf. 1 Cor 8:6, Col 1:3), and three-membered (Father, Son, and Spirit, cf. 2 Cor 1:21-22, 13:14, 1 Cor 6:11, Matt 28:19, Gal 3:11-14, etc.).⁷⁶ From the New Testament material and second-century material we can conclude that 'one-membered, two-membered and three-

⁷³ Greene-McCreight, 'Rule', 703.

⁷⁴ Bokedal, 'Origins', 233.

⁷⁵ Bokedal, 'Origins', 235. Paul M. Blowers makes this point particularly well. 'With the Rule of Faith, from the outset, we have to do with a norm of Christian faith and practice which, like the "canonical narrative tradition" in its fullness, had as its most basic and positive thrust the faithful hearing and interpretative "performance" (doctrinally, ritually, pastorally, ethically etc.) of the story within the church.' Paul Blowers, 'The Regula Fidei and the Narrative Character of Early Christian Faith', *Pro Ecclesia* No. 2 (1998), 199-228, citing 205-6.

⁷⁶ Kelly, *Creeeds*, 14-23.

membered confessions flourished side by side in the apostolic Church as parallel and mutual independent formulations of the one kerygma'.⁷⁷ Thus, the Christian faith had considerable flexibility in its early stages.

The wording of basic Christian theology could vary and be adjusted to fit each specific purpose. It was fashionable, particularly among rationalist critical scholarship, to press this facet of the origin of the Christian faith. They emphasised that early New Testament texts displayed little doctrinal interest, whereas later texts show the formation of ecclesial faith into solid structures. William Wrede, in his lecture 'The Task and Method of So-called "New Testament Theology"' in 1897, claimed that dogmatic theology was a later development of the church.⁷⁸ Wrede and other rationalist scholars such as F. C. Baur, Harnack, Schweitzer, and Werner urge us to sever the early simple teachings of Jesus from later ecclesial quasi systematic thinkers, highlighting the foreign mindset and concepts of later writers over those of the beginning.⁷⁹ However, among others, Martin Hengel, Alister McGrath, and H. E. W. Turner all found this position unconvincing.⁸⁰ Hurtado likewise opposes this theory of gradual accumulation, and states that 'the Christian religion ... seems to have blossomed quite quickly.'⁸¹ More recent research has shown that while the designation Rule of Faith appeared in the second century, proto-creedal and doctrinal language can be linked to the Christian community from the earliest beginnings (1 Cor 8:6; Matt 28:19).⁸² One example is Galatians 6:15-16 (cf. Col. 1:5-6), where Paul writes about 'the uncompromisable essence of the truth of the

⁷⁷ Kelly, *Creeeds*, 24.

⁷⁸ William Wrede, 'The Task and Method of So-called "New Testament Theology"', in R. Morgan (ed.), *The Nature of New Testament Theology: The Contribution of William Wrede and Adolf Schlatter* (London: SCM, 1973), 68-116.

⁷⁹ Thiselton, *Doctrine*, 34-6.

⁸⁰ Thiselton, *Doctrine*, 36.

⁸¹ Larry W. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (London: SCM Press, 1988), 125.

⁸² This is suggested not only by its role for the early church fathers, but also its underlying significance for the early Christological material in the New Testament itself (1. Cor. 15:3-7; Rom. 1:3-4, 8:34; 1. Tim. 3:16; 1. Pet. 3:18-19, 21b-22), in Bokedal, 'Origins', 234; Thiselton, *Doctrine*, 37, 40.

gospel associated with the universality of the gospel and the concept of “new creation”⁸³ Thiselton also concludes that ‘[s]pecific doctrinal themes faithfully reflect what Irenaeus calls “the rule of faith” found in the theology of the apostolic circle. To be sure, the canon speaks a coherent gospel with polyphonic voices.’⁸⁴ Therefore, granted all contextual flexibility, we perceive a stable centre and further common features to the Rule amidst the polyphony of the Christian choir.⁸⁵

It appears conclusive that what became later known as the Rule of Faith goes back to a stable core content, as Lietzmann argues in his analysis of the Apostles’ Creed. He concludes that ‘all the doctrinal articles to be found in the Apostles’ Creed appear about the end of the 1st century on the formularies of the Church, giving them fullness and an impressive definiteness’.⁸⁶ Blowers also argues for flexibility with a stable centre. Observing the speeches in Acts, he shows that the changes in content depend largely on the change in audience.⁸⁷ Moving from there to other New Testament material and the early church fathers, the variations in form and content show a church in the process of understanding its own foundation in particular contexts. Flexibility should therefore not be overemphasised, but understood as a form of contextualised faith. The ‘Great Church committed itself not to a universal invariable statement of faith but to variable local tellings of a *particular* story that aspired to universal

⁸³ Bokedal, ‘Origins’, 234.

⁸⁴ Thiselton, *Doctrine*, 40.

⁸⁵ Wall writes that ‘the NT already envisages these core beliefs in various creedal formulae and hymnic stanzas (e.g., Luke 1:46-55; Phil. 2:6-11; Col. 1:15-20; 1 Tim. 3:16; Heb. 6:2; Rev. 1:5-8)’. Similarly Stuhlmacher lists the following passages as evidence for the centrality of core Christian beliefs: ‘John 11:25-26; 14:6; 1 John 2:1-2; 4:9-10; Rom 1:1-6; 1:16-17 + 3:21-31; 1 Tim 2:5-6 etc. But these texts being inextricably with Old Testament texts such as Ex 20:1-6; Deut 6:4-5; Hos 11:8-9; Isa 7:9; 9:5-6; 25:6-9; 43:1-7; Isa 52:13-53:12; Jer 31:31-34; Ps 139:1-16; Prov 8:22-36 etc., since without this Old Testament foundation the statements of the New Testament remain incomplete and subject to misinterpretation.’ Wall, ‘Traditions’, 98; Stuhlmacher, *Theology*, 63.

⁸⁶ Hans Lietzmann, *A History of the Early Church* vol. 1 (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1951, 1993), 376.

⁸⁷ Blowers, ‘Regula’, 208.

significance'.⁸⁸ We can thus conclude that 'for the early Church, the Rule of Faith could be both rather firm (crystallized, yet flexible) and comprehensive (functioning as a summary of the faith)'.⁸⁹ Essentially, the Rule of Faith constitutes a basic theology of universal scope, with varying formulas being deployed depending on context.⁹⁰

What are then the different contexts in which the Rule's functioned in the life of the early church? The Rule has often been viewed as a tool of apologetics to safeguard the Christian faith against heresies. Chadwick writes that the Rule of Faith functioned as 'weapon against heresy'.⁹¹ Heresies, or rivalling interpretations of the Jesus event, accompanied the early church from the very beginning (Acts 15; Gal 1:6; 1 Cor 1:10-17). The use of basic creeds therefore in the context of polemic discourses against divergent beliefs is not unlikely. However, it can be contested whether this was the only, or even the most prominent, use of the Rule. Hägglund acknowledges Chadwick's point, but hesitates to reduce the Rule's use to polemics. In his estimation, the Rule was not only directed at opposition, but also fulfilled a positive function for the church to help Christians lead their lives faithfully. Its constructive character enabled the church to teach and understand the earlier Jewish writings and emerging Christian writings.⁹² Bokedal concurs that the principle setting of the Rule was 'non apologetical',⁹³ and Kelly writes that the 'impulse towards their

⁸⁸ Blowers, 'Regula', 208.

⁸⁹ Bokedal, 'Origins', 255.

⁹⁰ This discussion sheds light on how we understand ecclesial unity. We follow Vanhoozer's view that the unity of the ecclesial faith community is not 'the monological institutional unity of Rome but a dialogical or "plural" unity'. We follow a Protestant ecclesiology that understands the unity of all believers as a plural unity that has as its centre a basic faith that manifests itself in diverse contexts. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 30.

⁹¹ Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (New York: Dorset Press, 1967), 44-5.

⁹² Hägglund, 'Bedeutung', 38-9.

⁹³ Bokedal, 'Origins', 255.

formulation came from within, not from without'.⁹⁴ Thus, it appears likely that early creedal formulas and the Rule of Faith arose because of inner ecclesial and external dynamics. Even though polemics made use of creedal material, its most natural setting was probably inner ecclesial use, leading believers to understand, live, and worship correctly.

There are various roles the Rule of Faith fulfilled in the life of the early church. Numerous texts suggest that the Rule of Faith was used as a guide for 'catechetical instruction preceding baptism', 'preaching', 'day-to-day polemic', 'liturgy', 'exorcism', and 'formal correspondence [i.e. letters]'.⁹⁵ The function of the Rule was broad. For the first Christian communities, 'these "rules" summarised the heart of Christian faith and served as theological boundary markers for Christian identity'⁹⁶ (Mark 1:1; Luke 1:1-4). As N. T. Wright argues, the unity of the Christian community did not develop around certain socio-ethnic or even political agendas, but a certain story. This story was based on the faith journey of Israel, which found its climax in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.⁹⁷ He then instructed his followers to continue to teach and preach the forgiveness of sins in his name (Matt 28:16-20; Luke 24:45-49). Jesus as fulfilment of Scripture assumes a central role within the Christian faith (Luke 24:13-35). The proclamation of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection would lead to repentance, belief, and baptism, which marked a believer's initiation into the church (Luke 24:44-49; Acts 2:38-41). The Rule might even point to emergence of early pre-baptismal confession that believers needed to learn and confirm the content thereof (Matt 28:19; 1 Tim 6:12; Heb 4:14).⁹⁸ The Faith, in many ways synonymous with the gospel, is thus received in proclamation, embodied in baptism and life. However, it was always clear that faith links to practice. Christians ought to live in light of the faith received. Thus, it forms the heart of the Christian identity, guides the worship of the believing communities (Acts

⁹⁴ Kelly, *Creeeds*, 28.

⁹⁵ Kelly, *Creeeds*, 13-4.

⁹⁶ Wall, 'Traditions', 88; Blowers, 'Regula', 214, 225.

⁹⁷ N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* vol. 1 (Minneapolis Fortress Press, 1992), 456.

⁹⁸ Bokedal, 'Origins', 240-1.

2:42; Rom 10:9; Eph 4:1-6), and actualises itself in many areas of the life of the believers.⁹⁹

After exploring how such basic faith doctrines functioned in the early church, we turn now to the question of Scripture and its interpretation. As one might imagine, The Rule of Faith offers a crucial theological impetus that guides the worshipful theological reflection of the church. [Comment: Begin here already with point 1: Discerning God's address in the text is possible and desired] The key to understanding how exactly the Rule informs the understanding of Scripture is to observe how the church understands the relationship between the Rule and Scripture. For the early church, the Rule functioned as a criterion for authentic apostolic teaching, evident in Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Clement of Alexandria.¹⁰⁰ Their belief was that this Rule preserves a faithful witness to Jesus' life and ministry. As discussed above, the validity of this view has gained further support in recent decades through the discussions of eminent scholars such as Martin Hengel, Alister McGrath, and H. E. W. Turner. Thus, building on this observation of the early, theological hermeneutics also proposes that the Rule of Faith encompasses theological commitments authentic to apostolic teaching, probably as a direct continuation of Jesus' own life (and death and resurrection) and teaching ministry (Luke 1:1-4; 24:44-46; Matt 28:16-20; Acts 1:3; 2:44-47).¹⁰¹

If the emergence of the Christian faith is an earlier and more complicated process than sometimes assumed, then it follows that the basic Christian faith also functioned as a criterion for the process of canonisation. The Rule of Faith served as a guideline to the church to discern which texts were received as

⁹⁹ Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2008), 57-8.

¹⁰⁰ Frances Young, 'Christian Teaching', in F. Young, L. Ayres, and A. Louth (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 91-104, citing 102; Ellen Flesseman-van Leer, *Tradition and Scripture in the Early Church* (Leiden: Gorcum & Prakke, 1954), 165.

¹⁰¹ Wall, 'Traditions', 97.

authentic witness to Jesus' life and teaching and which were not.¹⁰² The Rule of Faith served as a fundamental theological criterion for the church to decide which texts ought to be read and applied, and which were not trustworthy. Hence, the canonisation of the Bible was a process that took place in dialogue with the Christian faith captured in early proto-creedal formulas of the early church, not prior to them.¹⁰³ Thus, the final form and content of the scriptural canon is itself shaped by such early forms of the Christian faith. The Christian faith guided the process of production and canonisation of Scripture. In other words, the Rule of Faith embodied itself historically into the canonical form and theological content of the biblical texts. Consequentially, the church received the canon and early creedal formulas together, and both function as a normative unit. As Karlmann Beyschlag proposed in his *Grundriß der Dogmengeschichte*, the Rule and Scripture are not two different norms, but two sides of one norm, that is, of the transmitted Christian truth itself.¹⁰⁴ The Rule of Faith and Scripture are thus interconnected in this manner; the Rule 'emerges from Scripture itself, but it is also a lens through which Christians receive Scripture'.¹⁰⁵ Hence, just as the church came to recognise certain texts (canon) as representative of its central message (Rule of Faith), so the 'Church has never been able to do without a

¹⁰² Green, *Interpretation*, 72-3; Wall, 'Traditions', 98. This seems plausible if one recalls the Rule's apostolic origin, and that a major criteria for its acceptance was its links to apostolic teaching, which was partially provided by the Rule.

¹⁰³ Stuhlmacher explains that the process of canonisation of the New Testament should not be understood to have taken place as a separate stage, but importantly as part of one complex process with the canonisation of the Old Testament. The church received the Old and New Testaments as one collection. This argument from the history of canonisation further stresses the possibility of viewing the Bible having as a coherent book. See: Stuhlmacher, *Theology*, 53-61.

¹⁰⁴ Karlmann Beyschlag writes that the Rule and Scripture 'sind also nicht zwei verschiedene Normen, sondern zwei Seiten *einer* Norm, d.h. der überlieferten christlichen Wahrheit selbst.' Karlmann Beyschlag, *Grundriß der Dogmengeschichte* vol. 1 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1982 [2nd edn]), 154 (italics original).

¹⁰⁵ Billings, *Word*, 29. An impressive collection of how Scripture itself invites the reader to perceive its unity in God's purpose and character is given by Bauckham. Hence, we view the Rule of Faith not as final arbiter of interpretation, but as a necessary dialogue partner. Richard Bauckham, *The Bible in the Contemporary World: Hermeneutical Ventures* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2015), 5-6.

clear and catechetically suitable summary of the main content of Scripture, and also today is unable to teach in accordance with the Scripture without it'.¹⁰⁶

Above all, this reflection opens the discussion of hermeneutics in two distinct ways. Both these hermeneutical decisions are particularly important for the way we later develop formative interpretation. First, the Rule of Faith promotes that the principle task of theological interpretation is to discern God. All proto-creedal formulas centre on God as the agent behind salvific action and the object of worship. This then is the main question the theological interpreter brings to the text, 'not what separates us (language, diet, worldview, politics, social graces, and so forth) from the biblical authors, but whether we are ready to embrace the God to whom and the theological vision to which these writers bear witness'.¹⁰⁷ To discern God is the central task of theology in general, and so also of theological interpretation. As basic guidelines for faithful discerning of God's character and purpose for us and the world we have the entire scriptural witness of God's actions and being as well as early ecclesial creeds such as the Rule of Faith.¹⁰⁸ Both are essential in discerning God and the gospel message, as we argued above. Importantly, the process of discernment does not entail pressing biblical texts through a dogma-text-machine to arrive at timeless principles. While it would be comparatively easy to list the constituent elements of early creeds, the significantly harder task lies in discerning how the large scriptural story functions today.¹⁰⁹ Hence, the Rule of Faith helps us to understand how Scripture functions today, not by handing us specific answers

¹⁰⁶ Stuhlmacher, *Theology*, 61.

¹⁰⁷ Green, *Truth*, 18.

¹⁰⁸ Wall, 'Traditions', 102. We hasten to explain that this is not a dogmatic 'straitjacket', but rather explains the life of faith within which theological interpretation takes place. Billings, *Word*, 197.

¹⁰⁹ Much could be said about how we discern God in Scripture. Three insights that shape how we discern God are given by Thiselton in his reflection on how the Christian faith shapes biblical interpretation. (1) Scripture makes trans-contextually truth-claims about God and Jesus. That means, the God we discern is by definition beyond the created order. (2) Scripture is read as God's salvation, promise, pardon, judgement, etc. We discern that God is interested in relationship with creation. (3) The final horizon of interpretation is the eschatological dimension of promise. Thiselton, *Horizons*, 613-19.

to our current questions, but by providing a larger vision to see God's continuous work in the world. 'The Rule of Faith points to the expansive context for the Christian interpretation of Scripture: the economy of salvation itself, in which the Spirit unites God's people to Christ and his body (the church), empowered by a surprising, dynamic journey of dying to sin and coming to life in the Spirit's new creation.'¹¹⁰ Thus, faithful discernment of God in Scripture happens on our faith journey, on which we as believers are continuously transformed by the Spirit. This transformative journey shapes our whole being. While analytical skills are needed in the process of interpretation, the theological reader discerns God with spiritual imagination. Jeffrey puts it concisely: 'Through many years of reading and teaching literature I have come to believe that to read well one needs two apparently contradictory virtues — intellectual toughness and imaginative sympathy.'¹¹¹ Other dispositions are necessary, such as humility, devotion, and trust. Hence, the reader learns to discern God not like an abstract system, the principles of which we apply to our lives, but like a person, a creator and redeemer with whom we learn to live on a journey of a deepening and renewing relationship.

Second, the Rule of Faith places special emphasis on the final form of the biblical texts, since it identifies itself most clearly with the content and form of the canon as suitable witness to its truth. Among others, Francis Watson argues at great length that the final form of the biblical text is in fact what should

¹¹⁰ Billings, *Word*, 29.

¹¹¹ David Lyle Jeffrey, *Houses of Interpreter: Reading Scripture, Reading Culture* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2003), 173.

primarily concern the theological interpreter.¹¹² Watson's work exemplifies that the commitment to the final form can be approached from various directions (i.e. theological, hermeneutical, and exegetical) and therefore does not rely on simplistic dogmatic imposition. The length to which Watson argues this point appears appropriate, since a number of qualifications are needed in order not to slip into simplistic biblicism or the postmodern intra-textual world.¹¹³ The central observation is perhaps this: the reality behind the text is indissolubly connected to the text itself and, as such, any historical analysis that aims to disconnect content and form will inadvertently lead to an ever expanding reinforcing proliferation of possible historical scenarios. The reverse is, however, not true; namely, that proliferation of historical scenarios should cause us to abandon the project of historical study altogether. With our attention fixed on the final form of the text we maintain that the text still refers to the public world, not a intra-textual constructed world, for its truth-claims. Hence, we conclude that texts mediate reality rather than construct it.¹¹⁴ Given the possibility of focusing on the final form of the text, we can proceed thus. The new focus on the final form lends itself to certain forms of biblical theology that approach Scripture as a comprehensive story. This particular form of theological interpretation, is, in our view, promoted by the Rule of Faith and substantiated

¹¹² Watson, *Church*, 77. Richard Bauckham similarly promotes that the final form of the text (i.e. gospel narratives) ought to be the focus of the reader's interpretative efforts. To that end Bauckham introduces the category of 'eyewitness testimony' as a genre that integrates the historical and the theological dimensions of texts. Hence, similar to Watson, Bauckham begins to break with some basic assumptions of form critical analysis and proposes as way of reading the gospels as historical and theological accounts. Bauckham summarises: 'Understanding the Gospels as testimony, we can recognise this theological meaning of the history not as an arbitrary imposition on the objective facts, but as the way the witnesses perceived the history, in an inextricable coinherence of observable event and perceptible meaning.' Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels As Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids; Cambridge: Eerdmans: 2006), 5-8.

¹¹³ This does not exclude textual criticism, for which there is particular use. See further for a definition of final form: Watson, *Church*, 1-3.

¹¹⁴ Watson, *Church*, 225.

by the biblical texts themselves.¹¹⁵ Far from over-determining the meaning of every text, the Rule provides us with a generous narrative summary of the God witnessed in Scripture, as Greene-McCreight writes:

The Rule of Faith thus functions hermeneutically to hold together theologically the confessions of God the Creator and Jesus Christ the Son, and thus also to bring together in a dialectical relation two Testaments. The Rule is thus a basic 'take' on the subject matter and plot of the Christian story, which couples the confession of Jesus the Redeemer with the confession of God the Creator.¹¹⁶

All in all, theological hermeneutics argues for a new consensus that the final form of the biblical text is the main focus for the ongoing interpretation thereof. Building on this commitment, the reader is invited to read Scripture as a large story of God's redemptive involvement with humanity.

2.2 The General and the Particular: Schleiermacher and Thiselton

This final section compares two different paradigms on how hermeneutical decisions are reached, one being decisively in favour of general philosophical construction and which subsumes the specific theological characteristics in the general philosophical secular thought world (Schleiermacher), the other ultimately in favour of the reverse (Thiselton). This discussion serves primarily the purpose of structuring theological hermeneutics as a whole, which then informs how formative interpretation can be practised most fruitfully. Our main aim is to show that theological as well as formative interpretation does not take place in segregation from secular insights, but must happen in dialogue with them. This dialogue must, however, steer clear of subsuming the particular Christian faith into a general secular philosophical worldview.

The reason for beginning with Friedrich Schleiermacher (1758-1834) lies in his paramount influence within the field of hermeneutics. The church had

¹¹⁵ Importantly, reading Scripture as unity can also be substantiated by the biblical material itself. It is therefore never a simple imposition of ecclesial dogma, but given credence by the characteristics of the biblical canon itself. For similar view see: Bauckham, *Bible*, 6, 1-16.

¹¹⁶ Greene-McCreight, 'Rule', 703-4, 704.

practised theological exegesis for many centuries, but with Schleiermacher a new era of hermeneutical inquiry began. Schleiermacher changed the way subsequent generations would think about interpretation for a reason that to us today seems trivial (only to underline the magnitude of his influence). He aimed to find a synthesis between 'Wissenschaft, Philosophie und religiöser Gewißheit.'¹¹⁷ Thus, for Schleiermacher, hermeneutics deals with that general human condition as thinking, feeling, and religious beings. The most fitting hinge point to explicate his contribution is perhaps his understanding of religious experience. Stuhlmacher writes concerning Schleiermacher:

Für ihn besitzt die Religion als menschliche Grundhaltung ein Eigenrecht. In der religiösen Erfahrung verbinden sich für Schleiermacher das Wissen des Menschen um sich selbst, das Gefühl seiner Abhängigkeit von Gott und die Erkenntnis eines das Universum durchherrschenden Zusammenhangs in vollendeter Weise.¹¹⁸

Schleiermacher's hermeneutical proposal brings together two significant areas of his biography: a respect for piety and respect for philosophy and rational criticism.¹¹⁹ On the one hand, Schleiermacher wants to safeguard a religious interest in Christianity and wishes to maintain the integrity and validity of personal religious experience. On the other hand, he pursues a general hermeneutic that is based on scientific philosophical universality. Schleiermacher's great achievement for pioneering a general hermeneutic has to be understood in this context. Thus, he focused not on the particular interpretation of difficult or obscure texts, but on how humans understand in

¹¹⁷ Stuhlmacher, *Verstehen*, 136.

¹¹⁸ Stuhlmacher, *Verstehen*, 136.

¹¹⁹ The reason for this is certainly related to his childhood in the Moravian pietistic community and his later life as professor. From his early years he began reading contemporary philosophy (Kant, etc.).

general, i.e. 'hermeneutics is part of the art of thinking'.¹²⁰ He writes in his famous *Kurze Darstellung des theologischen Studiums zum Behuf einleitender Vorlesungen* in §132:

Das vollkommene Verstehen einer Rede oder Schrift ist eine Kunstleistung, und erheischt eine Kunstlehre oder Technik, welche wir durch den Ausdruck Hermeneutik bezeichnen.¹²¹

By defining the field of study in these terms, Schleiermacher combines philosophy and hermeneutics and subordinates any specific hermeneutic (i.e. theological hermeneutic) under the general philosophical hermeneutical project of studying the art of understanding.¹²² He goes beyond the understanding of specific texts in law or theology and aims to describe systematically the art of understanding, that is, studying human thinking and language (§133).¹²³ This involves not only linguistics (philology), as was previously the case, but also philosophy. He also believes that understanding necessitates 'psychologisches Verstehen',¹²⁴ that is, ascertaining and comprehension of the psychological state of author and recipients (§140).¹²⁵ Thus, he relocates hermeneutics firmly within the philosophical discipline.

The results of this change in disciplines were groundbreaking. The power of his proposal lies in its focus on philosophy and subordination of ecclesial dogma. This liberated Schleiermacher to develop and propose revolutionary

¹²⁰ Schleiermacher writes: 'Since the art of speaking and the art of understanding stand in relation to each other, speaking being only the outer side of thinking, hermeneutics is a part of the art of thinking, and is therefore philosophical.' Kurt Mueller-Vollmer, *Hermeneutics Reader: Texts of the German Tradition from the Enlightenment to the Present* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2006), 74.

¹²¹ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Kurze Darstellung des Theologischen Studiums: Zum Behuf Einleitender Vorlesungen Entworfen* (Berlin: G. Keimer, 1830), 59.

¹²² Werner G. Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance* (London: SCM, 1994), 44-49.

¹²³ Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher Dilthey Heidegger and Gadamer* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 86.

¹²⁴ Stuhlmacher, *Verstehen*, 138.

¹²⁵ Stuhlmacher, *Verstehen*, 138.

hermeneutical principles, many of which are still in use today, such as the division of interpretation into understanding and explanation, which goes back to Schleiermacher's 'divinatory and comparative'¹²⁶ method. Other concepts are that of the hermeneutical circle and pre-understanding, most of which have been enjoying general acknowledgement ever since. His distinction of grammatical and psychological interpretation has also had enormous influence.¹²⁷ Thus, the path first trodden by Schleiermacher has since been paved and widened by Dilthey, Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Ricoeur. They have worked their way further into this new territory, constructed key concepts, and provided crucial insights into human understanding. Gadamer's famous 'fusion of horizons' and his opposition to dispassionate objective inquiry come to mind.¹²⁸ Philosophy has provided important insights into the nature of understanding, the nature of language, and the implications of the human condition as a cultural historical being in time. Hence, Karl Barth uses words first addressed to Frederick the Great, Schleiermacher 'did not found a school, but an era'.¹²⁹

This discussion of Schleiermacher culminates for us in this observation: hermeneutics in the tradition of Schleiermacher questions the legitimacy of theological commitments in favour of a philosophical and critical historical path to theological knowledge.¹³⁰ While his proposal brought about a seismic shift in the field of hermeneutics, one question remains: Do we have to subordinate theological hermeneutics to philosophical hermeneutics to ensure open inquiry into the hermeneutical questions? Maybe it is possible, or even desirable, to understand philosophy as a handmaiden and history as an friend to theology.

¹²⁶ F. D. E. Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts* (ed. Heinz Kimmerle, tr. J. Duke and J. Forstman; Missoula: Scholar Press, 1977), 150.

¹²⁷ Thiselton, *Hermeneutics*, 156.

¹²⁸ Thiselton, *Hermeneutics*, 206, 219.

¹²⁹ Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (Zürich: SCM, 2001), 411.

¹³⁰ For Schleiermacher, the key for a unified vision in theological and biblical studies lies in locating theological exegesis within the boundaries of historical theology, but demanding of the interpreter a spirit of religious interest in Christianity (§102, §147). Stuhlmacher, *Verstehen*, 136-7.

A different vision of how secular and Christian thought might interact is given to us by Thiselton. The exceptional work of Anthony C. Thiselton in the field of philosophical hermeneutics provides a noteworthy example of this integrative practice. In his professional career, Thiselton pursued philosophical hermeneutics. His monumental works of *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein* and *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* feature perhaps all major scholars of the current philosophical hermeneutical discussion and enjoy recognition of the highest regard. Thiselton chooses to reflect theologically as well as philosophically on issues of textuality, authorship, and public life.¹³¹ He shows with great care how philosophical and theological discussions about the possibility of interpretation and practical questions of criteria for valid interpretation are intrinsically linked. Biblical hermeneutics, for instance, involves questions about the theological and canonical nature of biblical texts.¹³² Thus, in *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine and Systematic Theology*, Thiselton engages with theological construction and dogmatics, while holding philosophy in high regard.¹³³ He embodies exceptionally the synergy between biblical studies (exegesis), theology, and philosophy (i.e. philosophical hermeneutics), and can provide us with timely advice for Christian engagement with the Bible:

It is usual for committed Christian to pray, meditate, and seek God's presence during study of the Bible. But usually the Church Fathers and thinkers such as the devout Anselm would not have been any more reluctant to bring their philosophical reading and injuries before God in prayer and meditation. Nor would Luther have drawn a sharp dividing line between the sacred and what we nowadays regard as 'secular'. Theological inquiry is a mind-expanding activity. Even philosophical reflection within theology can honour God no less than biblical studies in the quest for truth and hermeneutical resources.¹³⁴

¹³¹ Thiselton, *Horizons*, 55-79.

¹³² Thiselton, *Hermeneutics*, 1.

¹³³ Thiselton, *Doctrine*, 97.

¹³⁴ Thiselton, *Theology*, 11-12.

All in all, the current form of theological hermeneutics follows this arguably ancient vision of how biblical interpretation is done. It claims that interpretation is open and a dialectical discipline. This should not be understood as a sell-out to a secular mindset, but rather follows an ancient practice to allow philosophy and theology to enrich one another.

However, Thiselton himself embodies not only synergy, but also tension between philosophy and theology. Philosophy converses with Christian theology over the contextual perception of reality and universal truth-claims. Thiselton summarises this tension eloquently:

Ever since the work of Dilthey it has been recognized that hermeneutics arises from interaction or dialectic between the general and the particular, the universal and the contingent, the critical and shifting horizons of life-worlds. Objectivism and a pre-occupation with wholly 'scientific' deduction and inductive generalizations about texts collapse the tension into scientific, positivistic, or formalist-doctrinal, system. Contextual relativism, social pragmatism, and deconstructionism, collapse the tension into a socio-contingent, fluid, life-world, in which horizons constantly shift simply in accordance with the flow of life as it is.¹³⁵

How can theological hermeneutics move forward from here? Can we ever arrive at anything more than contextual norms for interpretation? This question leads Thiselton to come to the heart of the issue. For him, much to his dismay, the lack of productive debate in hermeneutics is down to the misunderstanding between

*recognizing the inevitability of contextual pluralism at the level of establishing critical norms and the mistaken assumption that to attempt to move in the direction of a provisional and corrigible meta-critical ranking of such norms is thereby to deny this inevitability.*¹³⁶

¹³⁵ Thiselton, *Horizons*, 611.

¹³⁶ Thiselton, *Horizons*, 613 (italics original; also in the following citations).

Thiselton aims to hold in tension all life-contingent particularity and subjectivity, while still valuing certain norms as meta-critical. Following Pannenberg and Moltmann, Thiselton suggests that the collapse of the tension 'would represent a *betrayal of the critical character of Christian theology* as that which offers a *critique of life, and not merely a descriptive reflection of its as it is*'.¹³⁷ The reason is that a collapse leads communities to simply pragmatically affirm their own local interests. Thus, on the one hand, Thiselton repeatedly stresses that Christian theology has the capacity to remain open. Expecting a fulfilled vision of reality in the eschaton cautions premature closure (1 Cor 13:12).¹³⁸ On the other hand, Thiselton estimates Christian theology, as in Pannenberg's use of eschatology and Christology, to provide hermeneutics with 'horizons of ultimacy and of universality', which constitutes a '*critical system*'¹³⁹ and forms 'a metacritical and coherent frame'.¹⁴⁰ For Thiselton, '[t]he God of Christian theology stands as the source, creator, and goal of all; theology therefore has a universal character and claim'.¹⁴¹ This means that for pluralism, certain Christian theological claims will 'appear "privileged", and in the end a conflict of truth-claims may be inevitable'.¹⁴² A final conflict is unavoidable since Christian theology loses itself in self-contradictions, and thus would dissolve in utter incoherence, if it were to understand

*the prohibition of idolatry, the message of the cross, and the universality of eschatological promise as merely context-relative; as the product or construction of a particular social culture with no claim to offer a universal critique of life and thought, and even a metacritique of other criteria of thought, understanding, and action.*¹⁴³

¹³⁷ Thiselton, *Horizons*, 611.

¹³⁸ Thiselton, *Horizons*, 25, 615, 617-9.

¹³⁹ Thiselton, *Horizons*, 25.

¹⁴⁰ Thiselton, *Horizons*, 25.

¹⁴¹ Thiselton, *Horizons*, 25.

¹⁴² Thiselton, *Horizons*, 615.

¹⁴³ Thiselton, *Horizons*, 612-5 (italics original).

As the only critique, a point Thiselton admits, one might wish his works would integrate the dimension of Christian theology more clearly.¹⁴⁴ A similar but more explicit theological proposal, which takes the existence of God more explicitly into account for its engagement with literary theory, hermeneutics, and philosophy, comes from Vanhoozer. In agreement with Plantinga and Milbank, Vanhoozer rightly perceives it appropriate to permit Christian theology (cf. creation, incarnation, redemption) to have its say even on philosophical hermeneutical matters.¹⁴⁵ However, the implications of doctrine for philosophical hermeneutics might at first be opaque. As Watson comments, 'the significance for theology of, for example, debate about authorial intention or the role of the reader is not self-evident'.¹⁴⁶ Thankfully, Vanhoozer aids us in perceiving hermeneutics as already deeply theological. He writes: 'Derrida's announcement of the death of meaning alerts us to the indispensable tie between literary theory and theology.'¹⁴⁷ At the end, both Thiselton and Vanhoozer represent the growing consensus among some scholars that hermeneutical issues make philosophical and theological reflection indispensable.

Therefore, the form of theological hermeneutical we are interested in aims to integrate organically secular philosophical insights with Christian theology. The difficulty is to integrate theological and general insights to formulate an organic whole without dissolving the unique (i.e. the ecclesial faith) in the general (cf. Schleiermacher's God-consciousness). First, this prompts us to listen carefully to hermeneutical insights to equip our understanding of how we read and apply texts in general. Hermeneutics examine the importance of the Bible as a complex collection of various texts (the Bible as a historical book, literary work, poetic expression), and humans as cultural social beings and the authors of historically bound agents. As one might glean from our previous discussion,

¹⁴⁴ Craig G. Bartholomew, 'Three Horizons: Hermeneutics from the Other End—An Evaluation of Anthony Thiselton's Hermeneutic Proposals', *European Journal of Theology* 5.2 (1996): 121-135, 133; Thiselton, *Horizons*, 25-6.

¹⁴⁵ Vanhoozer, *Meaning*, 199-200.

¹⁴⁶ Watson, *Church*, 223.

¹⁴⁷ Vanhoozer, *Meaning*, 198.

dialogue with hermeneutics will always include philosophical concepts.¹⁴⁸ However, while philosophy is immensely useful, as Thiselton argues already at the beginning of *The Two Horizons*, it is used as a descriptive tool, not as the final critique of existence.¹⁴⁹ Second, theological hermeneutics that builds on a basic form of Christian theology (cf. Rule of Faith) functions as the larger critical context in which hermeneutical decisions have to be ultimately assessed. That means Christian theology develops, expands, challenges, or reshapes hermeneutical concepts by a constant self-critical dialogue with Scripture. This process renders theological hermeneutics unique as it engages from a certain perspective that at once commits itself to God as witnessed in Scripture and to human finitude in its partial knowledge and anticipation of a final revelation. Thus, the uniqueness of Scripture translates not into arbitrarily naive or simplistic hermeneutical principles, but into a hermeneutic that is an expression of utter hope and sheer dependence on God.

Conclusion

The primary goal of this chapter was to define and develop theological hermeneutics, to build the larger hermeneutical context of formative interpretation. This proposal approaches hermeneutics with a basic concern for God and the church. Following Billings, we contend that 'theological interpretation of Scripture is a multifaceted practice of a community of faith in reading the Bible as God's instrument of self-revelation and saving fellowship'.¹⁵⁰ This 'multifaceted practice'¹⁵¹ involves a complex circular dialectical movement by reflection on hermeneutics, Scripture, basic faith (-traditions) embodied in personal and corporate life of faith, accompanied with openness towards secular insights.¹⁵² With this framework we oppose the

¹⁴⁸ Jeanrond, *Hermeneutics*, 118.

¹⁴⁹ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger Bultmann Gadamer and Wittgenstein* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1980) 3-10.

¹⁵⁰ Billings, *Word*, xii.

¹⁵¹ Billings, *Word*, xii.

¹⁵² Watson, *Church*, 221-2.

previous academic paradigm that values the demarcation of theology and biblical studies (New and Old Testaments), and aim to remedy the proliferation of interpretative approaches with little sense of integration. Hence, we heed Watson's comment 'that theologically-oriented biblical interpretation should be an interdisciplinary activity, unconstrained by conventional disciplinary boundaries and critical of the distortions that these boundaries engender'.¹⁵³

With the presentation of the Rule of Faith we began with a basic form of the Christian faith exploring two central hermeneutical decisions that derive from it.¹⁵⁴ First, theological interpretation based on a basic form of the Christian faith (i.e. Rule of Faith) reads Scripture ultimately as the unique vehicle of God's self-disclosure (cf. gospel). Second, theological hermeneutics understands Scripture to function with most integrity in its final form. The emphasis on the final form of the biblical canon calls into question the modern obsession with secular critical historical inquiry and postmodern commitment to plural text-worlds.¹⁵⁵ Third, the integrative approach further emphasises the usefulness of insights from non-theological sources. As our discussion of Schleiermacher and Thiselton shows, the insights of secular sources are of great help to the theological interpreter. As further argued, integrating secular insights does take the form as proposed by Thiselton, not Schleiermacher, in that it identifies the Christian faith as a position from which truthful scholarship is possible.

How can these three points be integrated with the practise of a formative interpretation? This chapter, with its definition of theological hermeneutics, presents central hermeneutical decisions that shape the way we understand

¹⁵³ Watson, *Truth*, 17.

¹⁵⁴ It remains to be stressed that these hermeneutical decisions can be reached from a number of approaches – that is, by focusing on the biblical canon itself or on larger philosophical hermeneutical questions around text and history.

¹⁵⁵ The first two hermeneutical decisions illuminate the close connection of theological hermeneutics and biblical theology. In fact, biblical theology is only the result of these hermeneutical decisions, that is, prioritising the final form of the biblical canon with a sense for the unity of Scripture in God. (see: Craig. G. Bartholomew, 'Biblical Theology', in K. J. Vanhoozer (ed.), *Dictionary of Theological Interpretation* (London: SPCK, 2005), 84-90). Stuhlmacher is a major representatives of this movement in Germany: Peter Stuhlmacher, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments: Band I: Grundlegung: Von Jesus zu Paulus* (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992).

formative interpretation. Therefore, theological hermeneutics is the larger framework that guides formative interpretation by providing it with direction, focus, and structure.

First, theological hermeneutics provides direction for formative interpretation. Formative interpretation must ultimately focus on God's self-disclosure in the text. What we aim at in formative interpretation is not acquiring knowledge about a system, or learning a skill. Formative interpretation has more to do with building a relationship with God who chooses to reveal something of his nature and character in Scripture. Hence, the constant question the reader is faced with is whether he or she is willing to embrace God. By entering this kind of conversation with the text, God invites us into a transformative journey of moving towards unity with God, a God who restores us on the way. Obviously, with God, we do not refer to an intra-linguistic construct, but a real being outside the text whom the church continues to worship and serve, and who guides the church today.

Second, theological hermeneutics provides formative interpretation with focus. The focus of formative interpretation lies on the final form of the text, which means we tame the radical proliferation of historical hypothesising and acknowledge that the meaning of a reality behind the text is always mediated by the text. With this focus on the final form of the text, we begin to appreciate certain aspects of the biblical canon, that otherwise might remain opaque. Perhaps the most promising is the view that Scripture forms a coherent story, which has to be read as grand narrative. This approach would place non-narrative texts into the context of the large narrative sections for their theological and formative meaning.

Third, formative interpretation must happen in openness to secular insights. This last point is of great significance for formative interpretation, since it addresses directly the final points made in the previous chapter. First, Thiselton so helpfully models openness to secular insights that recognises the positive results of secular scholarship. Second, Thiselton acknowledges that we must make room for certain theological sensibilities, which prevent us from falling into idiosyncrasy or pluralism and guide the Christian community to perceive God's effective mercies that he so lavishly pours on all nations. Third, and perhaps most essentially, the basic foundation of guidance lies in a

particular vision of God and not in vague abstract absolutes. Thus, formative interpretation finds its orientation in the very person and character of God as witnessed in Scripture.¹⁵⁶

Taken together, these three basic building blocks shape formative interpretation. The difference between the formative character of theological hermeneutics and other approaches lies in that through reading the text we are expectant and open to encountering God. In other words, the formative goal of theological hermeneutics lies in guiding the church to continuously become the people of God who live by the word of God. Hence, it is our conviction that these basic hermeneutical decisions fruitfully integrate into formative interpretation, which allows the church to remain a unique embodiment of God's character and purpose for the world.

In our discussion so far we have focused mainly on hermeneutics and only vaguely addressed what we actually mean by formation. Thus, in our next chapter we define more closely the process and goal of formation. This will then help us to understand more thoroughly what formative interpretation is and how it ought to function.

¹⁵⁶ Thiselton, *Horizons*, 25.

Understanding Formation: A Theological Proposal

In chapter two we provided a basic hermeneutical framework from within which formative interpretation might proceed. But before we move to the actual interpretative proposals in the following chapter, we need to define the purpose and goal of formation from a Christian perspective. This chapter is therefore concerned with the material content of formation. Defining what formation is helps us ultimately to understand the goal of formative interpretation and provides us with criteria to assess when formative interpretation is successful. This chapter therefore is an essential link between our discussion of theological hermeneutics and formative interpretation.

Formation: A Preliminary Reflection

Before we move into a closer discussion of formation, it is necessary to provide a brief preliminary reflection on human formation. In general, formation is the process of human development. This observation is, however, scarcely sufficient to help us to make progress. Yet questions about formation take on an entirely new depth when we observe the larger picture and ask whether human formation is random or directed, who directs it, and towards which goal?

A number of examples can help us to see how formation could be viewed. First, the formative process could be pictured as the learning process in a survival camp. Human learning and development are about survival in the world. To that end we develop skills and strategies as well as coping mechanisms that help us survive in hostile and threatening environments. Those who learn quickly have the potential to develop further. Formation then becomes a means to survival, and a form of domination and control.

Second, human formation could be understood mainly in terms of a social masquerade. Formation is about social role play in which people learn to create and manage a number of different personas. Formation has at its centre social inclusion and belonging. Consequently, people learn to play different social roles like a member of a masquerade ball, in order to manage life with its demands, power-plays, and pleasures.

Third, formation could be understood as a career path. Rather than managing different roles, formation becomes an individualistic task. The focus lies predominantly on the autonomous agent who has self-actualisation and success as her goals. In more common terminology, humans become their better selves. Thus, formation is a process of progress controlled by the person to actualise potential to achieve one's goals.

These examples are only a snapshot of possible formative visions. We suggest that formation can be seen as adaptation towards survival, social masquerade to create belonging, role play for pleasure, or self-enhancement towards success. Essentially, every vision of formation answers two basic questions: (1) How do humans become? (2) What is the goal of becoming? These two questions will concern us from here on.

1. Formation: A General Introduction

Human becoming is the subject of many areas of research, such as psychology, sociology, and cultural studies. These resources are by nature descriptive tools to formulate a basic anthropology. Paul Vitz helps us reflect on these contemporary views of the human person in *The Self: Beyond the Postmodern Crisis* and thereby provides a fruitful starting point to the discussion. His critiques of the modern and postmodern visions of the self are of particular use for formation.¹⁵⁷ Three aspects seem to be of particular importance here.

First, the human self develops in a culturally and socially intersubjective environment (cf. Heidegger), not simply as an autonomous person. It was conventional in the modern era to de-emphasise interpersonal relationships, leading to a misconstrued view of human beings as autonomous rational agents. Instead, humans are dependent on relationships throughout, and particularly early in life. In those developing stages we receive stories about the world and ourselves which shape the perception of who we are, what life is about, and what our values and goals ought to be. In our view, postmodern thinkers rightly emphasise that humans develop as cultural, social, and relational beings.

¹⁵⁷ P. C. Vitz, 'Introduction', in P. C. Vitz and S. M. Felch (eds.), *The Self: Beyond the Postmodern Crisis* (University of Michigan: ISI Books, 2006), xvii-xxi.

Second, the modernist view of self does not account for the ongoing formation of adult selves who participate in the public life (i.e. profession, family, ageing). Formation continues into adulthood where people have many different roles, in which power-play, self-interest and disguise take part. Humans are not static and one-dimensional. Rather, they change from situation to situation, as subconscious processes are at work. Current research contributes to this awareness that formation is an ongoing feature of human existence:

[P]sychology and neurobiology provide compelling evidence that humans are created for development, relationship, and integration — all of which are dimensions of formation.¹⁵⁸

Third, formation has to recognise that humans are embodied agents.¹⁵⁹ Embodiment has been greatly neglected by modern and postmodern anthropology. However, it has become evident that human physicality shapes how we perceive and describe our existence in the world. Evidently, it is through our bodies that we have a direct sense of space and location in the world and are able to stand in communicative relationship to others. Human bodies allow us to identify ourselves as a self, irreducibly and separate from others, yet in close contact with others. Furthermore, our bodies are the primary channel of sensory experience and control. The human mind has the capacity to store our past experiences and to discern their meaning. For that we use imagination ('a basic image-schematic capacity for ordering our experience'¹⁶⁰) or conceptual schemes ('conceptual, conative, action guiding'¹⁶¹) that help us to manoeuvre our lives. Thus, our sensory experiences are all linked and develop

¹⁵⁸ J. K. Brown, C. M. Dahl, and W. C. Reuschling, 'Location: Our Selves, Our Disciplines, Our Process', in J. K. Brown, C. M. Dahl, and W. C. Reuschling (eds.), *Becoming Whole and Holy: An Integrative Conversation about Christian Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 1-14, citing 4-5; Jack O. Balswick, Pamela Ebstyne King, and Kevin S. Reimer (eds.), *The Reciprocating Self: Human Development in Theological Perspective* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005).

¹⁵⁹ Vitz, 'Introduction', xvii-xxi.

¹⁶⁰ Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason* (Chicago: University Press, 2013), xx.

¹⁶¹ Green, *Truth*, 21.

into a network of 'ever-forming ... and well-tested assumptions, shared by others with whom I associate, about "the way the world works"'.¹⁶² Additionally, humans develop 'dispositions', which are ways of responding to events in the world that become 'second nature'.¹⁶³ These dispositions constitute our 'embodied history' and 'embodied compass' and form part of our unconscious navigation system.

This brief overview helps us to understand two aspects of formation. One, we begin to see who or what is involved in human formation. Evidently, human life takes the shape of a constant formative movement. Predominantly involved in this dynamic are other humans. We develop as social beings, not as autonomous machines, which means that the process of becoming is shaped by other agents and their beliefs, commitments, desires, and actions. Personal development is a process that positions others as points of reference and the self as recipient. However, since humans are embodied personal agents (not machines), formation also involves the person's desires and wills, and the body's biology (genes). Humans do not simply regurgitate what they are fed, but begin to vocalise desires, form wills, shape opinions, learn language, express ideas, and formulate plans. Formation must view the self not only as recipient, but as active agent whose desires and will shape the formative process. In essence, formation arises continually out of the particular forms of reciprocal relationship of the self with other persons and the physical world.

The second main point here is to stress that a human continuously develops as whole persons. In particular it is our bodily existence that provides a place where experience and reflection come together. Embodiment reminds us that humans are integrated persons and that formation happens on multiple levels, since all areas of human life stand in intricate relationship to one another. A number of central areas of human life can be identified. Green writes that formation 'grow[s] out of the interrelations among our patterns of faith and thought, our allegiances and commitments, and our practices'.¹⁶⁴ This list is comprehensive, but misses two aspects. The first has already been mentioned:

¹⁶² Green, *Truth*, 22.

¹⁶³ Green, *Truth*, 21.

¹⁶⁴ Green, *Truth*, 19.

humans are embodied (integrated whole). Second, humans have wills and desires.

In conclusion, the basic vision of human existence in its various spheres combines (1) 'patterns of faith and thought', (2) 'allegiances and commitments', (3) 'practices',¹⁶⁵ (4) will and desires, and (5) embodiment. To reiterate, point (5) highlights that the other four areas intimately integrate in the human body and that the human body allows for the possibility of formative reciprocal interaction of the self with other agents in a socio-cultural context.

2. Formation: A Theological Perspective

Sociology, psychology, and neuroscience help us enormously in describing the phenomenon of human formation. However, to reflect on formation from a Christian perspective must include theology. Christian theology is not only descriptive, but also evaluative. That means its interest lies not with describing human existence, but with critical evaluation of what human life ought to be about. Biblical texts provide a critical momentum to move beyond mere description to statements about ultimate ends.¹⁶⁶ Hence, theology is an essential resource to help us understand the process of formation and the goal of formation from a Christian point of view.

2.1 Formation in the Biblical Story

We commence our theological discussion of formation by reflecting theologically on Scripture. The Bible understands humans in their relationship to God. This relationship with God is present in Scripture by the well-known four-stage drama of creation, fall, redemption, and recreation. This comprehensive story highlights a number of features of human formation.

First, the development of the human self is God's plan. The Genesis account depicts humans in a world with potential to develop. The creation accounts (Gen 1:1–2:25) assume that humans ought to be able to learn and develop with the tasks they are given. Terence Fretheim writes that 'there is an element of incompleteness that is integral to the very structures of created

¹⁶⁵ Green, *Truth*, 19.

¹⁶⁶ Vitz, 'Introduction', xvii-xxi.

existence ... (“subdue” the earth, Ge. 1:28).¹⁶⁷ It appears artificial to claim that the texts picture humans as static beings. Since human beings bear the image of their creator they are open to grow in their relationship with God. It is, one could say, the finitude of human existence that ‘sets humanity on a trajectory of growth and formation and invites human participation in the work of God through imaging God’.¹⁶⁸

Second, as Jeannine Brown points out, it is the irony of the story that human finitude (i.e. lack of knowledge, dependence on relationship and life from God, belonging to the created order) is not recognised as potential to grow in relationship, but as an obstacle to self-determination.¹⁶⁹ The fall exemplifies that humans want to become god-like in desiring knowledge and completeness apart from dependence on God (Gen. 3:5). But instead of becoming more like God, the humans solved the problem of limitedness by making themselves gods. There are many parallels to how humans aim to overcome limitedness by either defining our human faculties as potentially flawless (modern paradigm), or by defining human limitedness as the be-all-and-end-all of existence (postmodern paradigm). Be that as it may, the biblical picture assumes that formation ought to happen not by overcoming limitedness, but by continuous relationship with God, which renders human limitedness as the position of dependence and trust. After all, finitude recognises that we are humans and not God, that we are dependent and not self-sufficient.

Third, consequently the purpose of human becoming is tied up in the story of salvation. Human formation is the journey to fulfil God’s purpose for his creation. The Old Testament witnesses anticipate God’s restorative work, but also leave room for future fulfilment of that promise to change humanity (e.g. Deut 30:1-10; Isa 49:8–56:8; Jer 31:31-37). The New Testament witnesses to the fulfilment of those promises in Jesus. Salvation in Jesus is presented in

¹⁶⁷ Terence E. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 9.

¹⁶⁸ J. K. Brown, ‘Being and Becoming: The Scriptural Story of Formation’, in J. K. Brown, C. M. Dahl, and W. C. Reuschling (eds.), *Becoming Whole and Holy: An Integrative Conversation about Christian Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 65-82, citing 67.

¹⁶⁹ Brown, ‘Being’, 68.

numerous images. For instance, Paul writes that Christians are now living as new beings. In other words, moving from an Adamic humanity to a new humanity 'in Christ' is the future hope accompanied by present tangible traces of that future reality (e.g. 1 Cor 15:35-57; Col 3:1-4). The eschatological vision pictures unity between God, humanity, and the world; it 'involves the restoration of creation and communion with God.'¹⁷⁰

To summarise, Scripture defines human formation in a larger context, that of a created world, a fallen state, and a recovered purpose. Scripture recognises with other disciplines that formation is part of human existence. Physical (ageing), relational (faithfulness, estrangement), and character (wisdom, foolishness) formation are all part of this. Of particular interest to many biblical texts is whether a person moves 'towards' God or others, or if the person moves 'away' from God. Two theological phrases that describe the formative goal and trajectory ('towards' or 'away') are of special interest here: (2.1.1) the 'image of God', and (2.1.2) 'losing and finding self'.

2.1.1 Formed in(to) the image of God: The phrase 'image of God' is perhaps the most important theological insight into human development. In the Old Testament the relationship with God is one in which the subject ought to share God's character (Gen 1:27). 'You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.' (Lev 19:2, NAS). Thus, the nation of Israel is meant to emulate God's holiness for the other nations to see (Ex 19:5-6).¹⁷¹ In the New Testament, the image of God is found uniquely in the person of Jesus (2 Cor 4:1-5; Col 1:15-20; Heb 1:1-4). Jesus as Messiah, God's unique self-revelation, shows how humans ought to be, and opens the way for complete renewal. Thus, in New Testament terms, the 'goal [of formation] is growth towards a goal: conformity (... *symmorphous*) to the image of God's Son (Romans 8:29)'.¹⁷² This process is ongoing and the 'final end of the path is a transforming "face-to-face" encounter with our triune God, a joyful state of "knowing fully" and being

¹⁷⁰ Billings, *Word*, 10.

¹⁷¹ Brown, 'Being', 67.

¹⁷² Briggs, *Bible*, 136.

“fully known” as children of God in Christ (1 Cor 13:12; Rom 8:15-21).¹⁷³ Thus, humans are made to bear the image of God and as such resemble God. This means humans ought to ‘present those qualities that characterize God in a *visible way*’.¹⁷⁴

In essence, God whom we ought to resemble is one who stands in a love relationship with his creation. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus calls his disciples to radical love for enemies. In doing so, Jesus states, humans will show themselves to be true children of God, imitating God in his perfection (Matt 5:44-45, 48). Paul’s famous definition of love highlights the essential nature of love as the giving of self (1 Cor 13:4-7).¹⁷⁵ Another significant passage in this context is John 3:16, where love is authenticated in the self-giving of God in his Son. This self-giving initiates not a one-directional relationship, but reciprocal in that humans are to follow God and love him by devoting themselves to his commands (John 14:14, 21). Thus, walking with God happens through regular worshipful offering of one’s whole being to God (e.g. Rom 12:1-2; Eph 4:17-24; Phil 2:5; Col 2:6-7; 1 Pet 1:13-16). To be like God means to have the capacity to enter into a faithful covenant relationship with God and others, to be in full unity in mutual giving and receiving as expressed in Jesus’ prayer (John 17:21-23). Life as envisioned by the good news is one that takes this shape. Social scientists Jack Balswick, Kevin Reimer, and Pamela King take up this point and conclude that:

¹⁷³ Billings, *Word*, 9.

¹⁷⁴ Thiselton, *Theology*, 140.

¹⁷⁵ Thiselton comments that 1 Cor 13:4-7 is about the ‘Nature and Action of Love’. On verse five Thiselton comments that for Paul ἀγάπη is effectively about seeking the other first and not one’s own satisfaction. Thus, we observe that self-giving is the opposite of the self-seeking self-interest. Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2000), 1050f. Furthermore, this self-giving attitude finds its centre specifically in God. Nygren comments on Paul’s understanding of love. In 1 Cor 13:5 we come to understand that “‘Agape seeketh not its own” ... is a self-evident consequence of theocentric nature of his [Paul’s] idea of love. ... For when God’s Agape is shed abroad in a man’s heart through the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5) his life thereby gains a new centre. The emphasis is transferred from his own ego to Christ’. Nygren Anders, *Agape and Eros* all volumes (tr. Philip S. Watson; London: SPCK, 1953), 130f.

to live as beings made in the image of God is to exist as reciprocating selves, as unique individuals living in relationship with others. ... [T]he goal of human development as God intends, is the reciprocating self. To live according to God's design is to glorify God as a distinct human being in communion with God and others in mutual giving and receiving relationships.¹⁷⁶

Following Lossky, Thiselton similarly argues that the image of God 'involves the capacity to enter into relationship with God and with others. When restoration of this image occurs by grace, we may *represent* God and his self-giving love to others.'¹⁷⁷ In summary, then, formation as pictured by Scripture is not merely about self-bettering, not a process that is controlled by humans, not initiated by humans, and the goals of which are not set by humanity. Christian formation is unlike learning a skill, such as cooking, driving, speaking a foreign language, or running a business. It appears that Christian formation has to do with becoming a different person who lives in line with God's character and purpose. The goal of human existence is to faithfully reflect God's image and to follow God's purpose for his creation. Bearing his image means humans become able to live in a reciprocal, trusting, love relationship with God and others. Thus, the goal for formation is to live in whole relationship with the other. This is supported by the centrality of relationship for the Christian identity as it finds expression in Scripture.¹⁷⁸ Humans become children of God (Matt 5:45), friends of God (Jam 2:23, 4:4), brothers and sisters (1 John 4:20-21), saints (Ps 31:23, Rom 1:7, NAS), disciples (Matt 28:16, 19), stewards of creation (Gen 1:28), and a holy people (Lev 19:2; Deut 7:6, 28:9; 1 Pet 2:9).

¹⁷⁶ Balswick, *Self*, 31.

¹⁷⁷ Thiselton, *Theology*, 137; Vladimir Lossky, *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (London: J. Clarke, 1957); Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God* (London: Mowbrays, 1974).

¹⁷⁸ Paul Trebilco, *Self-designations and Group Identity in the New Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 298, 303.

2.1.2 *Formation as 'Losing and Finding Self':*¹⁷⁹ Creation, fall, and salvation highlight that two fundamental disruptions characterise the path of becoming a person who lives in line with God's character and purpose.¹⁸⁰

First, humans move from brokenness and corruption to a state where wholeness and holiness increase. Being in a state of brokenness, human development is thwarted. Sin causes further deformation and decay of the human person.¹⁸¹ It has to be noted that the ways in which formation can go wrong are large and complex. The power of sin reveals itself not only within humans, but also in their social interactions. There are wider relational and social dynamics which shape the ongoing development of children and adults. For instance, Carla Dahl uses attachment theory to describe the way children form emotional relationships. After describing the basic forms of emotional attachment she concludes that the 'effect of brokenness and sins of others relate to the nature of childhood and adult attachment styles on our path to becoming'.¹⁸²

To move the human out of that downward spiral requires a radical disruption of the self, formally called repentance. This discontinuity constitutes

¹⁷⁹ Bauckham, *Bible*, 138.

¹⁸⁰ Bauckham, *Bible*, 139.

¹⁸¹ Sin affects human formation. One example how sin thwarts human development is given by R. R. Reno, who explains how sin distorts identity formation: 'The universality of sin is not peripheral to human identity. Sin shapes life. To use Paul's language, sin enslaves, dictating the direction of human life. The direction is dynamic, gaining speed and intensity, leading to greater and greater iniquity (Rom. 6:19). ... [T]he very identity of the sinner is defined by sin'. R. R. Reno, 'Sin, Doctrine of', in K. J. Vanhoozer (ed.), *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (London: SPCK, 2005), 748-51, citing 750.

¹⁸² C. M. Dahl, 'Being and Becoming: *A Journey Toward Love*', in J. K. Brown, C. M. Dahl, and W. C. Reuschling (eds.), *Becoming Whole and Holy: An Integrative Conversation about Christian Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 15-36, citing 24. Other hindrances in human development are genetic disorders. Hence, at this stage we ought to recognise that a limited understanding of the complexity of human life and sin will result in a distorted view of how human development has been thwarted and requires remedy.

nothing short of a total salvific (trans-)formation.¹⁸³ A central theme for Paul brings the notion of transformation and salvation closely together. For Paul, humans are radically transformed as they participate in Jesus' life (2 Cor 3:18; Gal 2:19-20).¹⁸⁴ Richard Briggs clarifies how participation and transformation are linked:

This notion of transformation is specially focused on a person's removal from one sphere of influence — variously described, but basically the power of sin — and relocation into another sphere of influence — the power of Christ and his resurrection.¹⁸⁵

Being 'in Christ' speaks of this removal of one sphere of power (i.e. sin) into another (Gal 5:24). Hence, the first formative disruption describes a process which fundamentally reconstitutes the self. Richard Bauckham describes this form of transformation as one in which the 'false self' dies and the 'true self'¹⁸⁶ rises. The false self is characterised by the pervasive power of sin in its self-focused pursuit of independent self-creation. The true self receives its identity and formation from God.

Second, we distinguish a further aspect of transformation: further conforming to Christ. Bauckham guides our attention to the ongoing formation in which the true self now enters into the habitual movement of self-giving and receiving. Humans continue to be formed as they offer their whole being to God (e.g. Rom 12:1-2; Eph 4:17-24; Phil 2:5; Col 2:6-7; 1 Pet 1:13-16) and their self to one another. Jesus expressed as follows: 'Whoever seeks to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it' (Luke 17:33 NAS; Matt 10:39). In essence, the self lives out of self-giving and receives itself along that path. 'The self that knows itself to be given by God lives in giving itself, to and for God

¹⁸³ As we see it, transformation is a form of formation with special emphasis on the discontinuity or disruption in the formative process, theologically described as 'dying to self' (Matt 10:39) or 'participation in Christ' (2 Cor 3:18; Gal 2:19-20).

¹⁸⁴ Michael J. Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology* (Grand Rapids; Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2009), 7.

¹⁸⁵ Briggs, *Bible*, 136.

¹⁸⁶ Bauckham, *Bible*, 139f.

and others, and thus constantly receives itself as gift from God and from others.’¹⁸⁷ Who we become finds its answer in continuously living in this kind of self-giving relationship in which we increasingly reflect something of God’s character (Gal 5:22-26). Therefore, from a Christian perspective formation is not manufactured by focus on oneself, but rather a focus on God, and, equally important, the neighbour. As Mark McIntosh writes: ‘This process of becoming who one most truly is takes place, in other words, by means of relationship, by means of love for the other – both divine and human.’¹⁸⁸

2.2 *Learning to Love through Reflection and Practice*

So far we have argued that formative development orients itself to the image of God particularly revealed in Christ, which essentially involves reconstituting the self into a person able to live in reciprocal relationships with God and others. This leaves us with the question of how we learn to live as such persons; how do we learn to give ourselves? The final pages of this chapter are devoted to answering this question.

In order to help us with this question we first listen to Carla M. Dahl. Her definition of formation maps out the subsequent considerations. She writes:

[Formation is] a multifaceted invitational process with many points of entry. Individual and communal responses to God’s call to wholeness and holiness are informed through reflection on the biblical and theological foundations of faith, the theoretical and practical dimensions of life and practice, and personal experiences of God in the past and present. This reflection serves as the basis for the ongoing process of integration that is essential for Christian maturity.¹⁸⁹

Dahl provides us with a fitting definition of the process of human becoming. A few preliminary comments are appropriate. First, Dahl suitably qualifies the

¹⁸⁷ Bauckham, *Bible*, 142.

¹⁸⁸ Mark A. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 211.

¹⁸⁹ C. M. Dahl, ‘Wholeness and Holiness: Selves in Community with God and Others’, in J. K. Brown, C. M. Dahl, and W. C. Reuschling (eds.), *Becoming Whole and Holy* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 37-51, citing 39.

formative process as invitational. Formation begins with God's invitation, hence it is a gift offered.¹⁹⁰ Second, Dahl divides human participation into reflection and response; a very appropriate distinction. We take it to mean that we picture human self-giving in two basic spheres: the inner life and the public or embodied life. Thus, to learn to love God as a whole being takes place in one's inner life of thoughts and emotions as well as in public embodied life of behaviour. These categories are not to be confused with a dualistic vision of the human person, which we do not share.¹⁹¹ It is for us self-evident that public behaviour habits as well as thought patterns are interdependent areas of human existence, to the effect that thoughts shape behaviour, but similarly behaviour shapes our thoughts. To put it into a formula: Reflection and practice invite and presuppose each other in the process of learning how to love others. Hence, Dahl's categories are useful distinctions for a clearer understanding, but not ontological claims about human existence.

2.2.1 Forming Love through Reflection: Dahl states that formation includes 'reflection on the biblical and theological foundations of faith, the theoretical and practical dimensions of life and practice, and personal experiences of God in the past and present'.¹⁹² To reflect, in our view, means the disposition to offer our heart and mind to God by deeply pondering the things of life with an expectation of having our minds shaped by God in the process. Thus it includes analytical thoughts as well as liturgical worshipful pondering, dwelling with God in prayer, and remembering his works.

One biblical term that fits the inner life of the human person is the term 'heart'. In the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* Johannes Behm presents us with a number of different uses in Scripture.¹⁹³ Among others, the term is

¹⁹⁰ Green and Goldingay similarly view Scripture communicates an invitation, not a demand to 'believe seven impossible things before breakfast.' John Goldingay, *Models for Interpretation of Scripture* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1995), 121, and Green, *Truth*, 163-4.

¹⁹¹ Thiselton, *Theology*, 140-3.

¹⁹² Dahl, 'Wholeness', 39.

¹⁹³ J. Behm, 'καρδία', in G. Kittel and G. Friedrich (eds.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 605-14.

used for the inner place of feeling (Gen 6:6; 45:26), the place of reflection and pondering (Luke 2:19, 51). Behm concludes: 'The NT use of the term agrees with the OT use. ... Even more strongly than the LXX it concentrates on the heart as the main organ of psychic and spiritual life ... the central organ of the body ... the centre of the inner life.'¹⁹⁴ Hence, the heart is a comprehensive term for the centre of the inner human being, the location of our will, thoughts, desires, plans, questions, and feelings. Using the term 'heart' in this larger sense perhaps includes most of what we today consider to be the human mind. As argued before, the mind is the place of complex cognitive capacities (conceptual schemes, imagination, and reason).

The salient point is this. In the process of reflection, we offer our hearts and minds to God; that is, we offer our thoughts, desires, wills, passions, questions, hopes, dreams, and fears to God. This has the following effect. When we begin to open our world, immediately we alter what we are concerned about. We are no longer concerned with ourselves, but with what God might desire. Consequently, in giving our inner world to God, we prepare ourselves to be changed, our thoughts, practices, emotions, wills, and desires to be conformed to his. A scriptural example that captures this concern is wisdom literature. The writer(s) of Proverbs does not primarily appeal to reason, as if the reader has a lack of rational understanding. The incessant call is to listen intently and let the author's appeals enter the reader's heart (cf. 1:8, 23-24; 2:1-5, 4:1-2, 4:20-23). Proverbs is nothing less than a long entreaty to open one's entire life to the ways of God (8:1-7), to desire wisdom (3:1-3), and to trust God (3:5-7). The text calls its readers to protect their hearts and mind from destructive influences, and with their whole inner world of desires and wills to listen and reflect on what is said.

The quintessential saying that captures this form of reflection is written at the outset of Proverbs: 'The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge' (Prov 1:7, *NAS*). Here, then, we encounter what reflection entails. Reflection is a practice that begins with offering one's whole life to God and in giving one's thoughts and emotions, one's dreams and fears to God. We offer not only our ability to reason, but our capacity to imagine, to worship, to desire.

¹⁹⁴ Behm, 'καρδία', 611.

Reflection means to devote one's thoughts to listen intently to God, who in his love will teach us how to love him and love others. In humbling ourselves we may in fact receive God's grace in a changed and renewed heart and mind that are able to perceive God's will for our lives (Rom 12:1-2), God's love for other people, and God's forgiveness for us and our neighbour.

2.2.2 *Forming Love through Embodied Response: 'Individual and communal responses to God's call to wholeness and holiness',*¹⁹⁵ Dahl writes, also belong to formation. As already indicated, we take this to address generally the importance of practice in developing love for others. Our embodied existence allows us to interact, communicate, and make changes in the world. The words of Paul in Romans 12 are particularly poignant here: 'Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship' (Rom. 12:1, NAS). For Paul, human bodies, quite opposite to Gnostic philosophy, are essential for us to worship God practically. Käsemann helpfully explains what the term 'body' means for Paul:

[It is] that piece of the world, which we ourselves are and for which we bear responsibility, because it was the earliest gift of our Creator to us. 'Body' is not primarily to be regarded ... from the standpoint of the individual. For the apostle it signifies man in his worldliness [existence in the world] and therefore in his ability to communicate. ... In the bodily obedience of the Christian ... the lordship of Christ finds visible expression, and only when this visible expression takes personal shape in us does the whole thing become credible as Gospel message.¹⁹⁶

The human body is the primary domain of influence and responsibility. With our actions we show visibly our inner commitment to God and others. Thus, learning to love means taking up certain behaviours and refraining from others. Changes in behaviour can follow prior acts of reflection, and in a certain sense this is always true. But what is important to highlight is that humans are

¹⁹⁵ Dahl, 'Wholeness', 39.

¹⁹⁶ Ernst Käsemann, *New Testament Questions Today* (London: SCM, 1969), 135.

also already involved in habitual practices that likewise shape the way we think about the world.

A proposal for formation that takes this point up is given by James K. A. Smith, who argues that embodiment has been greatly neglected in understanding human beings and their formation. He critiques the misunderstanding that formation should focus on one's basic cognitive beliefs (worldview). In *Desiring the Kingdom*, Smith argues that the basic assumption behind much of current Christian education displays a view of humans as 'cognitive machines'.¹⁹⁷ This anthropological vision of human existence highlights the ability to think, rather than to desire. Intellectual understanding stands in the foreground, while questions of practice become secondary. When we mistakenly understand human existence only in terms of thinking, then shaping people's worldview (articulation of basic beliefs) through cerebral activity becomes the main path of formation. Formation becomes primarily a matter of altering thinking, rather than practices. Smith disapproves of this one-sidedness and desires to correct a misguided and dualistic anthropology. Humans are more than thinking machines. He proposes an anthropology that envisions humans as embodied liturgical creatures.

Following Augustine, Smith's proposal centres on changing bodily practices in order to change our thoughts and desires. 'To be human is to love, and it is what we love that defines who we are.'¹⁹⁸ However, human worship, love, and desire are deeper than analytical conceptualisation. This means that thinking grows out of processes that precede mere cognitive reflection. This 'precognitive or prerational orientation to the world is shaped and primed by very material, embodied practices.'¹⁹⁹ Human desires and passions are shaped through liturgical practices; that is, through bodily habits and behaviour patterns. Liturgy is all around us; every society and person has its own cultural liturgies (work, holidays, schooling, weekend activities, media and entertainment, consumeristic patterns). Smith lists a number of alternative

¹⁹⁷ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 27-35.

¹⁹⁸ Smith, *Kingdom*, 51.

¹⁹⁹ Smith, *Kingdom*, 28.

Christian liturgical practices: hospitality, song, baptism, prayer, creeds, confession, and Eucharist. Following these Christian habits (liturgy) will in time shape our desires. 'The liturgy is a "hearts and minds" strategy, a pedagogy that trains us as disciples precisely by putting our bodies through a regimen of repeated practices that get hold of our heart and "aim" our love towards the kingdom of God.'²⁰⁰

Smith's proposal is thoughtful and concrete. It provides a useful correction to an overly cerebral form of formation and points rightly to the danger of buying into dualistic notions of humans. Our practices are not merely results of prior cognitive activity, they likewise shape our thoughts and fuel our desires. If we wish to learn to love well, we must begin to change habits and take up self-giving practices. Self-giving is learnt not only communal or personal reflection, but by beginning to live it out in community.

Conclusion

In our larger purpose to propose ways to practise formative interpretation, this chapter contributes essential insights. The main goal of this chapter is to define formation. To summarise our findings we point to the social, psychological, and physical dimensions of human existence that enable humans to develop throughout their lives. Humans stand in a reciprocal relationship with others, through which they receive much of their formation through relational social interaction with people. However, this does not mean humans are socially conditioned. Agency and embodiment make a reciprocal relationship possible to the effect that humans are self-involved in the process of becoming.

In addition, Scripture and theology shape our perception of and set criteria for Christian formation. The overall biblical narrative is significant here; that is, creation, rebellion, salvation, and finally unity. The biblical story provides us with two concepts that help us understand the goal and the process of formation. These are 'the image of God' and 'losing and finding self'. As image bearers humans are created to reflect God, most uniquely presented in Christ. The goal of becoming human is to live in whole reciprocal love relationship with God and others. The path to attain likeness with Christ is

²⁰⁰ Smith, *Kingdom*, 33.

similarly by means of relationship through which we constantly learn to give ourselves and through which we receive who we are, ultimately given by God. Our final paragraphs highlight that we learn to give ourselves through reflection and practice. They are interrelated, but designate two main areas of human activity. In essence, humans need to bring themselves before God in reflection and in practice to conform to the way God envisions our lives.

This chapter is a necessary link between our discussion of theological hermeneutics and formative interpretation. It adds, or at least clarifies, numerous insights to our discussion of formative interpretation. Let us draw out four ways in which this chapter offers guidelines to formative interpretation. First, this chapter defines the goal of formation as learning to live in reciprocal relationship with God and others. Formative interpretation of Scripture must therefore likewise have as its goal to teach and encourage the reader to enter into this kind of relationship with God. Stephen Fowl, in *Engaging Scripture*, expresses the same conviction when he writes ‘that Christians must read scripture in the light of their ends as Christians — ever deeper communion with the triune God and with each other.’²⁰¹ We agree; communion with God and each other is the principle goal of formative interpretation.

Second, this chapter defines criteria for what constitutes true formation — that is, the success of formative interpretation is assessed by the way it leads the reader deeper into love for God and love for others. Love, as defined above, is most essentially characterised by self-giving. Hence, interpretation that does not lead the readership to self-sacrifice ultimately misses the mark of being formative and Christian in nature (Rom 12:1-2). With this emphasis on the double love of God and neighbour as criteria for formative interpretation we follow Augustine, who writes: ‘Whoever, therefore, thinks that he [or she] understands the divine Scriptures or any part of them so that it does not build the double love of God and of our neighbour does not understand them at

²⁰¹ Stephen E. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), vii.

all.²⁰² Hence, we understand formative interpretation to be formative to the degree it fulfils this purpose.

Third, learning to love takes reflection. Formative interpretation, based on our discussion of reflection, must be seen as a holistic endeavour. As we come to think of formative interpretation, we have to remember that reflection goes beyond the application of reason and involves our whole selves, our character, our desires. Especially since the claims of Scripture might call us to compromise on our comfort, give up personal goals, or extend kindness at great personal cost, so the reader will constantly struggle to oppose the text or weaken its message. Hence, certain dispositions are required to listen and follow the text and not manipulate its message to fit our desires. Formative interpretation is therefore a matter of developing dispositions such as wisdom and humility to listening well and to obey Scripture.

Fourth, this chapter further explains that the formation of love is learned through training bodily habits. Hence, being formed by the biblical text is always also a public affair and cannot remain a matter of private spirituality. The effects of spiritual habits and participation in ecclesial practices spread to reconstitute our worship and desires. Formative interpretation therefore cannot move only from the mind to practices, but must involve ecclesial practices which prepare the desires of the mind to read with love for God and neighbour.

On our journey to develop a formative interpretative approach we discussed theological hermeneutics and formation. In the next chapter we turn to what constitutes formative interpretation of Scripture.

²⁰² M. Dods (ed.), J. F. Shaw (tr.), *The Works of Aurelius Augustine: Vol. 9: On Christian Doctrine: The Enchiridion: On Catechising: On Faith and the Creed* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1873), 30.

Theological Interpretation: Towards a Formative Theological Practice

In our view the previous chapters are a necessary prolegomena to this final chapter, the formative interpretation of Scripture. It is for the same reason that these chapters were written that we need to briefly recall their main points. First, present interpretative theory is in a state of pluralism and theological crisis. We concluded that this form of pluralism and theological marginalisation is detrimental for Christian formative interpretation. Second, in response, we reflected on how a theological hermeneutic might integrate theological intuitions and hermeneutical insights for a Christian interpretation of Scripture. Theological interpretation is a multifaceted practice and has as its primary goal to discern God in Scripture, which guides the life of believers personally and corporately. Hence, formative interpretation is part of theological hermeneutics. This discussion helped us to develop basic hermeneutical decisions which are fundamental to our formative interpretative practice. Third, we explored what formation from a Christian perspective looks like, which provides us with further goals and criteria for formative interpretation. Here we found, following Augustine, that formative interpretation must have as its aim love for God and others, which ultimately expresses itself in the ability to live in reciprocal self-giving relationships. This self-giving is a public affair and cannot be practised as private spirituality.

The previous chapters have laid the foundation for our understanding of formative interpretation. This chapter concentrates on the formal characteristics of formative interpretation, rather than the specific content of formation. Our discussion concerns itself with, first, the role of the reader, and second, the role of the biblical text in formative interpretation. First, concerning the reader we argue that formative interpretation requires the integration of rational analytical skills with spiritual dispositions for a holistic and formative encounter with God through the text. This section explores the importance of certain dispositions for a formative encounter with Scripture and the need for a fresh focus on spirituality. Second, concerning the biblical text we argue that

formative interpretation must focus on Scripture as a coherent narrative by which we perceive God's self-disclosure. In our view, Scripture functions coherently as one story that guides the believer on their journey of faith. When we perceive God's continuous presence with humanity, we receive direction on our pilgrimage. A proposal of this kind demands attention far beyond the scope of this work. This chapter is therefore merely a step *towards* formative interpretation, as the title indicates. Much remains to be explored, but despite this shortcoming this final chapter is written with the desire to function as a signpost to the more significant work already undertaken by other scholars in this direction.

1. Formative Interpretation: Reading as a Faithful Reader

Theological interpretation aims to guide the reader to be formed through reading Scripture by discerning God's being and character in it. In our definition of theological hermeneutics, we have already pointed out that theological interpretation asks for new sensibilities rather than more methods. Sensibilities and dispositions are essential for the way we respond to the text. Thus, in line with this larger theological hermeneutical framework, we argue in this section that formative interpretation can only succeed when the reader develops certain dispositions to respond well to the text. In other words, to discern God, humans require dispositions that go beyond observational skills and include characteristics such as humility and discipleship. These dispositions then lead the reader to respond wisely as he or she participates in God's work and practises spiritual disciplines.

Let us commence by observing how the interpretation of Scripture functions in the absence of certain dispositions that are nurtured by spirituality. In our view, the divorce of a life of faith from academic study problematises interpretation. If we neglect the life of faith and separate it from science (i.e. theology), both scholarship and spirituality may ultimately lose their way. Church history provides us with many examples of this occurrence, as Balthasar observes. In these instances "[s]cientific" theology became more and more divorced from prayer, and so lost the accent and tone with which one should speak of what is holy, while "affective" theology, as it became increasingly

empty, often degenerated into unctuous, platitudinous piety.’²⁰³ Mark McIntosh builds on Balthasar and asks whether theology without spirituality will forget how ‘to discern the nature of the mystery [God] – *and* to leave others not simply in reliance on the theologian’s words but lead them well enough in the right direction that believers may truly enter into transforming understanding themselves’.²⁰⁴ McIntosh rightly questions whether theology will end up speaking about a different god altogether, one that fits our preconceived systems and can be captured in words and concepts without encountering him. It is only a short way from a theology that loses its sense of holiness to forget that the God about whom they write is not a construct, but the maker of their existence. And it is indeed an even shorter journey from there to reconstruct a god in our own image that serves our own self-centred purposes.

What, then, does spirituality bring positively to the study of Scripture? First and foremost, McIntosh writes that ‘spirituality calls theology to an honesty about the difficulty of understanding what is unfathomable, ... an openness to what is not a puzzle to be solved but always a mystery to be lived’.²⁰⁵ In this fitting comment, McIntosh explains that spirituality is an expression that we ‘remain nothing other than beggars dependent on God’s gift’.²⁰⁶ Discerning God in Scripture is ultimately not a topic to be mastered, but a divine mystery to be encountered. Numerous ecclesial scholars, such as Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, Karl Rahner, Wolfgang Pannenberg, and Karl Barth agree on the need for this basic awareness. For them, ‘God alone is the ground and source of authentic Christian doctrine.’²⁰⁷ God, in this line of thinking, ‘can be only known by God ... We know God in utter dependence, in

²⁰³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology* vol. 1 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 208.

²⁰⁴ McIntosh, *Theology*, 15.

²⁰⁵ McIntosh, *Theology*, 15.

²⁰⁶ This quote is an allusion to Luther’s final words written in 1546. Stuhlmacher, *Theology*, 68.

²⁰⁷ Thiselton, *Doctrine*, 62.

pure discipleship and gratitude.²⁰⁸ Hence, to return to McIntosh's comment, humans are in need of spiritual dispositions that are nurtured by spiritual activities such as prayer, praise, service, and other practices. These foster in us dispositions of dependence, humility, and gratitude essential for the reader truly to begin to discern God and respond faithfully to his will and call through the text.

This brief exposition gives us a hint that formative reading is dependent on certain dispositions that guide the reader not to fall into self-centred idolatrous reconstructions of God, but to remain open and humble to God's call. This shows us two things.

First, we see that methods (i.e. systematic inquiry by reason) are insufficient for a Christian interpretation of Scripture.²⁰⁹ In our present work we have frequently pointed out that historical and literary approaches are welcome guides to our understanding of biblical texts, though a detailed discussion is beyond the scope of this work. However, methodological inquiry, with all its strengths for systematic description, can never guarantee a Christian interpretation of Scripture, since method does not address questions about

²⁰⁸ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: Vol 2: The Doctrine of God, Part 1* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 183. Barth continues: 'At this very point we are finally dissuaded from trusting and confiding in our own capacity and strength. At this very point we can see that our attempt to answer God's revelation with our views and concepts is an attempt undertaken with insufficient means, the work of unprofitable servants, so that we cannot possibly ascribe the success of this attempt and therefore the truth of our knowledge of God to ourselves, i.e., to the capacity of our views and concepts. In faith itself we are forced to say that our knowledge of God begins in all seriousness with the knowledge of the hiddenness of God.'

²⁰⁹ This conclusion is also reached by Peter Stuhlmacher: 'With respect to method, this means that the usual ensemble of historical method and the critical suspicion over against all historical material which guides them is not adequate to discover the truth of the biblical faith message. Historical criticism represents an important (and, in my opinion, essential) tool only for penetrating the historical dimension of the individual texts and the collective tradition of the Bible. The work done with this tool must be paired with the willingness to allow oneself to be confronted with the mystery of God in the biblical traditions (cf. Prov 1:7), and this willingness springs from the expectation that God does in fact reveal himself through Scripture (cf. Gal 4:9).'

Stuhlmacher, *Theology*, 67.

dispositions and character (cf. humility, spiritual imagination).²¹⁰ It is questionable whether readers without specific characteristics such as openness to transcendence, gratitude, and discipleship read Scripture with the same effect as others. Hence, theological interpretation calls into question the possibility of a neutral rational reader, who can dispense with the question of dispositions. For it does make a difference whether a reader approaches the text with interest or indifference. For instance, a Muslim or a secular person is more likely to respond with rejection to Scripture in light of prior distrust to the truthfulness of its message. It remains to be emphasised that the text still has the potential at every moment of encounter to change and subvert our previous conclusions, which means that even in distrust the text might become formative, even transformative.

Second, not only do we become aware that methods cannot guarantee a Christian interpretation, moreover, we see that the formation of our whole being – character, dispositions, and sensibilities – is very important for the correct interpretation of Scripture. Green, in his hermeneutical exposition, frequently explains that reading the Bible theologically ‘has less to do with what tools we bring to the task, however important these may be, and more to do with the location of our reading, the sensibilities that guide our conversation around these texts, and the dispositions by which we are drawn to Scripture’.²¹¹ Briggs similarly writes ‘that a concern with the moral formation of the reader must go hand in hand with the deployment of as wide a range as possible of interpretative insights from the various critical methodologies of biblical

²¹⁰ Green, *Truth*, 10-2.

²¹¹ Green, *Truth*, 101.

studies'.²¹² Formation of character and sensibilities are vital components for the way we respond to and embody Scripture in our practical lives.²¹³

Hence, we need to ask how particular spiritual practices shape our dispositions to respond well to Scripture. With regard to practices, we can point to prayer, service, communal worship, and witness as central features of the Christian life.²¹⁴ Prayer, for instance, is important, not so much to gain systematic information about God, but to be formed by the Spirit, who nurtures in us the ability to respond appropriately in thanksgiving, praise, or repentance when we read Scripture. In a seminal study of the nature of exegesis as prayer, Clifton Black discusses this in more detail.²¹⁵ He argues that prayer, like exegesis, is not done in isolation from God, but is an expression of our relationship with God.²¹⁶ Thus, Black suggests 'three prayerful dispositions that are indispensable for the exegete today, namely, a capacity for holiness; a transfigured affection, and a disposition for thankful praise.'²¹⁷ In a study of the

²¹² Richard S. Briggs, *The Virtuous Reader: Old Testament Narrative and Interpretive Virtue* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 195.

²¹³ The way we view the Spirit's works in the believer is perhaps best understood in this context. The Spirit presses upon the reader that what is read is *true* and therefore ought to shape our lives. Keener writes that the Spirit 'adds an epidemic dynamic that provides conviction'. Hence, the Spirit invites and enables us to respond in grateful reception, obedience, and trust when we actualise the message of Scripture. Craig S. Keener, *Spirit Hermeneutics: Reading Scripture in Light of Pentecost* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 176. Vanhoozer writes similarly, 'the Spirit does not alter the semantics of biblical literature or add to the stock of revelation. ... The Spirit is the "Lord of the hearing" not because he makes the words of the Bible mean something other than they say, but because he guides and directs the effects of Scripture's communicative action.' Vanhoozer, *Meaning*, 429.

²¹⁴ Billings writes: 'Discerning the mystery of Christ in Scripture involves a life of prayer, worship, and Christian community, and ... cannot be reduced to method or technique, because it is nothing less than a part of our life of participation in Christ through the Spirit, a means by which God nurtures our love of God and neighbour.' Billings, *Word*, 195.

²¹⁵ C. Clifton Black, 'Exegesis as Prayer', *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 23.2 (2002), 131-45.

²¹⁶ Black, 'Exegesis', 143.

²¹⁷ Black, 'Exegesis', 139.

Lord's Prayer (Lk 11:2b-4) Clifton Black further summarises how prayer creates these dispositions in us:

The [Lord's] Prayer draws out, or makes explicit, who we truly are: creatures made in God's image, warped by sin and restored by God's Spirit. Simultaneously, the Prayer trains what we are becoming: God's obedient children, with minds renewed in accordance with 'the mind of Christ' (1 Cor 2:16). By that double-pronged education, the Prayer reforms our manifold 'wanting' as human creatures: what we most profoundly *need* is evoked and exposed; what we most ardently *desire* is developed and disciplined.²¹⁸

Black's comment shows, to quote Billings, that 'approaching Scripture with prayerful meditation is not so much an exegetical method as a disposition appropriate to Scripture because Scripture is the instrument of God's communicative fellowship'.²¹⁹ Therefore, we emphatically agree with Holt and Bartholomew on this point: 'Prayer, in the sense of being present to the Father in dependence and thankfulness, is utterly basic to responding to the invitation to participate in the great drama of the Bible.'²²⁰ Participating in the Spirit's work through activities such as prayer, mission, or service matures the Christian reader to respond with willingness to follow God and participate in God's work.

Which specific virtues or dispositions are we then to form as readers?²²¹ Richard Briggs argues in *The Virtuous Reader: Old Testament Narrative and Interpretive Virtue* for a number of them. Briggs argues for humility, wisdom,

²¹⁸ C. Clifton Black, 'The Education of Human Wanting: Formation by Pater Noster', in W. P. Brown, *Character and Scripture: Moral Formation, Community, and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 248-63, citing 249f.

²¹⁹ Billings, *Word*, 216.

²²⁰ Craig G. Bartholomew and Robby Holt, 'Prayer in/and the Drama of Redemption in Luke', in C. G. Bartholomew, J. B. Green, and A. C. Thiselton (eds.), *Reading Luke: Interpretation, Reflection, Formation* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2005), 367.

²²¹ Vanhoozer defines interpretive virtues as '*a disposition of the mind and heart that arises from the motivation of understanding, for cognitive contact with the meaning of the text. An interpretive virtue, in other words, is one that is conducive to literary knowledge*'. Vanhoozer, *Meaning*, 376f (italics original).

trust, charity, and receptivity.²²² To take only the first, the role of humility in the process of interpretation has been recognised by many. For instance, Vanhoozer writes: 'In recognizing real limits, humility is pride's defeat. In recognizing that interpreters are not makers but receivers of meaning, humility is realistic about the aims and objectives of hermeneutics.'²²³ Humility highlights that the reader is dependent on God as Other to speak to us. Humans are able to perceive meaning, but are ultimately dependent on God to receive true meaning. But humility is not the only virtue, and it only functions in combination with others, such as conviction.²²⁴ The work of Briggs and others are exciting projects that highlight the need for more reflection on the interrelatedness between character, spirituality, and interpretation. But what is clear is that to be formed by the text, the reader needs to develop virtues such as humility, honesty, attention, and obedience.²²⁵ With such dispositions the reader will then respond with trust and thus learns to follow God's will and character.²²⁶ As Vanhoozer argues, we need to learn what it means to interpret as servant or disciple when we wish to be affected by the text.²²⁷

A final step can be taken here, which involves recognising that the dispositions we are commending are in fact part to the Christian faith. Vanhoozer writes that the 'interpretative virtues are in reality spiritual virtues:

²²² He takes up the challenge set by Gregory Jones who claims that '[w]e need several interpretative virtues for wise and faithful reading of Scripture. Prominent among them are receptivity, humility, truthfulness, courage, charity, and imagination.' L. Gregory Jones, 'Formed and Transformed by Scripture: Character, Community, and Authority in Biblical Interpretation', in W. P. Brown, *Character and Scripture: Moral Formation, Community, and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 18-33, citing 32.

²²³ Vanhoozer, *Meaning*, 463-4.

²²⁴ Briggs, *Reader*, 46.

²²⁵ Vanhoozer, *Meaning*, 377.

²²⁶ One informative example of how theological education can implement this insight is given by J. M. Frame, 'Studying Theology as a Servant of Jesus', Reformed Theological Seminary website (<https://www.rts.edu/Site/Resources/Booklets/StudyTheologyWeb14.pdf>; accessed December 2017).

²²⁷ Vanhoozer, *Meaning*, 402-7.

without faith — openness to transcendence — would never find something in the text that is not our own creation, or our own reflection. Hence, the struggle with the text is ultimately a *spiritual* struggle — with the text and ourselves.’²²⁸ We can only corroborate this statement by observing that faith or belief can itself be defined in terms of dispositions rather than individual mental occurrences. Price defines belief as a

multiform disposition, which is manifested or actualised in many different ways: not only in ... action ... but also in emotional states such as hope and fear; in feelings of doubt, surprise and confidence ... and in inferences ... in which a belief ‘spreads itself’ from a proposition to some of its consequences.²²⁹

In concise form, belief entails public expressions and personal backing to certain propositions in the form of particular responses in specific situations.²³⁰ These postures or dispositions of the reader are part of a wider inner framework (cf. Tate’s definition of ‘interpretative framework’²³¹) which includes the reader’s history and experience (cf. worldview).²³² Thus, emphasising the dispositional nature of belief helps us to understand that the virtues and dispositions we argued for are in fact nested within the Christian faith itself and are part of us when we say: ‘I believe.’ Scripture gives ample material to support this point. In the New Testament, 2 Peter 1:5-9 provides one such example, where the Christian faith is linked to specific virtues without which the believer is ineffective and unproductive in his or her life. What we are commending, then, is that the reader grows deeper in their faith and, as he or she does this, the spiritual disposition of faith may affect the reader to respond effectively and thus bears fruit in forms of further formation.

²²⁸ Vanhoozer, *Meaning*, 381.

²²⁹ H. H. Price, *Belief* (London: Allen & Unwin; New York: Humanities, 1969), 294.

²³⁰ Thiselton, *Doctrine*, 21.

²³¹ Tate, *Interpretation*, 221f.

²³² Price, *Belief*, 295-6.

Much remains here to be explored, but the central point is this: at the centre of formative interpretation stand certain spiritual dispositions, which are shaped by spiritual practices. For healthy formative interpretation a reader has to grow practical skills and also needs to grow as a person, since the success of formative interpretation depends on both. Both need to overlap for the reader to enter into a formative encounter with the text. Hence, the goal of theological hermeneutics and formative interpretation is the integration of the ecclesial community of worship and the scholarly community of interpretation. Clifton Black comments on the lack of integration and thereby concludes with what this section aims to argue:

The practices of these two [interpretative] communities, however, do not always overlap. In our time, we are sad to say, much training in biblical scholarship occurs in settings where prayer has been severed from its task and responsibility, where the nurture of a faithful church is a non sequitur. Visits to the religious aisles of Barnes & Noble have become for me chilling summons before the bar of judgement: much of what I find among the biblical resources are speculative fantasies, whether by Tim LaHaye or the Jesus Seminar. To my shame there is comparatively little that invites the church's laity or even curiously passerby into the mysterious world of biblical faith that questions us, little to remind a reader that exegesis, like prayer, is not a cold conjecture but a relationship with God so madly in love with us and the world that only the foolishness of the cross makes sense (1 Cor. 1:18-31). Cruciform exegesis resembles petitionary prayer in this respect: if serious, its practitioner is inextricably bound up with its fulfilment (Mt. 25:31-46).²³³

In summary, what we have argued is that formative interpretation becomes possible when the reader develops particular dispositions (cf. humility, gratitude) to accompany the interpretation of Scripture. These character qualities of the reader are crucial in order to respond faithfully with obedience and self-giving to God and others in the interpretation of the biblical texts. Hence, we appreciate most fully how the life of faith functions hermeneutically, when we recognise first the role of spirituality in forming the character of

²³³ Black, 'Exegesis', 143.

reader, and second the need for particular dispositions that allow for formative interpretation. This highlights that Scripture cannot be properly understood and appropriated apart from an ongoing participation in the life and work of God. It is in that participation in God's life and work that we become readers who increase in love and develop sensibilities of practical wisdom, humility, dependence, gratitude, expectancy, and other characteristics that function on a level that methodologies of academic scholarship cannot reach.²³⁴ Hence we come to understand that '[f]aithful interpretation of Scripture invites and presupposes participation in the community brought into being by God's redemptive action — the church'.²³⁵ It is in that participation in God's life and work that we come to understand that formative interpretation is a matter of the heart and mind being attuned and willing to be formed by God in the reading of Scripture.

2. Formative Interpretation: Participation in the Biblical Story

We offer a second proposal for formative interpretation, namely, that the biblical texts are appropriately read as a grand story. We have argued in chapter two that the reader should focus on the final form of the text. In this section we go a step further and argue that it is possible to read Scripture as a coherent story. This story then becomes a drama in which the Christian community participates. Formative interpretation is therefore the process of participating and embodying this story in our lives as a faith community.

The ecclesial reading of the Bible often functions self-evidently on this basic intuition: that Scripture functions as a unified narrative. This is perhaps the most basic way Scripture functions as God's Word in the community of faith. However, nowadays reading Scripture as a coherent story is surrounded with considerable controversy. Two objections are common. The first is issued

²³⁴ The distinction between dispositions (posture, character) and analytical critical inquiry has much in common with the philosophical hermeneutical division of 'understanding' and 'explanation', understanding being more intuitive and personal, and explanation critical analytical. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics*, 9-10.

²³⁵ Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays, 'Nine Theses on the Interpretation of Scripture', in Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays (eds.), *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 3-4.

by biblical scholars who object that harmonising all diverse texts into one storyline does serious damage to its historical cultural particularity. Each text stems from a particular situation at a particular time and can hardly be brought together under one theme, one might claim. Indeed, it seems as if Scripture presents us with complex traditions and genres. In this sense we cannot speak of Scripture being only narrative, and neither can we think of Scripture as written by one hand, like a novel. Nonetheless, Richard Bauckham explains why we can still think of Scripture as a 'coherent story'.²³⁶ He proposes the possibility of viewing textual diversity in genres and themes in their relationship to the large narrative sections. In a cumulative way, Scripture builds the story of God with his people through large sections of narrative interspersed with other material. Non-narrative material, such as Lamentations, fits into the larger story of exile and suffering. Similarly, Proverbs, one could argue, finds its place in the ongoing devotions of people to live in ways pleasing to God and learning how to obey him. Scripture continues to build its story, with regular summaries, until the final scene in Revelation.²³⁷ In its entirety, Genesis to Revelation provides the beginning and end of the entire story. From this perspective it therefore seems possible to affirm Scripture's narrative unity.²³⁸

A second objection comes from postmodernists, who oppose the legitimacy of grand narratives since they immediately detect oppressive power structures that prohibit diversity. An answer to this objection would take us beyond the scope of this paper, but it is worth commenting that Scripture's grand narrative is not a modern one, which postmodernity so ferociously attacks.²³⁹ It has at its centre not domination, but the subversion of all human power-play, since at its heart we find the forgiveness of sins and the call to humility and suffering for others. Hence, our cultural wisdom, personal values,

²³⁶ Bauckham, *Bible*, 1-8.

²³⁷ Bauckham, *Bible*, 4-5.

²³⁸ Bauckham, *Bible*, 1-4; G. W. Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology: Recovering the Gospel in the Church* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 145.

²³⁹ Bauckham, *Bible*, 11.

traditions, and communal commitments face an all-powerful critique by a trans-contextual God who crucifies our self-centredness.²⁴⁰

Much could be said about both objections. We recognise them as valid and real issues, but neither makes this endeavour obsolete. In our view, it is possible to read Scripture as a coherent story without damaging the integrity of the individual texts or engaging in oppressive power-play. Hence, we promote a narrational form of biblical theology as an essential component for a formative reading of Scripture.²⁴¹ Thus, from a Christian perspective, biblical texts reflect God's ongoing redemptive journey with a specific people, which then comes to include all nations. We speak of Scripture therefore as a collection of diverse writings, a collection of multifold small narratives with one major story.²⁴² Parts of it, called the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings, describe the collections of books that the Jewish community considers holy. In addition to these, Christians read the New Testament writings, mostly biographical material and letters. Goldingay compares this collection of documents to an 'anthology that tells a family history and gives us a picture of the family in different periods'.²⁴³ They are intersecting witnesses from 'radically different contexts to the one history of God with humanity which culminates in Christ's death and resurrection. The Scripture come to us in form of plural tradition.'²⁴⁴

Granted that Scripture can be read as a coherent story, how does Scripture's grand narrative function in the life of the community and the individual believer? Bartholomew and Goheen write that 'reading the Bible as grand narrative ... [is] important if Scripture is to function as God's word in the

²⁴⁰ Thiselton, *Horizons*, 614.

²⁴¹ The desire to see Scripture's inner unity is the basic goal that stands behind all biblical theological approaches. Bartholomew, 'Theology', 84.

²⁴² To mind comes Gérard Genette's distinction between narrative and story. See Gerard Loughin, *Telling God's Story* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 52-63, 57. This distinction allows us to hold to the particularity of biblical stories with their diverse viewpoints, while acknowledging that they all speak of one story.

²⁴³ John Goldingay, *Biblical Theology: The God of the Christian Scriptures* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 14.

²⁴⁴ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 208-9.

life of his people'.²⁴⁵ They urge us 'to recover the Bible as a grand story that tells us of God's ways with the world from creation to re-creation, from the garden of Eden to the new Jerusalem. Only thus will we see our way clear to indwell God's story and relate it to all of life today.'²⁴⁶ We agree with their observation, but ask, what does it mean to indwell a story?

To appreciate the importance of story, or narrative for formation, we first need to recognise the importance of imagination in the human sense-making process.²⁴⁷ As we encounter the world, humans constantly 'fill in' gaps in information in order to arrive at conclusions and carry out decisions. This happens constantly for simple and even complex tasks or situations. We continuously learn to place partial and limited pieces of information into a whole by an act of imagining and thereby come to understand events or experiences. Imagining is therefore an act that takes into account previous experiences, which help us to expect and predict certain scenarios. As we increase our learning, so our 'ever-forming assumptions'²⁴⁸ about the world are tested and corrected and thereby begin to solidify into narratives and stories. Hence, as cognitive scientist Mark Turner explains to us, story is a basic component of the mind. Our experiences and what we know about them are organised as stories. In fact, '[n]arrative imagining —story— is the fundamental instrument of thought. Rational capacities depend on it. It is our chief means of looking into the future, of predicting, of planning, and of explaining.'²⁴⁹ Meaning is therefore found in the way a part relates to the whole, and the way this relationship is expressed is in narrative.

In summary, narratives are imaginative compositions by which humans structure events to discern their meaning. Narratives are central to our way of

²⁴⁵ Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, 'Story and Biblical Theology', in C. Bartholomew, M. Healy, K. Möller, and R. Parry (eds.), *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 144-71, citing 144.

²⁴⁶ Bartholomew, 'Story', 144.

²⁴⁷ Green, *Interpretation*, 24-6.

²⁴⁸ Green, *Interpretation*, 26.

²⁴⁹ Mark Turner, *The Literary Mind: The Origins of Thought and Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 4f.

understanding the world. In this sense, to return to our previous questions, we indwell those stories because they become the very structure by which we make sense of ourselves (identity) and the world. We inhabit the stories we receive and develop.

Once we understand the centrality of stories and narratives for our lives, we must ask how does the Bible's grand story shape our lives? A comprehensive metaphor that explains this relationship between Scripture's narrative shape and the life of the reader is given by N. T. Wright.²⁵⁰ He suggests this picture: imagine that a Shakespearean play is discovered and that only the first four and pieces of the fifth acts are found. As it comes to the performance of this new play, the actors are asked to imagine, based on the first four and fragments of the fifth acts, how the last act might end. As it happens, the fifth and final act must be developed in coherence with the entire play, and also be a creative development thereof. Trained actors know enough to make educated guesses that are in line with Shakespeare's overall work, and still enact something entirely new which is unforeseeable in its specific details.

Wright's metaphor provides us with a fitting image to understand how the biblical story functions with authority to form the life and practice of believers and the church. Wright in particular sees Scripture as a drama in five acts, in which the fifth is only partially known. Scripture moves from (1) creation to (2) the fall, (3) covers the entire story of Israel, (4) culminates in Jesus, and (5) leads into the church's mission.²⁵¹ Today we find ourselves in this last act, that of the church. The church understands its mission and purpose only in continuation of the prior four acts, but is always looking ahead in anticipation of the final conclusion. As we perform this part of the drama, the church is therefore asked to look back on God's previous interaction with humanity and discern how we can faithfully and creatively participate in God's drama. Thus, the biblical story relates to our lives like a drama script to the interpretative performance of the

²⁵⁰ Wright, *Testament*, 139-43.

²⁵¹ Wright, *Testament*, 141-2.

actors.²⁵² We can conclude using Wright's insights that at the heart of formative interpretation stands the practice of reading Scripture as a coherent story in which we as the people of God learn to participate.

The basic form of formative interpretation we propose therefore is a biblical theological narrative approach with a specific emphasis on participation. To guide the reader in such an undertaking, a number of guidelines are needed. First, it is crucial to acknowledge that the drama or story in which we participate is not merely an intra-textual construct.²⁵³ We agree with Wright that Scripture 'offers a story which is the story of the whole world. It is public truth.'²⁵⁴ With that we affirm that biblical narratives have a referential function to reality. This means the biblical story, to use Francis Watson's phrase, 'refer[s] us to historical-theological reality'.²⁵⁵ Hence, the biblical story functions as a 'controlling story'²⁵⁶ that has normative character for the faith community, and which provides meaning and shapes the lives of the believers. It provides a worldview, a way of perceiving and understanding ourselves as part of a created order and as part of God's work in history. We therefore learn from Scripture things about ourselves that we cannot learn anywhere else, such as the nature of our condition as sinful and forgiven

²⁵² Well-known proposals that take up the language of drama and performance are the five-volume series of Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-drama: Theological Dramatic Theory* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988-98), and Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

²⁵³ Goldingay in his *Biblical Theology* claims that he refrains from identifying a 'common core' or 'underlying unity' in Scripture, and rather seeks to identify the 'building' Scripture constructs. But what is that 'building', one could ask – a linguistic construct? Another, and somewhat similar, comment we find in Green's *Practicing Theological Interpretation*. Green suggests that the unity we perceive in biblical texts is 'underneath them, in God's economy'. We agree that the unity we see in Scripture is not merely a linguistic construct, but is also founded on God's coherent involvement with the world. In the final instance, it appears, Goldingay similarly identifies this 'building' with the being of God himself. Goldingay, *Theology*, 16; Green, *Interpretation*, 80.

²⁵⁴ Wright, *Testament*, 41-2.

²⁵⁵ Watson, *Church*, 229.

²⁵⁶ Wright, *Testament*, 42.

beings. We come to know God uniquely, since this story assumes unique insight into historical-theological matters.²⁵⁷

Second, to speak of participating in God's story issues an important caveat against certain reductionist readings of Scripture. What we mean is that the reader is not to look into the text to find timeless principles, disconnected from the story, separated from participating in it. The point is made by McGrath, who explains that the narrative character of Scripture prohibits us from unduly generalising:

Recognising the narrative quality of Scripture allows the fullness of biblical revelation to be recovered ... Narratives are based in history, in actions, enabling us to avoid thinking of Christianity in terms of universal abstraction, and instead to ground it in the contingencies of our historical existence.²⁵⁸

Michael Horton, in his systematic theology, similarly writes that 'there is no moral to the story, no higher truth that it symbolizes in its own mythical way.' He continues:

²⁵⁷ That a certain reconceptualisation of history and radical historical critical study is necessary for theological and formative interpretation is evident. One intriguing hermeneutical proposal that aims to engage with the meaning of history is presented by Levering. He argues that history should be understood to possess linear and participatory dimensions. Hence, the meaning of history, as Levering suggests, is not to be understood solely as a linear succession of events ("horizontal" succession of moments'), but as subject to God's redemptive work in which we participate ("vertical" presence of the Trinity's creative and redemptive action'). 'It follows that one properly understands historical-temporal reality by integrating its linear and participatory dimensions. In short, my [Levering] thesis is that to enter into the realities taught in the biblical texts requires not only linear-historical tools (archeology, philology, and so forth), but also, and indeed primarily, participatory tools — doctrines and practices — by which the exegete enters fully into the biblical world.' Matthew Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis: A Theology of Biblical Interpretation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 1-2, 6, 13. Another way of reshaping historical study is given by Green, who insists that theological interpretation and certain forms of radical historical critical inquiry are to some degree mutually exclusive endeavours. See Green, *Interpretation*, 43-70.

²⁵⁸ Alister E. McGrath, *A Passion for Truth: The Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism* (Leicester: Apollos, 1996), 107-9

Christianity cannot be ‘demythologized’ or ‘translated’ into alien stories, categories, or philosophies. The key elements in its unfolding plot are not symbols or representations of a higher, purer, more universal truth. ... They do not make a point; they are the point, and the point that others have wished to make of them — usually in the direction of ontological speculations — empties Christianity of its actual content and power.²⁵⁹

In agreement with this cautionary note, formative interpretation opposes reading methods that treat Scripture as a sourcebook for abstract principles and general insights, or a horoscope for personal truths disconnected from the story of God’s involvement in this world. We oppose therefore notions that we can get to know God as a packaged system, without participating in his call to follow him in utter dependence. This is the reason we speak of participation in a story rather than of learning and applying principles. By implication, we begin to see that stories are not childish ways of talking about doctrines. The reverse is rather the case: ‘[d]octrines are essentially only shorthand ways of defining the terms in which we tell the story — it can also be powerfully told in other ways, for example liturgy and, not least, through discipleship’.²⁶⁰ Hence, even doctrines are themselves small stories and living mysteries that are encountered and lived.²⁶¹ Effectively, formative interpretation opposes reductionist approaches and promotes a covenantal approach that sees knowledge to be accessible only in relationship to God.

Third, perhaps the essential insight of this narrational approach is that formative interpretation is about performing faithfully the gospel story in our

²⁵⁹ Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 103-4.

²⁶⁰ Philip Greenslade, *A Passion for God’s Story: Discovering Your Place in God’s Strategic Plan* (Carlisle: Pasternoster, 2002), 21.

²⁶¹ McIntosh, *Theology*, 15. Mark McIntosh writes that ‘theologians cut off from spirituality may not only lose contact with important sources of religious reflection but may also lose the proper skills for speaking of the doctrines of Christianity – doctrines conceived not simply as propositions for analysis but as living mysteries to be encountered.’

lives.²⁶² Participation in God's dramatic work is done with a view to the past, present, and future, as Levering writes. 'These realities of Scripture are understood only as we share in them, in the ecclesial "present" that looks always both backward and (eschatologically) forward from within the Christological plan of human salvation, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.'²⁶³ Looking backwards means that participation in God's drama must involve regular contact with the past. On a practical note, readers who wish to do that need to continue to retell the story of the Christian faith, as Bauckham writes:

The church must be constantly retelling the story, never losing sight of the landmark events, never losing touch with the main lines of theological meaning in the Scripture's own tellings and commentaries, but also open to the never-exhausted potential of the texts in their resonances with contemporary life.²⁶⁴

Our main point here is the importance of constant retelling of the gospel story. In our view, this is the main activity of church practices: we participate and thereby retell God's story. Liturgy, song, preaching, teaching, Eucharist, baptism, practices of hospitality, and service all contribute to remembering aspects of God's story in Scripture and participating in it. Explicitly or implicitly, we learn to remember and reflect upon the story of God with humanity. However, remembering is always a worshipful act; thus, much of the retelling and reflecting is intrinsically linked to acts of praise and exaltation of God's work.²⁶⁵ Remembering is also a collective task, since the story we inhabit is a public act of God who calls many people to himself. It is communal, since the basic content of the story is of universal scope and requires response of humanity as a whole.

²⁶² Samuel Wells summarises for us: '[i]f the Christian story is a drama, then ethics, the embodiment of that story, is appropriately regarded as performance'. Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (London: SPCK, 2004), 45.

²⁶³ Levering, *Exegesis*, 143.

²⁶⁴ Bauckham, *Bible*, 7.

²⁶⁵ Loughin, *Story*, 50.

Looking forward describes that participation in God's story goes beyond remembering, and includes indwelling and enacting. We do not only look back, but we also look towards the future to shape the present. The eschatological vision of final union with God infuses our imagination with hope for the present. Hence, Bauckham points out that retelling must be paired with observing how the 'never-exhausted potential of the texts ... [resonates] with contemporary life'.²⁶⁶ Such a statement raises much larger questions about the meaning potential of texts. For the present purpose it will suffice that we affirm the importance of the historical context to understand the literal meaning of Scripture. But we also affirm that texts have multiple meanings that can arise in new contexts. For us, this is not a matter of indeterminacy, but of abundance. In our estimation, biblical texts 'do not have a single meaning ... [, but a] multiple complex sense given by God, the author of the whole drama'.²⁶⁷ Thus, to discern the gospel in Scripture is a contemporary task that goes beyond the narrowly construed historical settings to include our present context. There are innumerable ways in which texts have functioned as gospel to a specific person or group quite differently from others. A famous example is Luther's radical distinction of faith and law that builds on scriptural concepts, but also speaks quite uniquely into the religious discourse of late medieval time.²⁶⁸ In the same way, our present apprehension of God and the gospel is not about gaining timeless information, but to discern spiritually God's voice in the texts for us today. In this sense, we always interpret Scripture anew for the church to faithfully embody God's character and purpose in our particular places in the world. By doing so, the church continues to perceive God's address through Jesus Christ in the Spirit, who infuses the catholic ecclesial community with life, identity, and purpose.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁶ Bauckham, *Bible*, 7.

²⁶⁷ Davis, 'Theses', 2-3.

²⁶⁸ Watson, *Church*, 231-6.

²⁶⁹ Billings writes that 'believers gain knowledge of God on this journey, but that knowledge is not reducible to propositions; it is knowledge always connected to fellowship with God, always connected with a growth of love for God and the neighbour'. Billings, *Word*, 29.

Participation in God's story can take many forms. To keep with the metaphor of participation and drama, we might say that enacting the gospel story involves improvisation. This is well expressed by Gerard Loughlin, who writes:

when a person enters the scriptural story he or she does so by entering the church's performance of that story: he or she is baptised into a biblical ecclesial drama. It is not so much being written into a book as taking part in a play, a play that has to be improvised on the spot. As Rowan Williams puts it, people are 'invited to "create" themselves in finding a place within this drama – an improvisation in the theatre workshop, but one that purports to be about a comprehensive truth affecting one's identity and future.'²⁷⁰

Improvisation therefore suggests that the interpretation of biblical texts for new situations is not a matter of simple reciting, but involves improvisation or re-creation. Hence, formative interpretation is a 'hermeneutical spiral of action, reflection, and new encounter with the text and tradition.'²⁷¹ 'Improvisation is concerned with discernment ... attending to the Spirit through trained

²⁷⁰ Loughlin, *Story*, 20; Rowan D. Williams, 'Postmodern Theology and the Judgement of the World', in Frederic B. Burnham (ed.), *Postmodern Theology: Christian Faith in a Pluralist Society* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), 92-112, citing 97.

²⁷¹ Wells, *Improvisation*, 60.

listening.’²⁷² The Christian community is therefore asked to enact God’s story not by replaying old scenes, but by following the Spirit’s daily leading.²⁷³

Improvisation leaves with us the impression that formative interpretation is only a creative art. This is true, creativity and spiritual discernment are essential. However, in an effort to offer some realism to our proposal of formative interpretation, we have to recognise that many Christians also experience profound ruptures on their journey with God. Formative participatory interpretation therefore features also discontinuity and disorientation, when we enter periods of our lives that seem confusing. Ricoeur’s famously description of the way we appropriate texts is useful here. He speaks of first naïvete, distance, and second naïvete.²⁷⁴ By this threefold division he explains that we move from an experience of nearness to critical distance to a new nearness with a text. Ricoeur is right, our experience of reading Scripture includes seasons of ‘orientation’, ‘disorientation’, and ‘new orientation’, to use Brueggemann’s related concepts.²⁷⁵ This observation is helpful in so far, it explains that formative interpretation of Scripture is fundamentally dialogical and not a simple forward movement. How we communicate with God through reading Scripture changes and develops —

²⁷² Wells, *Improvisation*, 60.

²⁷³ Brueggemann helps us to understand the process improvisation when he observes the complex relationship obedience and interpretation. He writes, the ‘twin danger we face are that our interpretation will become autonomous and cease to be obedient, and that obedience will become “mere” and cease to be interpretative.’ Following Ricoeur he suggests as a link between obedience and interpretation (cf. improvisation) lies imagination. ‘Imagination led by God’s spirit could break our stubbornness and permit us to receive the world of God’s new righteousness.’ Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation and Obedience: From Faithful Reading to Faithful Living* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 2, 4. Thus, based on Brueggemann, we claim proper improvisation requires above all the development of a spiritual imagination. For similar view, see: Garrett Green, *Theology, Hermeneutics, and Imagination: The Crisis of Interpretation at the End of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 17.

²⁷⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil* (tr. E. Buchanan; Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), 347-57.

²⁷⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, 1984), 22, and throughout; Walter Brueggemann, *Spirituality of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002).

that is, formative interpretation is dynamic and includes seasons of serene communion, times of deep confusion, and periods of renewal.²⁷⁶

Conclusion

We recognise that this chapter is somewhat piecemeal, but aim to offer some impetus to move towards formative interpretation. As explained above, this chapter focuses on the formal characteristics of formative interpretation, rather than the actual practice thereof. First, we contended that the reader plays a central role in the process of formative interpretation. We view formative interpretation as a moral and spiritual act that involves much more than analytical skills. Hence, we emphasise the need for character formation and spiritual disciplines to respond to the text in ways appropriate to the formative work of God in our lives. The second section focuses on the way biblical texts function formatively. In our view, a narrative approach of biblical theology integrates very naturally with our theological hermeneutics. This interpretative vision shows significant potential to allow the reader to be shaped by participation in the story of God with humanity. The reader then begins to see Scripture as a story by which we can perceive God and simultaneously the complex meaning of life. Thus, Scripture becomes a basic story that shapes our perception and affects our practices.

Thus, we can now confidently state that it is the entire vision of this form of theological hermeneutics to invite the reader to be formed by Scripture. At the heart of this interpretative practice stands the continuous transforming walk of faith with God. As stated above, the main goal of formative interpretation is to discern God in Scripture, which means that God guides the reader 'on a journey of theological formation bounded only by the character and purpose of God'.²⁷⁷ To that end, theological interpretation is interested in leading readers to enter and continue this journey of faith which involves us 'dying to sin and coming to life in the Spirit's new creation'.²⁷⁸ Scripture, we can likewise

²⁷⁶ A helpful example is given by Brown in a autobiographical analysis of her development as theological interpreter. See Brown, 'Location', 5-7.

²⁷⁷ Green, *Truth*, 61; Blomberg, *Interpretation*, 18-9.

²⁷⁸ Billings, *Word*, 29.

conclude, is therefore a means of God's formative work which we as interpreters are invited to receive. Ryan S. Peterson summarises this eloquently, drawing particularly on Augustine's *On Christian Teaching*:

Through Scripture, God reveals that we are made for a journey into the knowledge and love of God, invites us to move intentionally and willingly forward in that journey, and facilitates successful movement in that journey. Scripture produces and shapes love in the believer when it is used for enjoying God, who generously encourages our enjoyment and in whose life of love we are at home.²⁷⁹

Speaking of journey highlights that formative interpretation is essentially participatory in nature. To journey with God means we participate in God's work and presence. Hence, we are formed as we participate in God's world, reading God's word. Reading Scripture helps us to understand God's being and work and to imagine how we are to join in with God's work today. Our attention to the reader's character and the biblical narrative both converge at this point. Participation in God's work requires of the reader to be willing and open to follow God's call. The reader must learn wisdom in order to faithfully read and apply Scripture. The call to participate further builds on the observation that Scripture as a whole has a narrative shape and which invites the reader to perceive Scripture as a witness to the larger story in which we participate. As a coherent story, Scripture functions with most integrity to guide its readers to participate in God's cosmic drama.

²⁷⁹ Ryan S. Peterson, "'For the Love of God': Scripture and the Formation of Human Identity", in Oliver D. Crisp and Fred Sanders (eds.), *The Voice of God in the Text of Scripture: Explorations in Constructive Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 181-96, citing 196.

Conclusion

The question of this paper is, how we are to interpret scripture for formation? The nature of this question led us to consider formative interpretation as part of theological hermeneutics. Hence, as the title explains, this paper is concerned with a theological hermeneutical proposal of formative interpretation of Scripture. Our paper moves successively from identifying the problem to developing a solution. The progressive nature of this approach means that we have needed to engage at some length with the topics of historical analysis of biblical interpretation, theological hermeneutics, and formation, before we could finally discuss formative interpretation. Let us retrace the steps we have taken before we suggest further prospects of this work.

We began with an analysis of the historical development of biblical interpretation. Here we concluded that, presently, interpretative theory is in a state of pluralism and theological crisis. This widespread pluralism problematises theological commitments by separating theology from biblical studies and eschewing specific faith questions to the private ecclesial sphere of life. In our view, this form of pluralism and theological marginalisation is detrimental for Christian formative interpretation. As our final comments concluded, biblical interpretation provides insufficient guidance and is overly sympathetic to idiosyncratic and pluralist interpretative agendas. With such a proliferation of methods and reckless pursuit of diversity, Christian formative interpretation is increasingly difficult to sustain.

Chapter two is a response to the current prevailing pluralism and dominance of historical critical thinking. In our view, a more nuanced theological response is needed. Therefore, we reflected on how a theological hermeneutic might integrate theological intuitions and hermeneutical insights for a Christian interpretation of Scripture. Theological interpretation we defined as ‘a multifaceted practice of a community of faith in reading the Bible as God’s instrument of self-revelation and saving fellowship’.²⁸⁰ Theological hermeneutics as a whole is the field of study that concerns itself with the

²⁸⁰ Billings, *Word*, xii.

context and the concrete development of specific hermeneutical decisions. It proceeds via a complex circular dialectical movement that involves reflection on hermeneutics, Scripture, and basic faith (-traditions). We argued in this section for three basic hermeneutical decisions that would undergird our further hermeneutical endeavour: (1) the goal of theology interpretation is the discernment of God, (2) the focus is the final form of the text, and (3) interpretation must involve open dialogue with secular insights. These basic decisions of theological hermeneutics have far-reaching consequences for formative interpretation. Importantly, formative interpretation is itself part of theological interpretation, which is a multifaceted practice that has as its primary goal to discern God in Scripture, who guides the lives of the believers personally and corporately. In our view, formative interpretative practice that follows theological hermeneutics has potential to overcome pluralism and the departmentalisation of church and academia.

Chapter three provides a necessary link between questions of theological hermeneutics and formative interpretation by addressing the process and the goal of formation. After presenting general scientific aspects of human development, we continued with a theological analysis of Scripture. Here, we defined formation as a holistic process involving all aspects of the human being to conform to God's image in Christ. This vision of formation as transformation or conformation to the image of God in Christ explains the goal of formation: to be able to live in reciprocal love relationship (with God and others). We also argued that the process of formation involves the losing and finding of self. These considerations provide us with important guidance for our discussion of formative interpretation. It sets the goal and some of the necessary parameters or criteria that accompany formative interpretation. The essential goal of formation was summarised by Stephen Fowl: 'Christians must read scripture in the light of their ends as Christians — ever deeper communion with the triune God and with each other.'²⁸¹ The most important criteria is that formative interpretation is measured in light of its success to nurture godly love in the reader. Here we are in basic agreement with Augustine, whose words we wish to reiterate as well: 'Whoever, therefore, thinks that he [or she] understands the

²⁸¹ Fowl, *Scripture*, vii.

divine Scriptures or any part of them so that it does not build the double love of God and of our neighbour does not understand them at all.'²⁸² A reader who does not develop the double love of God and neighbour can be said to miss the goal of Christian formative interpretation of Scripture, which is communion with God and each other. Whether and how the reader learns to love is a complex question, which leads us to the topic of our final chapter: a proposal of how to practise formative interpretation.

The final chapter is a proposal for how formative interpretation might function, as it proceeds from within a theological hermeneutical framework. This chapter is about the role of the reader and the text for formative interpretation. First, we discussed the importance of certain dispositions for the formative interpretation of Scripture. However, not only are dispositions important, but also the entire area of habits and practices that shape those dispositions. Hence, we must widen our view of formative interpretation to include spirituality. It was our aim to show that only in the continuous participation in God's work, particularly in the church, will Christians develop as people who are willing to be led by God. Second, we highlighted that the narrative character of Scripture is essential for the way Scripture shapes us as readers. We argued that formative interpretation benefits from from narrational participatory approaches in three ways: (1) it approaches Scripture with a certain critical realism, (2) it opposes reductionistic interpretation that aims at knowledge without relationship with God, and (3) it places the emphasis on the temporal character of our participation in the story of God's work on Earth as witnessed in Scripture. Hence, we concluded that formative interpretation is about learning to participate and perform the gospel story in our lives today in light of the past and the anticipated future.

Many of the issues raised require some further exploration. One area that has been neglected so far is how language itself shapes us as readers. For instance, the role of metaphors in the formation of the reader might provide further insights into the way biblical texts and concepts shape our perception or invite participation and response. Moreover, genres as a whole might possess specific formative functions for the community. For example, the Psalms may be

²⁸² Dods, *Augustine*, 30.

open for literary analysis (cf. parallelism), but ultimately they want to be sung or meditated upon, and not merely scrutinised. Another focus of research could be to compare Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant formative interpretative approaches. Presumably, they share commonality in their goals and criteria (for validity), but display variety in the way they implement Scripture reading in the life of the community and the believer.

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